

Denver art museum



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Olowe of Ise's Housepost Question The house post of Olowe Ise found in Denver Art Museum is a magnificent wooden work of art from a distinguished artist that embodies both symbolism and form. The sculpture that stands approximately 1.7 meters high highlights a horse rider with a spear in one hand and a fly whisk in the other, emphasized by his larger proportion relative to other elements in the art, and wearing a pendant coiffure that is encrusted by a mass of dark patina that adds value and mature beauty to him. The shield wielding warrior-like leader- identified by his spear, the incised vest, flywhisk and the missing tooth possibly lost in battle- also has a protruding beard and a raised mouth with front which all seek to highlight his towering stature.

Together with his smaller sized horse, he is balanced by a figure of woman having succulent breasts and an undulating torso creating a wave like motion, with two attendants besides her carrying what appears as gunpowder on their heads, creating a sense of mutual support and unity in the art work. The female similarly wears an upswept incised coiffure that rhymes well with that of the horse rider who has been propped up. Besides all figures in the sculpture have elongated necks and oval heads, bringing out a sense resemblance of smaller and larger parts of the art that is important for unity. The sculpture's frontal angles of the upper and lower regiment have been turned creating a variety of symbolism that can be read from all sides.

Question 2

The fantastic, dreamlike quality of the work produced by Olowe, a Yoruba by birth, can only be attributed to the long history and experience of the Yoruba people that inhabit the west coast of Africa in Nigeria, Eastern republic of

Benin and Togo, dating back to the 5th century BC (Drewal, Pemberton and Abiodan 50). Their early discovery of iron enabled them to develop better metallic tools such as axes and machetes that helped them a lot in wood carving, besides many other economic activities including agriculture and trade. They went further to develop their pottery, textile and leather work. The community grew quite a lot, that at some point they had 20 kingdoms, each with its own king and a strong military who were revered and governed the people. One of their strongest kingdoms had as much as 6, 600 towns and villages that it controlled by the end of the 18th century. The kingdoms had Ife as the cultural and religious center.

The Yoruba's religious beliefs centered on a view of the world as made up of two connected realms; the visible world of the living, and the spiritual of the ancestors and spirits. The world further was seen as having a supreme being, believed to be the creator, though they also believed in many other deities. The society also had priests who performed ceremonies, like the Epa festival. In these festivals, a female was designated for carrying a bowl that contained the powers of the priest, powers believed to be similar to the powers of the women, powers to reproduce and to compromise the fertility of others, thus women were held in high regard in this community (Rowland 20).

The house post of Olowe Ise would be identifiable as an African art, just by the emphasis of the human figures which is common in most African cultures, symbolizing emotion, imagination, mystical and religious experience. Just like the abstraction shown in the sculpture, African art tends to prefer this to naturalistic representation (Rowland, Drewal and Rietberg Museum 40). The African artists prefer to make sculptures, masks and other

carvings due to availability of wood in the Sub Saharan as a natural material for carving, something that Olowe's work directly identifies with. The abstracts of human figures in African art are also usually clad in decorative clothing, similar to the pendant coiffure seen on the sculpture of Olowe, both on the figure on the horse and the female supporting it. Smaller parts of African designs tend to resemble bigger parts. The designs thus bring out a three dimensional structure of what can be termed as a living sculpture, a characteristic common in African art. Western art usually prefers two dimensional structures and motion.

Question 3

So what is the meaning and themes of the house post art work, as an example of African art? As already mentioned, this work of art was greatly influenced by African culture and more specifically the Yoruba culture. Olowe was in fact born in Efon- Alaye, one of the greatest centers of Yoruba carving at the turn of the century, though he later migrated to Ise, to carve masks, veranda posts, doors and bowls for the king. With his fame and skill, he seems to like and hold leaders in high regard like the rest of the community, as based on the geographical breadth of where his carvings have been found, it has been suggested by some authors that he was lent out by the king of Ise to other kings (Fagg , Pemberton and Holcombe 160) .

The house post was in fact originally created for the home of a chief named Elefoshan Akure. The sculpture has a warrior like leader on horse, larger than other figures in the design, including the horse he rides, and being supported by a woman and with two others flanking her. This would mean that the man on the horse is a leader of the community who is held in high regard by members of he's community. The warrior has power and is supported by the

rest of the members of the community. However there are also both women and men on the sculpture's base who are equal in size meaning the society regarded both men and women as equal. As already observed, the sculpture was to adorn the home of chief Akure.

Therefore the symbolism that is brought out in the sculpture is meant to show the stature of the chief in his community, and how the community's men and women supported him. The statue also brings out the outstanding role of women as pillars of the chieftom, due to their reproductive strengths. The women of Yoruba are shown to be swerve and strong as shown by undulating torso and the generous pendant breasts of the woman supporting the warrior in the sculpture. It has also been indicated that the house post sculpture bears resemblance to many other works of art designed by Olowe for other palaces, which reinforce the social roles of people in the palaces and those who interacted with the palace (Hombberger, Abiodun, Dreval and Pemberton 50).

Question 4

Traditionally the Yoruba placed their sculptures at the front of the homes of the owners for them to be seen. Therefore for a man of Olowe's reputation and high regard in his society to have taken the responsibility of designing a statue for chief Akune and several other community leaders, it meant that he not only embodied the spirit of the sculpture, but he personally had support and respect for the chief as a member of the community which he wanted to show, which is the real essence of African culture and art i. e. bringing out the symbolism and form in the art.

With this approach the artist was able to effectively communicate to the fellow members of community his own view and agreement with the tenets

of the community they lived in. He demonstrated the spirit of the African people of upholding their leaders, women and jointly supporting the activities of the community. Olowe of Ise's House post is therefore a representation of the spirit of African art.

Works Cited

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