

## THE ACADEMY AND THE AVANT-GARDE

**THIS CHAPTER FOCUSES ON** the history of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST) in Zaria, the first degree-awarding art institution in Nigeria. In 1958 a group of ambitious NCAST students founded the Art Society, which became the inaugural act of mainstreaming modernist art during the 1960s. The process of transforming the NCAST art program from a training ground for secondary-school art teachers and casual artists into a school for professional artists, together with the tensions between the college and its national publics, reveals how competing demands on the institution dramatized the struggle between the colonial office and Nigeria's educated elite over the control and direction of modern art and its role in the making of modern postcolonial culture. This history reveals quite importantly how questions within the British faculty and between the school and its critics about the relevance of local content in the design of the art curriculum provided fertile ground for the radical work of the Art Society group in and after Zaria. By engaging the new cultural history of Zaria, this chap-

ter reconstructs a past that, until now, has seemed very distant due to lack of access to relevant archival records of the period. My task in this chapter, therefore, is to provide an intellectual history of the NCAST art department; to contextualize the motivating ideas of the Art Society; and in examining their artwork, to offer a more compelling account of what really happened at Zaria and what that has to do with the modernist movement in Nigeria in the decade of independence.

### The Art Department at NCAST, Zaria

The NCAST Fine Arts program began on a very modest scale in the 1953/54 academic year at the Ibadan branch of the college, with two teachers, Mr. Roy Barker and his wife, Mrs. V. M. Barker. As a subdepartment of education, the art program had eight foundation students enrolled in either the three-year course Art for Teachers or the three-year Commercial Art course. In its early years the program offered classes in weaving, pattern and design, imaginative composition, perspective drawing, anatomical studies, mural decoration, still life, figure drawing, wood carving, and modeling. However, the art program struggled mightily to assert its legitimacy as a relevant part of Nigeria's emergent academic community. But if the public was dubious of the program's place within the academic institution and beyond, it must have been in part because in its first years, the Art Section—as it was originally called—did not have a streamlined academic requirement for student admission, thus creating the impression that unlike the other programs in the college, art studies were laissez-faire and demanded from its practitioners less intellectual investment. The program's administrators, conscious of its critical public, devised ways of promoting the art program and its students and graduates, mostly through art exhibitions outside the college and by way of radio broadcasts. One such public relations event was the first gallery exhibition of students' work, organized in April 1955 at the Exhibition Centre in Marina, Lagos.

Quite likely an uninspiring show, the official opening of *The Nigerian College of Technology Art Exhibition* attracted important personalities, including the flamboyant federal minister of Natural Resources and Social Services, Adegoke Adelabu; the acting chief federal advisor on education, A. Hunt-Cooke; and the assistant principal of NCAST, Ibadan branch, K. O. Williams. This high-caliber guest list left no one in doubt about the stakes of the show. The eight exhibiting students, described in the catalog as “the first students to undertake a full-time training in Art in the Nigerian education scheme,”<sup>1</sup>

included four sophomores in the Art for Teachers course and four freshmen from the Commercial Art course.

In his opening address, the assistant principal stressed the exhibition's importance as a public relations event designed to introduce the college and its art program to a skeptical public. Emphasizing the future potential of the program and its graduates, however, he noted that the "College was proud of the exhibition, not so much [because] of the work done, as the work it is going to do, of which this was the first-fruits."<sup>2</sup> Despite this tacit acknowledgment of the mediocrity of the exhibited work, the principal reminded his audience of the students' artistic potential, invariably seeking a deferment of possible criticism of a program undergoing a series of structural and curricular transformations.

By September 1955 not only had the art program expanded into a full Department of Art, with more faculty and students; it also relocated from Ibadan to Zaria, with sixteen students enrolled that year for the four-year course leading to a diploma in fine art. This course comprised two years' study in anatomy, perspective, objective study, outdoor study, design subjects, life drawing, pictorial composition, modeling, pottery or fabric printing, general knowledge, and English. At the end of the second year, the students sat for the Intermediate Certificate in Arts and Crafts, followed by two years of specialization in painting, sculpture, or commercial design. Upon successful completion of the diploma course, a further year of study in the Department of Education was available for those graduates who intended to teach.

The transformation from an art-education institution (the model of art pedagogy established by Kenneth Murray a few decades earlier; see ch. 2) to an academy for professional artists and designers became complete in 1957, when the program phased out the three-year Teacher's Certificate course. This shift is crucial, for it signaled an important makeover of colonial art education, one emphasizing the training of teachers rather than professional artists. To press this concept further, it meant the final realization of Onabolu's (no doubt inflexible) vision of a Nigerian art academy; but whereas Zaria's orientation did not align with the strictly British Reynoldian Royal Academy model, it did serve as an advanced program for many students already introduced to rigorous art-making procedures, either in the studios of Aina Onabolu or Akinola Lasekan or in the art clubs (figures 3.1 and 3.2). What is clear, though, is that the cool reception of NCAST by a critical public put considerable pressure on a school in search of relevance in Nigeria and recognition in Britain. This recurring institutional anxiety, itself indexical of



**Figure 3.1** Sculpture Studio with students' work, Art Department, Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, Zaria, ca. 1958–1960. Photo, courtesy of Paul de Monchaux.

**Figure 3.2** Paul de Monchaux, *Head*, cement, 1958. This sculptural portrait was created as a demonstration in the sculpture class. Photo, courtesy of Paul de Monchaux. © The artist.

the pervasive angst between the colonizer and the colonized in the last days of empire, played out in an intradepartmental squabble among the British faculty members on how best to raise the program's profile. For instance, Donald Brooke, a lecturer in sculpture and an acquaintance of the famous English sculptor Henry Moore, believed that bringing high-profile artists like Moore to the school might be helpful, while Roy Barker, as departmental chair, was more concerned about seeking affiliation with a British art school. Thus, the first formal attempt at affiliating the Art Department with the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, in the 1957/58 session led to Slade Professor A. H. Gerrard's appointment as Zaria's external examiner, although negotiations between the two schools were ultimately inconclusive.<sup>3</sup>

The failure to secure London affiliation was not Zaria's only problem. A devastating challenge came in the form of withering criticism of the art program broadcast on national radio by Nigeria's most famous artist, Ben Enwonwu (1917–1994), sometime in the spring term of 1958.<sup>4</sup> Although a transcript of the broadcast does not seem to have survived, Enwonwu must have criticized the overwhelmingly European faculty and the art school's curricular focus, which by then had only one Nigerian artist, Clara Ugbodaga, on the teaching staff. At the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne (Paris, 1956), in a contemporary reformulation of the age-old charge levied against the colonial regime by the Lagos intellectual elite at the turn of the century, Enwonwu criticized the marginalization of qualified Nigerian artists in the colonial dispensation. The political problem faced by African artists, he argued, was manifest in the total control of art programs, like the Nigerian Festival of Arts, by Europeans who insisted on “fallacious standardization.”<sup>5</sup> He may have returned to these questions in his radio address with particular focus on the Zaria program.

The NCAST reaction to Enwonwu's broadcast was firm. In a letter reminiscent of the trademark indisposition of colonial administrators to criticism by native intellectual elite, the college registrar, W. A. Husband, requested that the federal government take official disciplinary action against the artist.<sup>6</sup> The government's lack of interest in sanctioning Enwonwu for the offensive broadcast, however, and the quick resolution of the confrontation seems to have been founded on anxieties about popular nationalist backlash against the colonial regime.<sup>7</sup> Described by the magazine *West Africa* a few years earlier as “one of the world's most unusual civil servants,”<sup>8</sup> Enwonwu was officially the Federal Art Supervisor in the Information Office. Without a specific task attached to his portfolio, his national visibility and his flamboy-

ant and prideful personality often collided with the strictures of colonial civil service. In any case, Zaria's hyperbolic response to the Enwonwu broadcast reminds us of pervasive and elevated anxieties in the administration about public perception of the college and its art program.

Within weeks of the Enwonwu episode, the art department sponsored a lecture, also broadcast on national radio, defending the program and its relationship with its Nigerian environment. Written and most likely presented by the art department chair, Roy Barker, in a conversational style reminiscent of the popular BBC talk series of the period, the broadcast helped the program in its struggle for national relevance. While no direct mention of Enwonwu is made in the lecture, there is no doubt that it was a response to him, using the same public medium through which he had unleashed his critical onslaught. The Barker broadcast, moreover, was meant to confront the challenge of establishing an art history of Nigeria in the light of new discoveries and old materials associated with the country's diverse ancient cultures. It was also designed to address the corollary problem of calibrating the art school's relationship, in terms of its curricular offerings, with these same traditions, which had assumed increasing significance in the Nigerian national imaginaries. Barker's position, however, was quite clear. Despite the acknowledged richness of Ife, Benin, and Esie sculptural traditions, he argued that the days of the "traditional wood carver" had been eclipsed by the contemporary "in-between stage"; that is to say, a transitional social milieu demanding a different kind of artist, one who "now stands free, sometimes uncomfortably free, in a bewildering, rapidly changing country."<sup>9</sup> The new artist, Barker argued, must confront ideas foreign to the constricted field of practice within which his ancestors "in [the] seldom-changing community" worked:

We may look back nostalgically to the glories of the past. We may decry this new Art. But let us understand that the change HAS come about. There ARE new things to say. There ARE new ways of saying them. Let us not be afraid of accepting ideas and techniques and above all do not let us, at this stage of our development, insist on a National Art or even on an African Art. Who shall say what these abstractions are? Can the European define African art? It is better to accept the new ideas from outside. To fight them is blind folly—to spite ourselves and deliberately to limit our future growth. Our National Characteristics and our African Art will not appear by force—rather will false characteristics appear. Characteristics which have become the Europeans' accepted ideas of them.

It may be argued that an acceptance of the foreign methods will re-

sult in a non-characteristic Art. Let me agree—indeed it is likely that this will happen—yes it certainly will if Nigeria has no men with that spark which raises the painter or the carver to the level of the Artist. That something which lifts men from the ranks of mere copyists who have not the strength or the ability to express themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Barker's reference to a "National Art" is important for two reasons. First, it steps away from the revivalist rhetoric of earlier colonial educators and ideologues. Second, it pushes against the nationalist tone of Enwonwu's earlier criticism. In Barker's view, nationalism, like other ideologies, because it exerts a restrictive rather than an emancipatory force on the creative imagination, could only compromise the establishment of a robust contemporary Nigerian art world. By accepting the methods of Western art, he reasoned, Nigerian artists would be in the vanguard of a new art with limitless potentialities. It is hard to fault Barker's argument, particularly its insistence on the liberatory value of the artistic experience, the transcendental power of the artistic imagination, and the dangers of art motivated primarily by politics and ideology. Yet the implied assumption of an axiomatic relationship between studies in African art and cultural irredentism ignores the unique means by which modernism and ideology were involved in productive and important, if underacknowledged, ways.

Barker also argued that a direct approach toward establishing a national art—by which he probably meant catalyzing the process with Africanist ideology or perhaps just studying African art—would inevitably lead to what he called "false characteristics." The Zaria Art Department's primary task was thus to help students acquire the aesthetic sensibilities and technical skills on which a vibrant Nigerian modernist art might be based. Yet Barker acknowledges the logical quandary faced by the "vocational art institute," like Zaria, which despite its mandate to teach people to sculpt and to paint, did not train artists; for according to him, it takes much more than training in studio methods and techniques to make an artist out of a painter, designer, or sculptor.

If for a moment we reinsert Barker's concept of an *artist* (rather than a mere painter, craftsman, or sculptor) in his argument about the possibility that acquiring foreign methods could result in "noncharacteristic art," the ideological basis of his meditation on the school of art in decolonizing Nigeria becomes obvious. The problem here is not so much with his claim that the art school does not make an artist—that might well be true—as with his absolutist thinking; that is, his refusal to accept that a profoundly expressive and formally sophisticated art could also be politically engaged and national-



istic (to the extent it participates in national identity discourse). Despite the tendency in Western modernist art history and theory to dissociate modernism from nationalism and to suggest their mutual antagonism, modernism in decolonizing societies often engaged productively with the discourse of the national.<sup>11</sup> The problem with Barker's argument was therefore the failure to come to terms with the idea that, in the process of developing a complex, diverse, and sophisticated contemporary art in Nigeria, the study of Nigerian and African art and cultural history can go hand in hand with the acquisition of foreign methods.

Although African art and Western art history, as such, were not taught as regular courses in Zaria during the NCAST years, some of the teachers gave occasional lectures or seminars in world art. For instance, Diana Madgett, a British artist who came to Zaria in 1957 after teaching at the University of Hong Kong for five years, gave lectures on Japanese and modern European artists. As Barker's radio program reveals, Zaria was particularly burdened with the question of calibrating its curriculum to justify its location within a specific national context. The inclusion of local content in the Zaria curriculum, however, began in 1958 with the arrival of Barker's successors, the British painter Patrick George (b. 1923) and the Canadian sculptor Paul de Monchaux (b. 1934), newly graduated from the Slade (figure 3.3).

In March 1959, de Monchaux, and two other teachers, G. E. Todd and Diana Madgett, along with two students, Uche Okeke and M. A. Ajayi, went on a ten-day study tour of southern Nigeria. The excursion covered different aspects of Nigerian cultural and artistic heritage, including the ethnographic museums recently established by Kenneth Murray at Ife, Benin, and Lagos. The group also visited important sites and monuments, such as the iron-studded monolith Opa Oranyan, said to have been installed in the ancient city of Ife during the reign of the first Yoruba king; the famous Tsoede bronzes, named after the founder of the Nupe Kingdom, at Tada (figure 3.4); the soapstone sculptures at Esie first documented by the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius in 1911; the old centers of glass-bead manufacture in Bida; and indigo-dyed cloth at Abeokuta. They also visited the palaces at Esie, Benin City, Akure, Ikere, and Owo to view their royal collections. Their itinerary included visits to major modern public art commissions, such as John Danford's bronze statue *Emotan* (1954) at Oba's Market in Benin City (figure 3.5); Enwonwu's wood sculpture ensemble *Risen Christ* (1953/54) at the Anglican Chapel, University College, Ibadan, and his bronze statue of Queen Elizabeth II in Lagos, commissioned by the Foreign Office in 1957; as well as several sculptural projects in Lagos by Enwonwu's great rival, Felix Idubor





**Figure 3.3** Group photograph showing Paul de Monchaux (center) and art students of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST), ca. 1960. Simon Okeke is seated left of de Monchaux. Photo, courtesy of Paul de Monchaux.

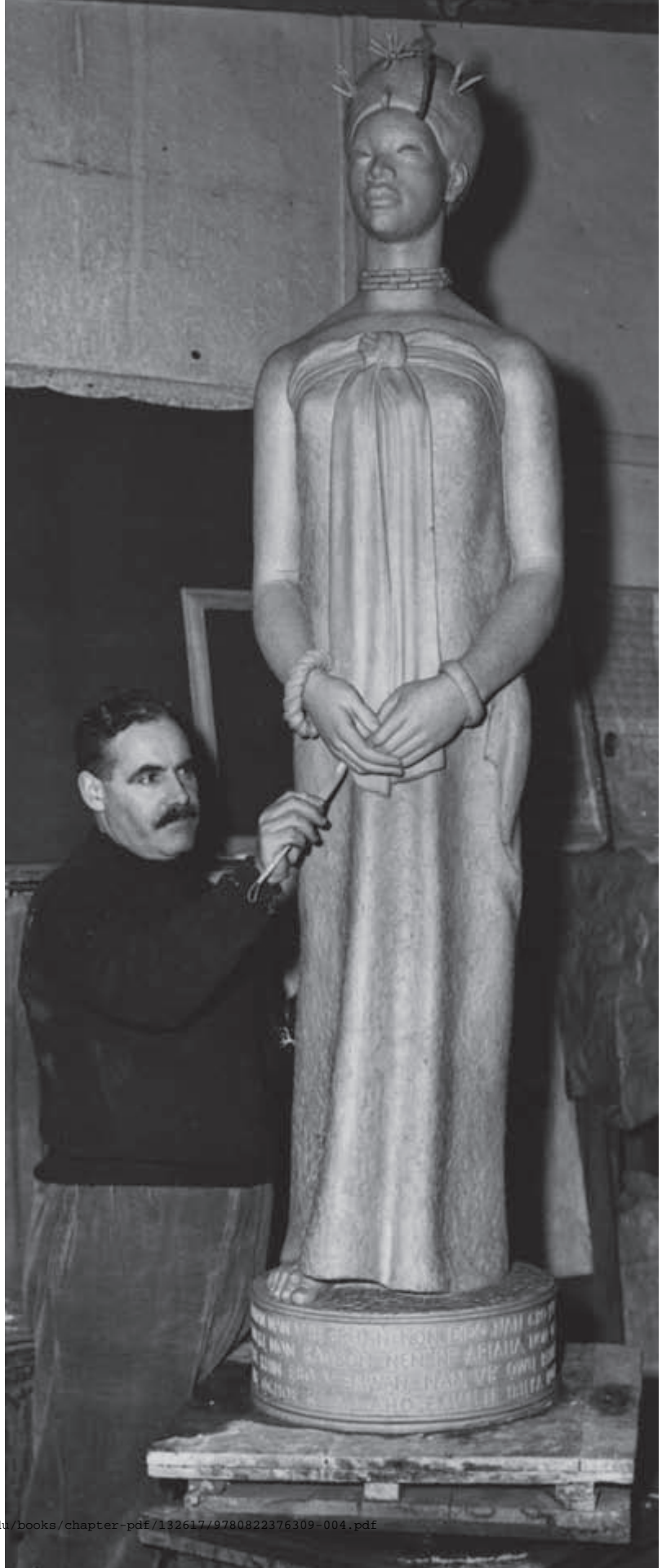
(1928–1991). Along the way, the group engaged in discussions on contemporary Nigerian literature, particularly the works of Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, and Amos Tutuola, quite likely prompted by Okeke, who was already collecting Igbo oral literatures. In addition to being a fledgling poet, he believed that contemporary art and literature faced similar challenges in decolonizing Nigeria. A month later, Patrick George and another teacher, G. E. Todd, took textile students to Zaria city to study local dyeing techniques, while another team of newly hired art teachers embarked on a similar trip in December 1959.

The effect of these study tours on the department's course offerings was immediate. Building on discussions with Okeke during their trip on the impact of Western and indigenous art on contemporary Nigerian art and on the prospects of professional art practice in Nigeria, de Monchaux gave lectures and seminars on African art, the art of Benin, and Yoruba sculpture between May and June, relying on his own photographs and trip notes but also



**Figure 3.4** Photograph of “Tsoede bronzes,” including the well-known seated figure (right) from Tada, taken in situ by Monchaux during the NCAST, Art Department faculty and students tour of southern Nigeria in 1959. Photo, courtesy of Paul de Monchaux.

**Figure 3.5**  
John Danford with  
plaster figure of  
*Emotan*, in his  
Chelsea studio,  
London, 1953. The  
statue, later cast in  
bronze, was installed  
at the Oba's Market,  
Benin City, in 1954.  
© Keystone Pictures  
USA / ZUMAPRESS  
.com.



on the writings of Ulli Beier and Leon Underwood. Clara Ugbodaga invited Enwonwu to give a lecture on contemporary Nigerian art, and T. A. Fasuyi, a former student, came to speak on traditional Nigerian art. These lectures demonstrated the art department's newfound commitment to expanding and "nationalizing" its curricular offerings.<sup>12</sup>

The other problem faced by the NCAST Art Department had to do with the status of its certification. With the departure of Patrick George in the summer of 1959, Clifford Frith (b. 1924), a painter and former teacher at Camberwell School of Art and Goldsmiths' College, became the chair. Soon after, he resuscitated the stalled affiliation process, predictably with Goldsmiths'.<sup>13</sup> In late December 1959, Patrick Millard, the respected British landscape painter recently appointed principal of Goldsmiths', visited Zaria. Although Goldsmiths' declined a formal affiliation with NCAST, the mere fact that it moderated Zaria's examinations brought the recognition by the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria of the NCAST diploma as conferring graduate status, a dramatic shift from the years of subgraduate categorization of the school's certificate by the government.

Frith further built on Patrick George's effort to introduce some African art in the Zaria art curriculum, as he believed that the students ought to be exposed to both European art and their own cultural heritages. To this end, he installed artifacts on loan from the Jos Museum in vitrines along the corridors and invited occasional lecturers in African art. Yet despite these curricular changes in the art department and the improved status of its diploma, doubts grew about the program's viability and its relevance within and outside the college. Compounding the situation was the fact that NCAST's art graduates—its ambassadors—looked to secure careers in secondary education, teacher-training colleges, or the civil service, because independent studio practice was widely considered precarious and undignified—a mere hobby for the gainfully employed or the preoccupation of those unable to secure decent jobs elsewhere. The Carr-Saunders Commission, appointed in 1962 by the northern regional government to supervise the founding of its new university, caused great clamor among Art Department staff and students when its report initially omitted the art program from the list of NCAST programs to be absorbed by the new university.

The report compelled Clifford Frith to solicit the support and endorsement of famous British artists and intellectuals. After failing to persuade the celebrated painter Francis Bacon to visit Zaria, in early 1961 he invited the painter Isabel Lambert (1912–1992)—an important British member of the figurative avant-garde better known for her professional and personal

relationships with Alberto Giacometti, Pablo Picasso, André Derain, Francis Bacon, Georges Bataille, Jacob Epstein, Simone de Beauvoir, and others—to spend time working in the NCAST painting studio.<sup>14</sup> Frith also solicited the intervention of the world-renowned biologist and author Sir Julian Huxley (1887–1975); unlike Barker before him, Frith recognized the significance of a recommendation from one of the most famous scientists of the day. Huxley’s response was immediate, positive, and persuasive. Recalling his recent visit to Zaria, Huxley stated that he had the impression that the Department of Fine Arts had done “remarkably well, especially in painting; certainly some of the advanced students whose work we saw, as well as some of those who have started on their own careers, are really good and original artists.” Huxley also argued against transferring the department to Lagos, thus addressing head-on persistent criticism of the school’s northern location by the southern Nigerian press and influential politicians:

If I recollect right, the [1959] Ashby Commission recommended the transfer of the [Art] Department to Lagos, on the ground that there would be more contacts there. I gather that there have also been objections raised to the continuance of an art school in a Moslem area. However, I wonder whether the atmosphere of Lagos would really be good for an Art School aiming at a fusion of African style and European technique, and trying to do original work. Lagos is very cosmopolitan, and full of distracting influences.

There is the further point that the work of the school has, in general, I understand, been welcome in the Northern Region, and that it was inducing better attitude towards the role the arts play in modern life. In view of this, it might well be desirable to continue with the present arrangement, partly on the ground that it has been successful so far, and partly as one means of ensuring better cultural communication and appreciation between the Regions.<sup>15</sup>

Sir Julian’s letter reminds us of the intensity of interregional rivalry in postindependence years and the extent to which federal decisions on the location of art schools, as well as educational and cultural institutions, were a crucial part of the national political power game. In any case, apart from Sir Julian’s solicited endorsement, the Art Department trumpeted, as proof of its program’s high standards, the professional attainments of three graduates from the 1961 class, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Jimo Akolo, who were “already well regarded as artists in Nigeria” and had attracted international attention.<sup>16</sup>



Once the decision was made to keep the Art Department as part of the new university, the faculty had to consider the place of art history and African art in its curriculum. In spite of the occasional seminars and lectures on African and Nigerian art since Patrick George's tenure, the official incorporation of art history into the program became a matter of intense dispute within the department. In a sense it highlighted the fact that structural and curricular changes in the educational sector were part of a slow, contentious process, even in postindependence Nigeria.

Two teachers, Donald Hope and Eric Taylor, opposed the introduction of art history to enhance the department's academic standing.<sup>17</sup> It was impossible, they argued, to teach the history of European art as an academic discipline, because the teachers and students at Zaria did not have direct access to works of art. And even if European art historians were invited to teach in Zaria, they would be frustrated by the absence of art museums there or anywhere in Nigeria. In their view, rather than introduce regular courses in African art, the new university could only establish limited and elementary art history classes taught with lantern slides and photographs, as was already being done in the college. This argument turns on its head Enwonwu's famous 1956 critique of colonial art institutions to the effect that, whereas European artists had unfettered access to excellent specimens of African art in European museums, African artists at best see only reproductions and third-rate examples of European art.<sup>18</sup>

The argument that Hope and Taylor presented against teaching the history of African art to Nigerian students at the new university is even more remarkable for the authors' inability to imagine African artworks as objects of systematic art appreciation, criticism, and history, especially in a new nation in need of meaningful perspectives on the history of the arts and material cultures of its constituent peoples and societies and on its place in world history. To them, nothing in ancient, traditional, or contemporary African visual arts qualified as fine art, a fact nullifying any claims they may have had as legitimate subjects of *art* history. To drive home this very point, they suggested that art students take courses in the proposed departments of African History and Archaeology and African Studies and Anthropology or have teachers from those departments give occasional lectures in the Art Department.

Taylor and Hope's memorandum highlights the differences in opinion within the Art Department on the proper response to the problem of adapting its program to the needs of postindependence Nigerian students and society.

### The Art Society

Given the widespread perception of fine art's inferiority as an academic pursuit and despite Enwonwu's national renown, the decision by four of the eleven students admitted in September 1957 to confront the status quo was nothing short of historic. These students came to Zaria with the ambition to become professional artists after their art training. They were not prepared to cede to their counterparts in other disciplines any claim to or air of academic superiority, in part because they entered Zaria highly recommended. Of the four, Uche Okeke (b. 1933) had already had a successful one-person exhibition at the Jos Museum in 1956, an achievement only a few contemporary Nigerian artists could claim; Demas Nwoko (b. 1935) won the silver cup for best all-around entry in art in the Western Regional Festival of Arts; Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932) completed eleven paintings commissioned by the United African Company for the main pavilion during the Ionian Sports event in Ondo in 1957; and Jimo Akolo (b. 1934) had won several first-prize awards in painting at the Northern Regional Festival of Arts and was included in the 1956 exhibition of paintings and prints by Keffi Boys at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York.<sup>19</sup>

Other alliances soon followed, with Nwoko and Uche Okeke as the nucleus of a widening circle of friends in the art department. Three students from the previous class, Yusuf Grillo (b. 1934), Simon Obiekezie Okeke (1937–1969), and William Olaosebikan (life dates unknown), joined the group of four.<sup>20</sup> Early in the 1958/59 session, four new students—Okechukwu Odita (b. 1936) and Oseloka Osadebe (b. 1935), secondary school mates of Nwoko's, and Ogbonnaya Nwagbara (1934–1985) and Felix Nwoko Ekeada (b. 1934)—completed the group, providing the critical mass the leaders needed to push for formal recognition of their association.<sup>21</sup> Following initial discussions by Demas Nwoko, Uche Okeke, and Simon Obiekezie Okeke on the possibilities of forming a Nigerian art society, an inaugural meeting of an association simply called Art Society took place on October 9, 1958. A month later, Simon Okeke was elected president, Uche Okeke secretary, and Onobrakpeya treasurer, with Mrs. Hart, wife of the college principal, serving as patron of the society.<sup>22</sup>

The aim of the Art Society was to “encourage the study of Fine Arts” and hold “weekly discussions on varied aspects of West African culture with special reference to Nigerian culture.”<sup>23</sup> On different occasions they discussed folktales, water spirits and deities, burial customs, marriage ceremonies, use of local names, indigenous mural paintings in Nigeria, and body marks, as



well as the ancient art of Benin, Ife, and Igbo-Ukwu. From the onset, the society planned to publish its own magazine, but the idea was shelved indefinitely in November 1959 due to lack of funds. However, the students' magazine, *Nigercol*, offered useful space for the writings of some of the Art Society members, particularly Uche Okeke, who published articles in all four issues of the annual magazine.<sup>24</sup>

Impressively enough, Uche Okeke's publications were based on primary research in traditional Nigerian cultures. For instance his article "Biom Burial," an account of burial and funerary practices of the Biom people of the Middle Belt region, appeared in 1958, followed by "Ibo Folk Tales," his first important essay on Igbo folklore and religion, illustrated with four of his own drawings. In 1960 he published the poem "Ebinti Song," and Odita contributed the essay "Nigerian Art and Artists," a panoptic account of professional artists in eastern Nigeria, from traditional blacksmiths in Awka to Ben Enwonwu and Uche Okeke. The magazine's last issue included two Okeke poems: "Ewu," an ode to a sacrificial goat, and "Moonlight," on the theme of childhood play in the village square.

The themes of these *Nigercol* publications by Okeke and Odita, consistent with the aims of the Art Society, are significant not least because they were among the first meaningful efforts to include Nigerian art and cultures among the resources and materials to which contemporary artists and scholars must pay attention. It was as if Okeke and Odita realized that the basis of any constructive engagement with local expressive cultures by contemporary artists and art historians was primary research focused on these cultures. In this way they preempted and indeed may have encouraged the March 1959 southern Nigeria tour by art department faculty that ultimately led to occasional lectures on Nigerian arts and cultures by resident and invited scholars. They must have realized that only through such direct engagement with the local cultural environment could contemporary artists and scholars commence the daunting yet necessary journey toward establishing a meaningful discourse on Nigerian art in the art academy.

In a very significant way, the exchange of information and ideas about indigenous cultures of Nigeria within an academic environment was a subversive gesture, because it provided its members a cultural counterweight to Zaria's Western-oriented curriculum. The society members' readiness to share information and experiences unique to their own ethnicities—or as in the case of the Biom text by Okeke, from their places of residence—testified to a nationalist impulse, an eagerness to claim the diverse ethnic cultures and traditions as part of a collective national heritage. However, notwith-

standing the exchange of information about Nigerian / West African cultural practices and art forms and its implication of a concerted imagining of a national heritage, the Art Society members for the most part focused on their own ethnic cultures for artistic inspiration, as if to confirm the powerful role of the ethnos in the constitution of contemporary Nigerian artistic identity.

One of the Art Society's initial strategic acts, besides appointing the branch principal's wife as patron, was writing to important nationalist politicians and the British Council, informing them of the society's mission and activities. Encouraging responses from both quarters bolstered the group; it amplified its ultimately unrealized plan to establish a magazine and organize an exhibition of the society's art work. To the society, recognition from the British Council, at that time the most powerful player in the Nigerian art and culture sector, would guarantee funding for its projects. On the other hand, by reaching out to key nationalists, the group aligned itself with the political elite mapping the road beyond political independence, the date of which was announced by the colonial secretary four days after the Art Society's inauguration. Despite the group's ideological motivation, seeking support of some school officials, nationalists, and imperial institutions testified to the society's pragmatism and its willingness to exploit all available resources, colonial or otherwise, in order to assert the relevance of contemporary art and artists in the life of the decolonizing nation.

Still, that the society took the idea of sovereignty quite seriously is manifested in its reservations about the merits of Zaria's affiliation with London. Rather than seek approval and support from British institutions, the society preferred to establish an independent, national art school and an institute of cultural studies and research. To the Art Society the idea that validation of their diplomas by a British institution was crucial to their future practice as Nigerian artists signaled a failure on their fellow students' part to recognize and appreciate the full implication of impending political independence. Though cognizant of Zaria's structural and curricular deficiencies, the society preferred full autonomy from a foreign educational system that had failed pitifully to address the needs of students seeking a professional career as artists in Nigeria. Thus, the opposition to Zaria's affiliation with Goldsmiths' College, London, was motivated by suspicion that such a relationship would amount to an extension of colonialism by other means, and as Okeke noted somewhat hyperbolically at the time, affiliation would inexorably lead to the establishment of a "European Art Empire."<sup>25</sup>

Although the group members, like everyone else, were concerned about the quality of their education and earning their diplomas, they did not con-

clude that foreign affiliation was the only viable option in a decolonizing Nigeria. Rather, as with nationalist politicians who, preferring immediate independence, rejected the gradualist approach to political independence prescribed by Britain, the Art Society wanted instant and complete autonomy from British institutions and lobbied to restructure the program with more local staff and curricular content. In this sense they might have agreed with the South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele (Es'kia Mphahlele), who argued in 1959 that gradualism, as a political tactic in the liberation of southern Africa, “paralyses the African intelligentsia as a liberatory force.”<sup>26</sup>

The Art Society disbanded in June 1961, on the eve of the graduation of Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Bruce Onobrakpeya. Concerned about the antagonistic relationship between the society and the fine art students' association and the general distrust of the group's activities within the Art Department, the society's triumvirate did not wish to see their junior colleagues bear the burden of their three years of troublemaking. More to the point, the society had outlived its relevance in Zaria, then in the process of becoming a new, regional university. Looking to the future, Uche Okeke noted in his diary that “the struggle now lies outside of the Zaria College.”<sup>27</sup>

### Natural Synthesis

Although the Art Society was quite firm in opposing the continued imposition of foreign artistic and educational institutions and ideals on soon-to-be-independent Nigeria, its opposition did not amount to outright rejection of Western art or any benefits that could accrue from adapting its institutional structures to suit the Nigerian environment. Its vision of contemporary Nigerian art was qualified by the same sense of realism adopted by its Egyptian modernist counterparts, who in the 1940s and 1950s came to terms with the inevitability of “alien” European practices, without which their hope of participating in the discourse and making of modern art would have been impossible.<sup>28</sup> It was obvious to the Art Society that the first stage in the development of modern Nigerian art depended on art instruction by Western artists and art teachers schooled in the canons of European art. But they also realized that the changing political climate called for a new relationship with Europe and its art and institutions, a new order anchored in the critical agency of the Nigerian artist and in his freedom to determine the terms of his engagement with his ancestral heritage, with Europe, and with the post-colonial world.

Unabashedly accepting of Western notions of progress and moderniza-

tion, the group nevertheless resisted an uncritical nativism and the unidirectional spread of shades of what Geeta Kapur has called “modernist universalism.”<sup>29</sup> To the group, notions of political, economic, and cultural progress and modernization, though dependent on the encounter with the West mostly through colonization, had to acknowledge the cultural specificity of all artistic expression. In a move that must be seen as the fulfillment of A. O. Osula’s 1952 prediction of the emergence of artists whose work would result from a synthesis of Western and local art traditions and styles, the Art Society adopted “natural synthesis” as a theoretical model for its new work.

In his presidential address marking the first anniversary of the Art Society at the beginning of the 1959 fall term, Uche Okeke outlined the idea he would call “natural synthesis” a year later. Exhortatory and upbeat, he criticized “the shortsighted schemers of [Nigeria’s] inadequate educational system,” which he said was responsible for the poor state of its contemporary art, and stressed the role the society had to play in championing the cause of art in independent Nigeria and Africa. In a key passage, Okeke states:

In our difficult work of building a truly Modern African art to be cherished and appreciated for its own sake—not only for its functional values—we are inspired by the struggle of such modern Mexican artists as Orozco [sic] and his compatriots. We must fight to free ourselves from mirroring foreign culture. . . . We must have our own school of art independent of European and Oriental schools, but drawing as much as possible from what we consider in our *clear* judgment to be the cream of these influences, and wedding them to our native art culture.<sup>30</sup>

Three aspects of Okeke’s argument are noteworthy. First is his claim for the aesthetic autonomy of modern African art; he wished to distance it from traditional African artworks, widely regarded in his time simply as functional, ritual objects. Second is his rejection of cultural colonialism, symbolically manifest in the push for the Goldsmiths’ College affiliation. The significance of the Mexican artists’ alliance with their country’s revolutionary movement was not lost on Okeke who, with his Art Society colleagues, was influenced by and identified with the work of Nigeria’s political nationalists, as well as of pan-Africanists, including Nnamdi Azikiwe and W. E. B. Du Bois. Third is his argument that modern African art’s inclusion of alien forms and concepts did not necessarily compromise its autonomy or integrity. Instead, the new artist could appropriate whatever he wished on his own terms.

Okeke formally proposed the idea of natural synthesis in his second an-

nual presidential speech (October 1960). In spite of its focus on problems confronting contemporary artists, the text addressed processes and strategies of social and cultural progress in independent Nigeria and Africa and the artist's role in them. In what he called an "age of inquiries and reassessment of our cultural values,"<sup>31</sup> he stated that contemporary artists of the new nation, like priests in eras past, had to become handmaidens of a new humanistic social order. His verse *Okolobia*, included in the speech to the society, uses imagery-laden poetry to elaborate his idea of natural synthesis:

Okolobia's sons shall learn to live  
from father's failing;  
blending diverse culture types,  
the cream of native kind  
adaptable alien type;  
the dawn of an age—  
the season of salvation.<sup>32</sup>

Inscribed in this synthesis is a critical reflexivity that is, on the one hand, suspicious of and dissatisfied with formalist versions of Western modernism and the mechanistic rationalism of the space age. On the other, Okeke is equally distrustful of sheer romantic nativism or the uncritical embrace of customs of the old order. In other words, each element by itself cannot adequately address the reality of postcolonial culture, which invariably is a product of diverse indigenous and foreign, African and European, local and global cultures. There is a sense in which this scenario suggests the postcolonial subject's ambivalence toward his past and especially Western culture; the latter is, for instance, both responsible for the evils of hegemonic colonialism and the bearer of the good things tagged with the notion of progress—such as advances in health care. But I see it as less a matter of ambivalence than a practice of subjective pragmatism toward the making and articulation of a modern cultural identity. We might think of identity in this scheme as necessarily contingent, dynamic, positively hybrid, and complexly constituted. Seen this way, natural synthesis and the work it eventually enabled offered a clearer view of the difference between the uses and the value of ancestral tradition in the work of the Art Society artists and in Kenneth Murray's vision of modern African art. Whereas Murray assumed traditional art to be part of heritage in dire need of revival through technically modern artistic methods and practices, natural synthesis imagined it as part of a usable past that included native and foreign art and cultures brought into the mnemonic and experiential orbit of the artists by modern life and education. Put differently,

if for Murray the recovery of traditional art and crafts is the basis of contemporary African creative authenticity, natural synthesis located that authenticity in the exercise of the will to determine what aspects of that tradition could be mobilized in fashioning a resolutely modern art that would not be beholden to the glories of traditional arts. I argue, then, that in prescribing the appropriation of the traditional art as a *partial* resource for a critical reformulation of a self-consciously modernist art, natural synthesis authorized an instrumental approach to traditional African art completely different from Murray's desire to revalorize it, such that it could serve as a bulwark against the supposed corrupting influence of decadent Western art and civilization.

In another section of his presidential address, Okeke explained his use of "synthesis," noting that "I am often tempted to describe it as natural synthesis, for it should be unconscious, not forced."<sup>33</sup> Although it is quite tempting to think of synthesis in dialectical terms or to think of "unconscious" in the light of Freudian psychoanalysis, there is no indication that Okeke and his colleagues, while at Zaria, had any interest in or familiarity with Hegel's dialectic or that they were keen on philosophical propositions subsumed under Hegelian logic and Marxian dialectical method. He might also have been unaware of Jean-Paul Sartre's elaborate, theoretically labored attempt a decade earlier to read negritude poetry in dialectical terms but on the basis of race and class in metropolitan France. Based on conversations I have had with Okeke over the years, it is clear to me that he imagined his idea of synthesis as operative in two ways. First, as a condition, meaning recognition of the historical reality of postcolonial society as constituted by indigenous, premodern, and Western elements, each no less valid or important than the others. And second, as a practice, one that assumes the artist's capacity to be an active mediator of culture, cultural formations, and ideas. Taken together, what is implied is the purposeful blending of distinctive, disparate, yet mutually entangled heritages in order to live meaningfully or authentically in a contemporary postcolonial and unapologetically modern society.

Moreover, Okeke seems to have relied on the ideas generated at the beginning of the decade by Dennis Duerden and A. O. Osula, who in their discussion of contemporary Nigerian art used "synthesis" to describe the kind of work around which future artists must establish their theoretical framework and operative modalities. Besides the fact that Duerden and Osula had previously proposed the idea of synthesis as a critical paradigm for the new work, it was also the favored mode of articulating the work of African and black writers, philosophers, and social scientists of the period. It is fairly accurate to suggest that in the 1950s synthesis was in the air, generated as it was by the

paradoxical mix of realism and romanticism of African, Africanist, and Afro-philic intellectuals who grappled with the challenge of reconciling the imperatives of cultural identity and political destiny in a decolonizing and modernizing Africa. This much is evident from the deliberations of the First and Second International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris (1956) and Rome (1959), at which convened many influential black intellectuals and politicians. The First Congress—described by conservative French media as a “Cultural Bandung,” after the 1955 Asian-African Conference of newly independent and anticolonial states in Bandung, Indonesia—was held at the Sorbonne and supported by giants of the French left intelligentsia, including Sartre, Théodore Monod, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Pablo Picasso (who designed the conference poster). Organized by a network of black intellectuals situated within and around the negritude movement and the influential francophone journal *Présence Africaine*, the Paris congress called for the study of black cultures, with the purpose of demonstrating their contributions to global civilizations. The Rome congress, taking place months before Okeke wrote the drafts of his text, in particular urged African artists and scholars to transcend European models through experiments with traditional African expressive forms and languages.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the Society of African Culture, formed in the wake of the Paris congress and in collaboration with *Présence Africaine*, was mandated to enable the revitalization of black cultures and to participate in the creation of a modern universal culture. In other words, whether or not “synthesis” was used to describe the task of black and African artists and intellectuals of the age of decolonization, there was a widespread but by no means unchallenged understanding that this work must entail the reflexive appropriation and combination of European and African cultural, technical, and conceptual resources. This discursive environment provided the wider context for Okeke’s formulation of natural synthesis and, more generally, for the ideas and work of the Art Society in Zaria and beyond.

To be sure, Okeke’s suggestion that synthesis must be unforced and his characterization of their synthesis as “natural” sidestep two major considerations. First, awareness and assertion of one’s cultural identity involves sets of complex operations that are anything but intuitive. Second, his description of their conceptual program as natural belies what one might call its implication of a tactical synthesis; that is to say, a systematic approach to image making in terms of which artistic traditions to explore and what specific elements from those traditions to subject to formal examination. Clearly, then, by describing the project as natural he aligned it with the tendency of political nationalism, as Benedict Anderson has argued, to insist on the



naturalness or authenticity of the imagined nation and therefore rhetorically contrasted it with the supposedly artificial and alienating Western-oriented Zaria pedagogy. Yet the work that Okeke and his colleagues mapped out for themselves refuses the essentialism implied by the rhetoric of the natural. In other words, his natural synthesis must be seen as a concept that on the one hand captures the paradox inherent in the modern African's fraught relationship with both his ancestral past and colonial modernity and on the other foregrounds the artist's claim to his agency as an actor confronting a field of diverse cultural alternatives that can, through his deliberate, creative action, become constitutive elements of his postcolonial self. Indeed, we are tempted to argue that Sartre's thoughts on negritude poetry speak to the very essence of Okeke's synthesis as "a systematic quest, a divestment and an asceticism which accompanies a continuous effort toward penetration."<sup>35</sup>

Natural synthesis, as formulated by Okeke, was to be the foundation of a "virile school of art with the new philosophy of the new age—[Nigeria's] renaissance period."<sup>36</sup> He also equated it with the literary goals of negritude and the political imperatives of African personality. It is thus worth digressing a bit but only to recover the essential aspects of these two crucial concepts, because they contain both the historical basis and the ideological armature for Uche Okeke's understanding of the work he and his peers set for themselves in 1957 and after.

### **African Personality and Negritude**

In his 1881 lecture at the Liberia College (now the University of Liberia, Monrovia) titled "The Idea of an African Personality," the educator and writer Edward W. Blyden (1832–1912) made a strong case for Africa's unique cultural history and experience in the face of the continent's encounter with Western civilization. "African personality" from then on became a key concept in pan-Africanist discourse and practice. Blyden's argument is based on the recognition of a contemporary perception of black people as Europe's other: its maligned, unredeemable antithesis.

Those who have lived in civilised communities, where there are different races, know the disparaging views which are entertained of the Negroes by their neighbours, and often, alas, by themselves. The standard of all physical and intellectual excellence in the present civilisation being the white complexion, whatever deviates from that favoured colour is proportionately depreciated until the black, which is the opposite, becomes not only the most unpopular but the most unprofitable colour.<sup>37</sup>

Arrayed against the black man, Blyden argues, are the prejudices that have become a fundamental, if not always acknowledged, part of social practice in Western society, prejudices encoded in literature read by Africans who, in turn, internalize the racism inherent in them, ultimately resulting in self-doubt or blind imitation and adoption of Western values.

Nevertheless, the solution is not in looking to foreigners but in learning from “our brothers in the interior who know better than we do the laws of growth for the race.”<sup>38</sup> Even when the Negro adopts those aspects of Western culture that are beneficial to him, he must bring in his own racial consciousness; such borrowing, argues Blyden, needs to be shaped by the Negro’s “race individuality.” Blyden suggests that only through recourse to the emotions and sensibilities natural to him, not through uncritical, ultimately unsuccessful mimicry, could the Negro stand any chance of exciting white people’s real curiosity and respect.<sup>39</sup> Though we are all human beings, ran his argument, we are not the same, and the sooner the Negro realizes that, in other words the sooner he asserts his racial and cultural difference, the better become his chances of developing a naturally and culturally conducive modern society. It has to be said, though, that in spite of his spirited criticism of racism, Blyden’s conception of race, like those of Alexander Crummell (1819–1898) and W. E. B. Du Bois, is based on nineteenth-century European racialist thought. He accepts rather than questions a discourse of race—bolstered by ersatz scientific and skewed moral arguments—that was responsible for the oppression of black people.

In the post–World War II period, Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972), the first president of Ghana and a leading pan-Africanist, brought the idea of African personality back into mainstream decolonization discourse. Yet despite its attractiveness and symbolic power, African personality has no specific meaning; it is one of those indefinable concepts or terms that is nevertheless charged with potential meaning, depending on the particular context of use. Ahmed Sékou Touré (1922–1984) of Mali, for instance, spoke of the economy, law, and education as rediscovering or rehabilitating the African personality, while Nkrumah referred to the need for an African personality in international affairs, by which he meant asserting an African voice on the global scene. In another instance, Nkrumah argued that the revival of African personality was an important goal of pan-Africanism in the postindependence era, implying that the concepts are indistinguishable. It is safe to say that African personality refers to ways of claiming or asserting the humanity of black peoples in Africa and the diaspora and is a symbolic expression of the political aspirations of African peoples. In that the term describes rhetorical

gestures deployed to counter the burdens placed on black peoples by the experience of racism and colonialism, it is an ideological and propaganda tool for African decolonization and independence movements.

Rather than propose an atavistic return to an imagined precolonial, pristine condition, African personality implied an active process of subject formation based on appropriated elements from traditional/indigenous and modern/Western cultures, politics, and social practices. Viewed in the context of African nationalist movements, the phrase simultaneously signified the African's projection and expression of a personality different from that of the European and his rejection of European control of his subjectivity.<sup>40</sup> These political and ideological aspects of African personality are precisely what Uche Okeke and his colleagues wished to identify with through the theory of natural synthesis, and it is in this sense, then, that the two ideas come close to and are indeed analogous to *négritude*, invented in Paris during the interwar period.

**DEVELOPED BY BLACK** francophone writers and intellectuals in Paris in the 1930s, *négritude* (in French, *négritude*) derived from a belief in the singularity and greatness of the black race. Though largely a literary movement, it inspired an artistic movement in Senegal in the 1960s, as many African artists associated with its Afrocentric aesthetic. Rather than merely be preoccupied with literary and intellectual matters, *négritude* derived from the alienation felt by black émigrés in mainland France confronted, even traumatized, by the impossibility of a raceless French utopia attainable only through total immersion in French language and culture. Despite the fact that the colonial policy adopted by France, better known as assimilation, made the colonial subjects from certain parts of the empire—in reality a tiny percentage of the black elite—French citizens, it spectacularly failed to shield them from the prevalent racism they encountered in the “motherland.” Thus, their double displacement or alienation, their physical and cultural distance from African traditional culture, and their social isolation from metropolitan society inevitably led to *négritude* as a self-affirmative movement.<sup>41</sup> As Césaire argued, *négritude* is both a psychic journey toward self-reclamation, a process of reconnection to a real and imaginary African past, in order to demonstrate the status of the black peoples as products and agents of history:

[I]f someone asks me what my conception of *Négritude* is, I answer that above all it is a concrete rather than an abstract coming to consciousness. And it seemed to me that if what we want is to establish this identity, then

we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are—that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black; that we were black and have a history, a history that contains certain cultural elements of great value; and the Negroes were not, as you put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations.<sup>42</sup>

Whatever shortcomings might be imputed to the celebratory mode of negritude poetry, such as the complaint by Anglophone African critics of its sheer exhibitionism, its indulgent negrophilia, or what Sartre called its “antiracist racism,” it was indeed a powerful affirmative gesture, an important theoretical framework for black racial and cultural consciousness. Not only that, but given the historical and social context from which it emerged, negritude was a radical political act in the sense that its proponents recovered a despised term (*nègre*) and “[threw] it back in the teeth of a hostile world as defiance and, at the same time, as assertion of [the African’s] fundamental dignity.”<sup>43</sup> In this sense, negritude literature was a key stage in a process that eventually (and by no means accidentally) inspired political action against colonialism and its racist infrastructure. It is in this sense that Césaire imagined the decolonization and political independence of black nations as negritude in action.<sup>44</sup> For Uche Okeke, negritude (and African personality) stood for the consciousness and desire for freedom by black people in the colonized world. By invoking the two concepts in his articulation of natural synthesis, he no doubt imagined a place for contemporary art and artists in this process as it unfolded in Nigeria. But he made it clear that their terms of engagement did not include recouping negritude’s Afro-nostalgia. Instead, for the Art Society it was more than enough to adapt the political implications of negritude to its argument about culture, national consciousness, and contemporary art in decolonizing Nigeria.

Let me press further, then, what I consider crucial parallels and disjunctions between negritude and natural synthesis. They both upheld the significance and value of African/Nigerian or black cultural heritage *and* Western forms and ideas as vehicles or bases for modern African politics, cultures, and art. They did not disavow the imperative of the universal associated with modernity, and they claimed the African’s right to contribute to what Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) called “the civilization of the universal.” But there is a crucial difference between the artistic implications of negritude and Uche Okeke’s natural synthesis.

Negritude’s concern was the revivification of the universal black soul and the black experience; as such, it attempted to define an aesthetic consistent with a putative racial consciousness. Unanchored to any specific Afri-



**Figure 3.6** Papa Ibra Tall, *Royal Couple*, tapestry, 1965. Photo, Ugochukwu Smooth Nzewi. © Papa Ibra Tall.

can artistic tradition(s), the negritude visual and literary aesthetic evoked qualities that Senghor imagined as unique to black people. And since African myths and generic extrapolations from Western anthropologies of Africa played a vital role in Senghor's enunciation of negritude philosophy, artistic expressions associated with it often avoided concrete references to art forms and design principles specific to any particular African society. Thus, the conjunction of modernist art and negritude philosophy at the École des Arts, Dakar, in the early 1960s resulted in work, such as Papa Ibra Tall's *Royal Couple* (1965), characterized in large part by visual rhythm, rich patterns, figural elegance, masks, royalty, and folklore, all meant to evoke memories of real and imaginary glorious African pasts (see figure 3.6).<sup>45</sup> This work, because it did not seek to invent a visual language based on any specific Senegalese artistic heritage, reflected the artists' interpretations of Senghor's for-

mulation of black essence; for this reason it might be better understood as a racial aesthetic. This, I am suggesting, is what links the design and compositional styles—indeed, the focus on real and imagined African and black cultural, religious themes—that we find in the works of Ibra Tall and Ibou Diouf, two leading figures in the early school of Dakar; in those of the AfriCOBRA painters of the Black Arts movement in the United States; and in Ben Enwonwu's paintings and sculptures of African dancers and black female nudes.

Natural synthesis prescribed a different approach. It is as if the Art Society needed to subject negritude to conceptual filtration, to distill national art consciousness—similar to Frantz Fanon's idea of national culture—from the gauzy mass of negritude's racialist aesthetic. While I am not aware of any direct knowledge on the part of Okeke and the Art Society of Fanon's work, it is remarkable that Fanon's withering critique of negritude at the 1959 Rome congress, reformulated in his landmark essay "On National Culture," anticipated Okeke's initial thoughts on natural synthesis later that year. For Fanon's memorable statement—"This historical necessity of men of African culture to racialize their claims and to speak more of African culture than a national culture will tend to lead them up a blind alley"<sup>46</sup>—or his pithier assertion that "Every culture is first and foremost national"<sup>47</sup> strikes at the heart of the Art Society's work. We might say that in focusing on specific arts and cultural practices of Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups, the society went beyond Fanon by recognizing the truth of the "national" in Africa, which is that it is not just often regarded as a less authentic basis of identity politics than the ethnos; its realities are conditioned or mediated by the competing interests of its powerful constituent ethnicities.

Quite remarkably, though, in spite of the surplus of visual imagery in the work of negritude's major poets and the invocation of African sculptural and masking traditions, for instance, in Senghor's articulation of the movement's literary aesthetic, there were no artists in its original ranks. *Art nègre* was, so to speak, all over the negritude rhetoric, but there were no Negro artists producing visual equivalents or complements to the group's literary output during the movement's heyday. Contemporary black and African artists eventually appeared at the margins of the negritude scene, inspired by its ideas, but only late in the day. By the time contemporary art took center stage in postindependence Senegal with Senghor's effort to create visual negritude at the École des Arts, Dakar—under the leadership of Papa Ibra Tall in the early 1960s—the international movement was all but an evening shadow. It was also at this point in the life of the movement that Uche Okeke and the



Art Society encountered it, mostly through the journal *Black Orpheus*, along with pan-Africanism and African personality.

### Art of the Art Society

Given Okeke's emphasis, in natural synthesis, on the exploration and adaptation of indigenous Nigerian art forms as bases for the Art Society's work—remember the lines in *Okolobia*, “blending diverse culture types, / the cream of native kind / adaptable alien type”—the question that must be asked is this: to what extent did the work that he and his colleagues produced while in Zaria reflect this idea? To this I argue that close analysis of this body of work reveals that the painting styles of the Art Society group did not so much reflect a thorough grounding in Nigerian artistic tradition as show these artists grappling with the formal lessons of the work of European symbolists, postimpressionists, and later modernists. This raises crucial questions about the relationship between praxis and rhetoric, between desire and reality. It calls for a reevaluation of our understanding of how the work of these artists evolved over time and of the claims made about the work from this period. But I first examine the Art Society's exemplary Zaria-period work and only later reflect on its relationship to the theory of natural synthesis and, beyond that, Nigerian art history.

**UCHE OKEKE READ** considerably about and was familiar with the work of European modern artists beginning with the symbolists and postimpressionists, while Demas Nwoko, a voracious reader, might have gone even further—as he once told me in the presence of Okeke—in what may have seemed like a competition for knowledge of modern and premodern art of Europe.<sup>48</sup> These encounters had a profound impact on their formal repertoire, despite the fact that their subject matter tended to focus on genre, traditional African, and the occasional Christian themes. In paintings that Okeke generally called experimental works (produced during his last year in school), the palette remarkably consisted of strong, vivid, complementary colors, with cadmium red, cobalt blue, and viridian green dominating. But his overall pictorial program resulted in two distinct styles. The first, characterized by dark, vigorous, painterly compositions featuring solidly modeled figural forms, is exemplified by *Egbenuoba* and *Monster* (both 1961) (figures 3.7 and 3.8). In *Monster*, a howling face with geometrically structured but loosely modeled features rendered in quick brushstrokes pushes to the edges of the pic-





**Figure 3.7** Uche Okeke, *Egbenuoba*, oil on board, 1961. Collection of the National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja. Photo, the author. © Uche Okeke.



**Figure 3.8** Uche Okeke, *Monster*, oil on board, 1961. Collection of the National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja. Photo, the author. © Uche Okeke.

ture plane. The color work is evidently fauvist, but the paint application is inconsistent, with heavy impastos in the bottom areas and livelier brushwork toward the top of the canvas. Similarly, in *Egbenuoba*, which refers to a masked performance of the hunters' cult among the north-central Igbo, the figure is depicted as a fierce, mustached adult male with a titled-man's red cap adorned with red, spiked branches. The dramatically rendered ocher skin and facial features—particularly the dome-shaped, flaring nostrils, the burning, semicircular eyes, and the cantilevered eyelids—are set against the blue and red torso and a green-blue background. In these pictures Okeke combines the structural serendipity of Igbo carved face masks with an expressive palette. In so doing, he arrives at a pictorial language redolent, though in an indeterminate way, of early twentieth-century European modernist painting.

But if there were any doubt that these are truly the works of an artist in search of an appropriate visual expression of his engagement with modernist painting, the very different style of several other paintings—including *Madonna and Child* (1961), *Christ* (1961; figure 3.9), and *Jumaa* (1961)—confirms their experimental status. These latter paintings, stridently graphic and severe, are characterized by flat, hard-edged areas of color enlivened by stocky figures with stylized facial features rendered as distinct sculptured forms. In *Madonna and Child*, light and delicate brushwork combine with clearly defined and boldly colored shapes. The effect, both graphic and decorative, is remarkably reminiscent of stained-glass painting. *Jumaa*, a landscape composition with five men clad in white, flowing robes in the fore- and mid-ground and a fringe of umber adobe houses in the back, is especially striking; even with few descriptive details the figures are solid, architectonic, and monumental (figure 3.10).<sup>49</sup> Even a cursory comparison between the formal style of this work and that of, say, *Egbenuoba* reveals drastically different approaches to color, form, and composition, all in various ways alluding to his interest in the visual rhetoric of the early European modernist avant-garde.

In yet another painting, *Ana Mmuo* (*Land of the Dead*) (1961; figure 3.11), described by Okeke as a “purely experimental” work, the artist makes an unprecedented and intriguing turn to abstraction, combining elements he appears to draw from the pictorial styles of Joan Miró and Paul Klee, whose works he was reading about at the time. Against a background of large abstract and organic shapes of cadmium red, orange, and yellow are solid black lines describing amorphous forms of spirit beings implied in the work’s title. The banishment of illusionistic space and volumetric form in some of his other pictures reaches its logical conclusion here, leaving only broad shapes of color and superimposed linear forms. *Ana Mmuo* is important in the development of Okeke’s painting precisely because it seems to occupy a critical juncture, a point when his experimentation with various stylistic modes rooted in European modernism led to an epiphanic moment—the realization of the possibilities of Igbo traditional mural and body art as sources for his painting.<sup>50</sup>

There is another aspect of Okeke’s work from Zaria that no doubt complicates our view of his formal experiments. Back in the summer of 1958, he visited the Jos Museum’s ethnographic collection and made sketches of objects, as well as extensive, meticulous typological studies of body marks, design motifs found on artifacts, and tree bark patterns.<sup>51</sup> Throughout the following year, he produced a large series of fantastical, crisp pen-and-ink drawings, exemplified by *Nza the Smart* (1958; figure 3.12), composed from a bewildering range of abstract motifs but depicting characters from popular





**Figure 3.10** Uche Okeke, *Jumaa*, oil on board, 1961. Artist's collection. Photo, the author.  
© Uche Okeke.

Igbo folktales.<sup>52</sup> *Nza* illustrates the tiny sunbird that outsmarted other animals by disguising itself as a larger, monstrous bird. In this drawing, Okeke represents the bird's elephantine legs and torso with motifs adapted from the rough patterns of palm tree trunks, while weblike patterns define the formless outlines of its asymmetrical wings. Another drawing from the series, *The Fabled Brute* (1959), shows a composite animal covered by spiral forms massed together to form a dense, warty skin. As in *Nza*, the snarling beast in this drawing, which in some ways reminds one of the tormented horse at the center of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), is mostly two-dimensional except for the thick dark lines suggesting the articulation of its legs and head and the hatched lines defining the beast's upper palate. The legs and webbed feet, antlers, serrated teeth, and bulging eyes are flat and belie the artist's interest in surface patterning and design rather than suggest forms in space.

It is no wonder that Okeke set these drawings in the world of Igbo tales, wherein characters taken from the phenomenal world are given to paranormal feats in wondrous circumstances, often involving episodes and characters from the land of the dead, where anything is possible. The bound-

**Figure 3.9** Uche Okeke, *Christ*, 1961. Collection of Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth.  
© Uche Okeke.





**Figure 3.11** Uche Okeke, *Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead)*, oil on board, 1961. Gift of Joanne B. Eicher and Cynthia, Carolyn Ngozi, and Diana Eicher 97-3-1. Photo, Franko Khoury. National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. © Uche Okeke.



**Figure 3.12** Uche Okeke, *Nza the Smart*, pen and ink, 1958. Reproduced from *Art in Development: A Nigerian Perspective* (1982), p. x. © Uche Okeke.

less imagination, indeed the freedom to connect diverse, illogical, existential contexts within the narrative structure of the folktales, provided the conceptual impetus for the kind of formal inventions that Okeke makes in these drawings. Despite the fact that the cultural sensibilities underpinning the stories and drawings make them much more than merely an experiment in mind-bending, phantasmagoric form, there is no question that these exercises provided Okeke the opportunity to explore the representational and abstract possibilities of line, texture, and pattern but also negative and positive space. In this sense, the drawings must be seen as both inventive experiments with and runaway extrapolations from elements of art and principles of design that he must have been studying in the painting and design class at Zaria. If we then return to the question of how to situate these drawings within the larger context of his Zaria work, it seems that as strong as the in-

clination might be to separate the work's two strands—one dependent on sheer manipulation of line, pattern, and space; the other on permutation of color, texture, and form—his focus on new methods of pictorial representation clearly owes a debt to his studies of European modernist art and artists.

I am convinced, though, that Okeke's simultaneous engagement with different representational orders, the juggling, as it were, of line- and color-based work, inevitably led to a temporary pictorial crisis. Part of the problem, it seems, was his inability to find the appropriate formal language to enable him to translate the exciting, infinitely more articulate and coherent linear forms in his folktale drawings into easel painting while at Zaria. In the spring of 1961, shortly before graduation, he came to the conclusion that only a single-minded focus on one as-yet-undetermined aspect of Igbo art would produce the kind of articulate formal style on which his future work must depend. It is within this critical context that we ought to appreciate the transformative status of the enigmatic *Ana Mmuo*.

**DEMAS NWOKO'S WORK**, like that of Okeke, traversed several stylistic modes, demonstrating both his own personal dialogue with modern European artists and the exchanges occurring between Art Society friends. By the beginning of his junior year (1959), Nwoko had adopted a vivid expressionistic style marked by rapidly delivered brushwork, a palette of earthy colors, and clumsily drawn figures with anxious facial expressions (*Earning a Living* and *Churchgoers*, both 1959). His penchant for deadpan humor and social commentary is manifest in another of his early pictures, *Beggars in the Train* (1959; figure 3.13). Dealing with the same theme, almsgiving, as Okeke's *Jumaa*, Nwoko here mixes pathos—suggested by the laconic disposition of the three figures, who seem to suffer from some uncertain bodily affliction—with a representation of the beggars as caricatures, as despicable monstrosities dominating the dark, claustrophobic interior of the train coach. Indeed, the deformed monstrous face, evident in *Beggars*, would be an important, enduring characteristic of Nwoko's style.

By 1960 Nwoko's palette and facture had come so close to Okeke's that some of each one's works could be easily misattributed to the other. His previously energetic brushwork all but disappears, and his surfaces become flatter, his forms more precisely drawn or delineated. A second version of *Beggars on the Train*, with its clearly defined compositional elements and more confidently drawn figures, shows this dramatic change.<sup>53</sup> Where the volumetric space of the train's interior in the first *Beggars* is subtly evident, in the sec-





**Figure 3.13** Demas Nwoko, *Beggars in the Train*, oil on board, 1959. Artist's collection. Photo, the author. © Demas Nwoko.

and the space is flattened, nonillusionistic, and subordinated to the design of the picture. These formal qualities are evident in two of his best-known paintings, *Ogboni Chief* (1960; figure 3.14) and *Nigeria in 1959* (1960; figure 3.15). Developed from a sketch the artist made during the Durbar, the annual royal pageant hosted by the emir of Zaria, *Nigeria* shows the resident, the British political officer in charge of the region, with his entourage, including his native orderlies. An obvious spoof of official colonial photography, the picture speaks to the Manichaean world of colonialism even at its moment of expiration. The white officers are all in different poses suggestive of systemic disarticulation, a loss of order and certitude, their long-drawn faces an index of disillusionment but also fatigue. Even in their imperious seats, they seem suddenly vulnerable to unknown forces lurking behind them in the dark, saturnine space inhabited by barely visible black figures with inscru-



**Figure 3.14**  
 Demas Nwoko, *Ogboni Chief*, oil on board,  
 1961. Artist's collection.  
 Photo, the author.  
 © Demas Nwoko.

table faces. It is as if the men recruited to protect the officers and the late colonial regime have turned into death's messengers, executioners waiting impatiently for the final hour of liberation. This is what makes this painting perhaps the most poignant comment by any Nigerian artist on the tension, anxiety, and disquiet between colonial officers and their Nigerian subordinates on the eve of political independence.

Despite the compelling conceptual density of this painting and its focus on a critical period in Nigerian political history, we must note that, stylistically, it owes much to the artist's studies of European modernism. For al-



**Figure 3.15**  
 Demas Nwoko, *Nigeria*  
*in 1959*, oil on board,  
 1960. Artist's collection.  
 Photo, the author.  
 © Demas Nwoko.

though the work sidesteps pictorial realism, its smooth and resolved surface texture and brushwork, along with the solidly drawn figures, recall the antiexpressionist formal clarity characteristic of *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting in Germany in the interwar period. But there is no clear stylistic consistency in Nwoko's work in his senior year. For instance, in *Praying Woman* and *Churchgoers* (both also from 1960), the style is more resolutely expressionist, and there is an energetic vigor in the brushwork, an almost insouciant air that belies the rather serious atmosphere conjured by the themes. Nwoko displays in all these pictures sufficient familiarity with modes already established by





**Figure 3.16** Demas Nwoko, *White Fraternity*, oil on board, ca. 1960. Collection of National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja. Photo, the author. © Demas Nwoko.

European modernist painters. In both form and composition, the 1960 pictures assert the artist's ability to appropriate, manage, and control techniques of delivery learned from an encounter with modern European painting.

Nwoko's use of contrasting color and exaggerated, highly stylized forms for dramatic effect is most evident in *White Fraternity* (1960; figure 3.16), in which a dark, amorphous, supine figure tries to separate four interlocked white and yellow hands that appear to be connected by a single arterial system. The areas of flat color and the epigrammatic rendition of the hands, flowers, and thorns suggest first the conspiracy of the white race to maintain the oppressive apartheid system in South Africa and, second, the impossibility of breaking Western collective control over the destiny of independent black Africa. In this and other pictures, Nwoko pushed his use of arbitrary color and inventively stylized forms to their dramatic limits, further in fact than did Okeke in his own "flat," pre-*Ana Mmuo* paintings of 1961.

If *White Fraternity* is indicative of Nwoko's short-lived attention to the pictorial value of two-dimensional forms and shapes (although he returned to this style after Zaria), he still did not completely jettison the figural style developed in, for example, *Nigeria in 1959*. Nevertheless, his palette remained expressionistic, as it did in *Bathing Women* (1961; figure 3.17), which depicts

**Figure 3.17** Demas Nwoko, *Bathing Women*, oil on canvas, 1961. Artist's collection. Photo, the author. © Demas Nwoko.





a group of naked rotund women bathing in a forest stream; and *The Leopard* (1961), in which a cluster of birds and animals mock a crouching leopard from behind a curtain of forest plants. In both paintings, pictorial space is totally collapsed. The striking exuberance of tropical foliage, the insinuation of the naturalness of female sexuality (as well as the projection of male sexual fantasy in *Bathing Women*), and finally the attention to the decorative value of color, shapes, and patterns all recall the naive naturalism of Henri Rousseau and the modernist primitivism of Paul Gauguin, two French postimpressionists whose work Nwoko and Okeke were studying at the time.

**FOREST SCENES RECUR IN** Bruce Onobrakpeya's 1961 paintings, which are strikingly similar to Nwoko's, particularly in the representation of nonperspectival space and a palette of intense, often complementary colors. A self-confessed admirer of Gauguin's Tahiti paintings and of the work of Vincent van Gogh, Onobrakpeya was attracted to Gauguin's renderings of pastoral and mythological subject matter in rich, somberly symbolist color.<sup>54</sup> Yet although he draws parallels on the one hand between the brilliant sunshine of Tahiti and the south of France (where Gauguin and van Gogh, respectively, resided and painted some of their best-known work) and on the other the sun-drenched southern Nigerian forests where he sets his mythological compositions, there is a remarkable difference. Onobrakpeya's painting, against our expectations, evokes not so much the brilliance of the tropical as the shaded, saturnine atmosphere of the deep forest floor. This much is evident in *Eketeké vbe Erevbuye (Two Laziest People)* (1961; figure 3.18), in which two spindly figures from Urhobo folklore impossibly wrestle atop the stalks of cocoyam plants, and *Hunter's Secret* (1961), where a red-colored, tortoiselike form gazes at a green female centaurlike spirit. Here the artist paints in what he refers to as his mythical realist mode, conjuring pictorial equivalences of the mythological fantasies of Urhobo oral narratives.

Onobrakpeya collected folktales as part of his cultural work—in the process of reimmersing himself in his native culture through its oral traditions, as well as simply recording them for posterity—but also as sources for his artistic subjects. In this, his interest in folktales compares with Uche Okeke's work involving Igbo tales. But unlike Okeke, whose imagery often focused on characters from Igbo folktales, Onobrakpeya included in his paintings the mythological landscapes that provide visual context for the actions of the human, animal, and metaphysical subjects of the folktales.

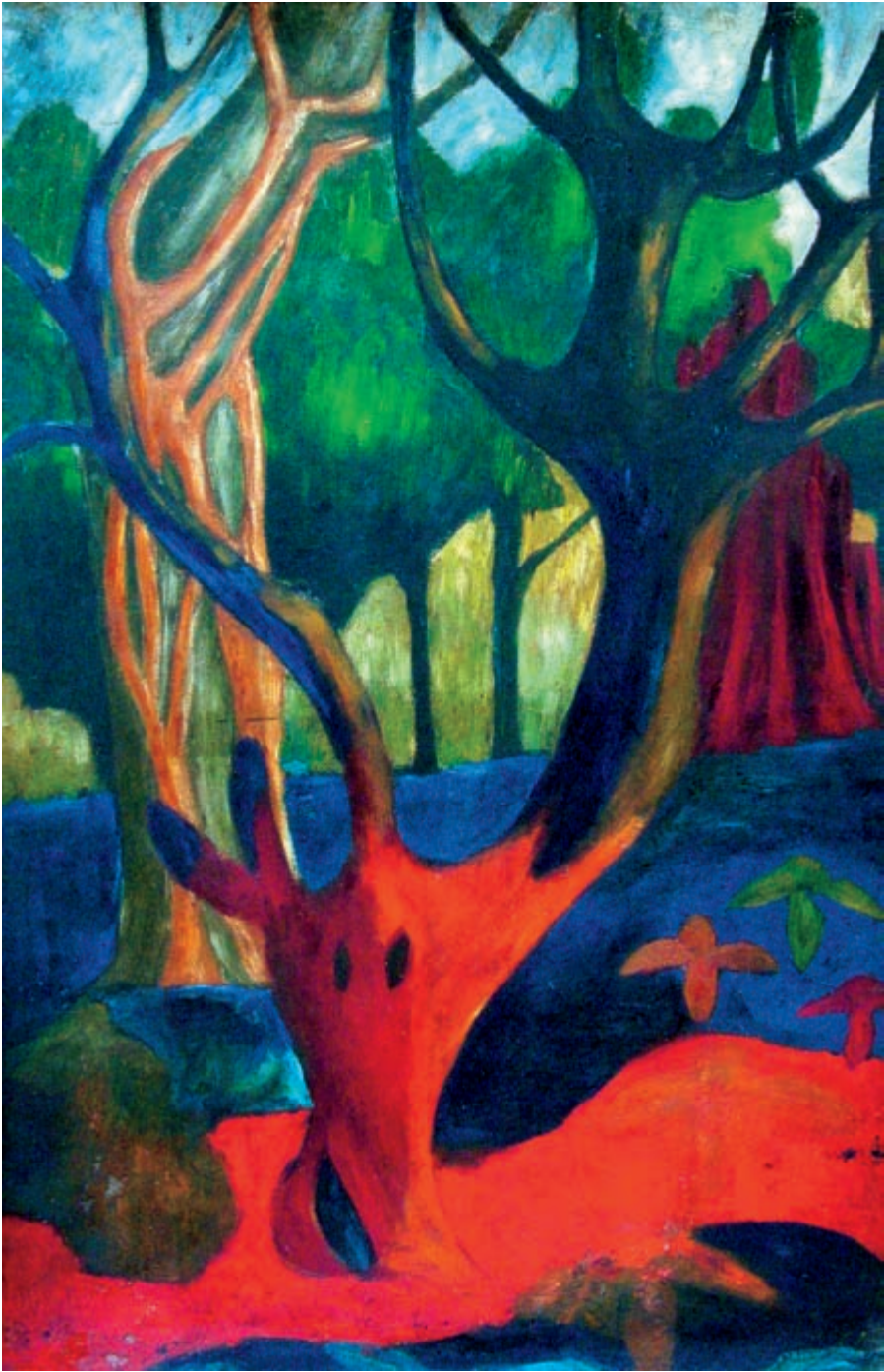
Even when Onobrakpeya takes on an unremarkable subject, as in *Land-*



**Figure 3.18** Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Eketekvbe Erevbuye (Two Laziest People)*, oil on board, 1961. Artist's collection. Photo, the author. © Bruce Onobrakpeya.

*scape with Skull and Anthill* (1961; figure 3.19), his intense symbolist color and foreshortened space yield an almost surreal landscape that seems to make sense only in the world of mythology and folklore. In other words, Onobrakpeya depends on his adaptation of European fauvist and symbolist formal styles for his visual interpretation of indigenous folkloric subject matter, the exploration of which he and his Art Society mates considered important for modern Nigerian art.





**Figure 3.19** Bruce Onobrakpeya, *Landscape with Skull and Anthill*, oil on board, 1961. Artist's collection. Photo, the author. © Bruce Onobrakpeya.



**Figure 3.20** Yusuf Grillo, *Oloogun*, oil on board, 1960. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Faysal El-Khalil. Image courtesy of ArtHouse Contemporary Ltd., Lagos. © Yusuf Grillo.

**THE WORK OF THREE OTHER** Art Society painters—Yusuf Grillo, Okechukwu Odita, and Oseloka Osadebe—further testifies to the influence of the early European avant-garde. Grillo’s work, usually generic portraits of Yoruba and Lagos subjects, is characterized by stylized figures and angular, intersecting color planes reminiscent of the compositional vectors and dynamic arcs of cubo-futurist painting (figure 3.20). Grillo is arguably the most astute colorist in the group; his palette has ever consisted of a limited range of cool, muted colors, although as *Sabada (Dance)* (1964) shows, he occasionally

sought to heighten dramatic effect by deft orchestration of a broader color spectrum (figure 3.21). Overall, the architectonic quality of his figures, set against backgrounds energized by dynamic color planes, might also derive from his early and abiding interest in mathematics, particularly geometry and trigonometry. Mathematics, he later explained, “makes you see things graphically.”

Grillo also acknowledged his fascination while at Zaria with the work of the French impressionists and postimpressionists. Not only did they open his eyes to the idea of painting as an exercise in reimagining pictorial space rather than a means of describing reality; he was struck by their irreverent approach to color and figuration. However, the two European artists who have had enduring influence on his painting are Amedeo Modigliani and Pablo Picasso. Modigliani’s female figures—with their elongated necks, bell-shaped shoulder frames, and angularly displaced faces—attracted Grillo for their formal elegance and what the art historian Robert Goldwater once described as their affective sentimentality and pathos.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, Grillo’s low-key, blue-biased palette was, in a way, his homage to and admiration for Picasso’s “Blue Period” paintings.

The confluence of these two stylistic elements is in full pictorial effect in *Harvest* (early 1960s; figure 3.22), depicting a blue-faced woman with a solidly built long neck supporting a small ovoid face turned to the side, her undulating, asymmetrical shoulders designed to balance the composition. The anatomical liberties Grillo takes in the representation of this Yoruba woman clearly differentiate his approach to painting and perception of the painter’s task from that of, say, Akinola Lasekan, who if he painted the same subject might have done so simply to illustrate or *represent* a Yoruba woman, complete with ethnographically verifiable sartorial and facial details (figure 3.23; see also figure 2.2). Where painting served Lasekan as a documentary medium, a means of accounting for the truth of a subject’s individual, professional and ethnic identity, for Grillo such a portrait was only an excuse for exploring and resolving painting problems. Thus, his early interest in mathematics, Modigliani, and Picasso readily explains the more important features of Grillo’s emerging style.

**IN THIS ACCOUNT OF THE** work of the Art Society in Zaria, we are constantly reminded of the subtle differential emphases in the artist-members’ pictorial styles, despite the pervasive influence of the European avant-garde. We must note, though, that the work of the 1962 group (which includes Oseloka

**Figure 3.21** Yusuf Grillo, *Sabada (Dance)*, 1964. Private collection. Image courtesy of Bonhams.  
© Yusuf Grillo.











**Figure 3.23** Akinola Lasekan, *Portrait of J. D. Akeredolu*, oil on canvas, 1957. Collection of Afolabi Kofo Abayomi. Photo, Anthony Nsofor. © Estate of Akinola Lasekan.

Osadebe and Okechukwu Odita), while still indebted to European modernist painting, reveals a more realistic representational style that can be attributed only to the influence of Clifford Frith, their painting teacher. This much is evident in Osadebe's *Lunch at the Park* (1961) and Odita's *Sheep Grazing* (1961) (figures 3.24 and 3.25). Indeed, the artist-critic Okpu Eze described Odita's work, presented in his 1962 exhibition, as academic and too uncomfortably close to Frith's rigorously objective style (figure 3.26), while Ulli Beier saw the paintings as weak copies of Frith, who perhaps unknown to Beier simultaneously experimented with abstract pictorial language, as is amply evident in such Zaria-period paintings as *Harmattan Landscape with Figures* (c. 1960/61) and other landscape compositions (figure 3.27).<sup>56</sup> While these critical assessments of Odita's debt to his teacher are correct in the sense that Odita's painting is reminiscent of Frith's brand of Euston Road School pic-

**Figure 3.22** Yusuf Grillo, *Harvest*, oil on board, early 1960s. Collection of Mr. G. Hathiramani. Image courtesy of Bonhams. © Yusuf Grillo.



**Figure 3.24** Oseloka Osadebe, *Lunch at the Park*, oil on board, 1961. Collection of Asele Institute, Nimo. Photo, the author. © Oseloka Osadebe.

**Figure 3.25** Okechukwu Odita, *Sheep Grazing*, oil on board, 1961. Collection of National Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja. Photo, the author. © E. Okechukwu Odita.







**Figure 3.26** Clifford Frith,  
*Fulani Portrait*, oil on canvas,  
ca. 1960. Courtesy of the artist.  
© Clifford Frith.

torial realism, Eze's charge of academicism in both artists, judged by their palette and figuration, is clearly overstated: The works of both Frith and his fellow faculty member Patrick George, as well as much of the work coming out of the Slade at the time, were exemplary of midcentury British figurative modernism (figure 3.28). In any case, Osadebe's and Odita's debt to continental European modernism was strong, particularly in the work from their senior year and just after graduation from Zaria. Recalling this is how best to make sense of the style of Odita's *Female Model* (1962; figure 3.29), with its expressive color and, in some parts, loosely applied brushwork, which harks back to paintings by Henri Matisse from his fauvist period. Alternately, in *Husband and Wife* (1964; figure 3.30), Osadebe combines energetic brushstrokes, clashing color planes, and figural distortion to achieve a pictorial effect reminiscent of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, among the Die Brücke painters of early twentieth-century Germany.



**Figure 3.27** Clifford Frith, *Harmattan Landscape with Figures*, oil on canvas, 1960–1961.  
Collection of Grant Waters. © Clifford Frith.



**Figure 3.28** Patrick George, *Hausa Standing*, oil on hardboard, 1959. UCL Art Museum, University College London. © Patrick George.



**Figure 3.29** Okechukwu Odita, *Female Model*, oil on board, 1962. Collection of Asele Institute, Nimo. Photo, the author. © E. Okechukwu Odita.



**Figure 3.30** Oseloka Osadebe, *Husband and Wife*, oil on board, 1964. Collection of Asele Institute, Nimo. Photo, the author. © Oseloka Osadebe.

Even the paintings of Jimo Akolo—though the fourth member of the 1961 painting class, he refused to join the society—testify to the importance of the European avant-garde in the evolving style of a group linked as much by ideological convictions as by similar artistic interests. In Akolo's late Zaria work, such as *Hausa Drummer* (1961; figure 3.31), there is the same combination of flat areas of intense color and modeled, volumetric facial features already noted in Okeke's paintings. Moreover, the interplay between the cobalt blue / cadmium red of the drummer and his drums and the warm green of his shoe sole is reminiscent of Okeke's use of the same colors in, say, *Eghenuoba*. De-





**Figure 3.31** Jimo Akolo, *Hausa Drummer*, oil on canvas, 1961. Courtesy, University of Sussex. © Jimo Akolo.

spite these similarities, however, Akolo's paint application is heavier, more consistent, and in a very fundamental sense more painterly.

Akolo's primary reason for not joining the Art Society was his conviction that the young artist's first priority was to learn the craft of painting; joining the group, he believed, amounted to compromising painting in the pursuit of ideology.<sup>57</sup> In a way this position recalls Roy Barker's 1957 talk on the Nigerian Broadcasting Service, in which he discussed the role of the art school and the negative influence of nationalist ideology on artistic creativity. Although Barker's talk might not have directly influenced his perspectives on art and politics, Akolo quite possibly might have been convinced by the rhetoric of artistic autonomy or by the Greenbergian historicist argument about painting's self-referentiality and the idea that any art tainted by ideology amounted to nothing but kitsch.

Whatever the case, Akolo's meticulous attention to the quality and character of his paint surface reflects his approach to easel painting as, first and foremost, mark making with pigment but also—here he comes close to Grillo—as a process of designing a surface with shapes of color. These tendencies intersect in *Women on a Train* (1960), where the picture plane is divided into simple, dynamic sections, the two female subjects barely noticeable in the top central part, as if to emphasize the primacy of formal composition over subject matter. The brushwork, a series of short vertical strokes that optically unify an otherwise structurally fragmented picture, testifies further to Akolo's attention to and exploration of pictorial devices, some of which he must have learned from his studies of Picasso, particularly the brush notations of the artist's synthetic cubist period.

**GIVEN THE PERVASIVE** influence of European modern art on the work of the Art Society group, how do we make sense of Okeke's claims about natural synthesis and national consciousness, about imagining a Nigerian modernism that is no longer beholden either to Western art or to the arts of the traditional African and Nigerian societies? Where, indeed, is the rebellion that art historians and critics ascribe to the society if it is not indexed in the work that its members were making at the time? One way to untangle this paradoxical European modernist stylistic sensibility in Art Society work is to suggest that the group's initial attraction to early European modernism was consistent with its overall program, which, as Okeke's statement on the society's last day of existence suggested, would continue beyond Zaria. It is thus not so much that they misrecognized the challenge posed by the theory

of natural synthesis as that the Zaria work was only the first step toward the realization of its full artistic implications.

### **Natural Synthesis, Art, and History**

While the stylistic connections between the work of members of the Art Society and the European avant-garde now seem quite obvious, we are less certain about the reasons for their attraction to postimpressionist and fauvist painting, as opposed to the more radical cubist style ostensibly linked with African art or even to nonobjective abstraction. Conscious appropriation of the latter or its derivatives, come to think of it, could have been a useful political gesture, one that might have played well into the politics of artistic decolonization by demonstrating the Nigerian artists' right, as it were, to take back from Europe African sculpture's gift to Parisian modernism. Moreover, such a focus on modernism's debts to African sculpture could have delivered to the Art Society the opportunity to critique colonialism's role in the making of European modern art, since African artifacts and material cultures flooded Europe under the auspices of colonial trade, science, and military campaigns. In any case, a different, more helpful way to think of the Art Society's attraction to postimpressionism is, perhaps, that they identified with the historic and sweeping impact of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European avant-garde on the post-Renaissance tradition of constructed naturalism; but they were not so keen on the radical abstraction of Picasso-Braque cubism, the nonobjective aspects of surrealism and Dada, or post-World War II abstract expressionism.

Compared to early modernist painting or to the work of their teachers—who also included Clara Ugboaga, who taught drawing and whose work in the late 1950s involved what one might call a postcubist collage aesthetic—the work of the Art Society can seem quite ordinary, much as European modernist riffs of African sculpture can sometimes seem pedestrian compared to their original African models. But given that these young artists' Euro-modernist style was only the first step in a journey that they imagined from the beginning would go beyond their Zaria tutelage and because they were simultaneously building the infrastructure of that next phase through research into traditional Nigerian art forms and oral traditions, it is fair to conclude that the artistic significance of their Zaria work derives totally from its place within the modernism anticipated by the theory of natural synthesis.

Moreover, given the critical influence of the European historical avant-garde on Art Society (and Akolo's) painting, does Okeke's disagreement with



“those who live in Africa and ape European artists” in his 1960 speech not amount to a denial of the group’s conscious appropriation of modernist international styles and aesthetics? This may well be the case; in a way it points to the dialectical tensions, the push-pull, attract-resist, and infinitely fraught relationship of the colonized African self and its European imperial other. Evidently, in the process of asserting cultural and artistic autonomy, it was imperative for these artists to learn and unlearn, to use and discard, the same critical tools fashioned by modern European artists in their own struggles with tradition. As this book’s introduction suggests, this tactic is amply reflected in the ideological practices of the era to which the work of the Art Society is ineluctably tied.

I am thinking also of the fact that, embedded in the dialectic of African independence, in its political and cultural manifestations, was a simultaneous rejection of imperial Europe and an attraction to its knowledge base and political systems. We know that Edward Blyden initiated his idea of African personality while holding on to the tenets of Christian doctrine, that Léopold Senghor advocated African cultural independence and uniqueness among the negritude poets though he articulated his theory of negritude using ideas borrowed from French colonial ethnology, and that Kwame Nkrumah sharpened the political edge of African personality with the aid of Marxist and socialist thought. The list goes on. In all these instances, the advocates of African political and cultural identity appropriated and, in the process, reimagined what to them were progressive and useful aspects of European socioeconomic and political experience. Their politics affirmed the right of the African to assert his reauthenticated identity, which is, nevertheless, contingent rather than fixed but also effectively constituted by the multiplex encounters between inherited and appropriated cultures and knowledge systems. That African and African diaspora intellectuals of the post-World War II period saw this as the ideal model of African postcolonial modernity is evident, as noted earlier, from the deliberations and communiqués issued at the Black Writers and Artists Congresses of 1956 and 1959. To be sure, the Rome congress resolution on African literature encouraged writers to go beyond Western literary models in their search for new forms of expression, while its Commission on the Arts resolved that there was an “over-riding obligation imposed on all black artists to produce within their culture a liberation of all different forms of expression.”<sup>58</sup> These strategies are writ large in the idea of natural synthesis and in the Art Society’s turn to the European historical avant-garde as an inaugural gesture in the process of articulating the postcolonial artistic self.

But I cannot help thinking that Uche Okeke might also have been referring to a different kind of international art, the inalienably European and international academic realism of Aina Onabolu. The difference between the Art Society's Zaria-period work and Onabolu's, in terms of a relationship with European art, is both historical and conceptual; for whereas Onabolu looked to a premodern tradition framed by the visual theory of one-point perspective, the Art Society identified with the antitraditionalist work of the European modernist avant-garde. Onabolu's inflexible faith in formal academism and his unwillingness to imagine or acknowledge, even as late as the 1960s, different ways of constructing the artistic image outside the strictures of the one-point-perspective system separates him from the kind of work anticipated by natural synthesis. In other words, the society replaced the academism of Onabolu (and Akinola Lasekan), radical as it was earlier in the century, with the experimental aesthetic of the historical avant-garde. It is in this sense of a conscious appropriation of European artistic forms as a means of redefining the task of the modern African artist that the Art Society work is genealogically related to that of Onabolu and is also the reason its work is conceptually, not to mention ideologically, incompatible with the kind of art enabled by Kenneth Murray's pedagogy.

Despite the reasons suggested here for the Art Society's attraction to the work of the precubist avant-garde, the fact that it was to this early, somewhat dated, period of European modernism that they anchored their work deserves brief commentary, because critics of modern African art might see this as proof that these artists came late to the modernist party and thus were anything but avant-garde. There are two ways to look at the issue. First, by relating the Art Society's work to its specific cultural milieu, still dominated on the one hand by neoacademic mimetic realism and on the other by nativist, naive imagery, the extent to which it represents the inaugural manifestation of postcolonial modernism in Nigeria becomes clear. I believe that this is what Michael Crowder meant in 1962 when he declared, "it is fair to say that the young artists who are coming to the fore today in Nigeria are at the vanguard of a cultural revolution compatible with the country's independent status."<sup>59</sup> It is in this sense that Onabolu's work, given the state of art in Nigeria and the racial-sociological context of colonialism at the beginning of the twentieth century, was progressive and advanced and appears (as does the Art Society modernism) quaint and belated only when viewed exclusively from the warped mirror of European art history.

Second, given that the members of the Art Society had access to cubist and later abstract expressionist art, I speculate that their attraction to pre-

vious modernist work was a conscious decision. As their later work confirms, none of the artists were drawn to the radical formal abstraction proposed by cubism and later pushed to the limits of optical flatness by the Russian constructivists and the American abstract expressionists. This might be related to the Art Society's other project of depicting subject matter relating to their cultural experiences, as well as to the influence of Clifford Frith's and Patrick George's British figurative modernism. The Art Society's connection to European modern painting, as outlined here, has important art-historical implications. Due to the society's claim to a critical mandate informed by anticolonial national consciousness, criticism of its work has tended to merge Zaria-period theoretical aspirations and artistic work, as if the one *completely* explains the other. As this chapter makes clear, if we were to focus strictly on the group's formal style, we would be hard pressed to reconcile it with the theory of natural synthesis. Many observers have done just this but without looking closely at the less obvious aspects of the work and its motivating theory. Part of the problem, it seems, is the failure on the part of scholars to fully appreciate the ramifications of the idea of natural synthesis but also, more crucially, the fact that ideas often have gestation periods. They take time to materialize, if they do so at all. So no matter how much we scour the Art Society's Zaria work for the elements of the "cream of native kind" insinuated by Okeke's poem, we are left only with *themes* and *subjects* pertaining to contemporary and traditional Nigerian cultures and peoples. While they were working within the academic context of the art school and while they schooled themselves in the methods of the European modernists, the actual synthesis of Western and African formal elements simply had to wait for another day, as chapter 5 details, after Zaria.