VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Three *Olumeye* by Olowe of Ise

September 18, 2005 to January 15, 2006







DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART





Detail showing movable severed head.

Fig. 1. Kneeling female figure with bowl *(olumeye)*, Olowe of Ise, early 20th century. Wood, pigment, and paint, H. 19 1/2 in. Dallas Museum of Art, The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc., 2004.16.McD.



Fig. 2. Kneeling female figure with bowl *(olumeye)*, Agbonbiofe of Efon-Alaaye, early 20th century. Wood, H. 16 1/2 in. Collection of John and Jane Pemberton. Photo: Stephen Petegorsky.



Fig. 3. Kneeling female figure with bowl *(olumeye)*, Olowe of Ise, early 20th century. Wood and pigment, H. 15 3/4 in. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. J. Thomas Lewis. Photo: Will Drescher.



Fig. 4 Kneeling female figure with bowl *(olumeye)*, Olowe of Ise, early 20th century. Wood and pigment, H. 21 1/16 in. The Walt Disney-Tishman African Art Collection. Photo: Jess Allen.

Imagine you have published a catalogue raisonné in the belief that all of the works by the artist had been found. Then, years later, the unexpected happens: an unknown work by that artist appears on the art market. This is what happened in 2004 when a sculpture depicting a kneeling female figure holding a bowl came to light (fig. 1). It was attributed to one of the most important tradition-based African artists of the 20th century. After several months of intensive research to confirm its authenticity, the sculpture was acquired for the Dallas Museum of Art by The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc. This exhibition introduces the sculpture and its creator. It also refutes the widely held assumptions that African artists are anonymous and that they do not challenge convention.

THE MYTH OF THE ANONYMOUS AFRICAN ARTIST

Tradition-based artists' names rarely appear in exhibitions of African art. Instead, the work is usually identified by the name of a people, such as the Yoruba, or a country, Nigeria. To the contrary, African artists were not anonymous but were known to their patrons and the people living in their communities. Exceptional artists were summoned to work in communities far from their home territory. Few of their names are known today because early ethnographers and collectors rarely asked, "Who made this?"

THE ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

The artist who sculpted the kneeling female figure with bowl that is the subject of this exhibition was named Olowere [o-lo-wer-ray]. He was commonly known as Olowe of Ise [o-lo-way of ee-say]. Ise is the town in which he lived most of his life. He was born around 1875, before vital statistics were routinely recorded in Nigeria and before interviewing artists became customary. He left no diaries or bills of sale of his work; he probably could not write in either English or Yoruba. In the absence of conventional sources of information, where does one begin to search for information with which to reconstruct a tradition-based African artist's biography? The sources include written, sometimes published, accounts by Europeans who met the artist and documented his art; *in situ* photography of his sculptures; the indigenous record, in the form of an *oriki* [o-ree-kee], praise song; and descendants' recollections.

Olowe of Ise was born in Efon-Alaaye, a royal town in Nigeria that was an important center for Yoruba visual art in the 19th century. At a young age, he moved to Ise, where he served the Arinjale [ah-ren-jah-lay], or king, as a court messenger. Ise remained his home base throughout his life, until he was about sixty-three years old. When and where Olowe learned to carve is unknown. According to his descendants, he was self-taught. It is more likely that once his talent had been discovered, he was apprenticed to a master sculptor to gain command of the Yoruba canon and hone his carving skills. Eventually Olowe became the master of his own atelier, or workshop. According to some sources, he had as many as fifteen assistants; others claim he worked alone. His chief patron was the Arinjale of Ise, who loaned him to other Yoruba kings and prominent families to beautify their residences with sculpted veranda posts and doors. His patrons, who also included religious specialists, commissioned him to carve masks, figures, divination boards, and drums for religious worship activities. He also carved children's toys and game boards. Olowe's most distant patron was at Idanre, some sixty miles south of Ise. Olowe of Ise was active from around the turn of the 20th century until his death in approximately 1938.

In 1924 Olowe of Ise's work, if not his name, reached England. A two-panel painted door and lintel ensemble with figures carved in exceedingly high relief from the Ogoga's (king's) palace at Ikere was selected for display at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, London. It was installed at the entrance to the timber exhibit in the Nigerian Pavilion. The door ensemble, whose imagery commemorates the first British Traveling Commissioner's visit to a Yoruba king in 1899, impressed British Museum officials enough for them to acquire the sculpture for the permanent collection.

British colonial government officials, anthropologists, educators, and other foreign visitors documented Olowe's sculptures in *in situ* photographs, published reports, and unpublished personal diaries. These materials can be examined in memorabilia boxes that were deposited at the Rhodes House Library at Oxford University and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, as well as in journals pertaining to African studies. Philip Allison, a British forester who regularly visited the Arinjale of Ise in the 1930s and admired Olowe's art, is credited with identifying the sculptor by name.

OLOWE OF ISE'S *ORIKI*

The following excerpts are from Olowe's *oriki*, or praise song, that a surviving wife of the artist recorded in 1988. The *oriki* indicates that Olowe of Ise was held in high esteem and that he was a very strong man who made his living from carving. It also cites the towns where he worked and his "lion" (perhaps meaning the extraordinary palace doors) that was sent to England.

Olowe...
Outstanding among his peers.
One who carves the hard wood of the iroko tree
as though it were as soft as a calabash.
One who achieves fame with the proceeds of his carving.

Olowe...
The master carver.
He went to the palace of Ogoga
And spent four years there.
He was carving there.
If you visit the Ogoga's palace
And the one at Owo,
The work of my husband is there.
If you go to Ikare,
The work of my husband is there.
Pay a visit to Igede,
You will find my husband's work there.
The same thing at Ukiti.
His work is there.
Mention Olowe's name at Ogbagi,
In Use, too,
My husband's work can be found.
In Deji's palace,
My husband worked at Akure.
Olowe also worked at Ogotun.
There was a carved lion
That was taken to England.
With his hands he made it.

Olowe of Ise's *oriki* was recorded by Professor John Pemberton III in Ise, Nigeria, in 1988 and is reproduced with his kind permission.



Fig. 5. Kneeling female figure with bowl *(olumeye)*, Olowe of Ise, before 1925. Wood, pigment, and paint, H. 25 1/16 in. National Museum of African Art, bequest of William A. McCarty-Cooper, 95-10-1. Photo: Franko Khoury.

OLUMEYE

Olumeye [o-loo-may-yay] refers to a kneeling female holding a lidded bowl that was used to hold the kola nuts *(obi)* a host offered to his guests in a domestic hospitality ritual or to deities (*orisha* [o-ree-shah]) in the context of religious worship. Such bowls may also have been used to store valuables. *Olumeye* means "one who knows honor" and serves as "a messenger of the spirits." The figure also celebrates Yoruba aesthetic ideals of feminine beauty. All Yoruba sculptors knew how to carve an *olumeye*.

The conventional approach to carving an *olumeye* is exemplified by Agbonbiofe (d. 1945), a master sculptor of the Adeshina family of carvers and beadworkers of Efon-Alaaye and a contemporary of Olowe. The slender female figure wearing a crested hairstyle evokes modesty and elegance with minimal scarification and ornamentation (fig. 2). Agbonbiofe carved the lidded bowl in the conventional form of a cock, an animal that is usually sacrificed to the *orisha*.

OLOWE REINVENTS THE *OLUMEYE*

Olowe's reinvention of the *olumeye* breaks with the conventional conception of the genre as exemplified by Agbonbiofe of Efon-Alaaye's rendition (fig. 2) and his own (fig. 3, not included in the exhibition). While both artists celebrate feminine beauty, in his new version of the form Olowe emphasizes those desirable attributes through exaggeration (fig. 1). His *olumeye*'s coiffeur soars skyward, her neck is elongated to extend her height, and the scarification patterns carved in low relief on her face and back are carefully detailed. The lidded bowl is no longer in the form of a cock. Here, the dome-shaped lid, like the bowl, is boldly decorated with zigzags, diamonds, rectangles, and other geometric designs. Atop the lid is a group of birds pecking at a mound of feed carved in high relief. The bowl rests on the upraised hands of female figures kneeling along the edge of a circular base. Except for the lid, the entire sculpture is carved from a single piece of wood. While many *olumeye* are decorated with scarification designs, none are painted or have a bowl that has a lid decorated in this manner.

Another unique feature of Olowe's sculpture reinforces the notion that the artist was an innovative and virtuosic sculptor. Olowe carved a freestanding bearded human head within the "cage" created by the kneeling female figures around the base. The head must have been carved from within the cage; it can be moved about but it cannot be removed (detail of fig. 1).

Yoruba art, like African art in general, is meaningful. In the work of Olowe, the larger kneeling female figure represents a betrothed young woman as indicated by the scarification carved in relief patterns on her back. Her *agogo* hairstyle indicates she is a new bride or the "bride" of a deity. The feeding birds may refer to the extraordinary and sometimes feared spiritual powers (*ase* [ah-shay]) of "our Mothers," that is to say, women of the past, present, and future. The severed head may be symbolic of woman's *ase* used for destructive purposes, or a sacrificial victim, similar to those on the Yoruba funerary ring displayed in the African art gallery on the Museum's third level.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Olowe carved two other *olumeye*. In each work, a kneeling female figure holds a lidded bowl supported by figures forming a "cage" for a severed head. While the compositions are similar, each sculpture is larger and more complex than the Dallas sculpture. For example, the lid on the bowl from the Walt Disney-Tishman African Art Collection is decorated with a pair of large, standing cocks (fig. 4). The kneeling female figure from the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, carries an infant on her back (fig. 5). The lid on this bowl is more elaborately decorated, with four standing females holding the shoulder of her neighbor. The male and female figures on the base include an unusual kneeling nude male at the center.

The *olumeye* in the Dallas collection is the smallest and has the simplest design of the three reinvented sculptures. It was probably the prototype, a revolutionary redesign of a Yoruba standard.

Dr. Roslyn Adele Walker

Senior Curator of the Arts of Africa, the Pacific, and the Americas and The Margaret McDermott Curator of African Art

Dallas Museum of Art

FOR FURTHER READING

Allison, Philip A. "A Yoruba Carver." *Nigeria* (Lagos) 22 (1944): 49–50.

Kloman, Susan, and Catherine Elliott. "Discovered: A Supremely Rare and Important Yoruba Bowl by Olowe of Ise." *Tribal Arts* (Autumn 2004): 119–22.

Pemberton, John. "A Rare and Important Yoruba Bowl by Olowe of Ise." *Sotheby's African, Oceanic and Pre-Columbian Art*, Lot 60 (2004): 66–69.

Walker, Roslyn Adele. *Olowe of Ise: A Yoruba Sculptor to Kings*. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1998.

CHECKLIST

Kneeling female figure with bowl *(olumeye)*
Olowe of Ise (c. 1875–c. 1938)
Southwestern Nigeria, Ekiti Yoruba people
Early 20th century
Wood, pigment, and paint
Dallas Museum of Art, The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc., 2004.16.McD

Kneeling female figure with bowl *(olumeye)*
Agbonbiofe of Efon-Alaaye (d. 1945)
Southwestern Nigeria, Yoruba people
Early 20th century
Wood
Lent by John and Jane Pemberton

Kneeling female figure with bowl *(olumeye)*
Olowe of Ise (c. 1875–c. 1938)
Southwestern Nigeria, Ekiti Yoruba people
Early 20th century
Wood and pigment
The Walt Disney-Tishman African Art Collection

Kneeling female figure with bowl *(olumeye)*
Olowe of Ise (c. 1875–c. 1938)
Southwestern Nigeria, Ekiti Yoruba people
Wood, pigment, and paint
National Museum of African Art, bequest of William A. McCarty-Cooper, 95-10-1

Variations on a Theme: Three "Olumeye" by Olowe of Ise was organized by the Dallas Museum of Art.

The exhibition is supported by the Dallas Museum of Art League. Air transportation is provided by American Airlines.

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

1717 NORTH HARWOOD ST
DALLAS TX 75201

DallasMuseumofArt.org