



A HYPOTHETIC MODEL OF NIGERIAN SIGNBOARD PAINTERS¹

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Our knowledge of the art of Nigerian signboard painters is due to a lucky coincidence — the fact that they attracted the attention of a specialist in, and promoter of, Nigerian culture in general, Mr. Ulli Beier, who was living and working in Nigeria for many years. The paintings of these painters must have been seen by hundreds of European and American visitors to Nigeria. Before Ulli Beier, however, nobody was probably able to recognize their artistic quality and to realize their poetic contents as well as social and temporal contingency. Individual paintings may have gone abroad as curios but before Ulli Beier, nobody has obviously made any collection of them.

His collection was not particularly large, consisting of twenty-two pieces of unequal artistic quality. It was exhibited for the first time in the Museum of Folk Art in the Nigerian town Oshogbo in 1965. In 1966, the owner consigned the collection for a long term to the care of the Náprstek Museum in Prague. In autumn 1969, the whole of it was exhibited in the Second Triennial of Insitic Art in Bratislava and, for the second time, as a part of the exhibition Modern African Art of the Sixties, in the Náprstek Museum in Prague, in 1972. In 1970, a selection of this set was presented to the visitors of the exhibition of modern African art in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna, in 1972, in the Dannish gallery Louisiana in Humlebaek, and in 1973, in Finland. The introductory arti-

cles printed in the catalogues of these exhibitions²⁾ were based on the studies by Ulli Beier.³⁾ Practically everything what we knew of these paintings in the sixties was thus known either directly from Ulli Beier or through the mediation of the collection made by him.⁴⁾

Since then, our knowledge of this particular genre of contemporary African painting has increased, no more being confined to Nigeria only.⁵⁾ We know, for instance, even the moving personal history experienced during the Civil War in Nigeria by Augustine Okoye, known under the firm designation and pseudonym „Middle Art“, the author of, e. g., the picture of Chukwuma and Rose, from the Beier's collection, reproduced several times, and other works.⁶⁾ However, besides general sociological observations on the position of sign painters on the verge of the rapidly changing African society, at the beginning of the sixties, we are missing deeper and more detailed studies based on field research and elucidating the choice of subjects, the way of composition etc. of these works, from the point of view of cultural history. Unless such research is done, we shall obviously remain dependent mostly on what we are able to read in the individual pictures.⁷⁾

In this connection, one of the largest paintings of the Beier's collection is worth attention. This is the signboard, reproduced many times, of an author of these signs from the town Onitsha, the above-mentioned „Middle Art“ (Fig. 1). We know that the picture painted on a sololit board measuring 61 × 168 cm served probably as the door of his shop in the bazaar. The picture presents the artist's self-portrait, a standing figure of a man, with the left hand raised in greeting and the right one nonchalantly put into a trouser-pocket. Above the head of the figure, there is a ribbon bearing the inscription „THE MANAGER INCHARGE“. The way of writing the two words „in charge“ together as well as the unsuitability of such an inscription on a small workshop where the painter was probably the only employer as well as employee, point to his rather limited knowledge of English and his naïve use of this language. Equally naïve is the impression aroused by a word comment written near the hand raised in greeting, viz. „I salute“, and a small „See“ with an attached arrowhead directed at the main inscription — as if such an appeal could intensify the effectiveness of the whole painting.

This picture is similar to another painting to be found in the Beier's collection, a signboard of a barber, also reproduced several times, the author of which is an anonymous painter of signs from the town Onitsha, too, hidden under the assumed firm name "Willy Arts" (Fig. 2). The painting is done on a piece of plywood measuring 54 × 107 cm. Similarly as the previous picture, it presents a standing man clad in a smart European suit. The gestures of the hands are reversed here, the left hand being put into the pocket of the jacket and the right one raised, but not in greeting. This firm signboard presents also the proprietor of the enterprise to be propagated. Whereas the self-portrait of "Middle Art" is a naïvely realistic painting, the other sign is a naïve portrait of an ideal barber. The barber, a producer of smartness, has to be smart himself. Not only his clothes but also his head-dress are inseparable parts of this smartness, at the same time recommending the master's trade skill. His raised hand holds a clipping machine as a conspicuous hieroglyphic symbol to be understood, at first sight, even by those who do not know English, and indicating the profession of the owner of the shop. On the right side, we may see a vertical inscription saying "New African Barbar" (sic!) and "No. 64", the latter being probably the number of the shop in the bazaar.

It is the main thing differentiating thematically the two pictures, i. e. the clipping machine in the barber's right hand, which raises the suspicion that they may be internally closer to each other than the first sight seems to reveal. The machine gives the impression of a foreign element in the painting, as if added later. In proportion to the figure of the barber, it is too large and is not integrated with the hand as a perfect tool. In other words, this is not a painting of a barber **with** a machine, as it would like to be, but a barber **and** a machine. If we remove the machine, we may obtain again a painting of a man with his hand raised in greeting. There arises the justifiable question whether the two painters did not use the same model, and if so, which one. A certain clue may be found in an article by Ulli Beier, stating that the painter of signs "from newspaper photographs painted portraits of all the famous people who caught his imagination: Lumumba, Kennedy, Nkrumah, Churchill... Such portraits were bought occasionally, but in painting them the artist identified himself with the successful and the rich."⁸)

Was it not a portrait of some of these statesmen which served as a model of the two signboards? Although President Kennedy was also popular with the Nigerians, as testified to by a hair-dress bearing his name here, nevertheless we must rather think of portraits of African statesmen, in this connection. And it was just Patrice Lumumba whose name was also borne by a popular Nigerian hair-dress imitating his hair-dressing. Besides other things, this fact is a testimony to the popularity of Lumumba's portrait in Nigeria at that time. In the first half of the sixties when the paintings known from the Beier's collection originated, Lumumba was probably the most popular personality in Africa. Could it not be his portrait which was used as a model by the signboard painters?

On the 18th of October, 1964, the African weekly *Jeune Afrique* published a photograph of the then only "memorial" of Patrice Lumumba (Fig. 3) erected in what was then Stanleyville (now Kisangani). This was no memorial in the usual sense of the word, i. e. a statue, but an idealized painted portrait of Lumumba, placed in a kind of niche behind glass, like in a shop-window. This picture presents a schematic standing figure in a perfect European suit, with the right hand raised high in salute and the left one reposing on a globe turned in such a way that the whole continent of Africa is visible. The little-distinct newspaper photograph shows that either behind or on the head of this statesman of Congo, there is some kind of scarf presenting three capitals, M. N. C., an abbreviation of the political party of Lumumba (Mouvement National Congolais), on the white background. When comparing all of these three paintings, their correspondences, both in the whole and in detail, seem to be too numerous and striking to admit mutually independent origin. First of all, we must mention the approximately identical size of the paintings, resulting, of course, from the identical composition of the figures. In all of these cases, the subject is a standing male figure painted from a slightly oblique angle. The author of the "Middle Art's" self-portrait, however, has mastered this task in the face only, painted obviously according to his own photograph. The figure itself is painted from the strictly frontal view. When supposing that the two Nigerian "naïve painters" were inspired by the portrait of Lumumba, we must note that they were not able to imitate the slight under-view from which Lumumba is

painted. The Nigerian paintings differ from their hypothetical model in the type of the suit. This, however, can be explained by the assumption that their authors either did not know double-breasted suits or that they wanted to bring the clothes of their figures nearer to reality; but, as we shall see later, it may be explained also in another way. On the other hand, their paintings agree with their model in significant details which may have been looked upon as symbols of a higher social status, such as the white collar with a tie and the white handkerchief in the breast-pocket. Only "Middle Art" replaced the latter by a fountain-pen which, from the point of view of the given society, fulfils the same function in an even more comprehensible way. The two Nigerians took also great care to let a narrow strip of white cuffs stick out of the sleeves, as is the case of Lumumba's figure. As for the raised hand, the agreement is evident, and in the case of the barber (the added clipping machine), the deviation is easy to explain.

A special problem is posed by the position of the other hand. In all of these three cases, that hand is at rest. The globe with the visible African continent, in the portrait of Lumumba, has symbolic significance, equally as the clipping machine in the hand of the barber. For obvious reasons, the former attribute is missing in the two Nigerian paintings. However, it is necessary to explain why both authors depicted the figures with the other hand put into the pocket. To my opinion, there is only one explanation which would be valid even if one of the Nigerian painters would have imitated the already finished painting of his countryman. The Nigerian signboards were probably not painted according to the idealized portrait of Lumumba, but all of these three pictures are likely to have been painted according to one and the same agency photograph of Lumumba, in which the Congo statesman had really one hand put into the pocket. The official commemorative painting had to censure this unceremoniousness and used this opportunity to add a contemporary political symbol. We are certainly justified to assume that in that photograph, Lumumba was wearing a single-breasted jacket which was replaced by a more festive double-breasted one for the purpose of an official portrait.

Unless this photograph is found, this explanation will remain a mere assumption, but a very probable one, revealing one of

the ways of naïve painting of signs in Nigeria in the sixties of the present century.

If our hypothesis is correct, the free imitation of Lumumba's portrait seems to have resulted in the creation of a specific compositional manner by Nigerian sign painters. This may be seen in another signboard from the original Beier's collection (Fig. 4), now preserved in the Náprstek Museum in Prague (Cat. No. A 9.377).⁹) This sign of a bookbinder and producer of rubber-stamps, painted on a piece of plywood (65 × 113 cm), presents a sitting African woman in a European dress and with a European coiffure. The raised hand bent in the elbow, again as if waving in greeting, holds a stamp, the left hand being loosely lowered onto the bank the figure is sitting on, resting on a book. Equally as in the case of the barber, the figure in this sign is provided with a symbol of the firm. The signboard is reported to have originated in Owerri, another town of Iboland. This picture has deviated from its hypothetic model more than the two preceding ones, especially in depicting a woman, but even this deviation is easy to explain. Either the owner of the firm was a woman, or, which seems to be more probable, the customer was expected to be impressed, besides the prestigious city appearance of the painted figure, also by its sex-appeal, in agreement with principles of modern advertising. The deviation in the position of the figure (the female figure is sitting whereas the male ones are standing) probably resulted from the photographic model the painter was using. This is testified to by the lower half of the body, especially the position both the legs and the left hand with the book are occupying, which realistically agrees with a nonchalant sitting pose of a photo-model. Inconsistent with this perfect realism is the unaccomplished anatomy of the right hand holding the stamp. It is this hand which testifies to the degree to which the painter is bound to the compositional manner inspired by the imitation of the ideal portrait of Lumumba.

Notes:

- 1) The present article is a revised and enlarged version of a treatise published in Slovakian and Russian in the Bulletin of the Slovak National Gallery ARS POPULI 1 (7), Bratislava 1976, pp. 38—41 and 90—95.
- 2) 2 Triennial of Insitic Art, Bratislava 1969 (E. Herold) Erich Herold, Moderní africké umění 60. let (sbírka Ulli Beiera), Praha 1972
Oeuvres africaines nouvelles, Paris 1970 (Jacqueline Delange and Philip Fry)
Moderne Malerei in Afrika, Wien 1970 (Annemarie Schweeger-Hefel)
Erich Herold, Kunst fra Nigeria, Louisiana Revy, 13/2, Humlebaek 1972, pp. 32—3
Erich Herold, Taidetta Nigeriasta, Kansan kuvia Folkets bilder, Helsinki 1973, pp. 13—15.
- 3) Tendenzen, Zeitschrift für engagierte Kunst, Vol. VII, pp. 2—11, München 1956
African Arts, Vol. IV, No. 3, pp. 22—27, Los Angeles 1972.
- 4) The more important part of the collection was returned by the Náprstek Museum to the owner, in 1973. Some of the pictures were exhibited again in the exhibition Moderne Kunst aus Afrika, within the framework of the so-called First Festival of World Cultures, in West-Berlin, in 1979. A part of the collection was donated by Ulli Beier to the Náprstek Museum, a. o. also the signboard "Hellow! Portraiture", about which see below.
- 5) E. g., Kurt Weidemann, Afrikanische Friseurschilder, Novum Gebrauchsgraphik, 2/1977, pp. 17—24, present evidence from Niger, Republic of Benin, Camerouns, Mali, Togo and Nigeria; Ulli Beier, Middle Art: The Paintings of War, African Arts, IX/2, pp. 20—23; Los Angeles 1976; Christine Kristen, Signpainting in Ghana. African Arts, XIII/3, pp. 38—41, Los Angeles 1980.
- 6) Cover and p. 112 of the Catalogue of the Berlin exhibition, in 1979.
- 7) See also the following studies from the Catalogue of the Berlin exhibition, 1979:
Ulli Beier, Middle Art, pp. 96—8; Ulli Beier, Laderschilder und Legenden (Naive Malerei in Nigeria), pp. 99—106; Wolfgang Längsfeld, Schildermalerei, pp. 107—123.

- 8) Ulli Beier, Signwriters Art in Nigeria, African Arts, IV/3, p. 26, Los Angeles 1971.
- 9) Published in Helsingin sanomat, March 30, 1973, on the occasion of the above-mentioned exhibition in Helsinki; Ulli Beier (1971) and elsewhere.

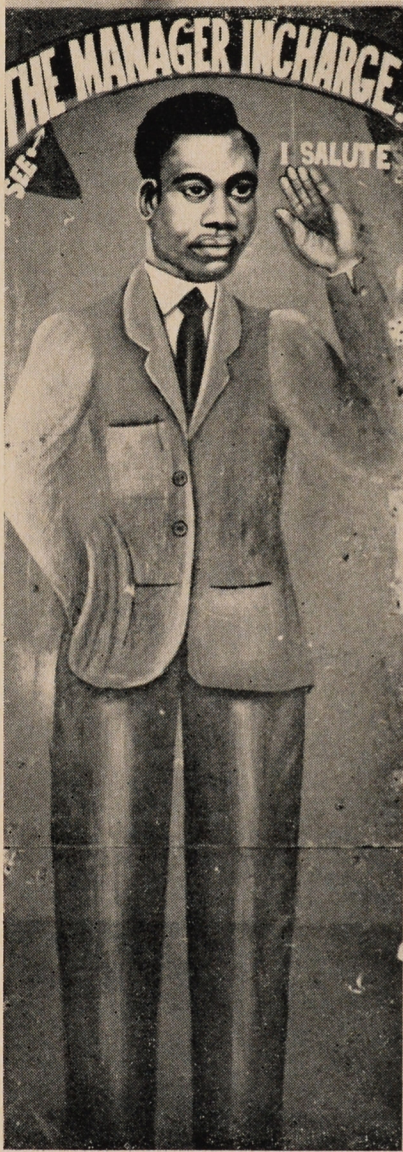


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

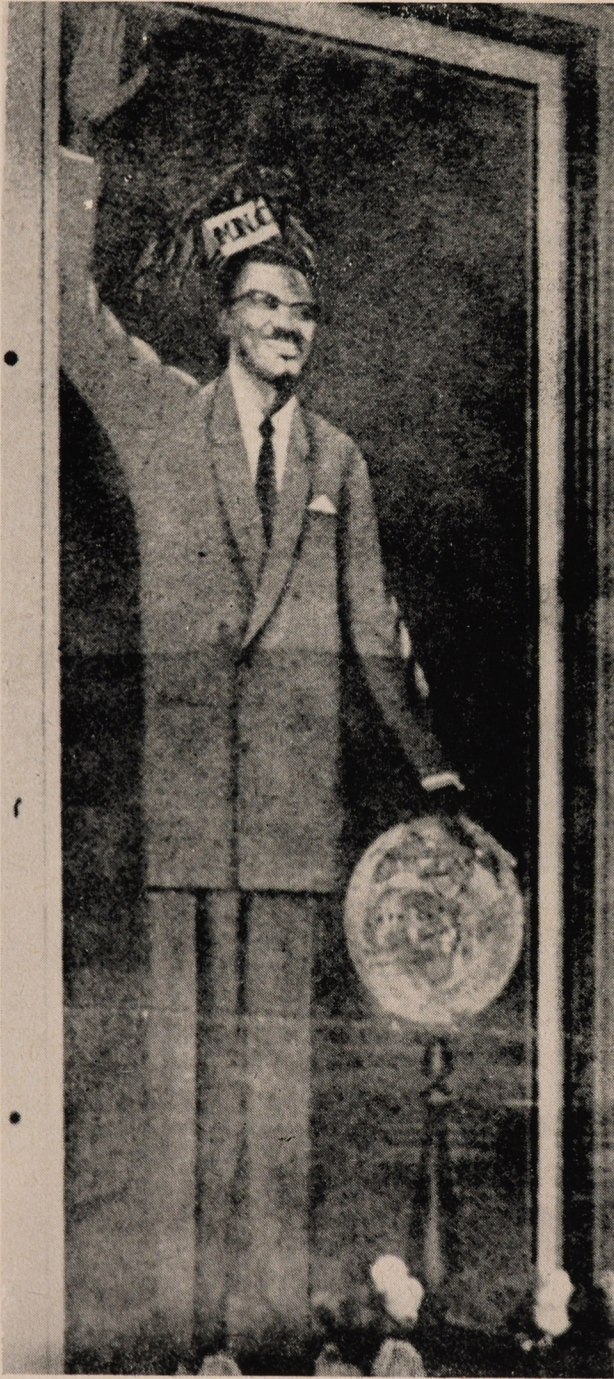


Fig. 3



Fig. 4