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BEN ENWONWU

(Nigeria, 1917-1994)

"BLACK CULTURE"

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(Nigeria, 1917-1994)

Frieze Viewing Room

7-16 October 2020

Frieze Masters: Spotlight

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COVER: Ben Enwonwu, *Black Culture*, 1986, Gouache on paper, 29 x 21 in.

BACK COVER: Ben Enwonwu, *Anyanwu*, c.1975, Bronze, 36.6 x 9.8 x 6.7 in.

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Image courtesy of the Ben Enwonwu Foundation.



Ben Enwonwu's life and career are central to any study of African modernism. 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.

I am honoured to organise this presentation of Ben Enwonwu at Frieze Masters 2020, in the Spotlight section, which features solo presentations by groundbreaking artists of the twentieth century. While the physical edition of the fair has been canceled this year due to the global pandemic, we look forward to participating in the Frieze Viewing Room, its online edition.

This presentation includes twelve works in oil, gouache, and wood and bronze sculpture by Enwonwu spanning the years 1940-1980. The selection focuses on several recurring themes in the artist's work: dances, performances and masquerades, reflective of the movements of Negritude and Pan-Africanism.

Ben Enwonwu was a pioneer in developing a visual vocabulary for Nigerian modernism to speak on its own terms. His artworks were in conversation with modern art movements throughout Africa and around the world. It is no surprise that his artwork has gained such renewed international attention, cementing his legacy as one of the twentieth century's most important artists.

Kavita Chellaram
Founder, kó

BEN ENWONWU @ FRIEZE MASTERS

*Dr. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbachie
University of California Santa Barbara
August 31, 2020*

Benedict (Ben) Enwonwu was undoubtedly a major master of modern art in the 20th century. He was a pioneer African modernist and the first artist from the African continent to gain transnational global visibility. His unique artworks had already been exhibited in Africa, Europe, Asia and the USA by 1950.

Enwonwu was born in Onitsha in Eastern Nigeria in 1917 and grew up in a cosmopolitan market town that was a center of indigenous Igbo culture and British colonial control. He was a sculptor and painter, and his art was based on complex amalgamation of indigenous Igbo/African systems of representation, and aesthetic forms derived from British colonial culture, both of which framed the artist's early years. Enwonwu was first introduced to the conceptual structures of Igbo aesthetics through his father's practice as a sculptor who produced both ritual and secular artworks for indigenous Onitsha society. Throughout his life, Enwonwu described himself primarily as a sculptor and used his father's traditional tools of sculpture, mainly an adz, to produce his own works.

Enwonwu was trained by Kenneth C. Murray in the first accredited formal art education program in colonial Nigeria, and his early artworks showed a mastery of sculpture. When Murray exhibited artworks by his students at the Zwemmer Gallery in London in 1937, Enwonwu's sculptures received great praise from British

artists and critics, and were described as extraordinary examples of modernist aesthetics. He received a scholarship to study at the Slade School in London and became the first African to graduate from that institution. During his education at the Slade, Enwonwu received and executed many sculpture commissions. Early in his professional career, he was commissioned to produce a sculpture of Queen Elizabeth II, which he completed in 1956. The resulting sculpture was a major international sensation; stories and pictures of the artwork were published in all major newspapers worldwide.

As a transnational African modernist, Enwonwu harnessed his multicultural heritage to produce an artistic synthesis characterized by complex formal and conceptual concerns, focused mainly on masquerades. During his childhood, Enwonwu was embedded in Igbo cultural practices and paintings of masquerades appeared quite early in his oeuvre (the earliest date to 1935). In fact, masquerades and themes of metamorphosis suffuse Enwonwu's oeuvre. Various Igbo masquerades, such as Agbogho Mmo, Ayolugbe, Mmonwu Ogonogo and Mgbedike appear in Enwonwu's art. In his later years, Enwonwu focused almost exclusively on the Ogolo masquerade, distinguished by its white-faced masks. The divergent forms and interpretation of masquerade motifs can be seen in the *Africa Dances* series, which shows a progressive transformation of the theme over many decades.

Enwonwu's most famous sculpture is titled *Anyanwu* (Rising Sun), which he produced in 1955 alongside his commission for the sculpture of Queen Elizabeth II. Several versions of the *Anyanwu* sculpture are



Ben Enwonwu with Kenneth C. Murray's art students, Courtesy of the Ben Enwonwu Foundation.



Ben Enwonwu with Queen Elizabeth II and his bronze statue of her. Courtesy of the Ben Enwonwu Foundation.

located at the National Museum in Lagos, the United Nations Headquarters in New York, and the National Museum of Zimbabwe. Enwonwu also produced many smaller versions of *Anyanwu*, which are much sought after by collectors of his works. *Anyanwu* shows the international range of Enwonwu's artistic influences. It is considered Enwonwu's masterpiece and it reflects his varied aesthetic influences. The head of the figure is derived from 16th century Edo-Benin bronze head of a queen. Its body has been compared to the attenuated figures of European modernist artist Alberto Giacometti. Its symbolism echoes the New Negro aesthetics of Meta Warrick Fuller, whose *Ethiopia Awakening* (1914) was a foundational image in the emergent politics of pan-Africanism's call for African independence and cultural revival, which was later adopted by the Negritude movement.

Enwonwu became familiar with African American art of the New Negro and Harlem Renaissance era during a visit to the USA in 1950. The Harmon Foundation, which at this time was the preeminent promoter of African American art, sponsored his visit. Enwonwu had a chance to engage artworks in the Harmon Foundation collection, which tracked closely the principal figures and artworks of African American art since 1922 when William Elmer Harmon established the foundation. Enwonwu also visited Howard University where he interacted with Alain Leroy Locke, theorist of the Harlem Renaissance, and James E Porter, whose *Modern Negro Art* was the first book written solely about African American art. Enwonwu's visit to the USA was also widely publicized in African American newspapers and his exhibition at the Harmon Foundation was reviewed in *Time* magazine. He gave exhibitions of his wood carving techniques and several



Ben Enwonwu's *Anyanwu* presentation at the UN Headquarters, NY, 1966. Courtesy of the Daily Times of Nigeria Photo Archives.

talks on modern African art and various institutions on the East Coast. Enwonwu's visit to the USA provided him with opportunities to engage African American art, which continued to influence his artwork for the rest of his career.

In addition to his artworks, Enwonwu wrote many critical evaluations of the emergent modes of African modernism, all of which opposed efforts to marginalize the new practices as mimicry of European forms. He emphasized the fact that European artists were copying



Ben Enwonwu chats with Prime Minister Alhaja Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Courtesy of the Ben Enwonwu Foundation.

from (or being influenced by) African art, arguing that even if African artists sometimes engaged existing Euromodernist practices, their works needed to be interpreted within its local and global contexts as a new and unique development.

By the time Ben Enwonwu died in 1994, he had created a significant legacy of artistic and critical interventions, formulated on a notion of African modernist practice that built on important indigenous aesthetics and conceptual frameworks. The past two decades has seen greater acknowledgement of Enwonwu's important contributions to global modernism. His various artworks, critical writings, and commentary on the art of his time are among the most substantial of any modern artist in the global context.

Dr. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbachie is professor of Art History at University of California, Santa Barbara, specialising on the arts and visual culture of Africa and its Diasporas. He is the author of Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist (University of Rochester Press, 2008). Making History: The Femi Akinsanya African Art Collection (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2011), and editor of Artists of Nigeria (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2012).

Ben Enwonwu

Africa Dances

1954

Gouache and watercolour on paper

30½ x 10½ in. (78 x 27 cm.)

Enwonwu's *Africa Dances* series form a major thematic core of his artworks. He began the series as a response to problematic representations of African culture in British colonial publications. In these artworks, Enwonwu foregrounded the primacy of dance and performance as central elements of African and African diaspora cultural representation. His use of "Africa" rather than "African" in the title *Africa Dances* reflects his Pan-Africanist belief in the transcendent nature of dance as a numinous mode of African cultural expression. This version of *Africa Dances* from 1954 already established the primary form of artworks in these series, in its use of a central female figure caught in an expressive pose. This initial focus would be expanded greatly as the series progressed, fragmenting into multiple figures drawn in interlocking poses. Enwonwu used gouache as a medium from his earliest paintings and their monochromatic form is also important to these early examples of paintings in the *Africa Dances* series.



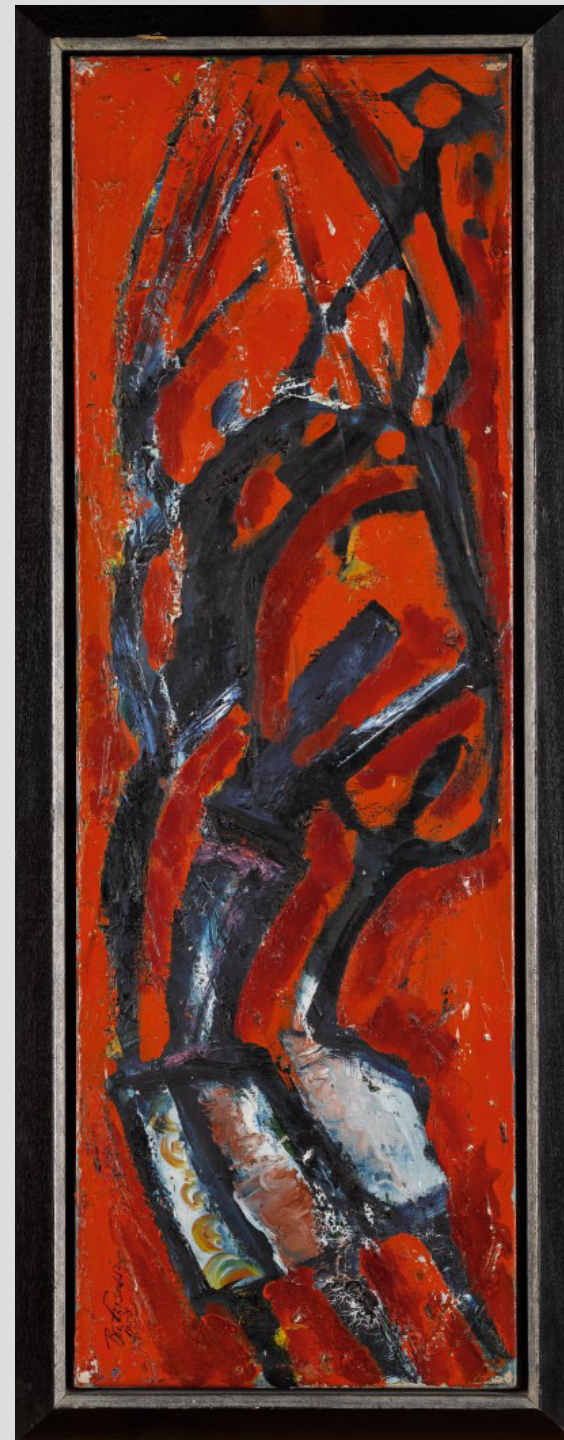
Ben Enwonwu
Africa Dances
1957
Gouache on paper (pair)
15½ x 5½ in. each (39.5 x 14 cm. each)

This painting shows the rapid progression of Enwonwu's *Africa Dances* series. The single figure of a woman in the 1954 version has been transformed into multiple female figures whose dance is anchored by the maiden spirit (*Agbogho Mmo*) masquerade in the left panel of the artwork, which is identified by the complex carving of its mask headdress and sinuous figure. The dancing female figures on the right show how subsequent versions of artworks in this series were transformed: multiple dancers in echoing poses now accompany the prominent central figure. The painting is vertically oriented and uses an ocher color to demarcate its foreground and background.



Ben Enwonwu
Abstract Figures (Africa Dances)
1958
Oil on canvas
36 x 12 in. (91.5 x 30.6 cm.)

In this painting from the *Africa Dances* series, Enwonwu shifts from his reliance on gouache to the use of oil paints. He also pushes the attenuated forms of the dancing figures towards pure abstraction by using bold red color to frame the broad black strokes that represent the dancers, who have been transformed from female to male figures. The ochre strokes on the central figure and stylized forms at the top of the painting point to Enwonwu's interest in *Igbo Uli motifs*.



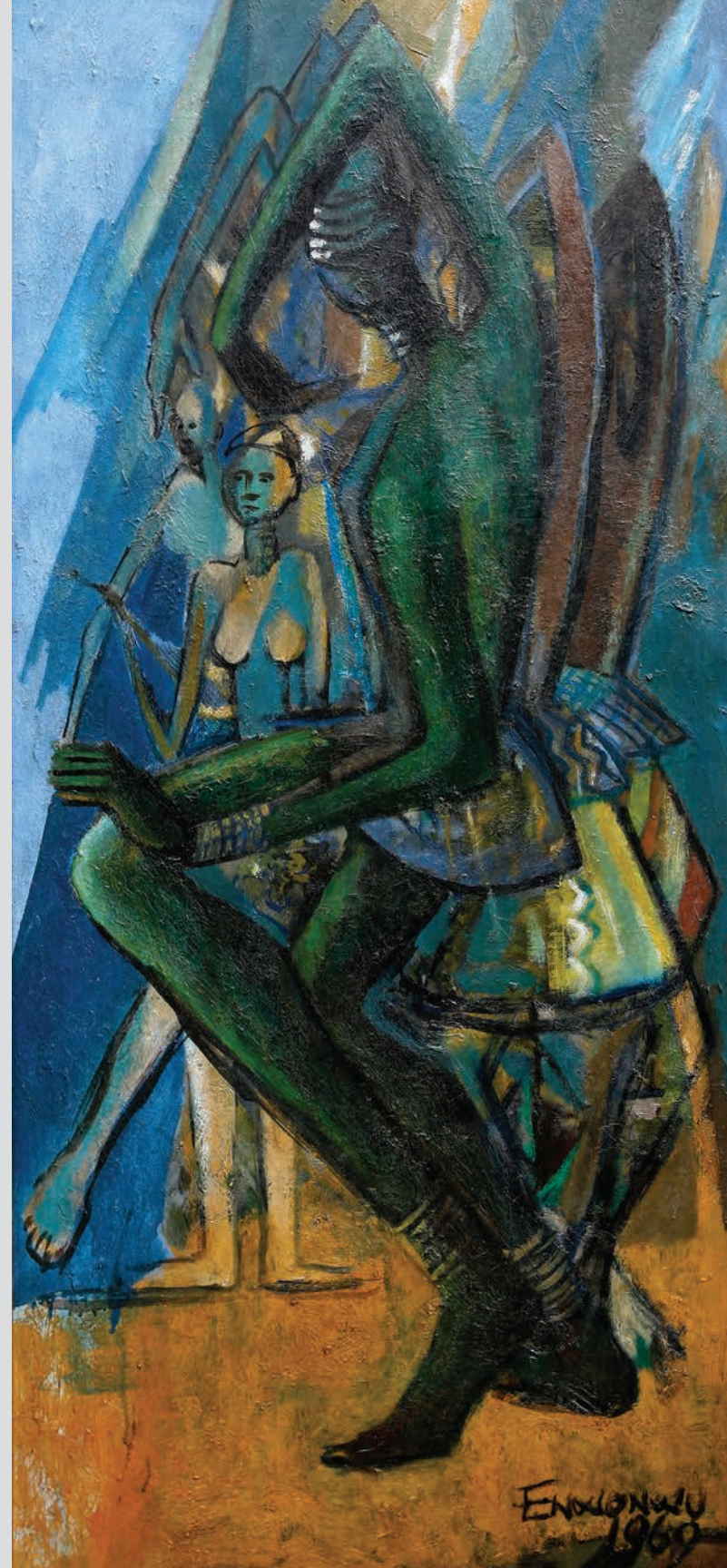
Ben Enwonwu
Dancing Figure
1956
Gouache on paper
21.9 x 19.7 in. (55.5 x 50 cm.)

This painting combines the motif of dancing women with a representation of the dance of the *Ogolo masquerade*. The central figure in this painting is minimalist and its swirling form is characteristic of how the masquerade dances, spinning around in a cyclonic motion. Enwonwu hints at the complexity of Ogolo's performance through the speed of his execution of the drawing. The red color of the background is associated with spiritual powers and adds to the numinous affect of the image.



Ben Enwonwu
Africa Dances
1969
Oil on board
42½ x 20¾ in. (108 x 52.5 cm.)

Africa Dances (1969) represents the mature phase of Enwonwu's Africa Dances series. The key elements of this mature phase include the demarcation between the ochre foreground and cerulean blue background, and the increased size of these paintings. There is greater use of symbolic motifs drawn from Uli art in these works, and a fractal sensibility in the placement of multiple figures, complemented by the refractive nature of the background colors. The figures are painted in bold greens and browns, and are adorned with bright costumes. Enwonwu uses his signature as an element of composition, to anchor the bulk of imagery on the right side of the painting.





Ben Enwonwu
Negritude
1980
Gouache on paper
20.6 x 29.5 in. (52.5 x 75 cm.)

Enwonwu was an Anglophone proponent of *Negritude* and also the only notable visual artist among the early adherents of this ideology, who mostly worked in literature. Enwonwu was invited to join the Negritude movement by Leopold Senghor, one of its founders. Subsequently, Negritude imagery became prominent in his artworks and he used the term as a title in many of his paintings. There is a subtle transformation of Enwonwu's art in the shift from *Africa Dances* to *Negritude* and this is reflected in the thematic orientation of his later paintings.



Ben Enwonwu
Negritude
1973
Gouache on paper
14.6 x 21.7 in. (37 x 55 cm.)

Negritude (1973) shows this transformation in the dense silhouette of the central figure and the ghostly blue and yellow forms of the background figures, whose clearly drawn visage contrasts with the monochromatic form of the central image. The series of *Negritude* paintings with monochromatic figures also contrast with the frenetic form of Enwonwu's *Africa Dances* series. Their bold forms and color washes show a graphic design sensibility and an almost literal interpretation of Senghor's romantic imaginary of the African past.



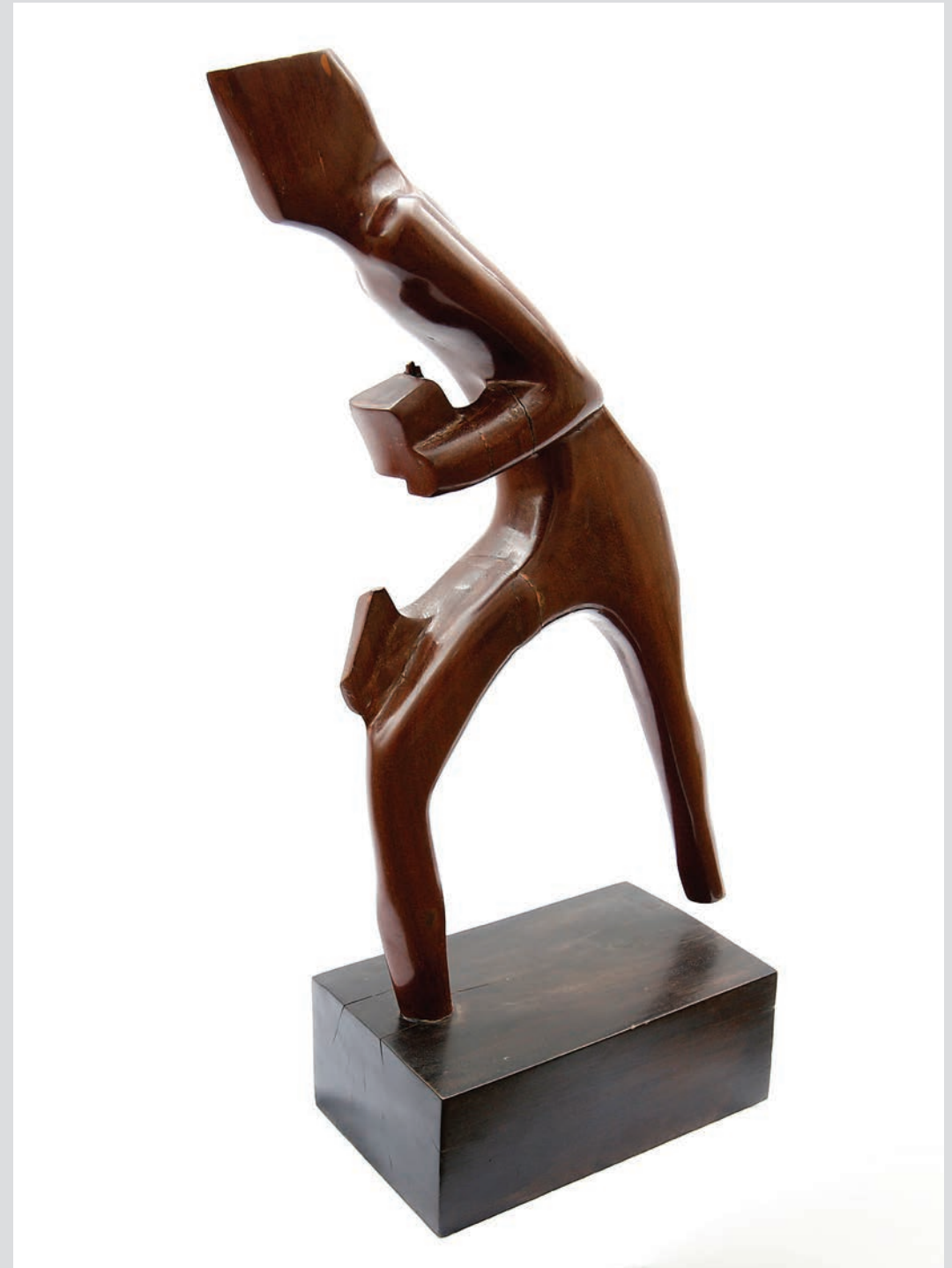
Ben Enwonwu
Black Culture
1986
Gouache on paper
29 x 21 in. (74 x 53.5 cm.)

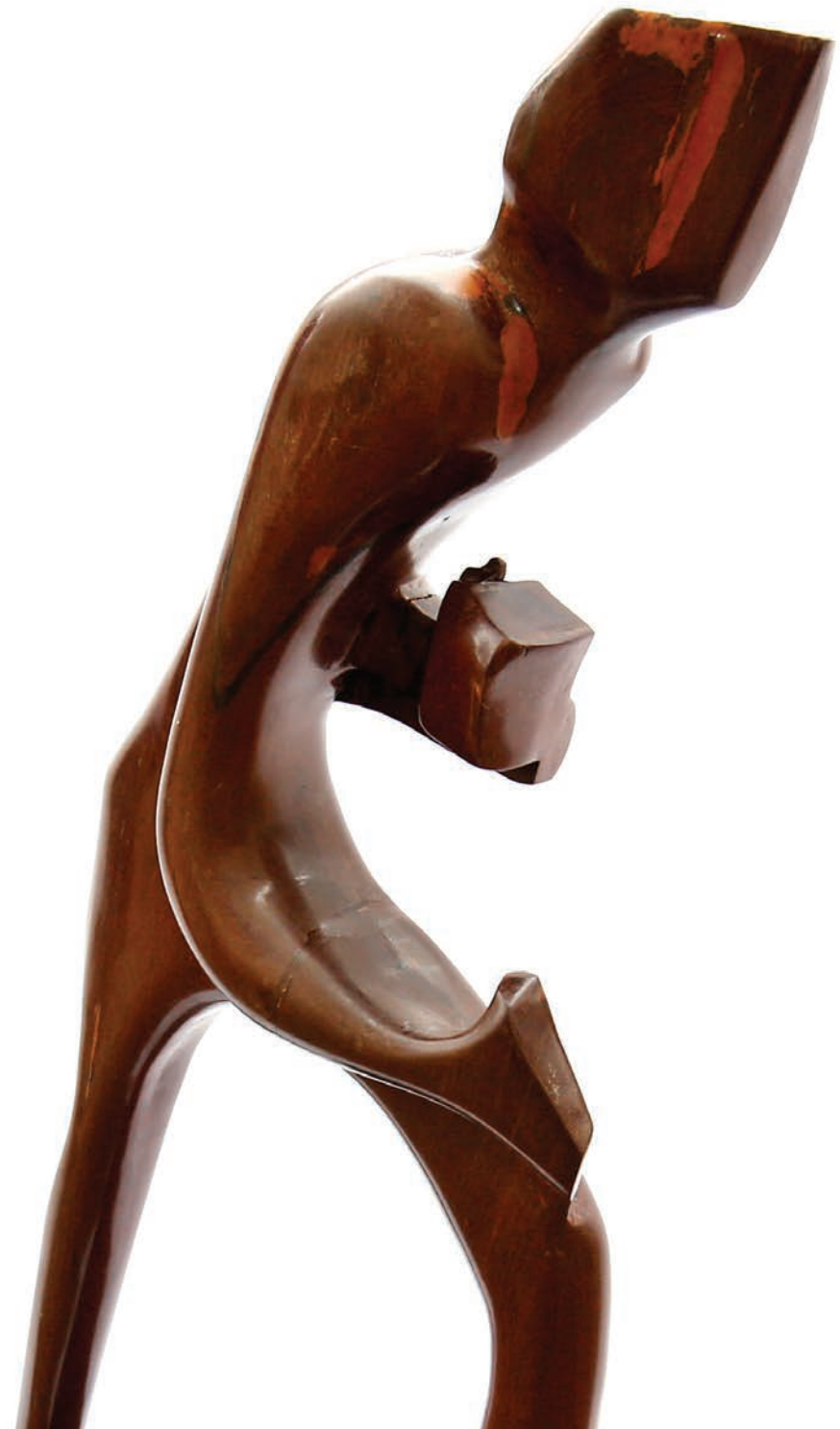
Black Culture (1986) was the culmination of Enwonwu's *Negritude* phase, consisting of those paintings that used monochromatic black color to delineate female figures occupying the center of the pictorial space. This particular painting combines the graphic orientation of the series with a color sensibility drawn from Enwonwu's late paintings. The central female figure has clearly delineated facial features and hairstyle, which along with its blue hands shift it away from the silhouette form of earlier examples in this series. The expansive ochre background of the painting enhances her sable figure, which is interspersed with Igbo maiden spirit masquerades rendered in ghostly white and blue. There is also a phalanx of Uli motifs in the background.



Ben Enwonwu
The Boxer
1942
Wood
25 x 11.5 x 4.5 in. (63.5 x 29.2 x 11.4 cm.)

The Boxer uses minimalist planes and fluid forms to generate an image of an athlete in motion. This sculpture shows the sophistication of Enwonwu's early artworks and why he insisted on being described as a sculptor even though he was equally gifted as a painter. They also show why he quickly gained an international reputation when his works were first exhibited at the Zwemmer Gallery in 1937. Enwonwu was very particular about his choice of wood for sculpture, and he considered them vital to the final form of such artworks. *The Boxer* was carved in mahogany, which Enwonwu used along with ebony and tropical redwood to create his most famous sculptures.

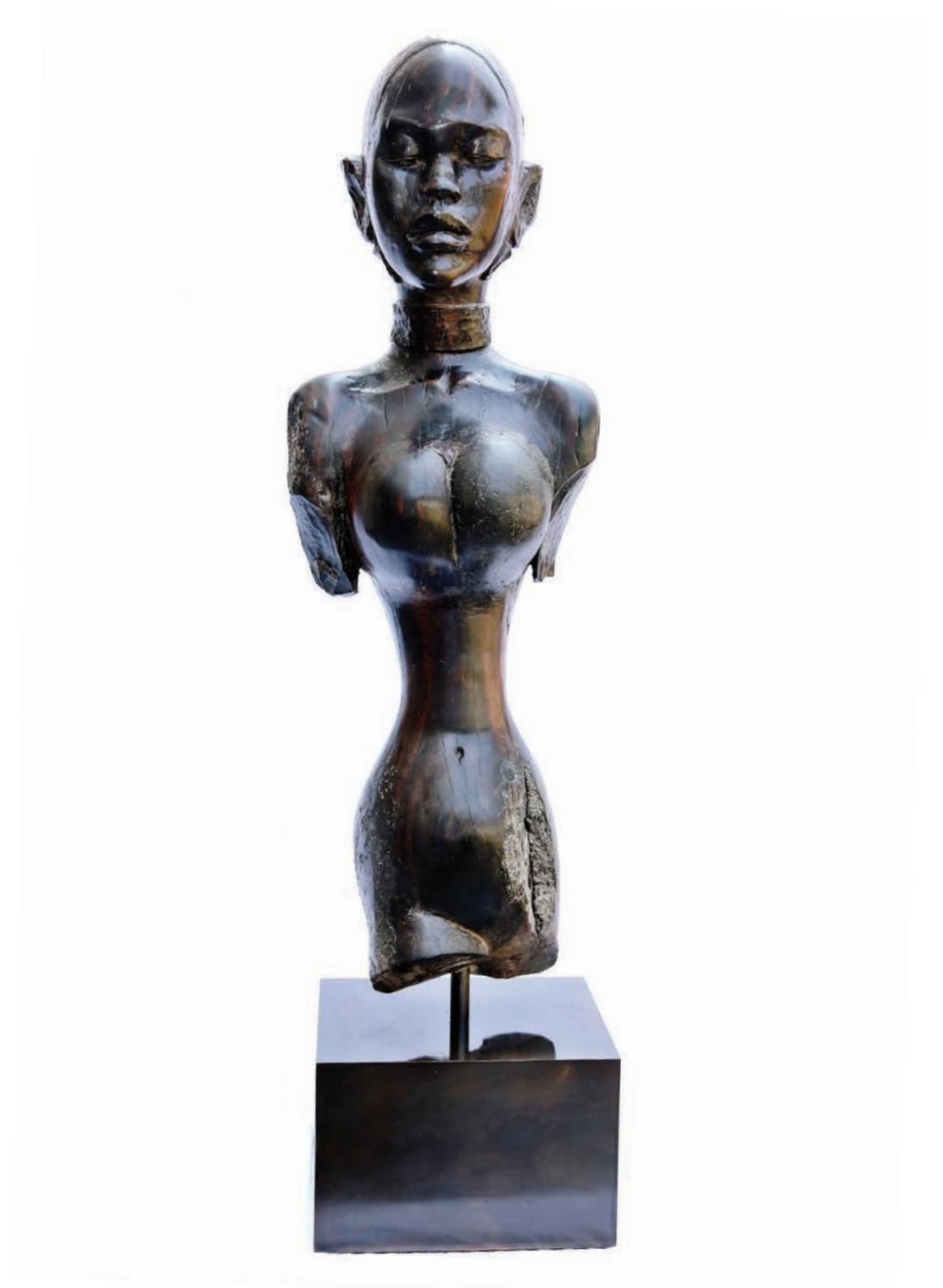




Ben Enwonwu
The Boxer
(detail)

Ben Enwonwu
Torso of Girl
1967
Wood (ebony)
36 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 4 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (93 x 10.5 x 5 cm.)

Throughout his career, Enwonwu carried out his most audacious formalistic experiments in sculpture. *Torso of Girl* represents an important node in Enwonwu's artistic transformation. It fits within the style of a series of his sculptures that used highly polished surfaces to represent different kinds of African ethnic identities. The female figure in this sculpture is a woman of the Fulani people who wears the iconic jewelry and earrings common to this nomadic population. Fulani imagery was an important subset of Enwonwu's sculptures and constitutes an identifiable series among his other series of artworks.





Torso of Girl
(back and side view)



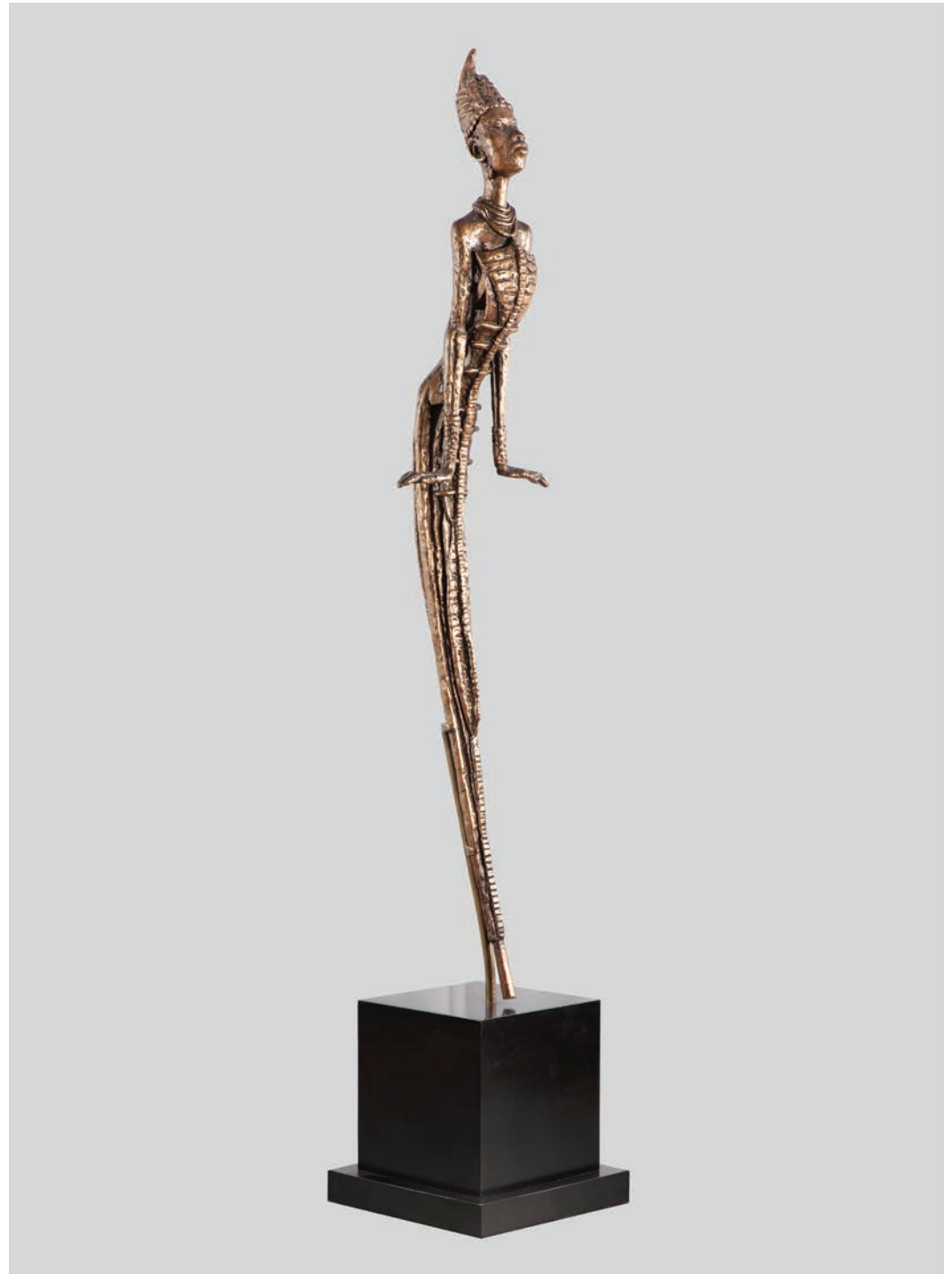
Ben Enwonwu
Untitled
c.1980
Wood
15.5 x 9 x 5.5 in. (39.4 x 22.9 x 14 cm.)

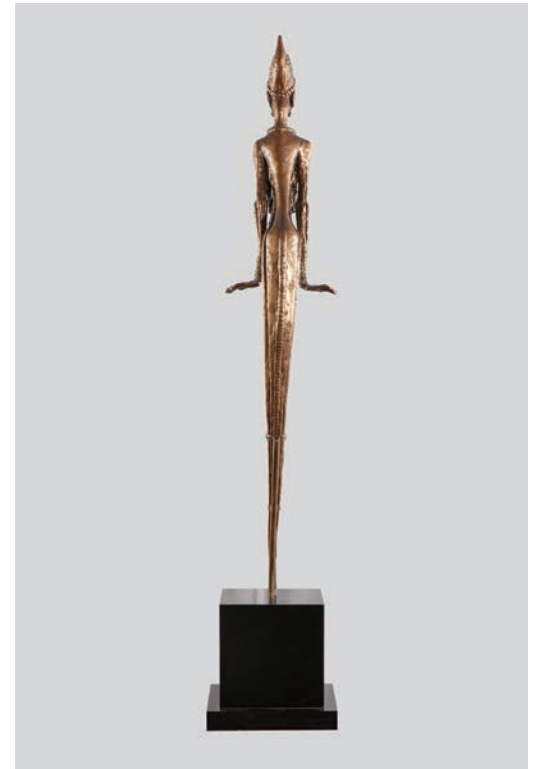
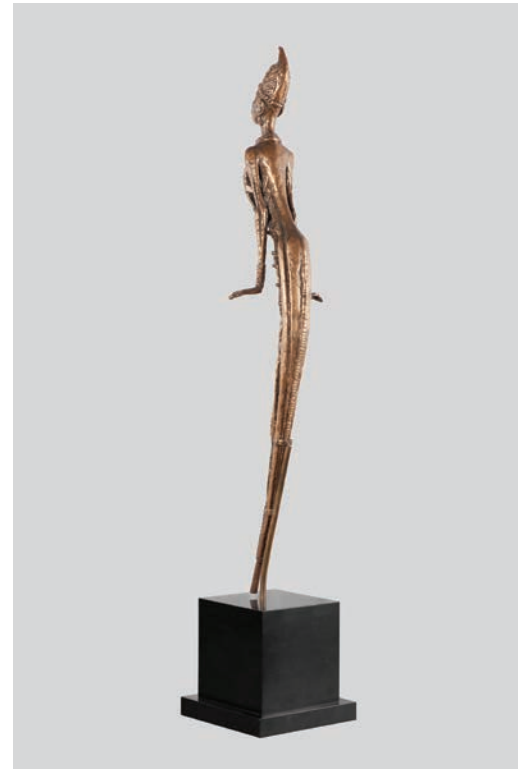
Enwonwu used smooth forms for his sculptures of female figures but many of his sculptures oscillated between smooth and rough surfaces, or combinations of both, especially in those sculptures that highlighted his expressionist style. This sculpture shows a female figure, whose abstract rendition appears often in Enwonwu's sculptures of women and is easily identifiable by their biomorphic form and polished surfaces.



Ben Enwonwu
Anyanwu
c.1975
Bronze
36.6 x 9.8 x 6.7 in. (93 x 25 x 17 cm.)

This version of *Anyanwu* derives from an early scale model that Enwonwu produced as a template for his large-form *Anyanwu* sculptures. *Anyanwu* means “rising sun” in the Igbo language, and it identifies a principal solar deity. The delicate form of the sculpture echoes Enwonwu’s imagery from his *Africa Dances* series, and it shows the graceful and elegant poses prevalent in Enwonwu’s dancers. This version of *Anyanwu* is signed and numbered by the artist (number 3), which makes it quite valuable among the sculptures in the series.





Anwanyu
(back and side view)



Signed, Edition #3



Anwanyu
(detail)

“ *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.* ”

- Ben Enwonwu, on Anyanwu

Courtesy of the Ben Enwonwu Foundation.



About kó

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. Through exhibitions, publications, public programming, and participation in art fairs, Kó aims to expand conversations about contemporary art in Africa to a local and global audience.

www.ko-artspace.com

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