Olówè of Isè
A Master Wood Carver of the Yoruba

Anonymous wood carvers, who gained neither fame nor admiration for their work; artists, who work out the shapes and styles of their works only within rigid set forms and produce undateable pieces – these and other, in part romantically distorted, assumptions even today still shape a widely held image of the nature of African artistic creation. In actual fact, even in Africa, some artists, highly regarded because of their capabilities, produced commissioned pieces and their names were well-known. The aesthetics of works of art were discussed and stylistic innovations were not frowned on. A prime example of this dynamic within African art is the life and works of the significant Yoruba artist Olówè of Isè.

Olówè and his Work under Rosalyn A. Walker

In 1988 Rosalyn A. Walker, as curator at that time for African art at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, organised an exhibition dedicated to Olówè and wrote a monograph as the catalogue to accompany the exhibition.¹ Her most important sources about the artist from the federal Nigerian state of Ekiti were photographs of his works and reports written by travellers such as Charles Partridge, Philip A. Allison, Major C. T. Lawrence, E. Harlan Duckworth, Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, Ulli Beier, William Fagg and John Picton, the Oriki praise song recorded in 1988 by John Pemberton III and the results of her own field research.

According to the data collected by Walker, Olówè’s mother was living as a prisoner of war in Efon Alaye when she gave birth to him and a sister from around 1873 to 1877. After the father had managed to purchase his family’s freedom, Olówè spent most of his life in Ife and, according to Philip A. Allison, died in 1938 or 1939. Even today he is remembered every year with a festival.

Olówè began carving when he first started to earn his living as a youth in Ife with all kinds of lowly jobs as one of the many hundred errand boys (elemeso) at the court of the king (Arinjale). The question as to whether he had any teacher(s) or whether he taught himself his profession alone by means of his talent remains unanswered for Walker. As a master carver, Olówè developed a distinctive style characterised, in particular, by figures carved with perspective, asymmetries, high reliefs and the depiction of movement. The artist worked in a geographic area of about a hundred square kilometres around the town of Ife. His works have been documented in the royal palaces of the towns of Isè, Ikéré, Owo and Akure, as well as Ikare, Igede, Ukiti, Ogbagi, Use and Ogotun. In Europe, people became aware of his artistic creations in 1924 at the British Empire Exhibition in Wembley. There a magnificent door on loan from the Ikéré palace was much admired in the exhibit at the Nigerian pavilion.²

Illustration Map
Olówè’s area of influence

Illustration Wembley Exhibition
The door of the Ikéré palace in 1924 at the British Empire Exhibition in Wembley, London.

Illustration: Walu Door
The different sized door panels and the asymmetric arrangement of the figures do not correspond with classic African art.
Credit: Galerie Walu

Illustration: Walu Door Detail
An example of a 10 to 15cm high relief. The figures protrude beyond the edge of the frame and, although they are in profile, they are nevertheless turning their heads towards the observer.

Illustration: Walu Door Detail
Depiction of movement in contrast to the more usual static figures in African art

The Latest Insights and Evaluation

As far as is currently known, Olówè lived between 61 and 68 years and began his artistic career presumably at about the age of 15 in about 1890. Contrary to Walker’s observations, it is not unimaginable, however gifted, that he could have learned his craft without training or lessons – he must have had some kind of apprenticeship. What is certain is that, over the course of time, Olówè realised his own artistic vision within the Ekiti style. From a certain point onwards, after he had overtaken his teachers, he sought and found – now self-taught – new creative approaches on his own. If one assumes in the course of his development as an artist he had a ten year apprenticeship and then a coming to maturity as an artist, which took another ten years, then Olówè presumably found and consolidated his own style at around 35 years of age. Since, as an old man, he presumably left the work to his pupils then the peak of his creative achievements was probably reached in the twenty years between 1910 und 1930.

It is easier to answer Walker’s question regarding possible contacts of Olówè’s with other wood carvers and their work: during his lengthy career he is bound to have seen a good many works by his counterparts and may have also been inspired by them. Possible sources of such inspiration would be artists like Obembe of Efôn-Alayè (c. 1869 - 1939), Bamgboye of Odo-Owa (c. 1883 - 1978) or Aréògún of Osi-Ilorin (c. 1880 - 1954). Furthermore, it is completely possible that he, as Walker mentions, had knowledge of artworks outside Africa through illustrations in books and was influenced by them. On the other hand, it is possible that some his motifs have their source in the early history of the region. Here we cite the artistic use of the relief in the bronze plaques of the Benin kingdom in which the motif of birds pecking at the eyes of decapitated heads clearly has its origin. The freely carved heads amongst Olówè’s bowls are also perhaps in the tradition of the Edo (Benin) ancestral rattle staffs. (ukhurhe).

Illustration Detroit door:
Olówè produced this door as a replacement for the door that was exchanged and sent to London. Today it stands in the Detroit Institute of Arts.
Credit: The Detroit Institute of Arts
Olówè’s Work on the Art Market

Olówè’s talent was so appreciated that he was entrusted with the complete furnishing of the palaces of the wealthy. The artist often worked on his own or else with up to 15 employees for years on such commissions, which could be compared with those from the wealthy patrons of the arts in the Renaissance.

In Rosalyn A. Walker’s catalogue about 50 works of Olówè’s are listed. Their exact number varies according to whether pairs are classified as one or two sculptures in the list and how many of the works can really be attributed to Olówè as some pieces differ stylistically from the rest of his body of work.

In 2004 Rosalyn A. Walker went to work for the Museum of Art in Dallas, which, in the same year at Sotheby’s May auction in New York, purchased a female bowl-carrier by Olówè for a record price of 534,000 US dollars. Since then, the same auction house has offered three further pieces by Olówès: a bowl and two doors. In situ, in the trade and in collections, thanks to the increased interest, further new works by the artist have surfaced again and again. This proves that, contrary to the commonly held belief, there still exist top class pieces either waiting to be discovered in Africa and hidden in private collections. The only nagging question is, which of these new discoveries can we confidently attribute to Olówè?

Illustration tiled floor: Credit: Z.R. Dmochowski, Ethnographica Ltd.
Illustration red door: Credit: Galerie Walu

Captions for the three photographs:
Three photographs of the same door, which show how the palaces and their architectural elements were continually restored and repainted.

Illustration from Sotheby’s catalogue:
By Sotheby’s restored door at the auction in New York, 2006. Credit: Sotheby’s, New York.

Illustration head:
Head of the figure in the second block from the bottom which was missing from the Sotheby’s door in NY. Credit: Galerie Walu

Anyone who deals with this difficult subject has to differentiate between works carried out by Olówè’s own hand as well as works by his pupils which they produced either under his supervision or not. In addition to this there are pieces by his imitators which were produced for their own use and imitations which are intended for sale to collectors. Occasionally it is extremely difficult to differentiate Olówè’s own works from those of his pupils or imitators. It is certain that in this case too, as so often, that the copy is worse than a
first class original, the work of the pupil is not of equal worth to that of the master. In what does a second or third class original differ from a good copy? And: who can attribute a piece in front of them without inventory records and without a faultless and verifiable provenance? Olówè’s students were bound to have set up on their own in his lifetime for various reasons and at least in part have alluded to the style and forms of their master. There is after all no copyright for African art (yet). One can also assume that canny craftsmen will have been copying the master carver’s successful style whilst he was still alive and that others will have carried on with this after his demise.

This break-down brings fresh aspects to the word "forgery". After all, the producers of the pieces in the different categories depicted are at any rate good craftsmen — even if possessed of varying degrees of artistic talent if not at all less talented or simply without a clue. Forgery in the usual sense of the word only arises through the intention to deceive. Should the carver at the production stage already have the intention to deceive future beholders over the attribution of the work in order to achieve an increase in value then he is a forger and, if the work sells successfully, then he is a fraudster. For the most part though, it is not the craftsman but a commissioning agent, who initiates the fraud and it is always a dealer that carries it through to the end. It is only at this stage that the piece becomes a forgery: when a seller declares the goods knowingly as something that is authentic.

*Illustration Green Posts*
Work by a pupil of Olówè: the similarity to the veranda post in the New Orleans Museum of Art is astonishing — it does however fall short of the perfection of the version by Olówè. Details such as the pistol, the arm jewellery are not as strongly executed. The age of the wood has been dated at .......... years by the ETH in Zürich by means of the C14 method; the patina analysis by the Swiss Institute for Art confirms a seven layer composition with very different pigments; both results rule out a modern forgery.

*Credit: Galerie Walu*

*Illustration Forgery*
Example of an Olówè forgery. The execution is clumsy, the patina has been synthetically manufactured.

Olówè is however without doubt an exception in African art and the development in the prices can, as far as one can predict, only carry on in the direction they have taken — assuming we are speaking of a genuine, legally acquired, Olówè.

*Manuscript extract from a book about the art of the Yoruba by Jean und Jane David, which is currently in preparation.*