

Anatsui's Mixed Media Work: Promoting Socio-Economic Development through Modern Art

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Abstract

El Anatsui emerged on the modern art scene during the late 1960s and 70s, a period of vibrant post-independence art movements in West Africa. A well-known sculptor and experimentalist, he first worked as an art educator at the University of Winneba, Ghana, in 1969. In 1975, he relocated to Nigeria as a lecturer at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he contributed immensely to the promotion of African art globally through the use of found objects within his immediate environment in the creation of artistic forms that can be reinterpreted into two and three dimensional visual images. This paper will analyze four of Anatsui's creative works: Young Woman's Cloth (2003); Activities in 1004 Housing Estate (2002); Remnant of Grandma Cloth (1995) and Afor (2010). It will also discuss the socio-economic impact of his work on the development of modern art.

Keywords:

Educator, Objects,
Experimentalist,
Sculptor, Socio-
economic
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Background to the Study

El Anatsui is one of the foremost artists to emerge on the modern art scene in post-independence Africa. He was born in 1944, in Anyako, South-eastern Ghana, into a family of talented indigenous artists that produced the Kente fabric. He spent his early childhood with his uncle in Anloga in the Volta Region.

Anatsui attended Keta Secondary School where he decided to have a formal education in art to become an artist. From 1965 to 1969, he attended the University of Science and Technology (now Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KWUST) in Kumasi where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in sculpture and a post-graduate diploma in art education. Between 1969 and 1975, he lectured in the Art Education Department, University of Winneba, Ghana. He relocated to Nigeria where he assumed the position of a lecturer in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1975. He became a Professor of Sculpture in 1996.

The Ghanaian sculptor and environmentalist has created many impressive sculptures using locally found objects in his immediate environment, as well as textile (fabrics) in his artistic mixed media installation art. Offoedu-Okeke (2012) observed that, "Anatsui has worked in wood, ceramics, metal and recently mixed media installations that use aluminum metal strips and copper wires to weave sculptures with the visual look of indigenous Ashanti Kente Cloth". The works of this highly acclaimed scholar span well over four decades since his graduation from the College of Art in Ghana and as a lecture in University of Nigeria, Nsukka from 1975 till date.

Anatsui's early art forms were created in wood and clay and, using the formalist approach, the artist expressed the Ghanaian and Nigeria culture in woven cloths such as the Kente, Adinkra and other Ghanaian motifs. He also incorporated Uli and Nsibidi motifs of eastern Nigeria into his artwork while lecturing in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. As an extension of his creative works in mixed media sculptures, he embraced the use of wood panels, totems, ceramics, metals and metal strips, copper wires, aluminum, and bottle-tops or caps in his installations.

Anatsui's keen interest in the African culture further led him to experiment in his installation art by using copper wires to weave or bind found objects which he also adorned with Kente, Adinkara, Uli and Nsibidi motifs, a blend of the culture of two indigenous West African countries - Ghana and Nigeria - to showcase his artistic practice virtually to the rest of the world.

For Anaikor, "Anatsui's work has a unique appearance, as the Nok and Yoruba ... terracottas, yet [is] also modern and fresh with irregular shapes and openings" (as cited in Onwankpa, 2013). Anatsui also explored the traditional motifs, symbols, and designs of the Uli with organic content that can be interpreted in different ways. This repetition is seen in the juxtaposition of his installation art. Uli is an Igbo art form first started and supported with artistic philosophy and application by Uche Okeke and

extended to other artists such as Chuka Amaetuna, Chike Amiakor and El Anatsui. Konate explained this trend as “the search for Igbo-identity [through the use of the] Uli linear forms to depict radical socio-political and cultural subject matters” (as cited in Ngene, 2014). Anatsui's use of this art form played an important role in the promotion of the Igbo culture.

Anatsui also employed traditional African sign systems among them Nsibidi signs, Bamum and Vai scripts, and Adinkra symbols in the design of his wood sculptures and panels. A good example is his *Patches of History Series* (1993) which addresses issues that are connected to slavery, colonialism, and post-colonialism (Universes in Universe, 2010). Evidently, in addition to the Igbo culture, the artist also promotes the Ewe and Akan cultures of Ghana.

Significantly, Anatsui's incredible creative works address socio-economic and political issues that affect the country where he was born (Ghana) and the country where he lives and works as a practicing sculptor. His recent works have earned him international recognition and placed him on a global scale.

Anatsui's Modern Sculptural Techniques

Anatsui's sculptural practice involves the integration of various indigenous techniques. The aesthetics of his visual sculpture reflects his interest in the art forms of the Ewe culture and the Ghanaian tradition of narrow-strip weaving. Onuzulike (2005) validated this observation by noting that in Anatsui's work are traces of “the influence of the artistic tradition of the Ewe people of south eastern Ghana and southern Togo (best known for their tradition of narrow-strip weaving), and the Uli experiment at Nsukka...” He further recognized Anatsui's distinctive way of capturing the essence of these various influences as “a trans-cultural breakthrough that obliterates the badge of “Ewe”, or “Igbo”, or “African” Sculptor”.

The artist's techniques involve the use of the following: discarded objects to create installations of artwork; bottle caps, printing plates, cassava graters, and aluminum strips sewn together with copper wires; red-hot knife to create forms based on designs of the Kente cloth; burning technique effects on repeated patterns and symbols of the Adinkra cloth, as well as using clay and wood panels to create sculptures that defy categorization. The artist's technique of creating his artworks through the use of a chainsaw and oxyacetylene flames is also a metaphor for the redestruction of traditional African indigenous culture.

Anatsui's use of the materials above “reflects his interest in reuse transformation and an intrinsic desire to connect to his continent of Africa, while transcending the limitation of place” (www.jackshainman.com). It also reveals his ability to interrogate the history of waste to wealth within his immediate environment in his artistic practice, and in the process, create interesting and meaningful works that suggest different things and can be interpreted in different ways. This is in line with his personal philosophy which he

revealed in the following remark: "...I don't want to be a dictator; I want to be somebody who suggests things" (www.jackshainman.com). The themes of Anatsui's highly allusive and monumental constructions which have immense visual power revolve around consumption, transformation and the environment. The techniques that bring these themes to life also reveal his interest in environmentalism and concern for the environment and the desire to protect it through his work.

Analysis of Selected Works of El Anatsui "Young Woman's Cloth" (2003; Figure 1)

Anatsui's *Young Woman's Cloth*, an outstanding mixed media work, is rendered in bottle caps strung together with copper wires. Although this technique adopted by the artist looks tedious, it is clearly impressionistic and involves deliberate Methodism. First, the artist collected bottle caps of different alcoholic drinks in various colours, some with inscriptions from his environment, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He then flattened the caps, one after the other, with some parts chopped off during the process. Some of the flattened caps are irregular in shape and slightly squeezed.

The bottle caps were then arranged in vertical and horizontal movements with some flat caps in the same colour bearing graphical inscriptions of the manufacturers of the brand such as "Stern Distilleries and Food Industries Ltd." and "New life Beverages Ltd". At the topmost part of the picture plane are flat bottle caps with symbols, double zigzags with the company names running through the middle. More so, the colour scheme of the caps are different, some in red hues, some plain without inscriptions, while some are in gold-coated colours with graphical blind embossed lines and embossed inscriptions on them. Some parts of the topmost part of the picture plane are rendered in brown and gold, and others in blue and red, with inscriptions of brand names and symbols. On the bottom part of the composition, the colour scheme comprises blue, orange and gold hues. The artwork is properly mounted on the background.

Evidently, the artist did not apply any pigment to the bottle caps. However, the natural colours of the caps give the artwork a brilliance which enhances its beauty especially when viewed from different angles or perspectives. This increases its aesthetic value which has overshadowed his artwork created in wood, for this work of metal cloth showcases beauty and sophistication. Offoedu-Okeke (2012) in his analysis of Anatsui's metal artwork remarked that "Strung together from hundreds of thousands of bottle caps, aluminum strips and other thin metal strips using copper wire, these sculptures have the flow of cloth and hang in colorful filigree".

Anatsui's aim in creating the iconic "Young Woman's Cloth" is to contribute to the development of modern art in Nigeria and Ghana and the sub region of West Africa through his mixed media techniques. This work is an example of how the contemporary artist can overcome the difficulty of expressing himself only in a single medium by using mixed media, which gives him the freedom to combine different media and techniques, to express his creative tendencies.

Activities in 1004 Housing Estate (2002; Figure 2)

1004 Housing Estate was originally built by the Federal Government of Nigeria in Victoria Island, Lagos, and originally opened in 1979. The estate comprises of 1004 flats, marionettes, and studio apartments for the accommodation of senators and members of the House of Representatives. The estate was later occupied by senior staff of the Federal Civil Servants before its acquisition in 2008 by 1004 Estate Limited for a fee of N7 billion.

Based on activities of the people in this estate, Anatsui created an impressive abstract in wood sculpture with colorful pigmentation on the forms. This mixed media installation was placed on a black background using flat plywood and sticks. The first and second pieces of the flat wood have a whitish cream background in what looks like brush strokes. On top of two flat panels are embossed forms that look like beads created in vertical and horizontal movements. Also depicted are six bead-like forms that are broken into two, separated by lines with an assemblage of two flat boards with eight sticklike forms behind it. At the topmost right side of the second board are seven circular relief embossed balls.

After the first two flat boards is a board painted with blue background, with some parts rendered in whitish cream. After the third board are five other boards on a whitish cream background. On the surface of six of the panels are relief figures that are created in abstraction, showing human movement and activities with a ground-line and ground-plane. According to Lucie-Smith (1991), "ground-line in Primitive and NAIVE forms of painting, [is] a line indicating the ground on which figures and objects stand [while] ground-plane [is] a surface which appears to recede into the Picture Space in Perspective drawing and painting, and which provides a base for the figures and objects depicted". Anatsui adopted this technique to highlight his figures in perspective and, at the same time, show their movement in space.

The next set of panels show solid brown and blackish circles bordered by thin circles numbering over one million. Behind the panels are sticks of different heights arranged in vertical forms and painted in cream and black. The last seven flat panels with sticks have irregular spacing and shades. The panels have dotted circles in different colours - blue, red, green, white, yellow and orange. The vertical wood panels are subdivided into squares with embossed circular shapes within each square. At both ends of the panels are tiny sticks in black and orange which appear vertically at both the top and bottom of the wood composition.

This visual is highly impressive and unique, for it emphasizes Anatsui's continuous exploration of media and techniques that highlight the gradual transformation of images in relief form on a picture plane. Despite the artist's long years of practice, he still experiments in artistic creativity using styles and techniques which young up-coming artists can emulate in their creative endeavors, thus contributing to the development of modern art.

Remnant of Grandma Cloth (1995; Figure 3)

“Remnant of Grandma Cloth” which the artist created in dark burnt wood patches in 1995 is probably the result of his recall of his interactions with his grandmother's cloth. The composition which showcases the conceptual depth of Anatsui's burnt-wood sculpture is created with pieces of burnt wood bound together vertically at the right part of the composition. Close to the centre of the artwork and at the topmost right is a colourful textile in repeated square patterns in red, yellow, green, sap-green, and hues of green, yellow and red, with black lines in squares of the same size. At the top is a burnt slice of wood occupying an area of what resembles a piece of textile. This artwork is mounted on a white background that projects the colours used in the artistic work.

Frank (2006) rightly opined:

The living spirit of wood is given a second life in hand made objects. Growth characteristics of individual trees remain visible in the grain of wood long after trees are cut, giving wood a vitality not found in other materials. Its abundance, versatility, and warm tactile qualities have made wood a favored material for human use and for art pieces.

Frank's statement confirmed the significance of Anatsui's use of wood in the creation of this work. Wood adds an element of elegance to the forms and objects which evokes contemplation and appreciation as seen in this artwork. Also the artist's application of paint pigments to the work reveals his excellent understanding of wood, as well as the processes involved in the shaping and colouring of burnt wood in artistic creations. The overall effect is a sensitive melding of form and functionality which is greatly appreciated by art lovers and art collectors.

Anatsui created “Afor”, a sophisticated composition, in aluminum, copper wire, clay, wood and thousands of liquor bottle caps and by stripping aluminum and sewing it together with copper wire. It is a work that has earned the artist international acclaim as one of the foremost artists in the Sub-Saharan region of West Africa and the rest of the world.

“Afor” looks more or less like the movement of cloth with brilliant colours - silver, hues of red, black, tinted yellow, blue, and gray. The style and techniques are unique and based on the colour scheme of the Kente cloth and Adinkra patterns of the rich culture of Ghana - a reflection of Anatsui's training in the mores of the Akan culture. The work has a woven textile look with a beautiful colour scheme that enhances its natural state.

The composition's vertical and horizontal sides are irregular in shape. The left side of the composition is polychromatic while the right hand side is mostly chromatic. It also has the features of a free standing “metal cloth”, a look achieved through the use of discarded sets of printing plates, milk cans, and aluminum strips from liqueur bottle caps. These materials form the metal's primary characteristics which give it strength and formability. The form and content of “Afor” also enhance the meaning of the artwork, for as noted by Frank (2006), “form refers to the total effect of the combined visual qualities within a work, including such components as materials, colour, shape, line and design”.

“Afor” as an artwork has its visual perspectives and appearances that are a part of its reality. As observed by Egonwa (2005), Anatsui is an expressive artist who has a good understanding of visual languages. It is for this reason that his themes and formalism are so intricately interwoven.

Evidently, Anatsui understands his materials and how to get the best out of them through their forms and his styles and techniques. “Afor” is an intriguing work of art in an artistic space in modern Art and its aesthetic value, the result of the artist's numerous sculptural experimentations, has had a great impact on many individuals that have come across it.

Conclusion

Anatsui is an outstanding artist and internationally acclaimed sculptor who has created innovative artwork using materials such as burnt wood, wood panels, and found wood, liqueur bottle caps, and aluminum strips sewn together with copper wire which he constructs by using a chainsaw and oxyacetylene flames. Many of his creations are metaphors of the revival of indigenous African culture. Anatsui is an experimentalist artist who has used different found materials as a source of inspiration in sculptural endeavours that support his style and techniques.

The artist's artwork largely showcase his rich Ghanaian cultural heritage which he expresses through the use of the Kente and Adinkra cloths in addition to stamps, symbols, forms and motifs drawn from Ghanaian highlife music, and chieftaincy paraphernalia created in gold such as the Asante stool whose origins he explores in his works. His appointment as a lecturer in Nigeria in 1975 created the opportunity for him to become acquainted with new forms and motifs from the Nigerian culture such as Uli motifs, Nsibidi signs, Bamum and Via scripts. This resulted in his intricate intertwining of elements of both Ghanaian and Nigerian cultures, thus promoting the cultures of both countries in his works.

Anatsui's artistic works, transformations of everyday materials found in the environment, are of great visual, aesthetic and economic value. His creations of “metal cloths” installation art are excellent examples which showcase his ingenuity. Through his skills, he has not only revealed his interest in the environment but also protected it. His works have also supported the growth of jobs through the inspiration of both established and aspiring artists in the production of artistic creations. This is of great economic advantage, not only to these artists who benefit financially, but also to the economy of the nation because their artistic endeavours stimulate and sustain the economy.

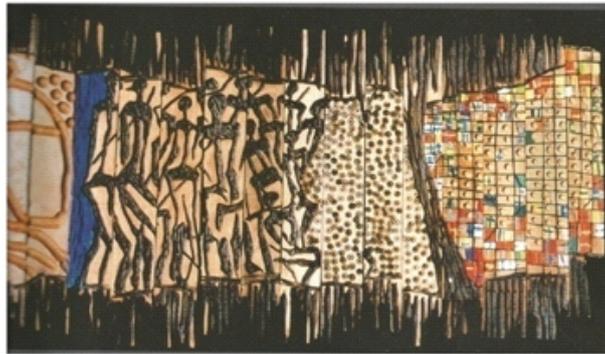
Also, Anatsui's possess quality, meaning and aesthetic value and attract individuals and organizations who invest in art. Such resources benefit not only the artist but also impact the nation's economy and, at the same time, promote social interest in the rich cultures that are highlighted in them. This leads to the creation of multiple socio-economic benefits in society.

Anatsui's works and art exhibitions have also attracted visitors and established social connections that have proved beneficial to many. His works have, therefore, not only impacted the economy, but proved to be an important and significant factor in the development of modern art in Nigeria, Ghana and in the sub-region of West Africa.

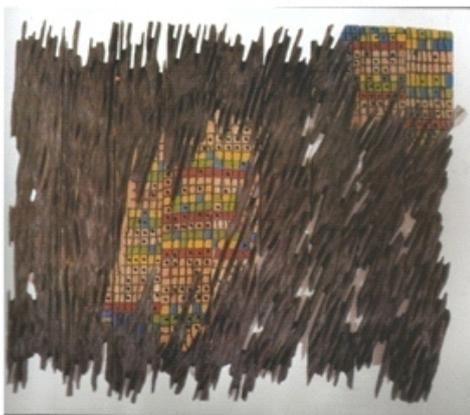
List of Figures



Young Woman's Cloth (detail), 2003
Aluminum bottle tops
and copper wire, 290x841cm
Private Collection



Activities in 1004 Housing Estate, 2002
Wood, pigment, dimensions unknown
and copper wire, 290x841cm
Private Collection
Photo Courtesy of Pendulum Art Gallery



Remnant of Grandma Cloth, 1995
Wood, pigment, 80x92x2.5cm
Private Collection.
Photo Courtesy of the artist



Afor, 2010
Aluminum, Liquor bottle caps, and copper wire,
281.9x297.2cm
Private Collection.
Photo Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

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