

STELLA IDIONG'S ARTISTIC LEGACY

Best Ochigbo, Ph.D.

Department of Fine and Industrial Arts
University of Uyo
+234 8035838077
bestochigbo@uniuyo.edu.ng

Ime Ukim, Ph.D.

Department of Fine and Industrial Arts
University of Uyo
+234 7035030887
imeukim@uniuyo.edu.ng

(Correspondence: imeukim@yahoo.com +234 7035030887)

Abstract

Stella Idiong, a graphics genius of Nigerian origin, left an indelible mark on the sands of time given her exploits in graphics practice and teaching, especially print and aqua mono techniques which she transmitted to her artistic heirs. In spite of such legacy she left behind, there has not been adequate scholarly work done in this regard. This paper, therefore, sets out to document her artistic legacy for posterity. The objectives of the paper are to highlight the techniques and styles Stella Idiong employed in her graphics practice, and to x-ray the artistic legacy she bequeathed to her artistic heirs. It employed library source of information gathering and descriptive research approach. The paper concludes that the legacy left behind by Stella Idiong is that of artistic transmission - the continuing influence of her compelling and irresistible print and aqua mono techniques on her artistic heirs.

Keywords: aqua mono, graphics practice, legacy, printmaking.

Who is Stella Idiong?

Stella Idiong was born in Ikot Udoe, Ikot Ekpene on September 21st, 1945 to the royal family of Nto Udo Ukut. Her father Samuel Udo Ukut was a renowned colonial District Clerk, sub-treasurer and agrarian farmer. Stella Idiong started her education in 1955 at Government

School, Awka in present day Anambra State, and later at Urban Primary School, Ikot Ekpene between 1958 and 1961. She obtained her Teachers' Grade II Certificate from Holy Child College in 1966. For her tertiary education, she enrolled in Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana and graduated in 1975.

This was followed by a Master's degree from Michigan State University and a Doctorate degree from Columbia University in New York in 1988. She had taught at various levels of academic circles before venturing into tertiary education teaching at the then College of Education, Uyo in 1979, and later the University of Uyo, Uyo in 1992 up till 2008. She was a first in many respects: Female Professor, South-South Nigeria, Dean, Faculty of Environmental Studies, Director, Cultural Studies, University of Uyo, where she established a cultural farm that today has been taken over by the Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Uyo, for the benefit of mankind. Stella Idiong belonged to several professional Bodies like the Nigeria Society of Education through Art (NSEA), Southern Artists Female Association (SAFA), National Association of Female Artists (NAFA) among others. With these background, a peep into her exploits and legacy is pertinent.



Fig. 1: Prof. Stella Idiong

Art Practice

Stella Idiong was gifted as an artist; the way she created her prints using lino cut, the introduction of liquidized oil paints to create her famous technique of 'aqua mono' (single impression in water print), betrays a great sensitivity and spontaneity, and the resulting works convey a sense of interactivity and unity of purpose. She was renowned for her outstanding ability to conveniently work her subjects into space, creating subtle emotions. Stella Idiong experimented exhaustively with liquidized paint-achieving pictorial essence; the accidental through the manipulation of pictorial space in varying the properties of her paint to obtain eureka with great intellect and originality. This style today has become the hallmark of her legacy that is in effect in the department of Fine and Industrial Arts, to which she gave her all.

Stella Idiong's genius arose from the acute attention with which she observed the world around her. In her rendering of her immediate observable environment creating themes around women and children, she mastered various artistic media including illustrations and drawing, but became renowned as a successful printmaker. Her prints had several editions which earned her a reputation of an avid printmaker throughout Nigeria.

She was the first female artist from South-South geo-political region of Nigeria to attain the professorial position in the field of visual communicative art of Graphics, and was directly influenced by the plasto-cast printmaking technique by her first hand contact with the Nigerian Master Printmaker-Bruce Onobrakpeya, who is regarded as the living legend of Nigerian art. With this contact, Stella Idiong combined what she already knew with Bruce's technique to earn her the sobriquet equal of the artistic giants of Nigeria. Today, after Stella Idiong, however, artists, critics and curators have been forced to do battle with her legacy.

Unparalleled Legacy of Stella Idiong's Influence

This paper examines Stella Idiong's astonishing afterlife, the absorption and adaptation of her work by her students and those who came afterwards. The legacy left behind by Stella Idiong is that of artistic transmission - the continuing influence of Idiong's print and aqua mono on her artistic heirs. Her printmaking technique and aqua mono technique have fostered widespread approach of these techniques far and

beyond its birth place. This is surely a provocative account of Stella Idiong's influence on her contemporaries that has spread her techniques far and wide.

Idiong's ease of duplicating images in several editions of her printmaking, the establishment and recognition of her monogram and her great skill informs the desire of other artists to imbibe her peculiarities in artistic practice. One is tempted to ask: what is it about Idiong's influence that has fostered the widespread approach of her techniques? Was it simply the technical and creative nuances her disciples display? What are the forces at work in promulgating Stella Idiong's legacy? Because this is the first spotlight on Idiong's legacy, it demands the reintegration of basic biographic and iconographic information for more theoretical questions.

Paradoxically, Stella Idiong's oscillation of styles, which appeared personal, has been faithfully imitated by students of the Uyo Art School at every stage of students' intake and practiced by past students of the institution. Since so many practicing and upcoming artists have chosen to continue in her tradition, it leaves much to be desired. However, as the practice of her artistic influence has continued, especially among her former students, it is difficult to decipher her work from among those she had trained today. As an icon, she produced stylistically diverse striking responses to political and cultural events of her time. This trend has continued and is sustained by her adherents whose themes revolve around her vision for political and socio-cultural commentaries.

To buttress this point, it is pertinent to assay some of her works as seen in the lens of Ekanem, Umoette, Ekong and Idiong (2017) who submit that she built her reputation in graphics through printmaking. Some of her works on social commentary include: 'Alalok' which highlights the use of art as a catalyst for self development and nation building. Other works include but not limited to 'The Escape,' 'Baby Hawking', 'Child Hawker' and 'Exclusive Breastfeeding'. An analysis of 'Alalok' reveals the failing transportation system in an era. Moreso, it serves as a metaphor for mirroring the ills associated with such means of transportation. Only recently, one of her ex-students, Augustine Uwah explored similar means of transportation through printmaking of 'keke' in 2020. This is a legacy that lives on. Her crystallographic idiom

includes both asymmetrical and symmetrical motif patterns in its constituent parts as exemplified in ‘Child Hawker’.



Fig. 2: “The Escape”
Medium: Callograph
Artist: Stella Idiong
Year of Production: 2002
Source: Light Out Exhibition Catalogue



Fig.3: “Self Portrait II”
Medium: Aqua Mono
Artist: Stella Idiong
Year of Production: 2002
Source: Artforms Exhibition Catalogue



Fig.4: “Exclusive Breastfeeding”
Medium: Printmaking
Artist: Stella Idiong
Year of Production: 2002
Source: Artforms Exhibition Catalogue



Fig.5: “Resting Baby Hawker”
Medium: Contour Pen and Ink wash
Artist: Stella Idiong
Year of Production: 2002
Source: Light Out Exhibition Catalogue



Fig.6: "Father and Son"
Medium: Printmaking
Artist: Stella Idiong
Year of Production: 2001
Source: Artforms Exhibition Catalogue



Fig.7: "Peace Eroded"
Medium: Monotype
Artist: Stella Idiong
Year of Production: 1997
Source: Light Out Exhibition Catalogue

Today, her crystallographic approach is widely applied in the works of contemporary artists within the domain she operated. The impact of her creative contributions can best be described as sustainable legacy. In the words of her scion, Idiong (2018), "she has contributed so much in the development of young talents" furthermore, the legacy of

art practice and exhibitions would be encouraged as exhibitions are expected to be showcased especially in the Art Gallery built to keep her memory alive - Professor Stella Idiong Art Gallery at the University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria; an enduring legacy that promotes her love for exhibitions.



Fig.8: “Prof. Stella Idiong Art Gallery”
Location: University of Uyo, Nigeria
Source: <https://psiartgallery.com>

Stella Idiong had established worldwide reputation as a Graphic artist/Printmaker. She gained immensely in stature, and the particular genre of art that she practiced has assumed in all together deeper significance for the University of Uyo Art School, (Ochigbo, 2018). She left behind the continuation of her printmaking processes of woodcut, linoleum and serigraphy in the hands of her avid students like: Akaninyene John Sampson and Ito Ekong, who hand her artistic tradition to each generation of students in the Department of Fine and Industrial Arts, University of Uyo in Nigeria. Her predominance in the area of her specialization of woodcut, linoleum and serigraphy has been well articulated by Ekong (2018).



Fig.9: "Endangered Species"
Medium: Wood Cut
Artist: Stella Idiong
Year of Production: 2003
Source: In The Mind's Eye Exhibition
Catalogue



Fig.10: "Baby Hawking"
Medium: Lino Cut
Artist: Stella Idiong
Year of Production: 2001
Source: Light Out Exhibition Catalogue

Conclusion

While considering the extraordinary artistic legacy of this printmaking genius and educator - Stella Idiong (1945-2008), it is fair to ask who is Stella Idiong now? How do we interpret her life and work by different generations of art lovers who would have found something exciting about her style, technique and vision?

Some years ago, people remembered Stella Idiong as ‘Mma Culture’ reaching the pinnacle of her artistic career, who always invented herself anew, who always changed her ways of creating art with new materials and ideas. Every generation will have its own Stella Idiong, and they will be borne out of an enduring legacy. Without Stella Idiong and her legacy which even her family recognized, there would not have been an art gallery built to carry on her legacies. She got better at her practice as she got older. That is why her technique and style have been found to be so compelling and irresistible by her heirs. To the rest of us, her works are a tribute to humanity, hence we extol her legacies.

References

- Ekanem, E; Umoette, M; Ekong, N & Idiong U. (2017). A Portriat of Stella Idiong: A Sketch in Gold. Ikot Ekpene. Eyako Ventures
- Ekong, E. C. (2018) ‘Introduction’ in Artforms: A Commemorative Exhibition Catalogue in Honour of Prof. Stella Idiong. Uyo. Department of Fine and Industrial Arts.
- Idiong, U. S. (2018) A Birds Eye View in Artforms: A Commemorative Exhibition Catalogue in Honour of Prof. Stella Idiong. Uyo. Department of Fine and Industrial Arts.
- Ochigbo B. (2018) ‘Curatorial’ in Artforms: A Commemorative Exhibition Catalogue in Honour of Prof. Stella Idiong. Uyo. Department of Fine and Industrial Arts.