

# WOOD AND METAL EXPERIENCE

Chris Afuba

## Beginning:

Actually my initial shot at metal, was as a student of art at the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu. In 1988, as a second year student, we had no lecturer for metal sculpture. Having read about it in *Sculpture: Methods and Materials* by Richard Rich, and some other books, the zeal to experiment with mild steel was ignited. With nobody to teach me the techniques at school, the only option was a local metal fabricator popularly known as "welder". His name is Sam Utukpor. His former Master, Mr. Okoye, helped me, too.

With a welding machine from our departmental store I started to join pipes and other pieces of mild steel together. Our lecturers were impressed by what was coming up. They started motivating us with assignments and encouraging remarks. Harrigan Ebere, my only classmate, was also interested. Our head of section, Mr. Anene Obianyido, was particularly interested. He went a step further by urging me to experiment with bronze casting. That was what sent me to Benin to study the art of bronze casting for "Methods and Materials for Sculpture" subject.

Although some minor commissions on metal fabrication and some major ones in bronze came up, it was not until 1988, after AKA Circle of Exhibiting Artists had begun in 1986, that serious, visual exploration in metal sculpture began. Because of the fact that members of AKA were challenged with the spirit to always produce something new and unique, the thought of moving relief sculpture away from the rigid, conventional, visual format of squares and rectangles came up. The first attempt in that direction resulted in "Akala Aka" (Destiny) in metal. A look at my palm and subsequent drawing of the lines on it with metal did the job. The result was very interesting, because it had a

multi-dimensional concept and format. First interpretation was close to the wall.

The second work that emerged is "Akala Igwe" which translates as (Lines of Force). It is architectural. The interesting thing about it is that, like "Akala Aka", Igbo traditional design elements were employed. But unlike "Akala Aka" which is basically organic in interpretation, "Akala Igwe", which literally translates as: (lines of metal) is essentially geometric. While using traditional elements of design, contemporary architecture was in my mind. So, that accounted for the attempt to create perfect lines with metal to echo the geometric interpretation of our modern buildings. But as the work was lifted to the wall, another dimension appeared - a fourth dimension!

This aspect is created by light, whether natural or artificial. What you see when you lift the work slightly off the wall is cast shadow. It changes with the light source and its intensity depends on the intensity of light. Goodness me! It is dynamic. Beautifully, it always changes with the rising and setting of the sun or with the direction of any artificial light. Although the work itself is very dynamic and could be mounted and viewed from any side, the shadow intensifies the dynamism and gives the impression of mobility in stability.

As time went on, there was more freedom, until an explosion occurred. "The New Moon" was collected by Pius Okigbo and "Rock: Feel like I do ... " (after Peter Frampton) was collected by Wole Soyinka. There is "Music" and there is dancing with the rhythm of mild steel.

### **Wood and Metal:**

Frankly speaking, the first encounter with wood and metal was as a result of an unfortunate experience in 1991 which, to my mind, opened a kind of visual dialogue between wood and metal. An unscheduled visit to a wood market at Coal Camp in Enugu helped open up this unique chapter of visual exploration. A stack of weather-beaten, ant-eaten and seasoned branches of wood compelled my attention. Many of them had been attacked by ants but because of their very hard nature the ants found them very hard to conquer, but succeeded in giving them unique shapes. The whole stack was collected from an innocent woman who probably thought she

had seen another "suya" (grilled meat) seller.

On a very moody day, the wood had a dramatic attack from sympathetic hands. What Dr. Norman Vincent Pearl taught in "The Power of Positive Thinking" was applied: "... change your lemon into lemonade". Some pieces of those woods were used with metal to vent my emotion in a tangled situation. The thought of "tangle" evoked thoughts of weeds and plants that tangle and strangle other plants and trees in their bid to survive. At that time there were rods and wires of different lengths and sizes in the studio which skillfully began to twist and dance around some of those pieces of wood that were selected. The result was simply crazy, but amazing! One of the works is titled "Tangled: the Dirge of Depleted Wood". The second bagged the title of "Once upon a time ... " they were entered for AKA '91 exhibition but with no hope of attracting any collector. Surprisingly, none of them came back. Who collected them? Amazing! It was a lady (Angela Onyeador). So, when in 1992 a sponsorship came from the British Council in Enugu for a one-man show at the Nigerian Conservation Foundation in Lagos, it was a unique opportunity to explode in that visual metaphor. Chevron oil company collected "Rare Bird: From Migration to Extinction", "Greenhouse Wahala", "Ikenga", and bought "Bush Fire", "Photosynthesis" for the Nigerian Conservation Foundation.

It is important to note that while emotionally engaged in the spontaneous Concept, my mind raced and engrossed in the unfortunate situation of our abused environment. The thought of our depleted forests, the ozone layer and the greenhouse problem, pollution and our industrial mess, the reckless abuse of our man-made environment, etc was hard and painful. Also primary in my mind was the sad effect of war on our environment. Fire was not left out of my contemplation.

The philosophy behind it is the relationship between wood and metal, in terms of strength and weakness. Man invented metal to improve and develop his environment but, unfortunately, he turned metal against himself. He seems to lay more emphasis on power, security and fear-related ventures. As a result of this, he spends more time amassing weapons of mass destruction, missiles and the like. Even when his use of metal is economical, he fails to draw a clear line between production and destruction. The bulldozers and chain saws he created are used recklessly in the destruction of our natural environment. Wood is helpless against knives and axes, chain saws and

bulldozers. And so, most of our giant trees and forests which reinforce the earth and give us oxygen, are uprooted or swept out in the name of logging? How can we replace them? We are at the mercy of floods and erosion disasters. There are very few big trees to serve as wind breakers and shade our heads from the hot, blazing sun. With the greenhouse effect and the depletion of the ozone layer, the sun is right on our heads trying to melt our skulls. There is no place to hide!

This unfortunate situation has involved me in a protest art. A protest against environmental abuse. This has resulted in works like: "Tangled: The Dirge of Depleted Woods", "Once upon a time ...," "Scud Missile," "Bush Fire", "Rare Bird: From Migration to Extinction", "Photosynthesis", etc. Objects of the abused environment are used in the compositions. Burnt wood from actual fire disasters have been collected and used in visual dialogue with metal scraps, rods and wires which have been used as drawing materials in visual exploration. In doing this, objects of our abused environment are brought into our living rooms to evoke our feelings and rouse our sympathy towards environmental protection. In Issues in Contemporary African Art (1988) edited by Nkiru Nzegwu, Ikem Okoye exhibited some of those works including "Coca House" which was burnt in Ibadan in a subjective visual inquiry.

## Dialogue

On visual statement, the concept of dialogue has been in focus. Metal and wood could be considered to be strange bedfellows on one side and convenient partners on the other. So strange and hostile are they at first sight that one would wish they never met. Have you ever watched an axe tearing a piece of wood or a knife cutting it mercilessly? Do you want to talk of chain saw slashing and slicing wood or the bulldozer uprooting and tumbling wood? Would you call such relationship friendly?

On the other hand, wood and metal could be seen as convenient partners - a marriage between strength and weakness, force and feebleness. The resilient is engaged with the supple and the soft. For me, metal and wood are like a man with a woman in some cases. When metal is combined with wood, it gives the impression of solid reinforcement. A protective energy radiates around that wood and it looks like it would never break or crack. It is like a solid bond

and an assurance of durability. But do not be carried away because hard wood could stand the worst weather condition and have sometimes fossilized to impregnable forms.

Nevertheless, wood and metal have danced in visual harmony. Whether they are joined in the production of functional objects or purely aesthetic pieces, they are very beautiful. Have you watched them on steering wheels of luxurious vehicles or their dash boards? They are lovely. What of wood as handles of metal cutleries? Fantastic!

They are wonderful as forms of visual imagery, especially if you used them according to their forms and shapes. For me, they have been objects of love songs and dirges. It is exciting to make metal weave intricate dance round and about wood of different shapes.

Metal is used as drawing instrument. Different sizes of mild steel, like eight and four millimeter rods and wires give me various line weight and metal sheets and pieces of wood are used for shading and blocking-in. Sometimes they are seen as bones and flesh in my lyrical exploration. Igbo traditional *Uji* motifs and elements of design come in simultaneously.

On the side of dirges, wood is tangled and strangled by metal - a helpless situation, which is unfortunate. Our environment reeks with such experiences and many of my works have reflected such situation. For me they are strong visual inquiry which we should reflect on.

### **Wood and Metal Furniture**

Sculpture and furniture are two sister discipline which almost every sculptor is at home with. Just as sculpture deals with articulation and displacement of space, furniture does the same thing but with an addition of physical function. Nobody should also be surprised if a sculptor takes to architecture because they are the same basic profession with different functions. During the Renaissance era, sculptors and painters like Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci et cetera excelled in those areas. Even in Nigeria, Demas Nwoko is a case in point.

So, it was not a surprise when ornaments and articles of furniture started

coming out of my studio. Ladles, working sticks and wooden ornaments were the earliest functional sculpture which emerged. It was later followed by log tables (first introduced by Uche Okeke) and side stools, until simple but unique products of household furniture emerged. That period could be placed between 1970 and 2000.

After a quadro exhibition in 1998 with Nsikak Essien, Tony Umunna and Emmanuel Inua in a gallery shared by artists and a furniture dealer in Lagos, the idea of wood and metal furniture came up strong. What happened at the furniture shop was that they exhibited great wrought iron articles of furniture in the nature of tables, lamp stands et cetera. But they were combined or articulated with glass, fiberglass or polyester. The absence of wood and metal pieces made me think they were missing a unique aspect of beauty. But it was in the year 2000 that the idea became a reality.

One day while playing with broken pieces of wood the beauty of wood and metal in furniture struck me. The possibility of unique interpretation, individuality and traditional drawing scope gave extra incentive. First, it was a convenient, functional marriage. How to use metal to secure wood and how wood could sit in a belt of metal with bolts and nuts and screws to articulate pieces of wood at suitable spots were the main consideration.

On trying out the first piece which is a center table called "Akwa Ogazi" (Egg of a Guinea Fowl) the result was amazing. When Chinedu Idezuna saw the piece and some others, his dream of exhibiting my works at his gallery, the Castle Down, in Lagos became a reality. Playing with mild steel flat bars became very exciting. Flat bar has two basic directional formation. You could fold it beautifully like a belt or simply cut it into short lengths for flat base. Each of these directions has many possibilities.

Working with angle grinder on wood is an added advantage because it enables me to draw Igbo traditional *Uli* design on the wood with ease. The effect is a perfect marriage between the movement of the metal and the lines drawn. The whole thing is finally united by the dark stain of the lines and metal.

Works like "Hop-step-and jump" (a triple decked table), "Akwa-Azu" (fish egg) "Akwa Bar Beach" etc, which are all tables, came out. They were followed by a number of dining seats. One metal and glass piece came up

but it is not as exciting as the wood and metal pieces.

.

### **Broken Wood and Metal in Mural Exploration**

Visual exploration is an unfolding experience. That is where one may be inclined to think about evolution. Although there were broken woods introduced in a number of the earlier works, sometimes with a tint or shade of acrylic here and there, they were seen mainly as units of design. Occasionally, conscious attempt was made to include *Uli* elements and motifs in' the composition, but they were always considered as individual subjective interpretations meant to be appreciated as unique pieces. The idea of articulating group units to form a detachable complex mass lately evolved with traditional and contemporary architectural considerations.

Conscious of the fact that very few people would want the walls of their buildings to be decorated with any concept of *Uli*, Ona and Dagi traditional design, even if modified or stylized, the idea just came up to introduce them in contemporary architecture with permanent but detachable materials.

Then the challenges of enclosing, articulating and displacing large expanse of space came into play. Just as traditional, mural painters, most of them women in Igboland, would manage such spaces freely, serious attempt is always made to manage them freely with broken wood, mild steel rods and sheets. Definitely, both experiences are not the same but they share the same basic principles.

Now conscious attempt is made to select interesting broken wood from wood markets to be used in the composition, with the four colour palette of the Igbo people always in mind: black, white, yellow ochre and red. Conventionally, white and black are not regarded as colour but they form the backbone of Igbo colour symbolism: "Oji na Ocha" (black and white). They have their basic philosophical world view. The other two colours also have their peculiar symbolism but basically they are viewed aesthetically in those interpretations.

.

There is a clear link in later compositions vis-a-vis mild steel rods as drawing materials. As metal sheets are used to block in spaces as well as enhance

spatial interpretation, wood and metal sheets are used in spatial dialogue.

Sincerely speaking, marriage between wood and metal is sympathetic and convenient as couples in strength and love.

In a nutshell, wood and metal experience has been a dialogue, a conversation such as experienced between musical instruments in "Abia", "Ikoro", "Igede" and other Igbo traditional music and even in jazz saxophone or keyboard conversation.

**Chris Afuba**

*Enugu/ Nigeria  
2008*

#### REFERENCES

- AKA '88                      AKA 88 1988 Group Exhibition Catalogue,  
pp.16-19.
- AKA '89                      AKA 89 1989 Group Exhibition Catalogue,  
pp.16-19.
- AKA '90 .                    AKA 90 1990 Group Exhibition Catalogue,  
pp. 18-21.
- AKA '91                      AKA 91 1991 Group Exhibition Catalogue,  
pp. 16-19.
- Afuba, C.                    Tangled: The Dirge of Depleted Woods, 1992  
Solo Exhibition Catalogue.
- AKA '92                      AKA 92 1992 Group Exhibition Catalogue,  
pp.7-8.
- Afuba, C.                    AKA 93 1993 Group Exhibition Catalogue,  
pp.22-23.
- Afuba, C.                    AKA 94 1994 Group Exhibition Catalogue,  
pp.10-11.
- Afuba, C.                    Programme: 1995 World Environment Day, the  
Federal Environmental Protection Agency, Abuja,

- pp.2-4.
- Afuba, C. Dialogue: Conversation between Wood and Metal,  
2000 Solo Exhibition Catalogue.
- Nzegwu, N. Issues in Contemporary African New York,  
International Society for the Study of Africa ISSA at  
Binghamton University, pp.30-41, 44-46.
- Peale, N.V. The Power of Positive Thinking, Great Britain, 1953  
The Chaucer Press Ltd.