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BIOGRAPHY

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By Chukwunwike Ossai

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Uche Okeke (1933-2016) is a renowned Nigerian artist, thinker, and teacher who has really changed the way we see art in Africa. He combined our Igbo culture, especially Uli designs, with the modern style of drawing that appears fine all over the world. His work is a serious step that shows African art could be in a modern style and still hold the culture strong.

Uche Okeke is a Nimo man in Anambra state. From his childhood, he loved stories, drawing and Igbo tradition. He began his art journey at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology. This College later became Ahmadu Bello University.

He formed his group with artists such as Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Demas Nwoko. The group is called Zaria Art Society.

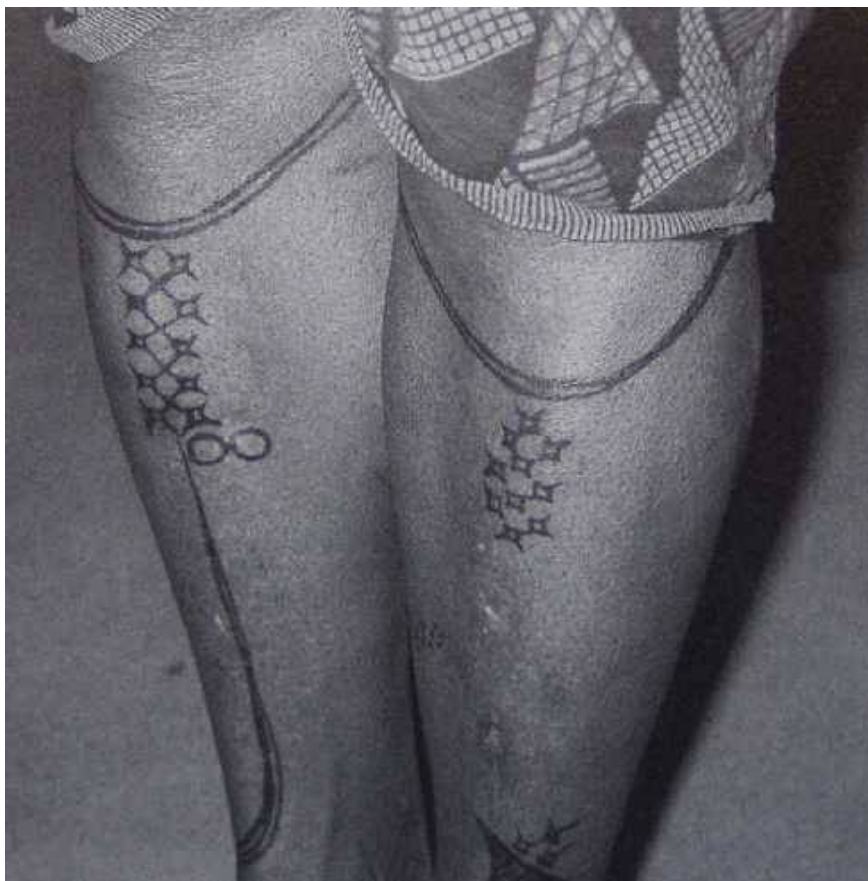
Their main idea is “Natural Synthesis”, which suggests that African art should be combined with traditional and modern styles to create our unique flavour.



Uche Okeke and the members of the Zaria Arts Society

Uche Okeke believes we, the Africans, mustn't copy the art of the white people. Let us combine our own African culture- Our Symbols, stories, and spirit- with Western style, so that the art looks original and proud.

He began using Uli Designs, the Igbo women's patterns are normally drawn on their bodies and walls. Uli has a natural flow and spiritual meaning. Okeke turned paper and canvas into modern fine art.



Uli Art worn by an Igbo Maiden

Uli is an old Igbo art in which women use natural dye to draw beautiful lines and shapes. It is used in ceremonies, festivals, or story time. It never lasts long, but it's beautiful and full of meaning.

Uche Okeke revives Uli. He drew works like “Ana Mmuo” (Land of Spirits) and “Obunjoko” that use Uli style to tell African stories in today's world.



Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead) embodies Uche Okeke's early experiments with uli—an Igbo female body and wall painting tradition from southern Nigeria.

In the 1970s, they made Uche Okeke head of the Fine Arts Department at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

There, he built the Nsukka School of Art. He encouraged students to incorporate their traditional African art style into their modern drawings.

From that school, artists such as El Anatsui, Obiora Udechukwu, and Chike Aniakor emerged. Uche was the one who trained them.



Uli body designs from Awka District, collected by W.B. Yeatman c. 1933 (Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford)

Uche Okeke also: 1. Drew children's books. 2. Wrote about African Art. 3. Gave speeches at conferences and promoted cultural law. 4. Used Art to push African stories to international.

Uche Okeke's art now travels far. Big museums in Europe and America have shown his works, which include:

1. Smithsonian Museum of African Art. 2. Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) 3. Pan-African Festival in Algeria. 4. Centre for Black Arts and Civilisation. (CBAAC).

He was still active in Art matters until he departed in 2016.

Uche Okeke doesn't only draw fine art. He changed how people see African culture. He showed us that our local style could become world-class if only we knew it better.

He built a bridge between the village and the gallery, connecting the old and the new, the local and the global.

Any African artist who uses tradition today stands on the shoulders of Uche Okeke.

Uche Okeke is indeed a legend. His work shows power, pride and deep African roots. He carried our culture and that made him shine in paper, paint and classrooms. As art grows in this world, the name of Uche Okeke will still echo in all African Creative Matters.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



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