

**ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF *DIVORCE* BY
BISI FAKEYE**

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Abstract

A piece of art without interpretation is lost. This is because image tends to speak beyond words; writing about images by art scholars seems like expressing the inexpressible. It is a fact that visual experience through works of art presents its distinct uniqueness as a form of address presented to someone. It however demands response that brings life to an art work, without which it is a mere substance. Most Nigerian master pieces are lost owing to our negligence to interpretation. In the words of Satre (1989), "we must continually test our reading of a work of art against the image itself. We must determine if it is complete enough, if it recognizes the full range of possible meanings the work might possess and at the same time we must ask ourselves if it violates and misrepresents the image". This paper therefore, examines critically, the structural arrangement of Bisi Fakeye's sculpture forms in the piece titled "Divorce" through the relationship of title, concept/image and elemental details just to confirm the master's "structural uprightness in his wood works".

Key Words: Interpretation, Divorce, Sculpture, Bisi Fakeye, Analysis

Introduction

Fakeye, Iyola Onawale Olabisi, is a re-known Nigerian carver, born in 1942. By virtue of his birth, he belongs to the sixth generation of Fakeye's family of carvers. As stated in nigerianartoyasat.org, Bisi moved to Ondo in 1960, where he was attached to his brother Lamidi Fakeye, as an apprentice. After seven years of apprenticeship, Bisi found Lagos as home. Subsequently, he met, mixed, and shared ideas with a new breed of contemporary/formally trained artists like Yusuf Grillo, Erhabor Emokpae, and Ben Osawe. He participated in workshops and exhibitions in Germany and United States of America in 1976 and 1989 respectively. Bisi died in 2017. Although this paper is not focused on the biography of Bisi, it is important to have glimpse knowledge of the artist whose work is being studied.

Furthermore, drawing from the wealth of exposition through his technical approach and details to sculpture, will enrich the present and give hope for future endeavours in Nigeria sculpture practice since he is no more.

As opined by Barrett (2003) opined that,

"works of art are mere things until we begin to carefully perceive and interpret them-then they become alive and enliven us as we reflect on, wonder about and respond to them...artists make marks, viewers make meaning of those marks, interpretative viewers take artists marks seriously as a result artists get excited about making more art when they read the insights and revelations that their works inspire"

Since works of art provide knowledge and experiences that we would not otherwise have, this paper therefore aims at encouraging and inspiring meaningful intellectual dialogue with the art work, the artist and viewers through constructive analytical interpretation of works of art.

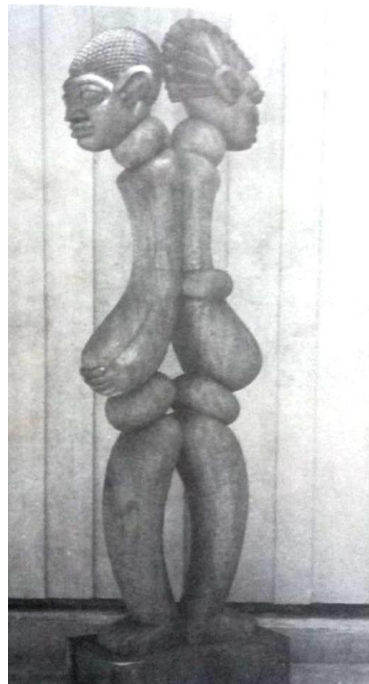


Fig.1.1 Bisi Fakeye, 1981,

Divorce, wood, 213.36 cm

The *Divorce*

Fagg (1971) posits that, “of all the known works of African sculptures to which we can safely attribute an age of more than a century, probably at least nine-tenths are Nigerians. This results from 2500 years of accumulation of sculptures in durable materials which were practiced especially in Nigeria area”. One of incarnates of these sculptures in durable material is Bisi Fakeye’s *Divorce*. This piece is executed in a durable hard wood measuring 213.36cm in height as the original brown colour suggests. The compositional arrangement presents twin figures of supposed male and female genders resting on each other’s back in a gloomy mood.

The forms are dominated by vertical and central axial arrangement, which project a symmetric composition of utmost balance. At this, one sees agreed disagreement. The piece has the elements and likeness of a modified traditional Yoruba wood sculpture. At a glance, one may not notice the intrusion of an impudent space that interrupted the flow of a vertical axis visibly between the rear contours of the piece. But a second look reveals the shape of a star separating the two head volumes along the neck region. Also evident are different sized triangular shapes at the top and in between the hip and buttocks respectively.

The work also shows an elongated oval-shape space that pierced through the cylindrically curved limbs of the two figures. This spatial intrusion further enhances the elongated frames of the figures. From the pictorial evidence, this sculpture composition is made up of fifteen double curves in varied volumes. Remarkably each volume is consciously repeated side by side with a high sense of simplicity, thereby reducing them to seven symmetric sets. The figure(s) really remind one of the Yoruba identical twins (Ibeji). Consequently, the use and adoption of curvilinear elements at the contours and various points of intersection clearly define the distinctive qualities and characters of the varied volumes.

At the apex, the neck presents the head into a slight forward tilt thereby closing up the gap created by the intruding space in between the rear of their heads. There is striking resemblances in the facial organisation of the minor forms. As Burkefeldsman (1967), expresses “the eye is much enlarged, and the planes of the nose are simplified as in African wood sculpture...however, it is conventionally illuminated”. It is almost impossible to identify the gender of the figures, if not for the exceptional embellishment of the female hairdo. While the head of the figure on the left side has multiple repeated patterns randomly incised on the dome of the head, the one on the right side has the feminine, stylistic and elaborate patterns typical of the Yoruba, Nigeria. Her hair patterns are reminiscence of the Igbo maiden masquerade (Agbogho muo). See fig.1.2



Fig.1.2

It is amazing that these hundreds of incisions that crisscrossed the posterior and anterior surfaces of the head did not distort the oval convexity. The diminutive volumes of the neck would have been better ignored if not for their important duty of holding the head in place. These perfectly spherical volumes sit as a mediator in between the head and the torso. The torso is rendered as a tubular concave volume that is inwardly enlarged at the lower end presenting an organic representation of the stomach. These tubular torsos gracefully melded into each other with their convex rear in a manner that suggests care, unity and solidarity.

However, to introduce a mediator into the super structure, two spherically shaped volumes suddenly emerged in between the torso and the limbs. This effectively reduced the monotony caused by the cylindrical verticality of the forms. To conclude this visual drama, Fakeye interprets the form of the limbs with cylindrical volumes that tapered down into a recessional plane that forms the foot. Holding the pieces of the super structure in place is a rectangular plane that evokes firmness and stability as the base.

In view of the above, the following questions beg for answers; Does the title of this piece lead us to the meaning convincingly? Can we see *Divorce* in the midst of mutual acquaintance? As we probe into the realities of these questions, it is also pertinent to recognise the beautiful interplay of spatial elements of the physical properties of the piece. Obviously there is the presence of linear orderliness, regularity and harmony in the sculpture composition. The perfection of these formal elements classifies the artists approach to formalism, which according to Wangboje (1982), locates excellence in formal organization as a relationship among the visual elements of sculpture. Also the piece evokes a feeling of visual rhythm owing to the repetition of all the forms to achieve balance and symmetrism. (See fig.1.3). The linear and curvilinear arrangement of chisel marks evokes the awe of Igbo -uli and Edeala body designs as corroborated by Aniakor, and Cole, (1987).



Fig.1.3

The mastery and expertise in this visual work of excellence forces one to think of a possible influence or contact with the west by the artist. Despite the fact that Bisi may not belong to the Oshogbo school of Art, he is of Yoruba origin. He may have been enjoying the patronage of western collectors. Egonwa (2007) opines that, since 1962 the Oshogbo school has most of its members scattered all over Yoruba land. Surprisingly though, some formally trained artists have enlisted in this school owing to the patronage they enjoy from foreigners whose idea of African art corresponds with; Okesebikan (1982), who states that, “in most Yoruba tribal carvings of human figures, the head is always emphasized”. Contrarily, Fakeye seem to be knowledgeable with western proportion and aesthetic principles. There is a formal symmetric balance in this piece confirming and supporting the robust stylistic truthfulness of the artist. The artist made frantic efforts to express divorce through this piece by the distinctive definition of individual forms, – although typical of Africa sculptures – the arrangement of figures looking at opposite direction, and their seemingly dejected look. Further elements in support of this concept are; first, despite the tubular roundedness characterizing the forms, the torso, which is a major player in the form context, recedes into a visible concavity living a bold impression of guilt, weakness and hopelessness.

Secondly, the limb, which carries the entire structure, is inverted into a convexity against the concavity of the torso. This compositional arrangement strongly projects the thought and intention of the artist. Therefore, one can infer that Bisi’s sculpture (Divorce) is not dealing with an individual’s problem but rather it is a visual commentary about a universal problem of man in his social life. The piece tells us about how much we need each other especially in times of distress.

Conclusion

The enculturation of works of art and creativity is one of the variables of life. Edewor (2010) posits that, every environment will remain docile when man’s creative essence is not put in place to salvage or enliven a hitherto soulful decadence. This means that art is an ideological weapon to challenge problems in their multifarious forms in the society. Therefore, by deliberately encouraging and inspiring meaningful, intellectual, and emotional dialogue between a work of art, the artist, and spectator, through analytical interpretation, we create a version of that work in our mind for ourselves. We also learn about the work itself; its insight, its particular view of human experience and that of the world. More importantly, a meaningful reading of a piece of sculpture reduces distance between viewer, the artist, and work of art; and as the distance disappears, the greater will be interest in the work itself and the importance of the personality of the artist.

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