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Asele: *The Legendary Igbo Designer*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Uche Okeke (1933 - 2016) Head of a Girl, 1962, pen and ink on paper.

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ASELE

Asele: The Legendary Igbo Designer

By Idenze Ezeme · Folklores · Ozikoro.com

In Igbo mythology, Asele is a famous designer from Nimo, a town in the north-central Igbo region. She was the most skilled uli artist. Uli is a traditional Igbo graphic art used to decorate objects for social and religious purposes. Asele's artistic talent came from Ala, the Earth Mother, who is the source of creativity in Igbo spirituality.

Because of her connection to the spirit world (ala mmuo), Asele became the greatest designer on earth. Even after she moved to the spirit world, she continued creating art, making her the finest designer of all time. She also inherited Ala's beauty and moral values.

Asele had a male counterpart named Badunka (or Badinka). The ancient art of Uli is linked to both of them. Asele represents the spirit of design, while Badunka is known for mastering production techniques and handcrafted objects. Asele's flowing uli patterns also influenced Igbo storytelling and poetry.

Her legacy inspires modern artists, especially Uche Okeke (1933–2016), who founded the Asele Institute in Nimo to promote Igbo art and culture.

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Uche Okeke: A Pioneer of Modern Nigerian Art

Uche Okeke was a Nigerian artist who helped develop the art program

at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, from 1970 to 1985. He was born in 1933 into an Igbo family in northern Nigeria. His love for Igbo culture grew from the stories told by his mother and sister, his education in Igbo land, and the discovery that his mother was an Uli artist.

Okeke studied at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology (now Ahmadu Bello University) from 1958 to 1961. He and other students rejected the British-style art training, instead promoting a “natural synthesis”—a blend of traditional Nigerian art with modern themes. He later founded the Asele Institute in Nimo, a cultural centre that preserves Nigerian art and history.

His early artworks included pen-and-ink portraits, illustrations of Igbo folktales, and paintings inspired by Igbo myths and spirits. He also illustrated scenes from Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* and the 1929 Aba Women’s Riots in oil paint. His style was deeply influenced by uli, which he used in a modern way rather than as a symbol of the past.

Okeke believed art should play a vital role in shaping Nigeria’s future. He promoted Igbo traditions through his work and helped establish a strong foundation for modern Nigerian art.

- National Museum of African Art. (n.d.). Uche Okeke. Smithsonian Institution.
- Ukpuru. (2016, June 5). Asele. Tumblr.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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