

ON THE COVER

Sankofa by Mahmood Ayobami Babalola

Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on February 7, 2023.

Sankofa is at once a word, a concept, and a symbol. Originating with the Akan people of Ghana in West Africa, the word literally means “to retrieve.” As a concept, it is rooted in the old Akan saying, “it is not wrong to go back and get what you forgot.” This is often expanded into the idea of reverence for the past and its lessons for the present and what lies ahead. A common Sankofa symbol is a bird, its feet planted forward but with head turned to an egg on its back. The egg has been taken to represent both the wisdom of the past, which must not be relinquished, and the promise of new beginnings. The Sankofa bird appears in Akan art and has also been taken up worldwide by the African diaspora. It has become an emblem that signifies the value of learning from history in moving forward to new possibilities.

Mahmood Ayobami Babalola, a Nigerian artist now located in Belfast, Northern Ireland, was thinking along these lines and inspired to use the Sankofa motif in a painting. We see a stylized bird, in blue with streaks of green, its feathers articulated in black half-circles, and with a beak touching the pale egg on its back. The half-circles are visual metaphors. Babalola says they are not complete because if the lessons of the past are learned, the mistakes will not return and “come full circle.” Blues and greens are the colors of nature in his view and represent the good in the past. The composition is dominated by round shapes which he says express the world going around and around, repeating itself. Behind the bird is a large circle, half red, flagging danger, and half blue. It is again an evocation of the past, but with a threat that will only emerge if what went before is neglected and not understood. In the upper right is another round shape, this one filled with stylized elephant tusks. He is not absolutely sure why he included them. Perhaps it was because the elephant is a revered animal, expressing greatness and beauty and the parts of the past that must be treasured.

Babalola grew up and was educated in Nigeria until moving to Belfast to pursue graduate study in data science at the University of Ulster. Yes, data science, not visual art or even

graphic design. Drawing and painting were preoccupations beginning early in life but there were no role models or successful artists in his native country. Similarly, his parents did not support the idea of an artistic career. Hence, Babalola was largely self-taught, never received formal art training, and made sure he had “backup” career options. Nonetheless, he learned from local artists and a mentor and developed his own style and esthetic values. His parents’ attitude changed in 2016 with the recognition Babalola received for his work, including a showing in Brazil. He notes that the situation in his homeland has changed and now supports a flourishing art scene.

Our cover artist’s preferred media include acrylic paints on canvas and occasional experiments on paper. He likes the quick drying time of the acrylics, which suits his “go with the flow” working style. Although he makes many sketches that may form the idea for a painting, his approach is not heavily planned and analytical. He does not mind making mistakes and dislikes the need for perfection. Moreover, he has moved away from realism, finding an image that just “looks like someone” unsatisfying. In making this transition, Babalola discovered what artists have learned over thousands of years. Namely, that although duplication of appearance is a skill, it is through distortion, abstraction, and color that an image achieves its maximum expression and impact. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that his favorite and greatest influence remains Pablo Picasso.

In telling his story and discussing the meanings of *Sankofa*, Babalola mentioned that the history of Nigeria was not taught during his school years. People had to learn it from their parents or through their own efforts. This was a great mistake in his view “because what we have now is the result of what we did in the past and what we have in the future depends on what we do now.” In consideration of this issue’s special theme on Black scholarship, we are pleased to provide an image expressing the value of recovering and embracing our neglected pasts to create a better future.

 R. Walter Heinrichs
Art Editor