# Yinka Shonibare: An African Diaspora Artist

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## Abstract

This paper delves into the artistic practice of Yinka Shonibare, an African Diaspora artist based in the United Kingdom known for exploring cultural identity, colonialism, and post-colonialism through various art forms. It discusses how Shonibare uses the so-called African print "Ankara" in his artworks to create some sort of subversion of colonial narratives with commentary on the cultural mix between Africa and Europe. The paper also highlights how Shonibare's works touch on themes of disability, class, and race, with varying interpretations from scholars. In addition, it highlights Shonibare's use of different materials and textures, drawing inspiration from local culture and the philosophy of negritude. The writing takes a journey into the international art scene starting from the 20th century period in Africa, shedding light on the challenges faced by African artists, especially female folks, in terms of funding and patronage. It also discusses the

characteristics of international African art, emphasizing its public nature and the influence of African sculptures and textiles on the artists' works.

## Biography and Artistic Style



*Yinka Shonibare, 2019. The British Library, Tate Modern Museum*

Yinka Shonibare CBE RA (1962) has marked his prints on the sands of time as a very successful international artist. He is a British Nigerian artist living in the United Kingdom. He employs sculpture, painting, film, installations, and photography, often infusing the acclaimed African print called “Ankara”- Dutch wax prints (plate 3) in exploring cultural identity, colonialism, and

post-colonialism within the contemporary context of globalization. Shonibare has established his name as a reputable name in the annals of the history of African diaspora artists, who have transcended and transposed their experiences of race and class into their body of work. Art enthusiasts and historians could view his oeuvre by following a Marxist approach to art history. However, not everyone sees him as such; Elizabeth Howdie, for example, analyzes Shonibare's works basically as disability studies as opposed to Yinka Shonibare's argument that it is not. I agree with Shonibare that *"A Day in the Life of a Victorian Dandy"* is more about the story of an African man's experiences living in the diaspora. Shonibare refuses to recognize himself as a disabled person. But how could he when he was perfectly non-disabled until the unfortunate tragedy that struck him at the age of eighteen? He contracted transverse myelitis, an inflammation of the spinal cord that paralyzed one side of his body. In *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (Plate 1), an arrangement of sequences of performance and photography reflecting the British taste for and nostalgic allusion to the Victorian era, Shonibare appears as a Black fancy Dandy- A self-made man who imitates an aristocratic style of life, despite his middle-class origin, birth, and background, especially in the Britain of the late-18th and early-19th centuries.



*Plate 1: Yinka Shonibare. Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 19.00 hours.*
*Photograph*
*2012 (printed);1998 (photographed)*

The narrative work of the British artist William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress* (plate 2) inspired the work. In Shonibare's case, he is Black. Very rare but not unusual in the Victorian era. Howie argues that Shonibare employs the substitution of a black dandy for the conventional white one as relating to race and disability. She insists that his intentionality about his disability is evident in the artist's photographs in *19.00 Hours* as he is supported by an elegant cane, though stylishly done. In 3.00 Hours and 11.00 Hours, he is also tilted to one side as though he is listening but a

cover-up for his disability. While Howie details extensively how these poses contribute to his disabilities, she fails to enjoy the work as an experience of a black man retelling his story and experiences abroad, as Shonibare keeps insisting.



*Plate 2: William Hogart.*
*A Rake's Progress 3: The Tavern's Scene, circa 1732-33*
*Oil on Canvas.*
*62.5 cm x 75 cm (24.6 in x 30 in)*



*Plate 3: Yinka Shonibare's Scramble for Africa (2009) features 14 life-size fiberglass mannequins dressed in Dutch wax printed cotton.*
*Yinka Shonibare/By permission, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*

## African Diaspora Artists: Past and Present

Shonibare tells his ingenious story like other contemporary African diaspora artists like Romare Bearden, an influential African American artist. He is renowned for his innovative collage techniques and ability to depict the African American experience with emotional depth and vibrancy, expressing personal and collective memories. Likewise, Jacob Lawrence is another prominent African American artist who gained international recognition for his striking use of colors and forms to tell the stories of African American history and culture—followed by Faith Ringgold, an African American artist best known for her social commentary with her vibrant and

thought-provoking story quilts, which combine painting, quilting, textile, and narrative storytelling to address social and political issues. Another shining example is Jean-Michel Basquiat, a Haitian American neo-expressionist artist who rose to fame in the 1980s with his graffiti-inspired paintings. He combines vivid colors, bold lines, and cryptic symbols to reflect the complexities of urban life and the African Diaspora identity. As a leading figure in the Neo-Expressionist movement, Basquiat's work has had a far-reaching impact on the global art market. It has inspired countless artists to embrace graffiti's raw energy and immediacy as an art form. Again, Kimathi Donkor, a British artist of African and Caribbean descent, is known for his thought-provoking paintings exploring race, history, and identity themes. Donkor's work challenges stereotypes and offers fresh perspectives on the African Diaspora experience by reimagining historical events and figures through a contemporary lens. His influence on global art is visible in the growing interest in revisiting and reinterpreting history through art. The art of this storytelling by diasporan artists started from their African counterparts who exhibited abroad without being residents there. They were and are still called *international artists*. The popularity of these artists grew after Susan Mullin Vogel, an American art historian and curator, introduced them to the world in the exhibition catalog (the most important publication on Modern African Art to date) for *Africa Explores 20th-century African Art* (1991), which is the second major exhibition on African Art in May 1991 in New York. It featured one hundred and thirty works from fifteen African countries (Vogel, Susan Mullin, 1991). The first was *Magiciens de la Tele*, curated by a French man, Jean Herbert Martin, in 1981 at Centre Pompidou in Paris, France. It featured one hundred works: fifty Western and fifty non-Western artworks by international artists.

## International Art and Artists: Meaning and Context

*International art* means art that addresses an international audience. Vogel (1991) avers that international African artists represent their countries in international gatherings such as Pan-African games or in Biennial exhibitions in places as various as Sao Paulo, Libreville, and Paris and may exhibit internationally, mainly under Government auspices. These artists have access to hybrid cultures. International African artists have obtained Western-style education either in Africa, Europe, or America or under a European mentor. They are usually widely traveled outside Africa and by invitation. They have domestic and overseas residency training and international patronage from government and private individuals. Their works have these essentialisms of *"Africanness"* that trace their identity back to their African root. These essential features are seen predominantly in African diaspora artists today. They leave no stone unturned in announcing their identity. And Howie's assertion that Yinka's work had anything to do with his disability remains contentious and quite condescending. Africans are fighters. In Yinka's words, *"When people see an artist of African origin, they think: oh, he's here to protest… but I am going to do it like a gentleman. It will look very nice"*. (Millett-Gallant and Howie, 2017 (p. 146). For an African man, it is more about representation and activism than sympathy. An African man is a proud man. International artists always want to represent Africa.

The precursors of international African art are Albert Lubaki (1895) (Plate 5) from Zaire and Tshyela Ntendu (Djilatendo), (Plate 4). They were both literate French and familiar with European imagery but retained their African identity in their works. Their familiar mentor was a European poet, Georges Thiry (1906-1994). They had exhibitions outside Africa but have yet to have an opportunity to see themselves. They believed that the ideologies of modern African art

must have antitraditional impulses through assimilation or the theory of natural synthesis, which is the artistic freedom to paint any theme with unlimited mediums and surfaces with a combination of inspiration from local culture wrapped around the philosophy of negritude. (An Afrocentric philosophy championed by Leopold Senghor)



*Plate 4: Albert Lubaki (1895-?, Congo)*
*Le retour de la pêche, circa 1930s*
*Ink and watercolor on paper*
*Signed 'Lubaki' on the center right*
*32 × 50 cm*



*Plate 5:* Tshyela Ntendu (Djilatendo)
Sans titre, circa 1929-1932
Watercolour on paper
29 1/10 × 48 4/5 in | 74 × 124 cm

International African artists at the time lived in large cities and sold their works through direct commissions, mainly from governments and corporations, and through exhibitions. Italians, Germans, and French were essential sponsors. There were fewer female artists due to a lack of funding and sociocultural limitations. They needed more patronage from African collectors but received attention from foreign buyers. They sold at high prices. They received travel grants and opportunities to exhibit and sell overseas.  Vogel went into detail by stating that international artists painted as flatly as murals. They were usually linear and decorative, as seen in Twins Seven-Seven (Nigeria), Papa Ibra Tall (Senegal), and Pilipili Molongoy (Zaire). These artists use African sculptures in painting because of their striking silhouettes. They employed the graphical

and geometric elements of African sculpture. Also, the way forms project into space. Ulism in Nigeria is a generative process of draughtsmanship drawn from ancient writings on walls and body paintings. Local textile artists like Bruce Onabrakpeya (Nigeria), Gerard Santoni (Ivoire), and The Groupe Bogolan (Mali) use local textile patterns and colors in many of their repertoire.

International African art, which could be viewed as public rather than private, rarely depicts portraitures, western adventures, interior spaces, and cosmopolitan life. They avoid stories of their homes and villages. Their works are seldom critical or satirical and only political. They never paint strongly felt subjects. International African artists address a global audience, such as the Pan-African Games or Biennial exhibitions in Sao Paulo, Libreville, and Paris. They have access to hybrid cultures. Their central aim is to uphold the nation rather than the region. They build national allegiance by suppressing ethnic references in favor of multiethnic ones. The new national artists raised people above their old ethnic antagonisms. For example, Businessmen wore suits and coats to showcase their modern national identity. Other pioneers include Aina Onabolu (1882-1963), an international artist from Nigeria who pioneered the use of the Western style of painting by Africans. T against the opinion of F.H Howard, who believed otherwise. Serge Creuz (1964) asserted his views that Western critics preferred African art with some level of "Africanness." Aina Onabolu tried to prove them wrong by obtaining degrees in the 1920s in Art schools in London and Paris. He went on to influence the Nigerian school curriculum on his return. His art had a social function as he executed realistic portraitures of historical figures. He and the rest of the educated Westernized African Artists were anti-traditional in their approach. It is safe to call him the pioneer of anti-traditional impulse.

## Negritude and Art

The pioneer of the philosophy of Negritude is Brother Marc Stanislas (Victor Wallenda). He founded *Kinshasa* School (now the Academie des Beaux Arts) in the 1940s. He admonished his students to maintain their level of *'Africanness'* while improving them through observing nature. He withheld Western art from them to prevent influences. Senghor of Senegal (Léopold Sedar Senghor), the first president of Senegal, articulated the philosophy of negritude as a clarion call to artists in the 1950s and 1960s. In the early 1970s, President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire promulgated the authenticity doctrine. Also, Zairian Avante-Gardistes (1977) wanted their art to have autonomy and intrinsic personality. Here are a few examples of African artists who carried on with the principles of negritude in their countries: Buraimoh (1943), a Nigerian artist from the Oshogbo School of Art, began making bead paintings in the 1960s. They featured the crowns, bags, and figures of the 19th and 20th century traditional Yoruba art. Serigne N'Diaye (1953) is a Senegalese artist trained at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Darkar who uses an Urban painting medium on glass but in semi-abstract. He depicted the 20th-century jumbled confusion and instability of city life. The Groupe Bogolan Kasobane (1978) was a group of six artists in Bamako, Mali, aiming to revitalize the Bogolanfini textile-dyeing technique. They paint African themes on fabrics. Youssouf Bath (1949) is an Ivoirian trained in Abidjan and Paris who works on bark, clothes, and paper with coffee and chalk. He believed that oil paint was cultural imperialism. His themes were masks, festivals, and spirituality. Ouattara (1957), as an Ivoirian artist, attached actual masks to his canvas. He painted nineteenth-century themes of 'primitive art' for his Sotto audience.

As times changed, many artists gained access to the Western world by migration or acquiring knowledge. What do we call international African artists living outside Africa? The African Diaspora artists. *Diaspora* was coined from the Greek word *dia-* meaning through, and *sprain-* meaning to sow or scatter. Krista Thompson defines it as the dispersal of people of common origin, background, or disbelief. (Thompson K. 2011) Thompson is a black American art historian whose research focuses on the modern and contemporary art and visual culture of the African diaspora. African diaspora describes the communities of people of African descent living outside the African continent. It has significantly contributed to the richness and diversity of the world's artistic landscape. The history of the African Diaspora is marked by the forced migration of millions of Africans through the Atlantic slave trade, followed by voluntary migration in search of better opportunities in the post-slavery era. These historical events led to the dispersion of African people and their cultural heritage across the globe, forming the foundation for the vibrant artistic traditions of the African Diaspora. African Diaspora has contributed to various artistic styles, techniques, and themes reverberating throughout the international art community. Thompson and Howie agree on "*passing*" and identity reconstruction as characteristics of an African in the diaspora. Some anthropologists theorize that during the *Middle Passage*, the enslaved people lost the memories of their previous lives and formed new memories with the visuals at play in the foreign land. Herskovits contended that Africans saw the Middle Passage as ushering in an emptiness or a blank slate that erased and estranged New World blacks from the continent of Africa and those with a vested interest in highlighting the Americanness (and not Africanness) of the Negro in the New World.  Anne-Fausto-Sterling argues that the body is a "somatic fact created by cultural effect" (Thompson K, 2011, p. 10). As Howie points out, passing is a form of transculturation or neoculturation, and *passing* is a predominant theme in

Shonibare's *Diary.* The Dandy constructs his identity and reinvents himself through his powers of observation and keen scrutiny to ascertain his space. However, it emphasizes the importance of looking, visibility, and identity, like all other African diasporan artists. Though Shobinare explores the themes of frivolity in the ambitious photo series *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, his work is compared to the satirical works of William Hogarth, the 18th-century painter and caricaturist. Though they eschew its moralizing tone, Shonibare's images are reminiscent of Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (1735), which follows the protagonist's decline and ruin. However, Shonibare's art embraces extravagance and luxury, subverting the notion of otherness by presenting the black dandy—a character portrayed by the artist, Shonibare himself—along with his adoring white attendants and acolytes. The dandy is a figure that plays out themes of leisure, frivolity, self-invention, and social mobility. His style and humor were typically associated with him in upper-class English social circles. Shonibare has called the dandy's attraction to him an "outsider." he shines in his other pieces with themes of otherness by incorporating African culture into his art using Dutch wax prints, considered African prints despite their Indonesian origins. As Thompson argues in her African diaspora art history scholarship, Shonibare subverts colonial narratives and comments on the interrelationship between Africa and Europe. She acknowledged the multiple cultural influences that produced new African diasporic cultures. The African diaspora artists, just like Shonibare, "*fuse*," "*intermingle*," or "*evolve*," in Thompson's own words, the use of European culture, explaining Shonibare's use of the Ankara print, although it is not purely African. (Thompson K, 2011, p. 16)  He is "intermingling." After all, is he not a British-Nigerian himself?

However, Shonibare's installations have been shown in major exhibitions across the world. Sydney, Australia, Toronto, the Venice Biennale, Documenta in Germany, the UK, the USA and

Lagos, Nigeria have deposits of his masterpieces. Including the Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town, South Africa which happen to have his film installation on display.

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