

## PAUL AHYI CARPENTER OF BODIES

The vocation of Paul Ahyi has its roots in his family origins.

Born in 1930 of Togolese parents, he is brought up by a princess of the Royal court of Abomey. An "Amazon's" daughter, she marries his father installed in Dahomey in the Twenties.

During these invaluable childhood years, he has under his eyes all the bas reliefs of the Royal court and the great sculptures honoring Previous Kings.

He can contemplate them at leisure and draws them as early as seven years of age. Today still, more than 70 years later, he remembers very fondly these memories.

He has been marked for life by the richness of this court art, which is often monumental, combining the power of volumes and a richness of colors to noble materials such as wood, iron, bronze and glazed ceramics, and also textiles.



*Paul Ahyi at the Royal Palace of Abomey, Bénin,  
1958, holding the votive saber of Glele II*



All these elements will deeply impregnate the spirit of the young child and will constitute the bases of his early vocation as multi disciplinary artist. Although educated at the tough French ecole des Beaux Arts, his mastery of Western Classicism does not make him forget his native culture. All his brilliant technique acquired



*Paul Ahvi at the IFAN Museum, Dakar. Senegal. 1951*

through Hard and dedicated work is used with talent and virtuosity to glorify the richness of his native culture.

Student in Lyon, then in Paris in Souverbie's workshop, he always keeps Africa at heart.

At that time, around 1955, he makes several encounters that will have determining effect on his intellectual and artistic education: in Lyon, Paulin Joachim, writer

and journalist from Benin who he will meet again in Paris within the "Presence Africaine" group; in Paris, Madeleine Rousseau who will introduce him to the "Musee de l'Homme" (Museum of Man) where he discover all the African cultures; Not to forget his meetings with Sheik Anta Diop whose visionary theories will leave a lasting impression.



The heart, is one of the keys to the work of Ahvi - Sculpting and Painting, Writing: His most famous Poetry Collection is entitled: *My heart bleeds*, this heart seen in the faces of his character's powerful heads, convex foreheads overhanging concave heart shaped faces delimited by arched eyebrows

*Assibi, monumental sculpture in the garden of the artist in Lome, 1992*

and rounded chins. Heart still whose sensuality is expressed by the cowry shaped glancing eyes and the pulpy, sensual mouths. His art is impregnated with passion. Omnipresent passion of man and nature, but passion always under control, the Master keeps the upper hand. he holds back the hand armed with the gouge or the chisel, directs and commands it. Linked to the brain, the hand executes, carries out the action, and materializes the thought of the artist.

Being very demanding, the Sculptor reaches mastery. Demanding of self but also of the material. All are selected with rigor: the iroko and the mahogany, the toti - an iron hard wood - and the royal ebony of Tabligbo, all will dry patiently then be carved with science and art. The artist is in communion with the matter, is one with it. When he kneads the Bassar Clay, he kneads his own flesh and gives it life, his life, fraternally shared. Great carpenter of bodies, he is also their heart.

His inspiration has no limits: He leaves the wood ago into Iron or Bronze, he catches the light in his stained glasses held with concrete. All these metals, all these woods, all these materials are his children, his vassals. He educates them and raises them to the ranked of his choice within the vast Pantheon of the gods and the ancestors of Africa.



*The Flower, stained glass.  
Foundation Paul Ahyi,  
Agassan, Togo, 1990*



*Monumental Bas-relief. Togolese Bank of the Commerce and Industry (BTCI), Lome, Dyed Cement, 1982*

Togbe, the Ancestor, the Old one or the Old man in Togo, the spiritual chief, is never far from his work. Their genesis, he is present in all his creations.

In effect the work is anchored in both Modernity and Tradition. We cannot say influence, Paul Ahyi is by himself that vivid tradition, lived from childhood in Benin and Togo; countries where the enduring worship of the ancestors is expressed through an abundance of sculptures, generally made of wood, with sometimes an addition metal, fabric and earth.



*Detail of an element of architecture, carved wood. house of the artist in Lome*

From North to South of Togo, the great traditional moba, ntem and éwé

statuary styles, cohabit in his mind. They are in there, present through their shapes, materials, and topics.

The geometry reigns over volumes: the cylinder of the heads and bodies flirts with the square. All expresses strength and dynamism. Raw, the surface is domesticated with the gouge and the grate. The finished form sometimes exactly follows the shape of the original aspect tree or branch, slipping into the prime aspect given

by nature. A fork becomes extended arms toward the sky or the ground, a node a pregnant woman's belly, a bump a breast; a reworked hole, pierced, becomes a light trap or a reliquary cavity: a voodoo shelter.

Elements will be distorted on purpose to accentuate their symbolic value: strong heads with the expressive features ready to give voice, powerful beater like hands, stuck against the body as if to protect it and prepare to willful action.

This hand theme so present in Paul Ahyi's sculptures is an eloquent recollection of his filiation; indeed one frequently finds it on ntem or kabyé statues of ancestors, in sanctuaries dedicated to the cult of ancestors.

Thick pegs pierce the bodies, deeply inserting mystical wishes and oaths as in the heart of fon voodoo statues. Spiking the sides of the sculptures, these magic imprints lock up the secrets far from the profane eyes. Art is not always easily unveiled, it is necessary to be initiated and learn.

Depending on the material used, the sculptures will be frontal, intertwined janus, or thread-like silhouettes.





*Detail of the entry door, engraved coppers, house of the artist in Lome*

Monumental heads will be matched

in an Egyptian style with the body of stocky columns offering to the sun and the wind their faces filled

with wonder. Ceramics petals will flower the monument's frontages and the walls of multicolored clouds of butterflies. Each shape has its goal, its message. The art work is always talking, utilitarian.

Paul Ahyi is free in his culture, he is a continuous creator, he expresses himself with what he finds and discovers around himself. Any traditional material can be substituted with another one, thus widening the field of the creativity. An object found by chance, sometimes a simple tool, will have a different status; revisited, it will be raised to higher rank by the eye of the sculptor. A pan will become helmet, a spoon sword.

As often on the statues of the highly honored éwé altars, foreign elements are attached to the original, copper or iron inclusions strung together, plates or Asen flat head nails. Fine multicolor beads mosaics, have sparkling and singing glints, on the dark surface of the heavy wood of iroko or the mahogany, or better, the ebony of Tabligbo with broad two-tone veins, even more the toti, this wood so hard that it is cut to make mortars.

Armed with his tools: the chisel and the mallet, the grater and the gouge, the adze and the chisel, the bush-hammer and the hand saw of the monumental masons, he does not fear any material, he controls them all from the oldest to the most modern like aluminum.



*Glass Incrustation shots in one of his works*



African art is often seen as sacred art. If that definition is only partially true, at least it has the merit explain why this art is never aimlessly decorative, but is a messenger and a medium, above all didactic. Beauty is real only when bearing meaning.



*Clay study for the monumental sculpture  
Fertile Forces, Dakar, 1978*

Each art work has a place in the Society. The traditional African artist can freely exert his talent inside limits fixed by the canons of the style related to a precise function. Admittedly, the African contemporary artist is released from these constraints. But a man like Paul Ahyi remains close to the classical themes of his African culture particularly from Togo and Benin, kinness freely adopted, even though there must be an unconscious part in these regions where spirits have so strong occult powers.

*Joy of life, (detail), mural ceramics, house of the artist in Lome*







*Adulteress. 2003. (detail)*

Who can say if these statues of men and women represent simple couples or if they are representations of ancestor's founders of clans or lineage like the great moba and tchamba figures? And these women holding a child are they simple mothers or should they also be considered mother goddesses, earth goddesses, fertilizing the fields of yams of the kabyié mounts and ensuring the perpetuation of the race and the traditions?

Probably the right answer is yes to both hypotheses.

Other topics of his work bring us back to that question, pairing tradition and modernity, as much through their African designs as by the search of meaning and questioning of the future that it causes: hunger, overpopulation, the cultural melting pot ready to explode for freedom?

Ancestors, couples, twins, workers, demonstrators all are brought together here by Paul Ahyi, in the joy and the tumult of the earth seasons. But also in the sorrow and anguish, those of yesterday and today.

What does these telamones with martyred bodies fears, these Titans and these "Saint-Sebastian who may be *"shot tomorrow at dawn"*, to cite the title of one of his most famous sculptures? What are they guilty of to deserve such punishment. Did they betray an initiation rite secret of their secret society or simply expressed their opinion as free men?

The sculptor is asking us the question, it is indeed the goal of his work to create, provoke,

Initiate! The work of Paul Ahyi cannot be summarized; it is too rich and diverse in its topics and techniques to be amenable to comments. That is his strength, bring the opposites in harmony together, and let past and future talk about Africa and humanity. The artist gives a lecture where work is glorified; he proposes a method for patience and rigor away from the easy paths of obliging creation. He is a demanding but generous Master who addresses his work to young artists to come on Africa's ground.

Pierre Amrouche, Lome 2007



*Portrait of a fulani woman pen-and-ink drawing, 1955-56*







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## BIOGRAPHY HIGHLIGHTS



Paul Ahyi, Lomé, 2007

1930: Born in Abomey, Benin

1949-1952: Student at the French Institute, Dakar

1952: Education at the "Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts", Lyon (France)

1957 Medal and 1st place of Artistic Anatomy, Analysis and Perspective Prize

1958 Medal and 2nd Prize of Decoration

1959 Medal and 1st Prize of Painting

Diplôme of the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, Paris

1960 Author of the Flag of Togo

1965 1st Prize of Sculpture, Togo

1970 Officer of the Order of the Mono, Togo

1985 Officer of Arts and Letters, Commander of French Academic Palms

Professor of Fine Arts, Professor of the School of Architecture and Urbanism, Lomé.

## PUBLICATIONS

Since 1960, Paul Ahyi published many studies on Art at Editions SAO-IFE:

*Reflections on Art and Culture in Africa*

*Here I am facing you with my difference*

*Introduction to Negro Art*

*The African Hairstyle Volume 1 and II*

*The Art of Airport, a non-problem*

*African reasons and symbols in Art and Architecture*

*Creative gestures I and II*

## PUBLIC WORKS

Cote d'Ivoire

Large marble sculpture *the Legend of Earth and Heaven*

Burkina Faso

Stained glasses and large ceramic decorative of the West African States Central Bank (BCEAO)

Benin

Large mosaic in the Cultural Space of the Institute of Development and Endogenous Exchanges (IDEE)

Stained glasses of the Convent of the nuns of Tofo and Monastery of Kokoubou

Senegal

Fertile forces at the BCEAO

Togo

Sculptural decoration of the frontage of Sarakawa. mural Ceramic of BCEAO

and two monuments for Togo Germany Friendship.

Stained glasses of the Franciscan Church and the Protestant Temple of Kodjoviakopé.

Korea

Great sculpture with ceramics *Africa Hope*.

Monumental sculptures in Nigeria, the Vatican and in the United Nations.

Pictorial works in Germany, Canada, China, Spain, Japan, Libya, Russia, and Yugoslavia



*Paul Ahyi decorated about the Mono one by General Evadema. 1970*

## EXCERPTS OF ARTICLES OF PAUL AHYI

The African modernism should not be synonymous of a new monkeying of the west, or a servile and automatic recopy of all the standards poured on Africa by those who see it from outside. If ever we make the error to believe that we can make ours other people modernism without changing anything, we run the risk of ending in a non-sense. (...)

*Modernism and cultural revival, 1974*

I use my share of ultra-modern equipment to engrave marble, of electric furnaces to fire my ceramics, paint tubes for my paintings. But I am not painting Mona Lisa's, I am not sculpting Apollos. No more than I yield to fascination in front of a Bobo mask or an Ifé pottery. I regard them as integral part of a past of which all the credits are completely exhausted. What imports is what Africans can do to deliver their immediate future. Because the true challenge for contemporary Black African culture is not to self-indulge in the role of curator of what Black man was, but to reveal what he is capable of leaving in heritage for tomorrow's generations (...)

Any art becomes infinite, becomes poetry, by giving up little by little its specific qualities, i.e. its finitude. Because we must be careful to confuse artist and craftsman, labor and artistic work. Nowadays all the craft productions without exception are described as art. This leads only to more confusion. every art has its technicians. Every art can be considered from a specific point of view. But that does not mean that the result of every work will be art, in a strict sense of the term. (...)

Architecture, art and  
technique?



*Portrait of a girl Oil on  
canvas, 1960  
57 X 46 cm*

## AFRICAN ARTIST FACING POLITICAL POWER

Interview of Paul Ahyi by Pierre Amrouche

PIERRE AMROUCHE - *Paul, you Graduate and leave Paris and the workshop of Souverbie around 1960. How does this "return to the Homeland" of the young revolutionary that you were at the time unfolds, influenced by the group of Alioune Diop, founder of "Presence Africaine", and by Madeleine Rousseau and her friend Sheik Anta Diop?*

PAUL AHYI - I indeed had the head full of new ideas and hopes. The progressists regimes, like the China of Mao, seemed to me a model for the young Africa of the independence years and I was in a hurry to put my knowledge and my virtuosity at the service of my African brothers. As soon as I came back in Lome president Sylvanus Olympio, the first elected official of our young Republic, called me and asked me to go to teach in the north of the country, in Sokodé. It was my first contact with the deep Togo. Strangely it is while teaching over there that I met most of the future elite of Togo.

PIERRE AMROUCHE - *And the general Eyadéma, when did you physically met him?*

PAUL AHYI - In 1970, he summoned to his place and asked me to make a marble sculpture of 36 tons for the new Presidency Building in construction. This Marble Sculpture project was dear to him, he regularly came to see the progress of the work; I believe that he was impressed by the vigor of the young and strong sculptor that I was. He knew already that I was not on his side politically, but only cared for a work well done. In 1974 Togo, like other African countries, was marked by the crisis of "authenticity", a pseudo return to the sources which for me did not have any Black or Negro roots, in the noble sense, and which I even found lowering; I should have changed my Christian first name of Paul for a traditional first name that pleased the power! Obviously I refused and preserved my Christian first name for the signature of my works. Zealous officers hastily let the General President know, denouncing me as a dangerous protestor - fact that Eyadéma knew for a long time - he lend a deaf ear to it and continued to order works!

PIERRE AMROUCHE - *How was Eyadéma with you?*

PAUL AHYI - Truthfully, Eyadéma always showed respect for my work, he did not even hold me rigor to have refused to make his effigy; I left that to the North Koreans, who are used to make official portraits!

PIERRE AMROUCHE - *In Lome one sees your works everywhere, from the airport to large hotels, banks, schools. You put art in the city, live, as you like to emphasize.*

PAUL AHYI - That is true, and the list of my public work in Togo would be too long to cite, I was certainly privileged from that point of view. But before all it was the work which was chosen, not the political ideas of the artist! Thanks to my work I met some prominent African Leaders: Senghor, Mobutu, Houphouët Boigny, etc. With all I maintained a courteous rapport and above all professional; I very quickly moved away from politics and my revolutionary ideas were put off!

PIERRE AMROUCHE - *As an Artist in Togo, you did you freely do your work like intended?*

PAUL AHYI - The only Government with which I had a true problem is Niger, which mutilated, without my consent, a sculpture which I made in 1984 in Niamey, simply to satisfy the requirements of the Islamic Conference which was to convene there. The heads and the breasts of my statues were too "present" for these puritans: they cut them out or drowned in a block of concrete! Later they asked me to remake them and I of course refused. Thus it is not dictatorship which attacked my work, but theocracy and its dogmatism, all considered it is the worst regime that one can be submitted to: that of ignorance.

My dilemma was to live under a more and more unbearable regime. If I held the road without deviating, I would say that it is thanks to my constant search for neutrality. It is not easy; it requires much abnegation not to fall into complacency and easiness. To take a step back from some advantages and to prefer the folding seat to the armchair. Wisdom taught me that to go bare handed into the lion den, is not courage but temerity. The samurai knows that his sacrifice will be appreciated by his people, but for us, are we ready to appreciate such a sacrifice?

Pierre Amrouche  
Lome, January 20

## LIST OF EXPOSED WORK



1 - *African, Witness, I*  
1983  
Solid mahogany  
52cm



11 *The family, 1980*  
Enameled brass  
162 cm



2 - *The couple,*  
1976  
Brass and sawn timber 50cm



12 - *Head of girl II,*  
2005  
Varnished wood  
34cm



3 - *Mindless lovers.*  
2000  
Solid Ebony of Tokpli  
130cm



13 - *Head of girl III.*  
2006  
Wood  
36cm



4 - *The Girl and the King,*  
2004  
Kaké Wood  
(Proposis Africana)  
155 cm and 158cm



14 - *Stay with me, 1976*  
Zota  
140 X 50 cm



5 - *Behold the child,*  
2005  
Toti Wood  
(Pterocarpus erinaceus)  
146x 80cm



15 - *Hostage I, 2004*  
Zota  
65 X 70 cm



6 - *Hostage II,*  
2004  
Zota 56 X 68 cm



16 - *The kiss, 1998* Solid  
mahogany 116 cm and 107  
cm



7 - *African, Witness II*  
2004  
Solid mahogany  
96cm



17 - *Day of anger, 2004*  
Zota  
72.5 X 70.5 cm



8 - *The couple III,*  
1980  
Etching on aluminum  
95.5 X 95.5 cm



18 - *Revolted, 2005* Toti  
wood (Pterocarpus  
erinaceus) 125 X 70 cm



9 - *The call, 1980*  
Zota  
73.5 X 94 cm



19 - *Hostage III, 2004*  
Zota  
70 X 65 cm



10 - *The sentence, 2004*  
Zota  
103 X 106 cm



20 - *The coupling, 2005*  
Toti wood  
(Pterocarpus erinaceus)  
90 X 115cm



21 - *Portrait of young girl I*, 2004  
Toti wood  
(Pterocarpus erinaceus)  
56 cm



22 - *Head of girl*, 2004  
Wood  
36 cm



23 - *Man support*, 2004  
Wood  
108cm



24 - *Howling man*, 2001  
Mahogany  
120cm



25 - *Protestors*, 2005  
Kaké  
(Proposis Africana)  
and of Toti wood  
(Pterocarpus erinaceus)  
40 cm - 120 cm  
125 cm - 130 cm



26 - *The couple II*, 1980  
Ceramics and beads  
51 x46cm



27 - *Birds*, 1965  
Wood and iron  
43cm



28 - *Young Princess I*, 2001  
Glazed ceramic  
80 cm (head: 29 cm)



29 - *Young Princess II*, 2006  
Glazed ceramic  
87 cm (head: 37 cm)



30 - *Bororo's love dance*, 1972  
Brass  
190cm



31 - *The angry man II*, 2004  
Kaké wood  
(Proposis Africana)  
85 cm



32 - *The angry man I*, 2000  
Kaké wood  
(Proposis Africana)  
100 cm



33 - *Young girl's head IV*, 2005  
Kaké wood  
(Proposis Africana)  
32cm



34 - *The challenge*, 1985  
Zota  
70,5x71 cm



35 - *The mother and her child I*, 2000  
Toti wood  
(Pterocarpus erinaceus)  
115cm



36 - *Birds*, 1974  
Zota  
62 X 68 cm



37 - *Adulteress or The evidence*, 2003  
Solid mahogany  
101 cm



38 - *Mother and child II*, 2000  
Varnished mahogany  
120cm I



39-*The vise*, 1975  
Solid mahogany  
50cm