

Onobrakpeya...

# Master of Printmaking

By MAYO CALDWELL

It has been written that art is not concerned with great artists, but with genius or prodigious skills and is fundamentally the outward form on an inward reach.

To participate in the search as a commercial artist, instructor or student is to be an artist.

On the Elizabeth City State University campus, the art colony is to be found in Johnson Hall. Each of these artists has a very personal and singular goal. One of them, Bruce Onobrakpeya's symbolizes the creative genius that abounds in Africa.

Onobrakpeya's artistic works in Printmaking (the original prints from a master plate) has won international praise.

Born in 1932 into an Urobo family in Agbarha-Otor, a town in what is now Nigeria's Bendel State, straddles the delta of the Niger.

Once Onobrakpeya had completed his secondary

schooling, he took up teaching in Benin City.

Upon decking to further his studies in art, he travelled north in 1957 to Zaria, the site of the Nigerian College of Technology. The institution has been renamed Ahmadu Bello University.

Onobrakpeya's prints and painting grace many collections, including those of the Queen of England and the Duke of Edinburgh.

Other major purchases have been made by such groups as the Nigerian Federal Society of Arts and Humanities, the National Theatre (Lagos) and the Vatican Museum. He is currently lecturing at ECSU as a FullBright-Hayes exchange scholar.

Dressed in a green leisure suit that complimented his smooth black skin, he leaned back in his chair searching for the right commingling of words.

Then, in his carefully



thought-out teacher's oratory style marked by staccato rhythms and syncopated long and short phrases, Onobrakpeya said, "Printmaking is my most passionate endeavor, which I will pursue for the rest of my life."

When queried about why he chose printmaking instead of

some other art form he warmly replied, "I like Printmaking because it is a method which enables artists to reach a great number of people at the same time. You can produce 12 original prints from one masterplate, thereby, enabling 11 extra art lovers to have their own original prints," he said.

Q. How did you come to attain the stature which you now command as an artist?

A. Like most other artists, I went through a long period of training in order to develop the technical capabilities which my ideas require. It was a Dutch professor, Ru Van Russen, an instructor at Tilburg University that prompted me to turn away increasingly from oil, drawing and silkscreening, to Printmaking.

Q. What kind of satisfaction do you get when an audience loves your works?

A. I get a feeling of accomplishment from seeing art-lovers respond to my works. The joy and happiness is not only in me, but it is passed over to the art lover. This is the greatest joy.

Q. How do you feel about Black American artists?

A. I like Black American art, particularly Jacob Lawrence. They, like African artists, try to use art to express their identity and inner feelings.

Q. Honestly, how do Africans feel about Black Americans? Would Black Americans be welcome in Nigeria?

A. Certainly, Black Americans would be treated as brothers at home. However, because of your long separation from Africa



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and your long association with Europeans, Black Americans are usually regarded by Africans as a people who have a western culture. The people here in Elizabeth City have treated me warmly-like a brother.

Q. How do you compare Western art with African art?

A. The old African art-bronze sculptures and all the old art works, are different from traditional Western art, which was inspired by the Greek classical art. Western or European art aims towards technical perfection.

Q. Some Europeans consider African art to be primitive. How do you feel about this belief?

A. Because some of the African art hasn't reached European technical perfection, it is wrongly termed primitive. African artists were not aiming at geometric perfection but at symbolism and not just an anatomical study of things.

Q. What is African art doing to help international understanding?

A. African art, music, dance, plastic arts and literature have in the past played a leading role in cementing family and tribal ties. The Nigerian government in particular has used this artistic form to draw the different ethnic groups

together during National Art Festivals. Moreover, the success of these festivals encouraged the Nigerian government to play host to the second All-African and World Black Festival, otherwise called Festac '77'. This festival brought many artists from all over the world together. Not only to entertain, but also to develop understanding, love and respect between all people.

Q. How does the Art Department at ECSU compare with other art departments that you have worked with?

A. Very favorably. Here, we have very good and dedicated instructors, who also work together as a team. As a result of this, the student are creating very good art works.

Q. Do you have any message that would help the young art students achieve their "realistic" goals?

A. Study hard. Work hard. Remember, a man becomes a doctor, or artist because this is what he has been taught. He desires it and works hard everyday to become successful. As our future leaders, you must develop discipline which will encourage and ensure our survival and growth. Be a serious student who is not only committed to himself but to his people.