

## INDIRECT RULE AND COLONIAL MODERNISM

**MODERN NIGERIAN ART WAS** a product of the desire to be modern. But it also developed from the work of the pioneer painter Aina Onabolu (1882–1963), who, in an attempt to demonstrate the African’s comparative artistic ability and in the face of colonialist and racist snobbery, broke with the artistic traditions of his ancestors. In the process, he developed a visual language that was new, ideologically progressive, and, to use an even more appropriate term, avant-garde. Onabolu’s career as a painter began around 1900; he soon built a considerable reputation among the Lagos black (and part of the white) cultural and political elite. Moreover, he vigorously campaigned, initially without much success, for art teaching in Lagos schools. By 1920, he had raised enough money to travel to England, where he studied art. Upon his return in 1922, he continued to press for the inclusion of art in the curricula of Lagos secondary schools. Perhaps in response to his many memoranda on the need for an additional art teacher, the Department of Education hired the young British artist Kenneth C. Murray (1903–1972) as an educa-

tion officer with the mandate to teach art in Lagos and southern Nigerian schools. However, and this is crucial, Murray's ideas about modern art for colonial Nigeria directly opposed those of Onabolu. If Onabolu saw in art the vehicle and tool for asserting the African's modernity and as a means for pictorial performance of his modern subjectivity following similar arguments made by many among Lagos's black educated elite, Murray saw things differently. Indeed, Murray's vision of African art mirrored the antimodernist ideological basis of Britain's colonial policy in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. Where Onabolu saw his work as a part of the radical work of emergent anticolonialism, Murray firmly put his teaching and research at the service of what one might call *colonial nativism*, convinced as he was, as were many ideologues of colonialism, of the African's cultural (if not racial) inferiority and inability to meaningfully appreciate or master the uniquely sophisticated European fine art traditions and practices. Thus while Onabolu broke with the past by adopting new pictorial modes of representing the self as he imagined a future different from that of his ancestors, Murray resolutely resisted the new because it alienated the old and, more troublingly, had the potential to level the imaginary boundaries between the irrevocably yet differentially modernizing Africa and Europe. In other words, Onabolu and Murray, I contend, represented two oppositional visions of modern Nigerian art during the colonial period. While Onabolu preempted the postcolonial modernism of the midcentury, Murray's art teaching unsuccessfully worked against the artistic and ideological tradition laid down by Onabolu.

This argument is significant to the task of this book for two reasons. First, it serves as a corrective art history, by which I mean a fundamental reinsertion of modern Nigerian art to the site of its ideological origins, a site defined, as I argue in chapter 1, by the struggle between the forces of the colonial status quo on the one hand and the voices of the anticolonialists and nationalists on the other. Previous analyses of this early period often have not disentangled or differentiated the work of these two pioneers, and in missing the crucial fissures and tensions in their visions of the colonial modern, such analyses fail to properly map the critical contours of early modern Nigerian art. While there is consensus on the radical nature of Onabolu's painting, given that he set out to disprove colonial and racist assumptions about the African's artistic ability, how this constitutes an art-historical problem—one framed by the reimagining of the relationship between the modern artist and the art of the past but also by the ways in which this problem is either exacerbated or ameliorated by the colonial experience and by the colonial art education developed by Murray—has not received due attention.

Let me paint the problem of this chapter, ultimately of this book, in brasher and hopefully clearer strokes: Postcolonial modernism in mid-twentieth-century Nigeria was born of the struggle between imperial and colonial nativist ideologies and the stridently modernist worldview of early nationalists and the educated elite. I contend that this modernism followed the anticolonial path established by Onobolu rather than, as some historians have it, the colonial nativism of Murray. For it is within the ranks of the nationalists—missionaries, educationists, lawyers, journalists—that we find committed believers in the African’s ability and readiness to master the tools of modernity on their own terms. This chapter thus outlines the historical and ideological grounds of colonial modernism in Nigeria, first by situating the work of Onobolu and Murray within the contestatory power lines of early twentieth-century African anti-imperialism and British colonialism. What becomes clear is that even in colonialism’s most altruistic guise, even in the hands of progressive colonial officials with the best of intentions toward the colonized peoples, the racist infrastructure of British imperial enterprise forced upon the political and cultural guardians of empire a denial and suppression of an emergent sovereign Africa and modernist art, the conditions of which were defined not by Britain/Europe but by the Africans themselves. The crucial link between Onobolu’s colonial modernism, in its insistence on mastery of (Western) techniques of figural realism and illusionistic landscape painting, and the vastly different stylistic attitude of the postcolonial modernists of the mid-twentieth century is the belief in the African’s right to determine his relationship with the art of his imagined past and in the assertion of his freedom to establish and negotiate the terms of his engagement with Western art.

The second reason this chapter foregrounds the opposing ideas of Onobolu and Murray before mapping the territory of postcolonial modernism in mid-twentieth-century Nigeria is as urgent as the first, precisely because the place of the work of British colonial art education, exemplified by the pedagogy of Kenneth Murray, in the history of modern Nigerian (and African) art has been a matter of debate among art historians. This problem is thrown in high relief in a book by Sylvester Ogbechie, who argues that the art and theory of natural synthesis proposed by Uche Okeke and the Art Society is a codification of Murray’s aesthetic philosophy and pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, another study argued, with remarkable directness, that the concept of natural synthesis is Murray’s baby.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Murray’s insistence on reviving so-called traditional arts and crafts as a basis for a new Nigerian art provided Okeke and his colleagues the fundamental theoretical and intellectual frame-

work for their supposedly radical work.<sup>3</sup> It will become obvious in due course that such arguments misrecognize the discrepant uses of traditional art and craft by Murray and Nigerian modernists of the independence decade.

This chapter is also important to the claim I make in this book that it is important to examine the impassioned, often acrimonious debates between the apologists of empire (including the closeted ones among them) and advocates of cultural and political freedom, even before the birth of the Nigerian nation in 1914, and to see within this contested terrain the grounds for the oppositional visions of modern Nigerian art so utterly manifest in the work of Onobolu and the Art Society on the one hand and that of Murray and colonial art education on the other. This chapter's second section shows how early debates about the character and direction of modern art in Nigeria reflected the fraught relationship of the increasingly dominant, even if unofficial, ideas of Onobolu and the institutionalized naive traditionalism inaugurated by Murray.

The point cannot be emphasized enough that in the colonial art education designed by Murray in the 1920s and 1930s, Nigeria relied on and remarkably affirmed the antimodernist ideology and practice of indirect rule and, in so doing, nurtured a stylistic trend that, in its unvarnished, crude nativism, clearly contradicted the aspirations of the cultural nationalists and later artists who identified with the conceptual and political basis but not the formal conditions of Onobolu's modernism. Colonialism as such naturally deferred the emergence of an effective and assertive Nigerian artistic modernism until the dawn of political independence when, as will be evident, pan-African, nationalist, and anticolonial ideologies synchronized with and, in fact, gave rise to a clearly articulated artistic idea and practice associated with the Art Society at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, and their fellow postcolonial modernists in Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent.

### **Kenneth C. Murray and Aina Onobolu**

In a 1963 memorandum to the Nigerian Council for Art and Culture on the teaching of art schools and colleges, Aina Onobolu made a crucial statement about his relationship with Kenneth Murray. After recalling the series of interviews he had in April 1926 with the director of education, Mr. Gier, and his deputy, Mr. Swanston, during which he pleaded for the appointment of a European art teacher for Lagos schools to complement his own work, he noted that in the summer of 1927 Murray was hired to teach in southern Nigeria "with good results." Then he added, "Though we agreed to disagree

as to whether African Art or Art based on the classical tradition should be taught.”<sup>4</sup> We do not know what Onabolu might have meant by “good results,” especially if he was completely opposed to something as fundamental as Murray’s ideas about the place of indigenous African and classical European art in the making of a progressive modernism. Yet in appealing to Gier and Swanston to hire a European teacher to join him in teaching and promoting the new art for which he had earned a substantial reputation in Lagos, we must wonder the extent to which Onabolu appreciated the tense relationship between the colonial regime and educated Africans such as himself and whether he was confident that the help he was seeking was really going to complement his own work as an artist and teacher. That is to say, might Onabolu have in fact been naive about the ideological fault lines marking the colonial landscape in the era of indirect rule? Did he not realize that colonial education, as imagined by Lord Lugard, the Phelps-Stokes Fund, and ultimately the Memorandum of 1925, was fundamentally antithetical to the sort of argument he articulated in *A Short Discourse on Art*,<sup>5</sup> his 1920 landmark text, and that his notes to the education officials might have provided the Department of Education an opportunity to assert its own vision of Nigerian modernism? Did he realize that, as I want to suggest, Kenneth Murray must have been hired precisely to stanch the noxious effect of Onabolu’s brand of art and pedagogy on young Nigerians, more precisely to formulate an art program that was compatible with the ideology and theory of indirect rule and the prescriptions of the memorandum? A brief consideration of Onabolu’s artistic ideas and cultural politics shows why these questions are pertinent.

*A Short Discourse on Art* is remarkable both as a foundational text of modern African artistic consciousness and because it directly confronts European prejudicial assumptions about African intellectual abilities; it is precisely the sort of critical work that earned many educated Africans before him the contempt of colonialism’s apologists. The text was published as a pamphlet accompanying the May 1920 art exhibition he organized on the eve of his departure to London, where he had gained admission to the St. John’s Wood School of Art. In it, he carefully establishes his credentials as a self-taught, confident, articulate, and passionate advocate of painting as the highest form of fine art—as distinct from craft, design, and other forms of visual practice. He describes his own mastery of the genre and the role of painting in awakening national consciousness,<sup>6</sup> but he also argues for a particular history of art that is patently Western but to which he is irrevocably connected by virtue of the colonial encounter. To him, pictorial realism—resulting from the rigorous application of one-point perspective and the use of “focus” as a compositional device—had the singular and crucial value of providing visual

expression to modern and secular African subjectivity in ways that the art of his ancestors, profoundly limited in formal and narrative possibilities by ritual imperatives, could never match. He also provided a detailed history of English academic painting, no doubt with the intention of establishing a particular art-historical knowledge not only with which he wished his work to be associated but also from which modern Nigerian art must calibrate its own trajectory.

It would be a mistake to miss the point of Onobolu's identification with the realist tradition of Western art and his claim, toward the end of the essay, that Yoruba traditional masks, sculptures, and drawings were "still crude destitute of Art and Science."<sup>7</sup> Like his contemporaries in Lagos, he must have been aware that once the genie of modernity was set free by *longue durée* historical processes and by the sudden impact of the colonial encounter, artistic practice based on preserving what to him were irrevocably moribund traditional arts and crafts—a refusal to appreciate culture as process rather than product, as the social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has argued—could not be the basis for a modern artistic subjectivity. Onobolu was, in other words, convinced that ethnicity and the cultural practices and social systems it circumscribed could not form a viable basis for modern life and the art associated with it. As such, in anticipation of a future independent nation, he looked to new ways of seeing and representing the world and the social self—which is precisely what the "science of perspective," associated with Western painting, and even the less artful medium of photography afforded him—rather than rely on techniques of representation linked to traditional and ancestral art. Realistic painting and photography could not only incomparably record the lives of (modern) Africans in ways the "stiff" religious art of his ancestors could not; they also quite significantly provided a powerful visual language for articulating the autonomous subjectivity of Nigerians confronted with the challenge of building a new, modern culture and nation. This is precisely the point made by A. O. Delo Dosumu in his preface to Onobolu's *A Short Discourse on Art*:

There is no greater expression of national life and character than Art and no one but [an] African can fully express her joy and sorrow, her hopes and aspirations, and her changing moods and passions. In this respect a great role awaits Mr. Onobolu—the interpretation of Africa to the outside world.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the leading members of the West African educated elite, many of whom Onobolu painted, saw his work as part of the larger struggle for

African sovereignty. This much is evident from the many enthusiastic reports about his work, particularly in the radical *Lagos Weekly Record* but also from Herbert Macaulay's declaration, in response to a 1920 exhibition of work by students at St. John's Wood, that Onobolu's art was a "clear, marvellous vindication of our struggle—a manifestation of our much repeated feelings that Africans are capable politically, intellectually and creatively."<sup>9</sup> His portraits of West African nationalists and sympathetic Europeans were thus seen as a continuation of the struggle against European snobbery.

To be sure, in terms of technical accomplishment and formal ambition, Onobolu's work as a portrait painter is unremarkable, especially given the particular tradition of Reynoldian Royal Academy painting with which he identified.<sup>10</sup> His portrait of *Mrs. Spencer Savage* (1906), generally regarded as his earliest masterpiece, demonstrates middling competence in watercolor, and his many portrait commissions in the years before and after his training in London and in Paris (at the Académie Julian) proved, in the estimation of contemporary observers, his mastery of the much coveted realistic figuration. If measured, however, against the traditional realism of Western academic painting, Onobolu's sometimes awkward figuration, clearly obvious in the rendering of the hands of *Dr. Sapara* (undated), and *Adebayo Doherty* (reputed to be his last painting), falls short. However, given that his oeuvre was almost entirely restricted to what must be seen as the painterly equivalent of studio photography, devoid of pictorial narrative, as his *Sisi Nurse* (1922) shows (figure 2.1), and given his insistence even until the early 1960s on academic art training for Nigerian schools, I am compelled to believe that Onobolu never quite saw the task of modern African artists as extending beyond representation of the modern self, as well as demonstrating to apparently unrepentant Western critics his technical and intellectual abilities.

Compared to the work of the pioneer modern Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), Onobolu's work shows the extent to which the Nigerian artist strayed away from the grand courtliness and pictorial mythologizing of the past associated with the academic tradition. Whereas Varma was embraced by and thrived in the courts of Baroda, Udaipur, Travancore, and Mysore and was supported by the British ruling class, the Raj, and the emergent nationalist elite and therefore alternated between portraiture, mythologies, and grand allegorical narratives in the true spirit of Western academic painting, Onobolu appears quite handicapped, limited in his choice of subjects, and tied, as it were, to portraiture and the rare landscape painting. It is tempting, then, to think that in his determination to break with the past, Onobolu saw no pictorial grandeur in Yoruba or Nigerian history or myths—





**Figure 2.1** Aina Onabolu, *Sisi Nurse*, oil on canvas, 1922. Photo, courtesy of Art House Ltd., Lagos.  
© Estate of Aina Onabolu.



unlike his former student Akinola Lasekan (1916–1972), who painted scenes of Yoruba legends and royal portraits (figure 2.2)—and saw in the Lagos, Ibadan, and Ife royal houses of his day no opportunities for grand courtly art. We might even further submit that the fact that Onobolu had no firsthand contact with European academic painters—as did Varma, who learned from the Dutch painter Theodore Jensen while in the Travancore royal court—his access to the full range of academic pictorial methods and imaginaries were limited during his formative years. Apart from helping us understand the extent of Onobolu’s “academism,” these considerations, we have to concede, trouble the description of Onobolu’s art as nationalist if, following Benedict Anderson, we take it that one of nationalism’s imperatives is the invention of (pictorial) myths of a deep national past. Varma certainly did so with what Geeta Kapur has described as his ambition of devising pan-Indian vision by subsuming the colony’s demographic and cultural diversity in the “hegemonic interests of [Indian] national unity”<sup>11</sup> (figure 2.3). Yet the fact that Onobolu put his portraiture in the service of the assertive sociopolitical ambition of the Lagos intellectual elite and given the foundational role of this class in the nationalist struggles of early-twentieth-century Nigeria, his work suggests that colonial-era Nigerian nationalism (shorn of pan-Nigerian national allegories) did not follow the classic path theorized by Anderson or indexed by Varma’s paintings.

Nevertheless, it bears emphasizing that Onobolu’s initial attraction to the Western academic tradition and pictorial realism at the very moment the European avant-garde waged war against this tradition was the logical direction for a resolutely new, modern, progressive African art. His academicism, situated as it was within the cultural context of an incipient African modernity, holds the same radical charge—in its rejection of “traditional” art—as the modernism of his European counterparts seized by the fever of inventing alternative ways of representing/evoking the reality and the world yielded by industrial modernity. Put simply, he and his European contemporaries were simultaneously developing new modes of painting—borrowed from or instigated by the cultural and historical other—from the ashes of tradition. This antitraditionalism of the European avant-garde as adopted by Onobolu must then explain the antagonism toward both by the contemporary European cultural and political establishment and the overseas colonial administration. This is the root of the pedagogical conflict, as indicated in the 1963 memorandum, between Onobolu and Murray.

Apart from his attraction to the nationalistic rhetoric and practice that had put the educated elite in the bad books of the colonial regime, Onobolu’s promotion of “high art” values—the two quotations by Owen Meredith



**Figure 2.2** Akinola Lasekan, *Ajaka of Owo*, watercolor and gouache on paper, 1944. The Newark Museum, Gift of Simon Ottenberg, TR91.2012.38.8. © Estate of Akinola Lasekan.



**Figure 2.3** Raja Ravi Varma, *Young Woman with a Veena*, oil on canvas, ca. 1901. Government Museum, Trivandrum, Kerala, India / Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library.

and William Turner in *A Short Discourse* reference the uniqueness of the “genius”—not only raised once more the specter of the inauthentic native degraded by an inferiority complex yet illogically locked in the mode of the racial mimic, unconscious slave, and counterfeit advocate of European culture and civilization. This is not so much about whether Onabolu, as a representative of the black race, had proven that he could master the patently Western genre of “fine art,” for his paintings—as F. H. Harward declared in his foreword to the artist’s 1920 exhibition catalog—had convincingly done that; rather, it is simply a matter of whether Onabolu ought to be pushing young Nigerians who studied under him to do the same, when all the colonial regime wanted at the time were docile natives sufficiently educated to do the clerical and manual jobs for which they were supposedly more naturally suited. To his critics and admirers, Onabolu’s art was resolutely the visual art

equivalent of literary education; this might explain the grudging tolerance of it by the colonial administration and surely the support by some mission and private schools in Lagos, as well as the progressive print media and the nationalist political elite.<sup>12</sup>

As an art teacher, Onabolu focused mostly on drawing, his courses including Principles of Drawing and Pattern Making, Basic Design and Coloring, Still Life Drawing, Color Theory and Practice, Principles and Approach to Perspective Drawing, and Pictorial Drawing. He also taught Anatomical Studies, Color, Light and Shade, Science of Perspective, and Imaginative Composition, among other subjects. These no doubt are familiar subjects in any Western academic art program, yet in spite of his fascination with the history of Western art and British academic painting, he apparently excluded from his curriculum art history or art appreciation. This is surprising in light of his argument in *A Short Discourse* “that to appreciate a good picture one must learn something about art.”<sup>13</sup> We could, I suppose, assume that the “something” in his statement has to do with the methods and principles of the drawn or painted image rather than a discourse of its history. Yet his meaning is quite obvious if one looks again at his text, because the call for learning about art leads him directly to an argument about the difference in formal integrity and expressive possibilities of painting and photography, followed by his historical account of Western art, with a long digression on British academic painting. The sense that he knew enough of Western art history, especially after his training in London and Paris, to offer even rudimentary lessons on the subject encourages some speculation as to why he did not include in his own teaching the very subjects he argued were essential to understanding art.

It seems to me that by not including the study of Western and, of course, African art history, Onabolu wished to emphasize that his pedagogy was focused on methods and principles of the realistic mode of visual representation and ultimately on the mastery of the new pictorial language. I am tempted to suggest a desire on Onabolu’s part to focus on the singularity of realism’s power as a tool for narrating history, not by giving an account of events and deeds of modern Nigerian heroes and leaders—as in normative history painting—but by simply bearing witness to their embodied humanity, which was a crucial act in the process of gaining control of the native’s subjectivity. Given the prevailing tendency to associate realism with rationality, which in turn was the motivating logic of Western modernity’s institutions and knowledge systems, mastery of this visual mode more or less implied the demonstration of one’s ability to be modern, which for the African was not yet a settled question. In other words, Onabolu’s task was not

so much to help his students find their place within the admirable tradition of Western art as assist them in acquiring the tools with which to speak a visual language that evoked the rationalism/realism of industrial modernity, the mastery of which was fundamental to the politics of the native educated elite. This is a way to understand, if one resists the temptation to think only in terms of mimicry and authenticity, why the first act of pioneer modern painters in the colonial worlds of India, Egypt, Nigeria, and elsewhere was to master the Western academic and naturalistic painting mode.

Let us step back for a moment but only to reconsider the significance of Onobolu's academicism in terms of both his relationship with history and the place of his work in the modernism of later generations of Nigerian artists. Reassessments of Onobolu's work in recent art-historical scholarship have revealed a faulty grasp by some observers of the task the artist set for himself, along with a misunderstanding of what I think are useful ways of imagining his academicism as radically modernist. Consider, for instance, the artist, writer, and curator Rasheed Araeen's assertion that "the realism of [Onobolu's] work is a product of colonialism, not an opposition to it as some believe."<sup>14</sup> Araeen sees as fundamentally flawed the work of what he calls "Africa's own historians," who have in different measures looked to Onobolu as the initial point of the continent's entry into art history, when in fact his work amounted to nothing but "mimicry under the tutelage of colonial paternalism." Araeen's point, in essence, is that because of European colonialism's far-reaching, transformative effect on the cultures of Africa, it was impossible for Onobolu (and other African artists) to claim agency or authenticity by speaking in a European visual tongue. Moreover, Onobolu's failure to link his academism to the distinctive naturalism of ancient Ife sculpture, which would stand for his own tradition, and the inability of African art history to argue for that ancestral connection instead of celebrating the artist's mimicry assured Africa's marginality in what Araeen calls the mainstream history of modernism. Of Araeen's many troubling pronouncements on Onobolu's modernism, the two that parallel more cogently the problem of this book and this chapter are, first, Araeen's erroneous assumption that African modernism is one uniform, uninflected story of appropriating European artistic forms and concepts; and, second, his claim that Onobolu's academism is nothing but mimicry and irresponsible abandonment of his African tradition. Here, Araeen's critique, remarkably reactionary for its time, retraces the criticisms of the educated nationalist elite by apologists of indirect rule.

Whatever part Aina Onobolu supposedly played in instigating the appointment of Kenneth Murray in the summer of 1927 as the first official arts



and crafts teacher in colonial Nigeria, Murray's arrival marked a significant shift on the part of the colonial government in its stance on art education, which until then existed, unregulated, outside the purview of the Education Department. But it became clear in no time that the two men had oppositional ideas about the direction, role, and scope of art in the colony. Soon after his arrival, Murray, a fresh graduate of the Birmingham School of Art, set about fashioning a new arts and crafts curriculum that became the model for southern Nigerian schools from the early 1930s onward (*Kwami*, 1936; *Keta Girl*, 1942; figures 2.4 and 2.5).

Fundamental to Murray's pedagogy is the belief that students should be encouraged to create art along purely African lines rather than be made to imitate European artistic styles and forms or be subjected to British examination standards. His staunch defense of art's locational specificity hints at the much more controversial but consistent conviction expressed in his many memoranda and letters that modern European art was far too advanced for Africans, who had yet to reach "the stage of perceiving a subject like art for its own sake."<sup>15</sup> Although not necessarily opposed to realism, he was critical of the study of perspective and object drawing, convinced as he was that the rigorous depiction of objective reality was far less important than the excitement of artistic imagination through memory images. He discouraged such pictorial methods as much because they derive from the spiritually impoverished European tradition as for their alienness to native tradition. "In African primary schools," he once wrote, "art and craft teaching should be based on the indigenous work without importations of design or technique from Europe. Drawing and painting could even be omitted from the curriculum of many schools in Nigeria, provided that wood carving was taught instead."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, his art teaching ran on two distinct tracks: first, the rendition of memory images created either by imagining unseen subjects or by drawing objects only after a brief observation; and second, the depiction of scenes of rural life and illustration of folk stories by means of flat rather than illusionistic pictorial forms.

In a passage that might well have been directed at the work of Aina Onabolu, Murray criticizes the African artist seeking the mastery of stylistic modes and pictorial techniques of the precubist era:

It must seem absurd that while European artists, supported by a philosophy of art, seek to acquire for their work the virtues of the art of Africa and of other pre-literate peoples, Africans, who have not yet the experience to formulate a reasoned point of view in art, should want to learn the conventions of art that most European artists would prefer to forget.<sup>17</sup>





**Figure 2.4** Kenneth Murray, *Kwami*, graphite on paper, 1936. Image courtesy of the Otter Gallery, University of Chichester, England. © Estate of Kenneth C. Murray.



**Figure 2.5** Kenneth Murray, *Keta Girl*, graphite on paper, 1942. Image courtesy of the Otter Gallery, University of Chichester, England. © Estate of Kenneth C. Murray.

Whereas Onabolu prepared students for professional work as modern painters or designers, Murray, by recommending apprenticeship with master traditional carvers for those who wished to practice professionally, was more invested in recovering native art traditions and in training artists whose work would satisfy the needs of rural and city dwellers who must be protected from the decadent, modern art and industrial crafts of Europe and Asia. Yet in banishing the study of perspective, a sophisticated pictorial device, from his art class, Murray provided neither an alternative, equally rigorous approach to formal composition nor new ways of seeing pictorially. The result is the simple, narrative 1930s paintings of his special students, including Uthman Ibrahim, Benedict Enwonwu, Christopher C. Ibeto, Jerome O. Ugoji, and A. J. Umana. The naive naturalism of Murray's school—characterized by idiosyncratic, flat pictorial space, unsophisticated palette, and rudimentary draftsmanship—was, as it turned out, not a transitory style of juvenilia. Rather, it continued into the artists' mature years, with the singular exception of Enwonwu's sophisticated "African style," which emerged only *after* he trained in London at the Slade School of Fine Art in the late 1940s. In other words, Murray's pedagogy, while providing his students minimal technical proficiency in representing traditional customs, festivities, and other "African" subject matter, neither catalyzed the production of the modern equivalent of the deep, formal inventiveness and symbolic power of the much admired traditional African art nor prepared them for the more challenging process of rigorous experimentation with and understanding of design principles inherent in traditional Western academic sculpture and painting.

Despite his lack of teaching experience before coming to Nigeria, Murray resolutely rejected Onabolu's pedagogy from the outset. His ideas about artistic practice and development in the colony came from a constellation of contemporary ideas about European child art education and Eastern philosophy and above all from his interpretation of Lugard's vision of education for tropical Africa. What is most striking about Murray is the manner in which these disparate sources seamlessly melded to produce a firm and dogmatic view of modern art in colonial Nigeria, one that was more conservative than anything his contemporaries working in other parts of West Africa imagined. I want to suggest that parsing what is part of the work of the European colonial *Weltanschauung* and what emanates from Murray's private convictions cannot lead to the sort of conclusions made by scholars who have argued that Murray's art teaching was distinctly opposed to the mainstream model of colonial native education.

The misunderstanding of Murray's art education in the scholarship is

manifest in many ways, not the least of which are moments when excursions into the archive confuse rather than clarify our view of the past. Consider, for instance, a page of text in Murray's archive consisting of statements about taste, child art education, the relationship of fine art and craft, and the universality of art and its place in the social imaginary—ideas excerpted from the British educator Joseph E. Barton's writing on "On Art in Education for Citizenship."<sup>18</sup> It has been argued that these notes represent Barton's articulation of modernism's "search for non-materialistic, spiritual values" and thus extrapolates a correlation between this idea of European modernism and Murray's view of African art "as a practice animated not only by religion and magic but also by its production of use/value in everyday life."<sup>19</sup> A cursory look at Barton, an ardent defender of "Parisian" postcubist modernism in post-World War I Britain, who in his famous six-part lecture series on the BBC in 1932 pushed for popular acceptance of the formal purism of functionalist architecture and abstract art—a position so radical that Roger Fry<sup>20</sup> had to call for the reclamation of what he called the tremulous vitality of artistic sensibility from Barton's mechanistic and functionalist aesthetic—suggests that Murray could not have found in Barton's ideas a positive influence. Whereas Barton argued in his book *Purpose and Admiration* that modernist abstraction was the most current and true manifestation of what he calls "the religion of beauty" (by which he means, echoing the more familiar theories of Clive Bell and Roger Fry, art that is not so much concerned with re-presenting the visual familiars of nature and the social experience as in evoking pure aesthetic emotion through sheer manipulation of artistic forms), Murray distrusted modernism for this very reason.<sup>21</sup> Given Murray's disapproval of modernism's nonspiritual basis, its expression of Western modernity's failures, and its moral decadence, he must have seen Barton as a key purveyor of the very ideas he hoped the new curriculum for native art education would prevent from taking root in Africa.

Even the influence of the Austrian art educator Franz Cižek (1865–1946) must be put in proper historical perspective to grasp the specific ways it relates to Murray's work. Quite rightly, a pamphlet in Murray's archive, produced by Francesca M. Wilson for the 1921 art exhibition of paintings by Cižek's students in London, irrefutably connects Murray's ideas about art education with those of the Austrian. However, it is much more likely that the Birmingham School of Art (at the time the top arts and crafts school in England), where Murray had trained, had familiarized him with pedagogical methods that were much more fundamental than those of Cižek. As it happens, Robert Catterson-Smith (1853–1938), a former principal at

Birmingham and an important voice in the British arts and crafts movement, had developed and taught a radical method of encouraging the child's power of artistic expression through memory drawing. This entailed requiring students to draw, from memory, images of objects shown to them for a brief period of time rather than draw images by directly observing the objects. One of Catterson-Smith's best-known students at Birmingham, Marion Richardson, adopted and refined his method and, with the help of Margery Fry and her brother, the art critic Roger Fry, became an influential advocate of memory drawing; it became a core part of Kenneth Murray's art teaching in Nigeria. Birmingham also provided the context for Murray's encounter with Čižek's ideas, because Francesca Wilson, author of the Čižek pamphlet in Murray's archive, was a history teacher at the Edgbaston Church of England College for Girls in Birmingham, as well as a friend of the Frys. This is important, if only because it indicates that although the exhibition of work by Čižek's students, organized by Wilson, traveled for several years (along with Wilson's text), Murray might in fact have come across both when he was still a student at Birmingham. In any case, Catterson-Smith's and Richardson's idea of memory drawing, together with Čižek's belief that the work of education, which naturally destroyed creative originality, ought to be the protection of children from outside influence so as to allow them grow from their own roots, needed one more element to coalesce into Murray's pedagogy and his vision of African art: the element of the mystical and the religious, which came readily from the Sri Lankan philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947).

A passage from Coomaraswamy's 1918 book *Dance of the Śiva*, which was included in a typescript of quotes in Murray's archive, describes how yoga could, through invocation of various Buddhas and bodhisattvas and by ritual purification and meditation, result in the emptying of the ego consciousness and the production of sacred images willed by the divinities with whom the artist at that moment is in perfect communion. Elsewhere in *Dance of the Śiva*, Coomaraswamy cites Sukracharya's injunction, which no doubt affirms the connection between art and spirituality, while making the case for the primacy of the internally generated image, emanating as it were from the true, mystically inspired self, over the images that remain merely in the optical realm:

Let the imager establish images in temples by meditation on the deities who are the objects of his devotion . . . in no other way, not even by direct or immediate vision of an actual object, is it possible to be so absorbed in contemplation, as thus in the making of images.<sup>22</sup>

What emerges from this tracking of Murray's development as an educator is a picture of Murray that is far more complex than previously imagined. For while there is no doubt that he was attracted to progressive models of art teaching and child education in Europe, we witness the co-optation and transmogrification of these ideas about nurturing artistic originality and authenticity into arguments about African cultural exceptionalism, the European's mandate to determine the conditions of Africa's access to modernity, and indeed the unsettled question of European modernism itself. Art schools for Africans, as imagined by Murray, were nothing short of what Jacqueline Delange and Philip Fry have called "protective centres for native talent."<sup>23</sup> The now legendary 1937 exhibition of paintings and sculptures organized by Murray for his students at the Zwemmer Gallery, London, clearly illustrates this point (figures 2.6 and 2.7)

The Zwemmer show was a triumph for Murray. For years, he had sought approval from the colonial administration to exhibit the work of his students in London, ostensibly to convince both Whitehall and his critics in Nigeria of the relevance of native art education. But the exhibition was also an emphatic statement about the viability of his pedagogical method and his ideas about African art.<sup>24</sup> In every sense the exhibition proved to be immensely popular, so much so that it remained open past its originally scheduled close. Art historians naturally point to the positive reviews it garnered, especially in the conservative English press, as evidence of Murray's successful insertion of modern African art into European cultural consciousness, as well as clear proof of his foundational role in the making of modern Nigerian art. But what does the Zwemmer show reveal about the use of products of empire in the internal battle for Britain's cultural modernity? How do the exhibition reviews confirm my reading of Murray's teaching as a process of creating African art that was anything but modern and progressive for its time?

Murray's alliance with Sir William Rothenstein, the principal of the Royal College of Art who opened the exhibition, is revelatory and significant. Rothenstein, a vocal critic of abstraction and Parisian modernism, had argued in 1931 that narrative realism, to him England's national style, was a viable bulwark against the senseless abstraction of the Continental modernists.<sup>25</sup> The Zwemmer exhibition, which showed "Africans doing real African art, rather than Europeans doing pseudo-African art," provided him the opportunity to simultaneously argue for the retention and expression of national essences through art and to criticize English/European artists whose modernism was linked to cubist formalist experimentation with African (and Oceanic) sculpture. In other words—this applies to the show's enthu-



**Figure 2.6** Ben Enwonwu, *Coconut Palms*, watercolor, 1935. Reproduced from *Nigeria 14* (1938), courtesy National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja. © The Ben Enwonwu Foundation.



**Figure 2.7** C. C. (Christopher Chukwunenye) Ibeto, *Ibo Dancers at Awka*, watercolor, 1937. Reproduced from *Nigeria 14* (1938), courtesy National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja. © Estate of C. C. Ibeto.



siastic reception by the conservative press—the exhibition proved that Africans had their own type of art, one quite different from either the sophisticated, narrative modernism preferred by Rothenstein and the academicians or the despicably powerful abstractions of the formal modernists defended by the likes of Fry, Barton, and Paul Nash. The exhibition, moreover, showed the British art world the great lie of abstract modernism: the real African art it claimed as one of its foundational resources was, after all, an illustrative, narrative art. Furthermore, it is not insignificant that the Zwemmer show appeared in London just one month after a major survey of contemporary art from England's dominions (Canada, Australia, South Africa, India, New Zealand). While the latter show revealed the dominion artists' familiarity with nineteenth- and twentieth-century European styles, the pictorial naivety of the Nigerian works readily confirmed the popular perception of the colonies, unlike the dominions, as still in dire need of British imperial tutelage. This I believe is the ideological lesson of the Zwemmer exhibition, the reason it attracted such attention in the British press.

Murray's teaching and ideas about African art in the era of colonization must be seen as indicative of his unwillingness to appreciate the ineluctable fact that even in the so-called primitive non-Western society, artistic development could reflect the transformations in the sociopolitical space inaugurated by the colonial encounter and internal forces of change. But whatever trouble we might have appreciating the grounds for his strong convictions about the direction of art in colonial Nigeria disappears once we accept that he was (perhaps unwillingly or unconsciously) in many ways a mainstream colonial pedagogue profoundly sympathetic to the ideology of indirect rule. Far from critical of colonial ideology, Murray's work was a part of the mainstream British-African colonial practice and discourse.<sup>26</sup>

Let me then press further the intellectual and political debts Murray owes to the ideology of indirect rule by suggesting that if he had any clear agenda as a teacher, it must have been to restore the original vision of Frederick Lugard for native schools. In 1943, citing a passage from Lugard's *Memoranda on Education* (1919), Murray wrote: "The primary object of the schools was 'the preservation of indigenous arts unspoiled by foreign designs, and the improvement of Native methods.'"<sup>27</sup> Murray lamented this unrealized mandate, blaming the Native Administration Works Department, which tended to focus on technical instruction at the expense of art. He noted the adverse impact of such instructional procedures and the disillusionment of students, most of them from noncraftsmen families, trained in the traditional arts but unable to secure government jobs that usually went to those trained in Euro-

pean methods and techniques. Finally, he challenged the slack government economic policy responsible for the influx of cheap European and Asian imports, which compromised the production of exquisite handmade native arts and craft.<sup>28</sup> To remedy this situation, an advisory committee on education recommended the revision of the art syllabus—the syllabus for art teachers that he designed and the government adopted in 1933—thereby winning the support of the Colonial Office for what he described as a “new attitude of encouraging the growth of indigenous arts.”<sup>29</sup>

Murray was not the first to defend or promote Lugard’s idea—a fact he acknowledged. He hinted at the influence of the writings of Eckart von Sydow, who, he noted, was among the earliest and most influential advocates of teaching art to Africans in the African spirit without forcing European ideas on them. In the concluding part of an essay remarkably insightful for the time, von Sydow, a Berlin-based expert in exotic art, wondered if there was a renaissance of African art in Africa.<sup>30</sup> “How,” he asked, “can the ancient art of the African native tribes be preserved or revitalized?” His answers are noteworthy. First, he argued that despite the temptation to encourage Africans to draw inspiration from Christian ideas, the result was bound to be unsatisfactory, not least because Christian art production tended to be “superficial, devoid of real inner meaning . . . and of a mawkish prettiness.” The only hope, as he saw it, would be for missionaries to encourage native talent to continue on the same lines as the ancient style, which could surely be adapted to Christian subjects. Second, he states:

The best opportunities for the practical furthering of art lie within the range of government art supervision. This must ever be guided by the consciousness that it has the power to preserve and renew a precious cultural possession. It should endeavour with all its might not to force on to the Negro the mask of European art, but to train him to express his own individuality, thereby protecting him from the danger of slavishly imitating Europe.<sup>31</sup>

Here then, I suggest, is a clear statement of the problem of the Education Department’s art program, one which Murray recognized, internalized, and subsequently set out to enforce once he had the opportunity to design the official art curriculum for Nigerian schools. It is worth observing, though, that neither von Sydow nor Murray came to this conclusion in isolation, for they, like Lugard, subscribed to the adaptationist model of acculturation for African societies.

Adaptation as a model for African education supposes that only a system-

atic revival of “tribal” cultures, institutions, and practices or the invention of surrogate authentic lifeways would guarantee the colonial subject access to a safe, uncorrupted modernity, a modernity circumscribed, nevertheless, by a European vision of the African tribal life. This model, however, is riddled with complications and paradoxes. In practice, it had as its object a limited appropriation and regulation of tools of Western modernity in order to re-inforce or rehabilitate the African’s immanent tribality. Yet in the task of assisting the colonial subject to keep connected to a past or passing tradition strictly defined, reconstructed, and promulgated by the colonial master, the apologists of adaptation could not concede to the colonized the prerogative of deciding the terms of his engagement with modernity or with the traditional culture for that matter. It is as if they could not live with the idea that he alone could meaningfully define the boundaries of his so-called African lines. Moreover, if, as most observers noted, the African’s encounter with the West had been a rapid process, did not the idea that limiting the African’s desire to acquire the tools with which to navigate the path to modernity strike the supporters of adaptation as patently absurd?

Translated to art pedagogy, adaptation theory meant an emphasis on production of traditional art and craft and on the recuperation and reification of “tribal” life with the aid of simple modern art techniques and media. Kenneth Murray’s art teaching in Nigeria exemplified this, as did the art program initiated by the British artist Margaret Trowell at Makerere College, in Kampala, Uganda. Their pedagogy resulted in pictures that exploited neither the full resources of mimetic representation nor the formal implications of abstract designs in African craftwork. In other words, the work failed to aspire to the rigor of academic formalism—an approach, I suggest, that in the given historical context represented the new and the progressive—or to the formal possibilities of the different modes of Western contemporary art. In a sense, the work of Trowell’s and Murray’s students related to “native” arts and culture only to the extent that they *illustrated* them; it typically did not show evidence of formal experimentation with properties of specific indigenous media or with their inherent design principles and compositional structures. Moreover, this work tests our imagination whenever we attempt to relate it to the techniques of memory drawing and spontaneous expression that supposedly gave rise to them, for their mechanical rendition of rural subject matter evince a mannered tribal affect. Further, the expectation that their students paint themes taken from life around them and from folklore often resulted in idyllic representations of bush “tribal” life, which not only appealed to the teacher’s primitivist imagination but also simultaneously led to systematic

erasure of anything associated with Europe, despite the pervasive effects of a long history of contact with Europe.

While Murray and Trowell represented the dominant pedagogical trends within the framework of British colonial ideology no less because of their influence on colonial art education in Nigeria and Uganda, few dissenting voices recognized the futility of the salvage paradigm inherent in adaptationist policies, proposing instead art and craft programs that unabashedly and positively acknowledged the inevitable reality of African cultural modernization. The work of George A. Stevens at Prince of Wales College, Achimota, in the Gold Coast (Ghana)—an arts and crafts school roughly modeled after the Bauhaus design school in Weimar, Germany—exemplifies this minority position.

Stevens, a graduate of the Slade School of Art, London, arrived at Achimota in 1924 and thus became the first official, dedicated art teacher in the British West African colonies. A widely read observer of the impact of colonization on indigenous cultures and a follower of Edward Tylor's work on primitive cultures, Stevens believed in the survivability of cultural habits in societies undergoing rapid transformation. He therefore saw the tasks of the modern researcher in Africa as carrying out a systematic study of dying cultural phenomena and then keeping these archives for future generations of Africans, who would most certainly need such knowledge. In this, Stevens's position was far from radical. This part of his work, articulated in a 1928 article in the journal *Africa*, attracted Kenneth Murray's admiration and widespread support among his contemporaries in Europe.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless (this is my point), Stevens also recognized that not all Africans lived or desired to remain in the villages or wished to map their own lifeworld with the compass of their ancestors and that the art curriculum at Achimota and the secondary schools must be comparable to that of English schools in anticipation of a future demand for postsecondary art academies. He was thus critical of the usual tendency of art educators to insist on training taste and observation while discouraging, as Murray insisted in Nigeria, the emergence of professional artists and designers in the modern sense. Stevens's work is important, then, not so much for what he achieved during his three-year tenure at Achimota as for his recognition of the value of academic art within the context of a modernizing Africa. We could thus speculate that he might have supported the adoption of Onabolu's pedagogy by the colonial government if he, rather than Murray, had been posted to Lagos.

This analysis of Murray's work as an art teacher must inevitably confront the primitivism lurking in the shadows of his utterances and in the writ-

ing of men like Eckart von Sydow. This is necessary for it helps us understand his work as a product of a discourse that was coincident with global colonial encounters. To be sure, I use “primitivism” here in just two of its proliferating senses: first, as a tactic used by European artists/intellectuals to critique and disidentify with the rationalist, white, patriarchal basis of modern Europe’s bourgeois society, which is how we often think of the artistic avant-garde; and second, as the outcome of European response to and participation in the invention and discourse of (but also fear and fantasies about) its racial-cultural other. Despite the temptation to see the first kind of primitivism as “progressive” on account of its apparently rejectionist or critical stance against the sociopolitical status quo, I am convinced—following Chinua Achebe’s critique of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and the arguments of Edward Said about European intellectuals’ participation in the production of orientalism—that the two kinds of primitivism are ineluctably conjoined in the production of the trope of the primitive, in spite of what might be their dissimilar motivating politics. I thus argue that though Murray’s writings and lifestyle suggest that he might have been genuinely convinced about the need to maintain the uniqueness of African indigenous cultures and to protect them from Western civilization’s aggressive inhumanity and decadent materialism, his insistence on “natural” rural scenes as the genuine face of colonial Africa comes close to the second type of primitivism. In other words, despite his criticism of the colonial regime—arguably driven by his realization that the government’s policies were moving away from the Lugardian adaptationist model—his ideas about contemporary African cultures and art were remarkably similar to von Sydow’s. In a way, Murray, like European avant-garde artists of his day, “inherited,” as Susan Hiller has argued, “an unconscious and ambivalent involvement with the colonial transaction of defining Europe’s ‘others’ as *primitives*, which, reciprocally, maintains an equally mythical ‘western’ ethnic identity.”<sup>33</sup> Still, there is a crucial difference between the work of Murray, whose primitivist imagination was, from every indication, born of a compelling empathy and yearning for an immersive experience of African cultures and lifeways, and that of such artists as Picasso and the Parisian avant-garde, for whom African and Oceanic arts were just alien resources for reimagining their own ideas and experiences of Europe and the West. Similarly, despite his intellectual debts to Lugard, it is hard to imagine Murray in the same frame in which we find such an ideological primitivist as Lugard or even Mary Kingsley. The conclusion we can draw from these fast and loose intellectual connections between Murray, von Sydow, Kingsley, and Lugard is that insofar as their work produced or ex-

tended the reaches of the adaptationist model of colonial practice, they were engaged in what I would like to call *imperial primitivism*.

### Early Debates on Modern Art

I must emphasize that Kenneth Murray's work as an art teacher was important but not for the reasons we find in the existing scholarship.<sup>34</sup> If we extricate his work from contemporary intellectual debates or resist reading it against the prevailing discourse of indirect rule colonialism, his art teaching could certainly be and has routinely been misconstrued as radical, therefore even anticolonial and progressive. Isolated from interwar ideas about native education and policies, his pedagogy appears groundbreaking, more so if it is compared to its other local, historically, and geographically proximate antithesis: the supposedly atavistic academism of Onabolu. However, only when we reevaluate or reinsert Murray's work into its intellectual and political milieu are we able to appreciate it not as a precursor of the radical work that emerged in Nigeria by the mid-twentieth century but as an index of British colonial educational policies in Africa.

Clearly, both Murray and Onabolu played critical roles in the development of modern art in Nigeria. The pertinent question is, what kind of modern art did their work anticipate? For Onabolu, as we have seen, the task of the modern Nigerian artist was first to dispel any racist assumption of the African's intellectual inferiority; how better to show this than through mastery, what Olu Oguibe aptly calls "reverse appropriation," of the creative sophistication that post-Renaissance European art had claimed as its sole property. It was important for Onabolu that the modern artist be subjected to rigorous training in the principles of form, design, and image-making techniques. It is unprofitable now to speculate the fate of Nigerian art had Murray's program not displaced that of Onabolu as the official curriculum for art teaching in Nigerian schools. What is certain is that despite Onabolu's marginalization in official art education, his art classes in private schools and in his own studio created the rudiments of an emergent art world, a thriving platform for articulating a modern artistic practice energized by his former students, many of whom organized themselves into art clubs in Lagos.

One such club was the Aghama Youth Club of Fine Arts, founded in the 1940s by Onabolu's former student A. O. Osula. As Donald MacRow suggested in 1954, the Aghama club "provided an alternative avenue for free expression among youth who, in fast changing Nigeria, had increasingly fewer opportunities to partake in native arts, customs and festivals."<sup>35</sup> The



club's members (who in 1957 included Uche Okeke, just before he enrolled in Zaria) engaged in life drawing, landscape painting, and other exercises. They emphasized technical mastery and professionalization and, contrary to Murray's pedagogy, had no interest in the supposedly vital native arts and crafts. Moreover, in carrying forward Onabolu's vision of the modern through his youth club, Osula also pointed to the next logical phase of modern Nigerian art by suggesting the task facing artists after the question of native artistic competence had been laid to rest.

In an important, though largely forgotten 1952 essay, Osula acknowledged the significance of what he called Nigeria's "art of the past" even as he affirmed his concern for the future of contemporary art.<sup>36</sup> Faced with the two distinct categories of artists he identified in colonial Nigeria—traditional craftsmen and the artists who based their styles and techniques on European examples—he clearly identified with the latter, the modern artists, to whom the future belonged. His vision of the modern, however, specifically called for modern artists to reengage with traditional art, for which many self-styled modern artists felt nothing but "irritation," so as to mine the formal, conceptual, and cultural reservoir of both new/foreign *and* old/native art:

Those who follow European ways and are influenced by Western technique—they have to rely more on their own powers of invention and imagination to create a new style which will incorporate something of our past with that which is new and strange coming from abroad. They have as much to learn from the traditionalists of the Nigerian interior as from the artists of Europe. This synthesis, desirable though it may be, has not yet been attained.<sup>37</sup>

His conclusion, at once emphatic and prophetic, explicitly noted the futurity of the modernism he imagined in 1952:

Little by little the difficulties will be overcome and young Nigerian artists, assimilating new techniques and media from Europe[,] will learn how to ally these with the best of our own Traditional Art, creating a synthesis of the old and the new, which will be the true Art of the present. Those who are working towards this end may be unknown to all but a few to-day, but, when they succeed, their worth must surely be recognised by all.<sup>38</sup>

Osula's ideas, broadly, are not without precedent. Two years before, John A. Danford, a British artist and the regional director of the British Council, published a watershed essay on Nigerian art.<sup>39</sup> Unimpressed by the myth of a "pure" African art, he contended that the so-called traditional art

of Africa had always absorbed foreign influences that, in turn, reshaped local traditions. As such, he argued, those who “regret the introduction of new ideas and methods from Europe in the field of art”—presumably people like Kenneth Murray—clearly misunderstood the nature of traditional art and the possibilities of contemporary art. He then proposed a “gradual blending of the African and European Schools, the artist taking the best both have to offer and building out of it a new School of Nigerian art.”<sup>40</sup>

It is quite possible that Osula borrowed his ideas of blending the “African and European Schools” from Danford. Yet more than anyone before him, Osula understood and articulated the problem of the modern Nigerian artist in the colonial period: how to negotiate *on his own terms* the formal and conceptual possibilities offered by traditional African and Western art. The limited intellectual resources available to his contemporaries and, one might add, the burden of colonial projection of African self-insufficiency seemed to have compelled Osula’s candid assessment; but he was also quite possibly convinced that the fast-paced movement, from the beginning of that decade, toward political independence meant that the enabling critical conditions for the inevitable resolution of the problem of contemporary artistic subjectivity was imminent. Even so, neither he nor Danford suggested the specific nature of this blending or synthesis or what aesthetic or conceptual program they expected to spring from their prognostications. Chapter 3 takes up this matter of synthesis as part of its concern with the discursive genealogies of the theoretical framework proposed by the Art Society for its particular brand of postcolonial modernism.

Notwithstanding the interventions and parallel modernist aspirations of the young Lagos artists—many of whom were taking correspondence art courses offered by Onabolu and his former student Akinola Lasekan (1916–1972), who himself took correspondence courses at the Hammer-smith School of Art, London (figure 2.8)—Murray’s influence continued to hold sway, entrenched as much by art teaching in government schools as through national competitions and exhibitions organized by the British Council and the National Festival of the Arts. The first of the British Council shows, the Nigerian Art Exhibition of 1948 curated by Danford, was perhaps the most important, not least because it was the first comprehensive survey of modern Nigerian art. Not since Murray’s exhibition of his students’ work at the Zwemmer Gallery in London a decade earlier had an art exhibition attempted to set the ground for a discourse of modern Nigerian art. It included works by Murray’s former students, artists influenced by his teaching, as well as Onabolu’s former students.



**Figure 2.8** Uthman Ibrahim, *Bamboos*, watercolor, ca. 1935. Reproduced from *Nigeria* 14 (1938), courtesy National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja. © Estate of Uthman Ibrahim.

The 1948 exhibition reflected Danford's view of Nigerian art as belonging to two distinct European and African styles that could be gradually blended into a truly modern art. Soon enough, in 1953, Dennis Duerden, an education officer and art teacher at Keffi Boys Secondary School, whose students were represented in the 1948 exhibition, announced the emergence of a Nigerian painting style.<sup>41</sup> But rather than seek recourse, as we might expect, in indigenous art forms in formulating his argument, he characterized the Nigerian style of painting in terms of its unique color, shapes, gestures, and patterns. His formal analysis, to be sure, reads more like an elementary discourse on composition and design applicable to work by schoolchildren rather than a serious critical proposition on the work of Nigerian painters. His descriptions of pictures "built up by nicely calculated patches of paint" or of the artists' interest in decoration rather than depth or the tendency to ar-

range “the most delicate brush strokes into a sensitive pattern” could reasonably apply to many, if not all, historical and recent pictorial traditions. Moreover, to mention a glaring problem with his analysis, he does not explain how this Nigerian style differs from what he calls “the highly developed painting of Persia or India,” both of which, like modern European art, are much more concerned with pictorial pattern and decoration than illusionistic depth. Apparently aware of the precariousness of his critical enterprise and the basis of his primary assumption, he later wondered if it was not presumptuous to derive a Nigerian style from the work of students in a single little-known secondary school. Yet by emphasizing the ethnic diversity of the students, which invariably meant that they constituted a valid sample of Nigerian artists, the *Nigerianness* of the style he had formulated—never mind that it was based on the work of teenagers—seemed to him all too evident. Concluding, he asked how this new Nigerian style could be sustained and developed and, as if to encourage recognition of his support for the Murray–indirect rule approach to colonial modern art, he rephrased the now familiar Lugardian dictum: the thing for the art teacher to do “is to discourage plagiarism of European styles based on the tradition of depth and atmosphere.”<sup>42</sup>

**I CONCLUDE THIS CHAPTER** with some speculation on two questions that haunt the events following the arrival of Kenneth Murray in 1927. Why did Onobolu seek the appointment of a Briton to teach in Lagos when his own difficult experience with the Department of Education ought to have made him aware that the arrival of a white teacher invariably meant his own displacement and possibly the derailment of his vision of art education and practice based on mastery of the academic tradition? Did he, to return to a question I posed earlier, misread the ideological fissures marking the landscape in the era of indirect rule? To these questions I offer three propositions. First, quite possibly Onobolu’s demand for a British art teacher was born of the need to compel respect for fine art by a colonial administration that had little regard for what it considered the profligate and potentially radical “literary” work of native troublemakers. The concern for establishing art education as an important portfolio within the Department of Education, in other words, might have trumped anxieties about his own fate as a teacher in the fraught landscape of indirect rule colonialism. Second, the adoption of the 1925 memorandum created an urgent need for the colonial government to implement its guidelines across sections of the Department of Education. It thus made the appointment of a British teacher to lead the harmonization

process inevitable and contingent—or to put it more starkly, Onabolu’s proposal, coming a year after the memorandum, may not have actually played a determining role in the official decision to create the position eventually occupied by Murray. Third, Onabolu, like Edward Blyden and other members of Lagos’s educated elite before him, must have felt his own fair share of the official antagonism directed toward educated natives—this was the subtext of his 1920 treatise—but may have decided that the radical potential of formal education was the requisite bulwark against the mainstream colonialists’ objurgation of native artistic ambitions and agency. Thus, he may have been undeterred by the possibility that whoever joined him in teaching art might introduce artistic ideas incompatible with his.

I like to think that Onabolu had to have been very much aware of what Olufemi Taiwo aptly describes as “subjectivity’s quirks,” which dictate that a teacher cannot control what a student does with her tuition or how she decides to exert her agency.<sup>43</sup> He might, in fact, have been certain that, even with the possibility that the Education Department would support a “tribal” model of art and African subjectivity, the introduction of Western-style realism could still underwrite a viable modernist sensibility. He must have believed, in fact, that once the administration accepted any kind of formal art teaching in the schools, it would unwittingly and inevitably release the genie of native artistic agency. These speculations about Onabolu’s intention are not far-fetched, for as will be seen, it is from Onabolu’s model of the speaking, self-aware colonial subject convinced of his connection to world historical cultures—not just to that of his real or imagined ancestors, as indirect rule colonialism arrogantly argued—that postcolonial modernism unfolded in Zaria, Ibadan, and Lagos during the independence decade.