

# THE INFLUENCE OF BEN OSAWE'S DRAUGHTMANSHIP ON HIS SCULPTURES

*Franklyn Chu Egwali*

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## Abstract

Most often people consider Ben Osawe as a genius in three dimensional art renditions, this is a welcome development. But to only think so amounts to short sightedness as the cradle of authorial identity of an artist lies in the intricate lines of expression the way words determine the dexterity of a wordsmith. It is very important to uphold that Osawe's drawings powerfully gave strength to his sculptures. In fact his drawings radically influenced and redefined his sculptures. They have left positive legacies behind for upcoming artists. This seminar paper therefore seeks to identify the identity of Osawe's art-forms through his draughtsmanship (drawings). In effect how his drawings positively transformed his sculptures from Camberwell School of art in London to the twilight of his practice is what this paper seeks to establish.

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**Keywords:** Ben Osawe's Draughtmanship, Sculptures

## Introduction

Authorial identity as defined by Faucault (1969) is the stylistic construction and organisation of each artistic creation. This identity influences the nature, contour, texture and structure of each particular art form. It is this uniqueness and definiteness that give birth to the artistic expressiveness of the artist. Briefly put therefore, the style of expression by any artist is his or her authorial identity. Furthermore, Moxey (1999) explained that authorial identity can be observed in the various genre of artistic creation – dance, music, theatre, furniture and furnishing, literature, the visual arts, etc.

One of the most profound aspects of the visual arts is drawing. It seeks to first catch the essence of a particular concept in its raw stage and state. It concretely translates an ordinary idea into a more tangible and workable form, this is the power of drawing. Added to this is the resourcefulness and correctness that is brought to bear in the understanding of each form. That is why the creative drawing of any form, using light and shade to show the various perspectives of the drawing indeed shows high class depth, fluidity, harmony and unique authorial identity.

As Hugh Honour and John Fleming (1998) in collaboration with Shearer (2001) believed, like other genre of art, drawing could fascinate or stimulate an action, positively or negatively. It could profoundly drum a message of hope or defeat, success or failure, depending on which divide the observers or viewers find themselves. Indeed, Osawe's great works of art first came out in drawings before they were translated and interpreted into a more tangible and concrete three dimensional forms, which by extension became his authorial identity. His art comes in various configurative styles among which are drawings that he did with great relish and calm adroitness. In fact, the unique manipulation of his pencil drawings, the clarity of each character, and the flexible connecting lines of each pencil mark shows his authorial identity.

Lucie-Smith (2001) and William (2001) while appraising the drawings of Albert Parley noted that as a result of Parley's power of expression, when it comes to figurative drawings, it invariably rubs off on his other genre of art, which includes sculptures and paintings. So it was with Osawe; his drawings powerfully influenced his bronze, wood, metal and fibreglass sculptures. As a necessary requirement, his commissioned metal sculptures were first drawn on paper and shown to his patrons (clients), and after approval, they are moulded or sculpted into a three- dimensional sculpture, wood, metal, fibreglass, cement, or bronze like the one at the foyer of the High Court, Sapele road, Benin City. And the metal sculpture meticulously executed at the Central Bank, Jos. As he stated a year before his death, in an interview with this writer, all works being executed must be sketched before being transferred to a more definite form which normally is in two or three dimensional mode.

Hopkins (2001) and Christian (2003) supported this view when they maintained that drawing could be in either a sketch or well detailed form. The essential thing is to first capture the essence of the subject being drawn. Ben Osawe is aware of all these. That is why he stated in an interview that, as a rule, he must always arm himself with paper and pencil for drawing before developing it into a more concrete three dimensional concept. Bowen (2002) and Dieter (2002) affirm that sketches are usually drawn to be developed subsequently into an authorial identity of the artist; that is why great masters of old practiced it. Michelangelo first sketched David before developing it to a piece of sculpture that later became a masterpiece. Osawe stated that sketches and drawings are extremely pivotal and essential in design concept as they have enabled him to first conceptualize the work itself.

However, to further improve his authorial drawings and skills, Osawe learnt to draw quick sketches, in two or three minute's durations. In his words in an interview:

*Apart from drawing brief and many sketches, I also learnt to draw with pen and ink which would be difficult to erase from paper. This way, I had already made up my mind that the object which is about to be drawn has to come out successful after drawing, since there would be not room for erasing. This day, I continued to improve in content and style. My drawing continued to fascinate my audience especially my white audience that constantly patronize me.*

### **How He Learnt Drawing at Camberwell**

At several fora, Ben Osawe has been referred to as a sculptor, especially as it relates to wood carving and bronze casting. And so, when in 1956 he decided to travel to England to improve his artistic horizon and visibility, it was also to improve his carving and casting of his wood and bronze sculptures. However, when he got to Camberwell School of Art in 1956, to his surprise, he was asked to enrol in the life drawing class, since it was among the core courses of the department. And as an artist, he must be above average in drawing if he must succeed in other areas and proceed to major in sculpture, his first love. This marked the beginning of Ben Osawe's devoting most of his time to drawing, especially life drawing. In the words of Osawe:

*My drawings took a leap for the better when I eventually returned from England in 1965. Before I left, I could not draw either with pencil or pen, I just carved and did my bronze casting. But when I returned, before embarking on any carving or concept, it had to be conceptualized first on paper, in the form of drawing or sketching before it was realized or executed in two or three dimensional form to become my authorial identity. In my wood sculptures for example, as I carved along, I still draw with charcoal, chalk or 5B lead pencil on the wood as new concepts emerge or perhaps flash into my mind. This process goes on until I eventually complete the*

*composition. Today, I could sell my drawing which comes usually in charcoal, crayon or pen on ink because these drawings have my identity on them.*

### **Selected Pencil Drawings of Ben Osawe**

The first drawing to be appraised here is the one Osawe called “[Nature of Man” (see figure 1a); it is a pencil drawing, which was sketched first in 1969 and later reproduced in bronze in 1970. It is an abstract figure of a man without a clearly defined hands, but possess the lower part of the body to the kneel in a stylized form. In this 1969 pencil drawing, Osawe defined the forms by using the light and shade method to perhaps show the areas of emphasis, areas that will be texturized when reproduced in bronze.

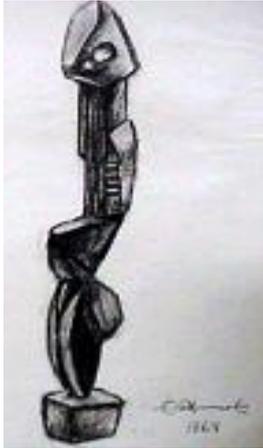


Figure 1a, *Nature of Man*, Pencil on Paper, 1969 - 70, Artist Collection



Figure 1b, *Bronze Copy of Nature of Man*, 1m ht, Bronze, 1970, Nymbus Gallery

Furthermore, he went as far as defining the head and the area suggesting the socket of the eyeballs. Rather dramatically he accentuated the various textures and subtle contours that became the hallmark of the art-form. As he drew in pencil, he visualised and resolved challenges of proportionality and movement of the sculpture as we can observe in figure 2 of the same art-form in bronze. As noticed in the pencil drawing, the directional movement of the head, the stomach and buttocks where clearly resolved, so that when reproduced in bronze it became perfected.

Not to be overlooked are also the various pencil lines that came together to define this drawing which indeed is Osawe’s authorial identity. An identity that is striking and expressive.

As observed by Obasuyi and Williams in Osawe’s drawings, the lines are not stiff, or stringent. Rather, in their words, “Osawe’s drawings are graceful, pliable, gentle and firm”. Corroborating this assertion, Ononeme, in an interview in his office in Benin, also averred that in Osawe’s drawings, we have an artist, answering the engaging questions of naturalism and stylization, especially as it concerns the abstract drawings. We can appreciate this in figure 2a below.

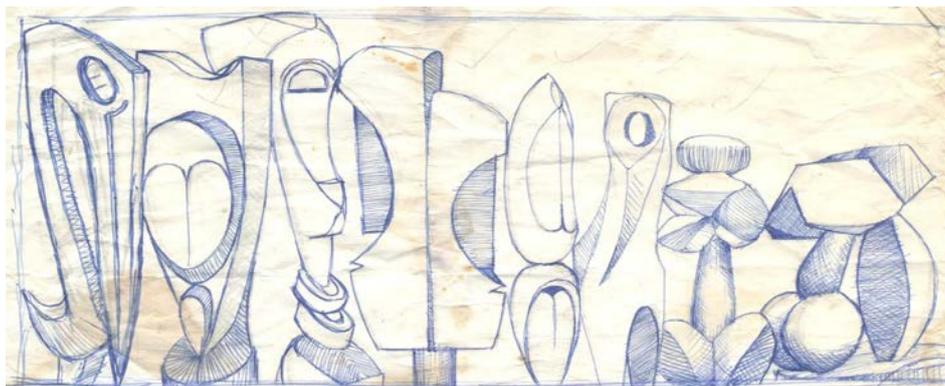


Figure 2a, *Clusters of Drawings. Pen on Paper. Undated. Artist Collection*

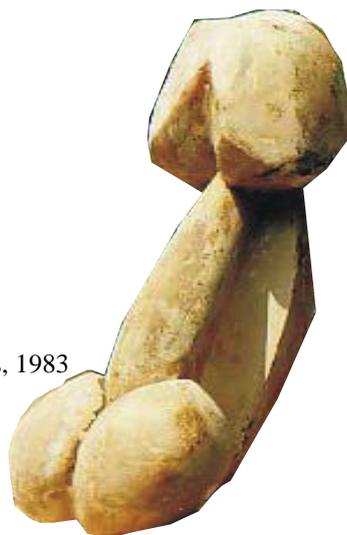


Figure 2b, *Libido, 95cm Ht, Fibre Glass, 1983 Artist's Collection*

In figure 2a above, we observe clusters of 8 drawings executed with pen on paper. As we encounter this undated composition, we enjoy the dexterity and forcefulness that was brought to bare in this drawing. Despite the obvious fact that they were made with pen, we nonetheless enjoy Osawe's resourcefulness in showing depth, light and shade and textures. At the end, he again demonstrated the three dimensionality of sculpture in this composition on paper.

For instance the last drawing in this cluster (see figure 2b) was reproduced in fibres glass in 1983. It is called "libido". We observe in stylised form procreation between a male and a female reproductive organ. At the end it demonstrated Osawe's authorial identity, an identity which started from his draughtsmanship.

In this drawing and like others of Osawe, as noted by Ogene, one appreciates the projection and recession of form, firm and flexible lines, all seeking for attention in the composition. These sequences give the drawing the sting and punch urgently required for a successful composition. As posited by Gardener (1995) and Kosetnevich (2006), it is not only the effect of line direction that the artist makes use of, but also the relationships that he sets up among the various lines. As observed, it is not only one kind of line that is used in a design or sketch, more likely, two or more also interplay, creating various degrees of authorial harmony and contrast; like the themes in a musical composition.

As can also be noticed in the drawings, Osawe cleverly weaves various shades of lines to give an eloquent testimony of his authorial draughtsmanship. We appreciate his knack for proportion, balance, content and context.

## **Legacies of Osawe's Draughtsmanship on His Pieces of Artforms**

As a result of the overriding importance of drawings in visual art, Osawe seriously and vigorously practiced draughtsmanship/drawing as part of his artistic career. Therefore as he relentlessly practiced his drawings, it overtly influenced his sculptural expressions and directly left his legacy behind. These legacies which finally became his authorial identity include:

### **Structurally Defined Sculptures**

Before Osawe embarked on the production of any piece of sculpture the idea must first be drawn on paper. This is to solve directly the problem of structure in the sculpture. The direction the sculpture will take is seriously addressed by Osawe in the various sketches in makes on paper. This overtly has to do with the natural couture of the visual expression. At the end, when it was finally realized in either two or three dimensions, the challenge of sculpturally deformed sculptures was resolved and solved.

### **Movement in Sculpture**

One of the factors that trigger either radical or mild expression in sculpture is movement. It is movement in sculpture that makes an art form expressive and fascinating. This area of sculpture is resolved by Osawe in his drawings before starting the real sculpture. The directional movement of the various parts of the sculpture (for instance the hands, legs, head and torso) that will result in an art form that is creatively expressive is first drawn on paper. He later goes through the drawings the second and third time before he finally embarks on modelling with clay, wood or wax.

### **Motifs and Patterns**

Most of the issues associated with the application of motifs and patterns are resolved in an extensive way in Osawe's drawings. These drawings took into cognisance the overall nature of the art work; they also show rather pointedly, the type, size and structure of the pattern or motif. Each art form possesses its definite and unique shape and gestalt. Osawe normally resolved the particular design pattern to be given to an art form first with pen, pencil on paper before it is finally realized. While on paper, they are in two dimension and later they are transformed into clay or wax form.

### **Areas Likely To Show Weakness of Concept**

Osawe in an interview in Benin told this writer that he normally endeavoured to resolve areas likely to show weakness of design in the overall construction in his drawings. After sketching, which normally showed the frontal and back view of the object, he went back to the drawing board to critically study the drawings again and again. After a series of amendments and corrections, they are finally translated/transformed in either clay or pure metal sheet which is the end product.

### **Texture and Form Relationship**

Before the actual construction of any concept, again, Osawe went to the drawing board to first sketch it on paper; texture of the form which could appear in various shapes and forms are seriously resolved by him on the sketch. The type of texture each section of the sculpture will take is equally addressed acutely. All these invariably form the bedrock of his authorial identity.

## Planes and Form Categorization

Another legacy Osawe resolved in his draughtsmanship was the articulation of planes. Most times, in his visual expressions, we encounter and appreciate the resolving and dissolving of forms into one another in planes. These planes are first drawn on paper taken into cognizance the shape and movement of each plane. After this process, Osawe went into clay modelling or wood carving. After the sketches on paper are completed creatively, these planes give birth to Osawe's authorial identity. Today wherever and whenever Osawe's sculptures are exhibited, they become easily recognizable as a result of these aforementioned legacies. Osawe being able to dynamically address these factors in his drawings, creatively became his authorial identity, an identity that has continuously influenced budding artists.

## Conclusion

Benson Nosakhare Gabriel Osawe (popularly called Ben Osawe), was born in 1932. He practised his profession for more than fifty years before he died on the 27th of June, 2007. During all these years, the artist skilfully and aptly made use of sensitive lines. These creative and imaginative authorial lines give great insights into what the sculptural forms expose. His visual expressions found succour in artistic professionalism that was emblazoned in life drawings and sketches. These imaginative drawings lucidly remind one of Henri Matisse's drawing of Seated Figure seen from the back (1940). Here in the drawing, like that of Osawe, one experiences expressiveness, objectivity, redefinition of form, western stylistic formalism, all reinvigorated in one visual construct. Osawe who schooled in Camberwell School of Art, England, endeavoured to capture pointedly all the principles of design, which according to Russell (2005) and Caroline (2003), also include such principles as composition, unity, rhythm, balance and proportion.

From observation and in my opinion, one can categorise Osawe's authorial drawings as belonging to the class of such notable artists as Henri Matisse (1869 – 1954), Alberto Giacometti (1901 – 1966), Constantine Brancusi (1876 – 1957), Ben Enwonwu (1921-1981), Isiaka Osunde (1936 till date) and Camille Pissaro (1830 – 1903). One rope that runs through the works of these artists is their intrinsic ability to breathe life into their two dimensional drawings. They make their drawings come alive thereby making them appear vibrant, potent, imaginative and in the process decisively create their authorial identity.

Osawe's authorial drawings possess an intellectualist approach as he came back from Britain to put into action what he assimilated from the western perceptual art. This is why when his art is viewed from the perspective of aesthetics, it assumes more meaning and authorial identity. In appreciating the art of Ben Osawe (which also includes his drawings), Egonwa (2005) asserted that:

*Osawe is one of Nigerian foremost artists who represent the breed of modernists, whose college training has helped in the rationalization of the written oral rules of design and form in traditional art for conscious application to modern art. In his art, all the principles in traditional aesthetics become operative even when the theme is modern.*

Osawe's ideological stance of putting his best in all his visual pronouncements has created works possessing maturity and thoughtfulness which have also resulted in drawings emphasizing his authorial identity. In his drawings, we enjoy his well-sophisticated planes, savoured in visual language of authorial draughtsmanship, so veritable and undeviating that it reminds one of the Chinese concepts of expression. This states that:

*Expression is the result of the action of the mind travelling indirectly through the brush or pencil. So direct and spontaneous is the connection between the concept in the artists mind and his hand that a drawing reveals more of his personality than a so-called finished work.*

Here are some of his drawings:



Fig. 3, *Sleeping Model*, Pencil on Paper, 1969, Artist Collection



Fig. 4, *Mr. Aigbe*, Pencil on Paper, 1985, Artist Collection



Fig. 5, *Head of Alice*, Crayon on Paper, 1963, Artist Collection

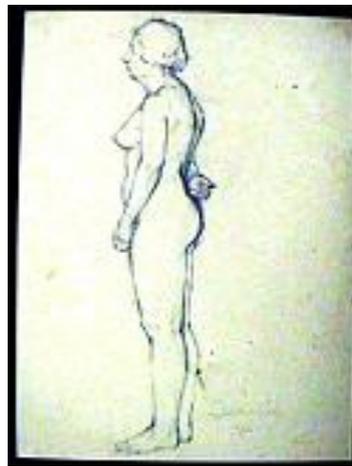


Fig. 6, *Standing Model - Elizabeth*, Pencil on Paper, 1963, Artist Collection



Fig. 7, *Elizabeth*, Pencil on Paper, 1963, Artist Collection



Fig. 8, *Twisted Horn Mask*, Pencil on Paper, 1991, Artist Collection

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#### **Interview:**

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- Ogene J. in his office in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin. Interview was on the sensitive nature of Osawe’s life drawings, on the 23rd of November, 2007.
- Ononeme E. in his office, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, on the characteristics of Ben Osawe’s life drawings in his office in the Department of Fine Arts, UNIBEN on the 29th of September, 2005.
- Osawe B. in his house/workshop, No. 6, Ekhaton Street, Upper Siluko, Ogida Quarters, Benin City, on his outstanding sketches and drawings, on the 5th, 7th, 11th, 13th – 19th of July 2005.