

# IZIBONGO

Celebrating Art in Africa and the Diaspora

Issue 30 - 2017

Song

for

Ben

Enwonwu

Natty Mark Samuels

# Editorial Note

Too often, people are put off from learning, by aspects such as the length of an article, or the lexicon used in a paper. As one of the truly pioneering figures of Modern Art in Africa, I've endeavoured to write something about Ben Enwonwu, that is accessible to all. That will be appreciated in the school and adult education centre, as well as the art college and gallery.

Also, imagine a hero of yours, present or past, that you're suddenly given access to! Unlimited time to listen and then to ask. Asking the questions you've always wanted to. This is the theme running through the writing: conversation.

A future issue of this magazine, will feature the paintings and sculpture of this artist, who lived in England as well as Nigeria.

I am happy to present to you, a biographical sketch in verse,  
SONG for BEN ENWONWU.

**Editor – Natty Mark Samuels – [africanschool.weebly.com](http://africanschool.weebly.com) – An African School Production**

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[https://reggaediscography.blogspot.co.uk/2017/09/izibongo-magazine-2017\\_28.html](https://reggaediscography.blogspot.co.uk/2017/09/izibongo-magazine-2017_28.html)

<http://rastaites.com/izibongo-issues-21-25/>



*from Ben Enwonwu Foundation*

# Song for Ben Enwonwu

(1917 – 1994)

to the Ben Enwonwu Foundation  
and to the memory of Aina Onabalu.

## Verse for the First Teacher

to Odigwe Emeka Enwonwu

If I sing a song of you Ben,  
There must be a verse for your father.  
Before the classroom of Kenneth Murray,  
Workshop of the Master Carver.

Your father told you of wood,  
Immersed you in the culture.  
He told you of the Igbo,  
Of their past and their forever.

## African

St. Joseph in Onitsha,  
St Theresa Umuahia;  
Going to school in the shadow of the saints.  
St. Mary Port Harcourt,  
St. Patrick Ibusa;  
Took Western input with an African constraint.

## School Teacher

They must have missed you when you left,  
I imagine the weeping of one or two.  
I see them waving saying,  
"We'll miss you Mr Enwonwu"

## The Visionary

For Ibadan and Umuahia,  
I give thanks for Kenneth Murray.  
Teacher and mentor,  
Exhibition advisor;  
I give thanks for the visionary.

### **Ben and Pablo**

Did it make your face glow,  
To know the place where you were first exhibited,  
Picasso's paintings would hang there also?

### **Zwemmer**

Was your hear pounding Ben, that day you stepped from the famous street, into that  
legendary gallery?

An African artist in a Western gallery. Who was there before? Gerard Sekoto and the  
Makerere students came two years later? Was there anyone before you and the chosen  
ones?

Was your heart pounding that day in 1937, as you stepped from Charing Cross Road, into  
the Zwemmer Gallery; to represent your culture, your country and your continent.

### **Remembering Harold Moody**

Did Dr. Moody go to Zwemmer?  
Was it featured in the *Keys*?  
If not to his house in Peckham,  
You must have known of the L.C.P

### **Prayers to Anyanwu**

On your exhibition visit years before Ben, it was summer; so I know you must have felt the  
unwanted embrace of the cold, that first winter at Goldsmiths, in 1944. Prayers to  
Anyanwu.

Did you curse the elements, the first time that you forgot your gloves? Prayers to  
Anyanwu.

I hope you weren't badly hurt, when because of a piece of ice, you slipped and fell.  
Prayers to Anyanwu.

When you left in the morning, you must have petitioned the sun deity of the Igbo, to bring a  
little something of what she represents, if only for a little while. Prayers to Anyanwau.

### **Lewisham Way**

For those who walk by everyday, it will mean nothing; but for me, it is certainly something.  
That I trod the same pavement in Lewisham Way going to Goddis Lodge, as you did, going  
daily to Goldsmiths College.

### **Caribbean Voices**

During the war years,  
Did you tune into Una Marson?  
With her *Caribbean Voices*.

You must have seen the film clip,  
Featuring Leary Constantine,  
Talking of contribution choices.

### **Necessity**

One day after waking,  
You found yourself,  
Going to a place called necessity.  
From London to Oxford,  
Slade to Ruskin,  
Your turn as evacuee.

### **Songs of the Igbo**

The only African artist there,  
In 1946,  
At the Modern Art Museum Paris;  
Presented by UNESCO.  
But you held your head high,  
You spoke and walked around;  
While in your head,  
You sang the songs of the Igbo.

### **Time With The Edo**

I heard you went to Benin,  
To those who know of bronze.  
Where else would you go?  
You went to Benin,  
To the guild of the casters,  
Time in the presence of the Edo.

### **First Class**

Heard the Slade gave you first class honours in sculpture.  
Heard you were a first class gentleman throughout your life.

### **Scholarship**

Afewerk Tekle arrived,  
Just after you'd left,  
Sent by Haile Selassie.  
As you were funded,  
By The British Council,  
And the Shell Petroleum Company.

### **WASU Celebration**

I imagine the WASU students, streaming in through the door of the Berkeley Gallery, beaming with pride. Streaming in, to each and every exhibition you had there. Beaming, to see a fellow African West African, a young man like themselves, presented in such a setting. Was Nkrumah still there? I know your first Berkeley exhibition was 1947, which was the year he returned to Ghana.

I see the students back at the Camden Hostel, talking of potential and toasting a pioneer: pouring libation to the ancestors, raising a glass to you.

### **A Time To Join**

1948 was your year of invitation and acceptance: fellowship and membership. The Royal Anthropological Institute; Royal Society of British Artists; the Hampstead Arts and Artists. Was it through the latter that you got the studio in Hampstead? Where those classic shots were taken, with you in a white lab coat.

### **Lagos**

That 1949 Lagos exhibition, was that your first in the homeland? Did all the peoples of the country come through the door.

The Tiv, Ijaw and Ibibio;  
Hausa, Fulani and the Edo  
Ebira, Igala and the Igbo.

I hope that over that two week period they all stepped in, to recognise achievement; to join the celebration of a fellow Nigerian.

### **Jacob and the Yoruba Girl**

As soon as he saw her, he knew he had to have her. 1950 was the year that Jacob Epstein fell in love with - and got the the Yoruba Girl.

## Hallowed

In 1950, America called you. You went to New York, Washington and Boston, exhibiting and teaching. Howard University in Washington, where so many of the greats had studied or taught, or both.

Did you meet Alain Locke?  
Converse with William Hansberry?  
My William the Conqueror,  
Founder of African Studies.

You were in some hallowed company there. Howard nurtured so many leading figures, in such fields as education, literature, music and civil rights.

Roberta Flack, Amiri Baraka:  
Harlem Heroine Zora Hurston.  
Ralph Bunche, Andrew Young:  
Nobel Laureate Tony Morrison.

## Milan

Summertime in Italy,  
Another step on the stair.  
The July and the August,  
Gallery Apollinaire.

## Iroko

From the UK you received an MBE,  
Commission from Ibadan University.  
So you gave them the *Risen Christ*,  
From the trunk of an iriko tree.

## He Gave Us

On Judgement Day they will say  
"He gave us *Anyanwu*,  
Let him go through."

## Aaron and Arturo

1956, back again to America, courtesy of Howard University. In April you went to Fisk. Did you talk with Aaron Douglas? If you did, I know you must have spoken of his African travels. I imagine you both, two pioneering artists, both well travelled, talking of creativity, movement and Movements; of Gerald Bhengu and Lois Jones; of the continent and the diaspora. June found you in the Shomberg Centre. Although he had left us physically by the time you got there, did you feel a touch of that energizing spirit. Did you hear a whisper from Arturo Shomberg?

### **Buckingham Palace**

From Kenneth C. Murray,  
To Masters in Anthology,  
Into Time Magazine.  
Student days Ibadan,  
Exhibition Japan,  
To a bronze sculpture of the Queen.

### **Treasures of Igbo Ukwu**

What did you speak of,  
In time at the palace,  
When Queen Elizabeth sat for you?

I imagine you smiling,  
Proud to tell her,  
Of the treasures of Igbo Ukwu.

### **Tate**

**1st Voice:** Your paintings have hung  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Voice:** In the great galleries of the world  
**1st Voice:** The Smithsonian  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Voice:** The Goethe Institut  
**Voices:** Your *Queen* on a chair in The Tate.

**1st Voice:** In the early days you walked alone  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Voice:** Opening doors for others  
**1st Voice:** Piccadilly Gallery  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Voice:** Glasgow Empire Exhibition  
**Voices:** Your *Queen* on a chair at The Tate.

**1st Voice:** You had a culture to share,  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Voice:** A country to speak of  
**1st Voice:** Songs of the Igbo  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Voice:** Anthem of the Nation  
**Voices:** Your *Queen* on a chair at The Tate.

### **Accolade**

The late fifties was a time of accolade, wasn't it? The Bennett Prize, given by the Royal Society of British Artists; Commonwealth Certificate, presented by the Royal Institute of Art. They saw your worth – and gave you credit for it. Plus, you had a degree in art – and another in anthropology.



### **Academia**

University of Lagos,  
You became a Fellow.  
Honorary degree,  
From Amadu Bello.  
Fine Art Professor,  
Obamfemi Awolowo.

### **Ballad in Bronze**

When I look at *Sango*,  
I think of strength:  
*Anyanwu* of spiritually.  
In your interaction with bronze,  
We saw facets of our humanity.

### **Ben and Howard**

1971 was a special year;  
As you went back to Howard,  
As the Visiting Artist,  
Continuing the love affair.

### **Senghor**

Another reason 1971 was a special one, is that Senghor said come. He invited you to Dakar, so he could confer one of the country's highest honours on you: Officer of the National Order of the Republic. You, who had done so much for Africa. An invitation from a poet to an artist, both believers in the potential and the power of the arts. When he sang the song of Negritude, you joined in on the chorus.

Senghor said come, so we can say a public thank you to you.

### **Kola Nut and Prayer**

You accepted the kola nut offered,  
Made a libation with beer.  
In your time to become *Agbalanze*,  
You offered many a prayer.

### **National Monument**

Your sculpture in Parliament,  
Outside of national buildings;  
Copies of *Tutu* in houses and flats.  
You embellish the country,  
A little beauty for all;  
A blessing for the model who sat.

### **Wole and Chinua**

Nine years after Senegal, Nigeria gives you one of its highest honours: National Order of Merit. They've given it to the writers Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe; this year, 2017, they gave it to your fellow artist, Bruce Onobrakpeya.

### **Nimo Blessings**

Did you enjoy working with Uche Okeke, in his home town of Nimo, at the Asele Institute, where you became a Fellow?

### **Ancestor**

In 1987,  
At the passing of your brother,  
You became the *okpala*.  
The new man of ritual,  
In a sacred role,  
Conversing with the ancestor.

### **Lagos and London**

1985, 1987 and 1990, became the years of the retrospective, in Nigeria and England: Lagos and London. It was time to look back and celebrate you, while you were still with us.

### **Gratitude for Eternity**

You've truly gone celestial Ben. They've named a crater after you, up there on planet Mercury: Enwonwu Crater.

They say its bright rays illumines the surrounding area: so it was with you. Through your sculpting and painting, lecturing and writing, you enlightened us about the African continent.

We thank you for the light: we thank you for your eternity.

## In Time To Come

In time to come,  
In the time before sunrise and sunset,  
We'll still marvel at Mercury.

In time to come,  
In the time of gallery and internet,  
We'll still marvel at your mastery.



from *Fine Art: Celebrating Nigerian Art*