

## FRANCIS UDUH: A PROFESSIONAL SCULPTOR AND ART EDUCATION INSTRUCTOR UNIVERSAL STUDIO OF ART, LAGOS, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

The existence of Schools and Workshops of apprenticeship in European cities centuries ago, led to the advancement of their societies particularly in checking the rate of youth restiveness and unemployment. These centers of learning and youth development, groomed both formal and the informal participants in Africa and particularly in Nigeria. Schools and Workshops of Art have grown to an appreciable level that many youths and adults, both formal and informal have all benefitted. The activities of the *Igun* and *Igbesanmwun* guilds of bronze casters and wood-carvers of Benin kingdom, the *Mbari-Mbayo*, the *Oye-Ekiti* experiences, the Abayomi Barber School, the Ife and Ibadan and many others are clear examples of this hopeful venture of which the beneficiaries are peoples of the society through instructors. Francis Uduh is a professional sculptor with immense talent as he combines wood carving and the cold cast technique to improve his rating in art professionalism. Though an art instructor at the Universal Studios of Art, Lagos, Nigeria, his art experiences has benefitted the formal and non-formal artists in the society which is the main focus of this article.

**Keywords:** Schools and Workshops, Formal and Informal, *Igun* and *Igbesanmwun* guilds, *Oye-Ekiti* experiences, Art experiences

### Introduction

The advancement of art in Africa and particularly in Nigeria had led to the training of the formal and informal artists in the society. These advancement interestingly, was as a result of the establishment of schools and workshops of art learning and apprenticeship in the arts. Many centers where these schools and workshops of art are located fortunately continue to engage participants in all fields of the arts, for example in art related designs, wood-carving, metal design, graphic design, print-making, bead-making, tie and dye, batik and other forms of art. In these centers, committed instructors are regularly recruited to mind these centers of experimentations that turned to be a bee-hive of art activities and excellences. Few of these centers are as follows: The *Igun* and *Igbesanmwun* guilds of wood-carvers and bronze casters of Benin kingdom, the Oshogbo school, the Ori-Olokun experimental workshop, *Oye-Ekiti* workshop by Rev. Fr. Carroll, the Abayomi Barber School, the Universal Studios of Art and many more undocumented centers stand exceptionally in art disseminations. The Universal Studios of Art under the supervision of Olabisi Onawale Fakeye a sculptor of repute graduated Francis Uduh a sculptor on whose activities this article focuses on.

## 2. Francis Uduh's early life and Education



**Fig. 1: Francis Uduh. © Uduh's Library**

Francis Uduh, born in 1964, is an Isoko by birth and hails from Ewvreni in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. As a child, he drew human and animal figures and also carved masks for masquerading activities in his locality. While attending Ewvreni Primary School in Ughelli, he had encouragement from his teachers who spotted his talent and capabilities to draw and paint. His commitment to art during his secondary education at Ewvreni, qualified him to attend Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi. On the completion of his course, he obtained a National Diploma Certificate (ND) in General Art and a Higher National Diploma (HND) in sculpture from Yaba College of Technology in 1987, an Exhibition Catalogue (2007:9).

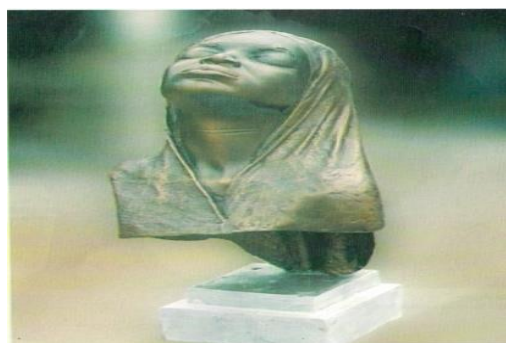
## 3. His experiences, experimentation and works

Uduh later focused on metal work and painting to compliment his activities in art aesthetics. He practiced with other artists in Lagos to advance his skills, before undergoing a brief training in Amsterdam, Holland. Though he would have willingly continued his practice in Holland, but, his lean financial resources could not sustain him. His works, on coming back home after his sojourn in Holland, however, became more focused and diverse, both in material and methods. Uduh is a hard working sculptor who has not deviated from his conventional approach to woodcarving. His works also feature with full sensitivity to the immediate society and beyond, *The Guardian* (2007:85).

Uduh has a special way of sitting while working on his wood as seen in Fig. 2. His vivid style is located within the context of his cold cast bronze and fiber glass technique. Another important thing that has attributed to his success is his quiet nature and calmness, undistracted approach to work. His work, *Out of This Realm* (Fig. 3), brings to focus a female figure that is getting out of the realm. The rendition of the figure is vivid, explanatory with eyes closed and hairs completely placed on the shoulders. This is a good example of Uduh's sculptures with inspirited realism, visionary concept, vivid expression and mechanical accuracy. *Out of this Realm* could be compared to Patrick Agose's *learning the Ropes* Fig. 4. These two works, on cold-cast bronze, show expressive reality, creative ingenuity and essentially finicky details.



**Fig 2: Francis Uduh at Work © Augustine Bardi.**



**Fig 3: Out of this Realm. Francis Uduh, Cold Cast, 2006, Size: 61cm © Universal Studios of Art**

In *Due Season* (2007:36) an Exhibition Catalogue writes that a technique in sculpture Cold cast remains a medium Francis Uduh prefers because of its quality finishing. On joining the Universal Studios of Art in 1996, he became more meticulous in representing his works more on cold cast and fiber glass, which is not to say that he completely left wood carving.



**Figure 4, Learning the Ropes. Patrick Agose, Cold Cast, 2005, Size: 55cm, © Universal Studios of Art**



**Fig. 5: Resource Control. Francis Uduh, Cold Cast, 2006, Size: 82cm Height, © Universal Studios of Art**

In *Resource Control* (Fig. 5), Uduh portrays a figure reflecting on the current crisis in the Niger Delta region. In the presentation, there is a figure looking emaciated and suffering from deprivation. This state of distress is occasioned by the mismanagement of resources in the region. Uduh is not subjective or sectional in his concept; he is rational because he is also affected indirectly. He tries as much as possible to interpret his works in totality to the understanding of all. In *Contemplation* (Fig. 6), he presents the figure of a man in fiber glass. The bearded figure with unkept bushy hair is captured in deep contemplation with hands folded across his chest. Uduh's expressions on wood work are unique. This expressive method is reflected in the work titled *Special Form 11* (Fig. 7). The work has some vents in the forehead of the human figure to allow a free flow of air, while the eyes, the nose and the mouth are projected in relief form.



**Fig. 6: Contemplation. Francis Uduh, Fibre Glass, 2009, Size : Not available ©Universal Studios of Art**

Another work is *Mask* (Fig. 8), executed with an Ebony wood with vents on the forehead and holes in the eyes, probably to allow a free flow of air to reach the wearer during ceremonies. In comparison with *Special Form 11*, (Fig. 7),



**Fig. 7: Special Form 11. (2007) Francis Uduh, Fibre Glass, 2007, Size, Not available ©Universal Studios of Art**

The ears are wide in structure and form. A significant work of Uduh is *Another Apple* (Fig. 9), which shows an upright hand holding an apple. He describes this piece “as an opportunity, which comes but once in life time, and that if not well harnessed may not come a second time”. The apple is firmly gripped between the thumb and the index fingers, with the rest of the hand strongly built around the apple.

Uduh uses less Ebony wood to express his artistic creativity. The work titled *Another Apple* has shown a significant advancement in his craftsmanship. Since his debut at an exhibition tagged: *Young Masters* in 1991, he has featured prominently in many group exhibitions, including an exhibition at the “Contemporary African Art Gallery” in Amsterdam, Holland in 1991. Uduh has had many commissions, with good patronage from land developers across the country, particularly in Lagos.



**Fig. 8: Mask 1.  
Francis Uduh. Ebony Wood, 2007,  
© Universal Studios of Art**



**Fig. 9: Another Apple.  
Francis Uduh, Cold Cast, 2006, Size: 56cm Height  
© Uduh's Collection**

Among his recent commissions is the “Providence House” in Admiralty Way, Lekki Lagos. Another commissioned work is the massive art work at the Margaret Ekpo International Airport, in Calabar, Cross River State. His works are also in many hospitals around the country. These include those at Eko and Ile-

Ife General Hospitals. Though he had no solo exhibition, patronages come from private galleries, and mostly from Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

#### **4. His contributions to the development of art in the society**

Uduh's contributions to art development in the society, remains very important and without limitations. Apart from his various exhibitions as an instructor at the Universal Studios of Art, Lagos, The *Guardian* (2007:72-73) still affirms his popularity as a sculptor and a multi-talented artist which is noticeable through his exhibitions and workshop practices. His duties as an instructor never interfered with his artistic relationship with youths, adults and art admirers both formal and non-formal in and around the community where he lives. Just as he instructs participants (2007:74) in the Universal Studios of Art on fundamentals of sculpture, so also he teaches selected participants in his neighborhood beginners sculpture. He introduces his stage to stage processes from sketch design, clay moulding and rendering, then finishing. *Resurgence* (2006:26) an Exhibition Catalogue equally approves Uduh's methods of approach to wood carving, he introduces paper cast design for an intended object to be sculpted, followed immediately by soft wood elimination to enable carving in obtaining the desired object, which acts as a maquette and after approval, working on a bigger object starts. According to Uduh in (A personal interview September, 2008), I derive fulfillment helping others realize their dreams to learning the rudiments of art. Francis has additional to his sculptural growth engaged participants in his part-time programmes by introducing the art of sculptural outdoor decoration a modern day aesthetical appreciation by members of the society.

#### **5. Uduh's contributions to charity**

The artist voluntarily participates in meaningful contributions to the society both nationally and internationally to raise funds for orphanages and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). (A personal interview with Francis Uduh, September, 2008). Although, he wants to remain anonymous to these credits and claims, he equally introduces to sponsoring the under privileged by paying schools fees, funding of feeding the homeless to cushion the economic hardship and crisis in our country. At a point, he gave a hotline communicative number to be reached in cases of urgent issues to be solved.

#### **6. Conclusion**

After many years of art reforms in Nigerian with regards to up-grading the art curriculum, art has remained indisputably a subject of neglect among students and parents. The benefits of workshops and schools of apprenticeship in recent time however have benefitted the formal and informal in the society. These centers of art formation have also advanced the growth of art in the society. The part played by instructors of these centers remains noticeable going by the number of those who go through their training. Francis Uduh is an extraordinary talented professional sculptor who presently instructs and tutors youths, adults both formal and non-formally educated in the Universal Studios of Art, Lagos, Nigeria. His techniques and styles he had taught peoples of the society on many occasions, it is therefore believed that as more schools

and workshops are established, the society will continue to benefit most especially the unemployed thus reducing remarkably much dependence on white colour jobs. The activities of instructors will always be vital to better artists in schools and workshops of apprenticeship now and in the future.

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