



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

HISTORICAL STUDIES

The Influence of Igbo Art in Late 18th-Century Virginia

By Idenze Ezeme

Ozikoro.com · Historical Studies · 3 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

The wrought-iron figure from the late 18th century is shown next to an Igbo ancestral shrine figure made of wood from the 19th or 20th century, displayed by Christie's.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

Ozi Ikòrò

THE INFLUENCE OF IGBO ART IN LATE 18TH-CENTURY VIRGINIA

The Influence of Igbo Art in Late 18th-Century Virginia

By Idenze Ezeme · Historical Studies · Ozikoro.com

Igbo People in Virginia and Their Craftsmanship During the late 18th century, the transatlantic slave trade was at its peak, and many enslaved Africans brought to Virginia came from the Bight of Biafra, a region dominated by the Igbo ethnic group. The Igbo became one of the largest African ethnocultural groups in Virginia at that...

01

Igbo People in Virginia and Their Craftsmanship

During the late 18th century, the transatlantic slave trade was at its peak, and many enslaved Africans brought to Virginia came from the Bight of Biafra, a region dominated by the Igbo ethnic group. The Igbo became one of the largest African ethnocultural groups in Virginia at that time. Many Igbo men were skilled blacksmiths, a highly respected craft in their homeland. In Igbo culture, blacksmithing was more than just a profession; it held spiritual and religious importance, as iron was believed to have mystical powers and was linked to deities, ancestors, and protection.



A wrought-iron figure made by an African in Alexandria, Virginia, in the late 18th century. It is 11 inches (27.9 cm) tall and is kept at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

One of the most intriguing pieces of African artistic influence in early America is a wrought-iron figure, made by an African in Alexandria, Virginia, during the late 18th century. This 11-inch (27.9 cm) tall sculpture, now housed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, reflects artistic traditions deeply connected to the Igbo people of present-day southeastern Nigeria.

02

Artistic Features and Igbo Influence

Historian Douglas Chambers (2005) suggests that this wrought-iron figure may have been influenced by Igbo artistic traditions, especially those seen in ancestral shrine figures. These sculptures were often



created to honor ancestors and were placed in sacred spaces.

The Virginia figure has several features that look like Igbo ancestral shrine sculptures:

- Stylized design – The figure is not fully realistic but has a unique artistic style, similar to many Igbo wooden sculptures.
- Long shape – The figure has a tall and slim body, which is common in Igbo art. This is different from the shorter and more natural-looking figures made by nearby West African cultures.
- Spiritual meaning – The figure may have been used as a personal symbol to honor an Igbo ancestor or could have represented a blacksmithing spirit from Igbo beliefs.

03

Possible Meanings of the Figure

Since the artist remains anonymous, we can only speculate on the exact purpose of the sculpture. However, based on Igbo cultural traditions, the figure might have been:

- An ancestral representation – A spiritual connection to an Igbo ancestor, brought to Virginia as a way to maintain cultural identity.
- A blacksmith's guardian – A sacred object used in blacksmithing rituals for protection and strength.
- A religious icon – A figure used in private worship, possibly serving multiple spiritual purposes.

04

A Link Between the Old and the New World

This wrought-iron sculpture stands as a rare and powerful testament



to the enduring artistic and cultural influence of the Igbo people in early America. Despite the devastating impact of enslavement and forced migration, African artisans in Virginia continued to create art that reflected their heritage, beliefs, and traditions.

05

Comparison to Igbo Wooden Ancestral Figures

Interestingly, when compared to a 19th/ 20th century Igbo ancestral shrine figure made of wood (now preserved by Christie's), the similarities in form and symbolism become even clearer. These sculptures—whether made of iron or wood—shared the purpose of honoring ancestors, connecting with spiritual forces, and preserving identity across continents.

This wrought-iron figure from Virginia is more than just a piece of metalwork—it is a historical bridge linking African artistic traditions to the African American experience. It serves as evidence that Igbo cultural heritage did not disappear despite the hardships of enslavement but instead transformed and endured in new ways. Through their craft and creativity, enslaved Igbo artisans left an artistic legacy that still speaks to us today.

- Ụkpurū. (n.d.). African (Igbo) art's influence in late 18th century Virginia.

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.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
