



Pioneering African modernist, Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu MBE at Frieze Masters

Frieze Masters | *Spotlight*

The Regent's Park, London

October 13-15, 2023 (Preview: October 11-12, 2023)

kó is pleased to announce a solo presentation of renowned Nigerian artist Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu MBE (1917-1994), known as Ben Enwonwu, at Frieze Masters, taking place October 13-15, 2023, at The Regent's Park, London. The project is included in the *Spotlight* section, which features solo presentations by ground-breaking artists of the twentieth century.

Ben Enwonwu was a pioneer in shaping the visual and conceptual discourse of African modernism. His enduring legacy solidifies his position as one of the most significant artists of the twentieth century. Working as a painter and sculptor throughout Nigeria's colonial, independence, and post-independence periods, he formed a unique modernist language that speaks to the country's culture and national identity. As the first African artist to achieve major global recognition, his work engaged in a dynamic dialogue with modern art movements in Africa and across the world.

This presentation will showcase a diverse selection of Ben Enwonwu's artworks spanning the 1940s to 1980s, including paintings in oil and gouache as well as wood and bronze sculptures. The selection focuses on several recurring themes in the artist's work, including masquerades, Igbo aesthetics, and the exploration of the human form. These themes serve as a testament to Enwonwu's profound engagement with the movements of Negritude and Pan-Africanism.

Born in 1917 in Onitsha, Nigeria, a cosmopolitan market town that served as the nexus of Igbo culture and British colonial influence, Enwonwu's early exposure to the conceptual underpinnings of Igbo aesthetics came through his father, a practicing sculptor. His formal art education began within the first accredited art program in colonial Nigeria. After debuting his artworks at London's Zwemmer Gallery in 1937, Enwonwu earned a scholarship to study at the prestigious Slade School in London, becoming its first African graduate. Enwonwu's artistic sophistication swiftly garnered international acclaim. In 1949, *Ebony Magazine* hailed him as "Africa's greatest artist," and by 1950, his work had been presented in exhibitions in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the USA.

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In 1956, Enwonwu was commissioned to produce a bronze sculpture of Queen Elizabeth II. As the first African artist to receive a commission from Queen Elizabeth II, the unveiling of his creation garnered significant worldwide attention and acclaim. A version of his iconic sculpture of *Anyanwu*, the Igbo sun god, was given as a gift to the United Nations from Nigeria in 1966. This masterpiece is now permanently installed within the United Nations Headquarters, symbolizing the rich cultural heritage and artistic excellence that Enwonwu brought to the international stage.

As a transnational African modernist, Enwonwu frequently centered his artistic exploration on the theme of masquerades. His ***Africa Dances*** series offers a compelling visual narrative of the theme's gradual evolution spanning several decades, emphasizing the central role of dance and performance in representing African and African diaspora cultures. Enwonwu's masterful treatment of this theme not only captures the beauty and complexity of masquerades but also serves as a testament to his profound engagement with the cultural heritage and artistic expression of these rich traditions.

Included in this presentation, ***Agbogho Mmuo*** is an oil on canvas from 1977 that encapsulates Enwonwu's focus on masquerade traditions. "Agbogho Mmuo," or "Maiden Spirits," is a traditional dance performed by young men in Igbo communities that pays homage to unmarried girls and ancestors. The curving figure, in mid-dance with elongated limbs, adorns an intricate costume and mask. Enwonwu's focus on the Igbo masquerade tradition took on new symbolism in the wake of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, as the Igbo people incorporated their culture into a re-united Nigeria. This work is likely the ***Agbogho Mmuo*** that illustrates the front cover of Sylvester Ogbachie's ***Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist***, a seminal text on the life and work of Enwonwu.

This presentation also includes watercolours from Enwonwu's ***Negritude*** series. Enwonwu was invited to join the Negritude movement by Leopold Senghor, one of its founders. The Negritude movement emerged in the 1930s and 1940s and sought to celebrate and promote the cultural, historical, and artistic contributions of people of African descent while challenging the negative stereotypes and colonial prejudices of African cultures. In his work ***Black Culture*** (1986), Enwonwu delves into the ideology of Negritude, indicating his affinity with the artists of the Harlem Renaissance that he encountered during his exhibition and tour in the United States in 1950. This interconnectedness of his artistic journey with global movements adds resonance to his contributions within the broader context of Africa and the Africa diaspora, representing cultural pride, unity, and connection.

Throughout his life, Enwonwu primarily identified himself as a sculptor. This presentation showcases a diverse array of sculptural works that exemplify his mastery in this medium. One notable work is the early mahogany wood sculpture titled ***The Boxer*** (1942). This

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sculpture employs minimalist planes and flowing forms to convey the dynamic motion of an athlete, offering viewers a striking visual representation of movement and strength. Another sculpture, ***Torso of a Girl***, is crafted from bonze, depicting a woman of the Fulani people with exquisite detail and emotive power.

Among his most renowned sculptures is the iconic bronze sculpture ***Anyanwu (Rising Sun)*** (c. 1975). Its elongated figure has drawn comparisons to the attenuated forms characteristic of European modernist artist Alberto Giacometti. Inspired by a 16th-century Edo-Benin bronze head of a queen, ***Anyanwu*** is celebrated as a symbol of Nigerian and pan-African identity. Versions of this masterpiece can also be found at the National Museum in Lagos and the National Museum of Zimbabwe, reinforcing its global recognition and enduring legacy.

Enwonwu explained the importance of ***Anyanwu*** for envisioning Nigeria's national consciousness at the dawn of independence: **“My aim was to symbolise our rising nation. I have tried to combine material, crafts, and tradition, to express a conception that is based on womanhood—woman, the mother and nourisher of man. In our rising nation, I see the forces embodied in womanhood; the beginning, and then, the development and flowering into the fullest stature of a nation—a people! This sculpture is spiritual in conception, rhythmic in movement, and three dimensional in its architectural setting—these qualities are characteristic of the sculptures of my ancestors.”**

Enwonwu was also an astute art critic who penned numerous critical assessments of the pressing currents within African modernism. He underscored a crucial point: that European artists were not only copying from but also being profoundly influenced by African art. His argument emphasized the need to interpret African modernism within its distinct local and global contexts, recognizing it as a novel and distinctive development. To this day, Ben Enwonwu's artworks, critical writings, and commentary on the art of his time continue to be among the most substantial of any modern artist in the global context. His legacy continues to enrich the enduring impact of African art on the broader landscape of modern art.

kó is an art space based in Lagos, Nigeria, that is dedicated to promoting modern and contemporary art. kó has a dual focus in championing Nigeria's leading artists from the modern period and celebrating emerging and established contemporary artists across Africa and the Diaspora.