

**Chijioke Onuora: The Draughtsman and His Bold and Gesture Drawings****By****Casmir Nwanoro Nnamele**

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**Abstract:**

This paper studies the bold and gesture drawings of Chijioke Onuora. Gesture drawing is a drawing produced in a continuous line. This was the type of linearity Onuora employed in his compressed charcoal drawings taught him by Seth Edward Anku. Linearity is used to describe drawings that have lines as their only pictorial elements. Charcoal refers to burnt wood, while compressed charcoal refers to the type of charcoal that produces darker impression, which makes it uneasy to erase. This medium is what he used to produce “bold sweeping linear gesture”. Yet he is not properly documented in art historical studies in Nigeria. The method used in this study is historical and analytical. This paper therefore, aims to document the bold and gesture charcoal drawings of Chijioke Onuora.

**Key words:** Bold, Gesture Drawing, Compressed Charcoal, Linearity

**Introduction:**

Chijioke Onuora is a gifted as well as a versatile visual artist of the moment, having produced and exhibited successfully in sculpture, painting, textile and drawing from diverse media. He is an art teacher, having taught and influenced a good number of Nigerian visual artists who passed through his tutelage at Nsukka. Around 1980s and 1990s he had a studio outside the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, popularly known, then, as “Tuff Studio” where he practiced art. There was hardly any student who schooled in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, from 1980s till now that was not aware of the visual art skills and linear proficiency of Chijioke Onuora. Irrespective of this creative versatility, he has not been properly documented art historically in Nigeria. The aesthetic, broad linear drawings produced with “compressed” charcoal have never received the required study they deserve. Attempts to document him and his charcoal drawings were merely on unpublished thesis and exhibition catalogues. These studies were mainly biographical with special interest in his artistic practice. None focused on his gesture drawings in charcoal. He was among the students who passed through the tutorship of Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu and Seth Edward Anku at the “Nsukka School”. Outstandingly, Seth Anku influenced him with his compressed charcoal rendition. Later, he taught and at the same time influenced those coming behind him, like Uche Edochie, Uche Uzorka and Izundu Nwankwo among others.

Onuora recalled that he initially got the idea of gesture drawing from Mrs. C. Dillard, an expatriate art teacher who taught him at Awka College of Education<sup>1</sup>. Gesture

drawing is a continuous use of a single line in drawing without stopping or lifting the hand from the paper until a whole drawing is completed<sup>2</sup>. Onuora earlier had interest in drawing because before his contact with Dillard at Awka, Anku and his group at “Nsukka School”, he had started exhibiting innate potentials in art. At the age of six, he recalled that he drew the bust of a soldier on the wall of their house<sup>3</sup>. Still at the same age, he produced “a pencil drawing of a kid with outstretched arms amidst a cluster of his first letter to his father who was then in the Biafran Army”<sup>4</sup>. In his secondary education, he was taught “drawing and painting”. He continued drawing up to the period, it metamorphosed into bold and gesture practice in charcoal

This art historical and analytical study was developed from my thesis at Nsukka, Nigeria, titled *Aesthetic Linearity: The Drawing Culture of the Modern Igbo Artists*, beginning from the early 2006. This paper, therefore, seeks to put Chijioko Onuora in the required art historical perspective, as a gifted draughtsman, with special interest in compressed charcoal drawings, while the essence is to document the influence and contributions of Onuora to modern draughtsmanship. Also, this paper is expected to contribute to knowledge and motivate further studies in drawings of Onuora.

### **Onuora’s Early Life and Education**

Chijioko Onuora, an accomplished artist, was born into the family of teachers, Rev. and Mrs. Joshua Chukwuemeka Onuora of Ede village in Adazi-Ani, Aniocha Local Government Area of Anambra State, on 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1962. His birth took place at Iyi Enu Hospital, Ogidi. He had his primary education from 1968 to 1973 at Thomas Anglican Primary School, Oraukwu. By 1970, he was in elementary 2 but the Nigeria – Biafra war delayed his studies. Onuora recalled that by 1973, when he was supposed to be in Secondary School, he was doing his primary 5. At this level, he enrolled for the Common Entrance Examination that took him to secondary school without taking the First School Leaving Certificate Examination.

Between 1973 and 1979, he studied at Oraukwu High School for his secondary education. In 1979, he enrolled at the College of Education, Awka, to study Fine Art. He graduated in 1982 and served his father land in the National Youths Service Corps (NYSC) programme between 1982 and 1983 at Ekpe Grammar School in former Edo State. In 1983, he enrolled in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, as a direct entry candidate, graduating in 1986 with a major in sculpture. Immediately after his graduation, he registered for Masters of Fine and Applied Arts (MFA) programme, continuing in sculpture studies. This programme spanned from 1987 – 1990. Later in 2006 Onuora enrolled for a Ph.D programme in Art History under the supervision of Ola Oloidi. This study lasted till 2012. According to him,

I researched into the development of pyrography techniques of sculpture production by artists of the Nsukka School. The study included the burnt wood sculptures of El Anatsui (the Pioneer), Ndidi Dike, Okey Ikenegbu, Gbubemi Amanoritsewor (Amas), Everistus Obodo, Ik Okenyi, Chike Akabuike and Uche Onyishi.<sup>5</sup>

### **Onuora: Early Drawings:**

Onuora started very early as a child to demonstrate his talent in drawing. He recalled that as an infant, he was drawing. According to him:

As an infant my art was limited to drawing and wet-sand architecture. Kneeling over cleared soil I drew anything that came to mind. I drew figures of boys and girls. I drew cars, bicycles and lorries complete with drivers. I drew fowls, goats and cows. Occasionally, I drew plants especially Iroko trees where scale was represented by covering the entire compound space with it. The easiest thing to draw was the human head. To do this, one only needed to make a good “c” and closing the open area with a wavy vertical line. A dot in the middle represented the eye.<sup>6</sup>

However, at the age of 6, Onuora had developed to the level of drawing on the wall of his father’s house. Common among his subjects, then, were “bust of soldiers”, because soldiers were every where as a result of the civil war. Even, he produced “a pencil drawing of a kid with outstretched arms amidst a cluster of his first letter to his father” already stated:

Like many other children ‘privileged’ to be brought up in a home with a firewood kitchen, Onuora had enjoyed drawing on soot-covered walls of his mother’s kitchen. While the dark walls were suitable grounds for drawings in white chalk, other walls were good grounds for charcoal drawings.<sup>7</sup>

In 1970, when Onuora was in primary 2, he attempted to compete with his class teacher in illustrating a cock on the “black board”. This he produced with coloured chalk. The ovation that greeted this success attracted the attention of pupils and teachers from other classes<sup>8</sup>. In primary 4, young Onuora was clearly outstanding in his class in terms of drawing and by the time he was in primary 5 he had begun to make drawings for people using graphite (pencil)<sup>9</sup>. Onuora recalls that the above progress in drawing was made without any formal instructor, according to him, in his primary education; he had no art teacher at all<sup>10</sup>.

Between 1973 and 1977, Onuora had his first formal art lesson from Mr. Asuzu, at Oraukwu High School, where he was taught only drawing and painting. Asuzu, from Okija, was trained at the Institute of Management and Technology (IMT), Enugu, where he obtained Ordinary National Diploma (OND) specializing in graphics. According to Onuora, within the school premises were drawings and paintings made by Rawland Ndefo, a notable artist of the era. In 1978, he was taught by another art teacher Mr. Amafil from Awo Idemili in Oru Local Government Area of Imo state. Amafil had a Masters Degree in art and this perhaps made his teaching too advanced for Onuora’s class, he recalled. Before he left secondary school in 1979, he was already competent in the use of pencil in drawing and “had made up his mind” to further his career in art. This decision led him to enroll at the College of Education, Awka, where he was taught drawing by Emman Okunna. Okunna graduated from the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1978, majoring in Ceramics. Eventually, Mrs. Dillard, an European teaching at the College of Education, then, developed interest in Onuora’s performance in drawing and taught him “Gesture Drawing”, which contributed to what he is today in the field of draughtsmanship. Under Dillard’s tutorial, he trained his hands in linearity. According to him; I saw Obiora Udechukwu’s drawing for the first time at Awka<sup>11</sup>. He also recalled that, he even copied some of them as a creative exercise. On graduating from Awka, he did his NYSC in a secondary school

where he taught drawings to the extent that Saturdays were made their sketching days. He emphasized that, it was an informal outfit<sup>12</sup>.

In 1983, he got admission through direct entry to study art at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. There, he was taught drawing by a Ghanaian artist, Seth Edward Anku along with his classmates, Amadi Anthony, Ik Igwenagu, Soniya Patel and Oluchukwu Oguibe. He recalled that, this was within their 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> years in the University. He “fondly recalls”: I was the best draughtsman among my set and I exhibited a whole lot of drawings during my final year<sup>13</sup>.

Before Onuora started his training and experiments on compressed charcoal, he was already proficient in the use of pencil as seen in his *Ifee and Nnamdi* (fig. 1) and *Chapel of Holy Spirit* (fig. 2) both executed in 1984. These works attest to his level of mastery and confidence in the use of pencil as a material before his admission into the University, having produced these type of drawings within a year as an undergraduate. Also his level of dexterity was pronounced for the drawings to possess the kind of realism expected from cameras, exact representation of objects. What makes fig.1 interesting are not only the naturalistic representations but the shading technique of hatching, with its linear strokes vibrating as if they were the first rain drops of the year. Other interesting aspects of the drawing are the effects of light and shade, the folds and the “compelling illusions of three dimensionality”. His representation of the *Chapel of the Holy Spirit* took the same diagonal stroke, dropping from the top right hand side to the left. The drawing looks very busy and dark, to capture the exact weather at the time of execution. The strong effect of the tonal gradation as seen on the cloud “captures the rumbling cumulus above the church’s tower”. He rightly represented the movement of the trees and bushy environment in a “windy moment that follows a tropical rainy moment”. Onuora was able to use the vertical strokes of the chapel building to counter the direction of the wind and the hatches to achieve calmness.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Onuora recalled that the beautiful aspect of the human being attracts his attention. According to him:

The human figure has always been my major subject and I tend to look out for the beautiful sides of the human form. It is only recently that I have beamed my search light on the ugly side of the human form and engagements. When I was working with graphite in 1980s and 1990s, I spent great deal of time in investigating as well as celebrating the feminine beauty. During that period, I did a lot of studies on the female face and body. While doing so, I tried as much as possible to avoid being vulgar<sup>14</sup>.

Within this period of his interest in celebrating the female beauty, he executed naturalistic drawings both in pencil and pastel, such as *Nymph* (fig.3) 1986, and *Maiden* (fig. 4) 1990. These are realistic drawings, product of imagination; result from his earlier interest in female studies.

### **Onuora: Charcoal Drawings**

Onuora started drawing with charcoal as far back as 1968, when he was 6 years. He recalled that this was during the civil war. According to him:

As a boy of six, one of the first drawing materials, I explored, outside drawing on sand, was charcoal. During the civil war, when there was a

total absence of match sticks, for making fire, people fetched 'live' charcoals from neighbors whenever the ones in the house extinguished.

With this practice, there was always an abundance of charcoal for drawing on walls. In my own case, I drew a lot of things on our walls<sup>15</sup>

Throughout Onuora's formal studies from primary school to College of Education, "he did not use charcoal but he saw drawings in charcoal". It was during his second year of a three year programme at the University that he came in contact with Seth Anku, "A Ghanaian-born multi talented art teacher" who introduced him into compressed charcoal rendition. Immediately after his graduation in 1986, as his mates were going for the youth's service, he went to stay with Anku at his Boy's Quarter in his 618 Odim Street Residence on campus. He stayed for about six months with him. Anku actually encouraged him to draw; he provided him all the necessary materials for drawing, like pencil, pastel, compressed charcoal, drawing sheets and papers<sup>16</sup>.

That was the period he produced his greatest number of drawings. He made an average of five drawings a day, and most of these drawings were disposed free without being well documented<sup>17</sup>. His closeness to Anku naturally made him acquire Anku's drawing technique because he saw him draw. Also he advised him to place a "soft pad" under his drawing sheet or paper before drawing. His interest in Anku and in drawing like him, made compressed charcoal used by Anku to become his chosen material for drawing, and to him:

Unlike Anku's drawing which explore human faces and action, Onuora added decorative and symbolic uli and nsibidi motifs to enrich his statements and to identify with ideology of natural synthesis as practiced in Nsukka School.<sup>18</sup>

Also, Onuora depicts semi-realistic images in figurative stylization, but "one can still glimpse the high level of draughtsmanship and well grounded knowledge of the human form and function".<sup>19</sup> He executes drawing that were highly striking and simple with a good dose of curvilinear strokes. The effects of the compressed charcoals, his chosen medium attracts thin and "bold sweeping lines". His gesture drawing experience accounts for the concentric-like circles persistent in his works. Uli motifs and symbols are introduced to actually achieve the poetic lyricism displayed in most of his drawings. Onuora's knowledge of gesture drawing and the use of charcoal is evident in his drawings, such as the *Hangman Also Dies* (fig. 5), *Emissaries* (fig. 6), *Ogolo* (fig. 7), *Ikwu Nne Cannot Reject You* (fig. 8) and *Whirlwind* (fig. 9) among others.

*Hangman Also Dies* features a continuous helix-like shape that displays wide and thin lines on the left and right hand sides. Under the suspected helix shape lays a stylized figure supporting his head with the hands. It seems the image is over whelmed with grief due to the death of the handed man dangling at the centre. In the *Emissaries*, Onuora also exhibited a continuous linear movement that has no end as the base for the figurative expressions on top. This gesture line captures the edge of a rapper in its swerved nature. Even the linear attempts appears soft and/or thin at the point of contact with itself and continued in its bold, curved, spiral and dark to light effect. The sun-like shape possesses very broad and thin ray-like rectangular shapes, surrounding an irregular circle. The figures are silhouetted with the same charcoal effect in progress.

In *Ikwu Nne Cannot Reject You*, Onuora plays with "the broad side of the charcoal bar" to produce broad lines that units and "fluctuates" into varying sizes and qualities. This

gesture drawing captures the position of a loosed and intertwined tape or ribbon ready for discard. Here, Onuora introduced speed, dexterity and spontaneity to “pirouette” and produce this dense linearity.

Similarly, in *Ogolo* and *Whirlwind* Onuora presents meandering liner movements that points to his gesture experience in charcoal. In *Whirlwind*, Onuora’s skill in handling lines is highly pronounced. But he captured some stylized faces that fade into “clouds of smoke-like effects. Two of the faces are enclosed in an egg form. In *Ogolo*, Onuora introduced a free flowing and broad charcoal movement that traps a dancing semi-abstract figure at the centre. The drawing reminds one of a snake in action. At its end appeared a curve with some poetic faces and strokes that overlap the broad expression.

### Conclusion

Chijioke Onuora proved himself a talented and experimental draughtsman, having started drawing as an infant and continued successfully till today. He drew to an extent without any art teacher, but later, he was taught and influenced by Seth Edward Anku, who introduced him into compressed charcoal.

However, before using compressed charcoal, Onuora was already confident in the use of graphite, pencil. What is interesting in his charcoal drawing is his unique and authoritative outputs. His authoritativeness is obvious in his bold gesture drawings produced with a peculiar creative dexterity and spontaneity. His being able to handle “the broad side of the charcoal bar” firmly to execute meandering, bold and fluctuating lines with required light and shade effects is commendable. Onuora has produced and exhibited a large body of drawings and at the same time taught and influenced a good number of draughtsmen in Nigeria. His “aesthetic linear” works made him a model in the field of draughtsmanship and in “art historical studies of modern drawings in Nigeria”. His drawings stand the chance to elevate charcoal drawing and draughtsmanship in contemporary Nigerian art. However, it is clear that the so-called charcoal is an effective medium for drawing. Although it has been neglected in contemporary usage, that art material hold a broad creative possibilities.

This paper, therefore, posits Chijioke Onuora in the required art historical perspective as a talented draughtsman in the use of compressed charcoal. His Early Life and Education have been adequately documented, likewise his Early Drawings and Charcoal Drawings. This is the beginning of the studies on Chijioke Onuora’s aesthetic bold and gesture drawings.

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Fig. 1: *Ifee and Nnamdi*, 20" X 24",  
Pencil, 1984. © Chijioke Onuora: Akala  
Unvi



Fig. 2: *Chapel of Holy Spirit*, 20" X 22",  
Pencil, 1984. © Chijioke Onuora: Akala  
Unyi



Fig. 3: *Nymph*, Pastel, 1986  
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Fig. 4: *Maiden*, 20'' X 16'',  
Pencil, 1990. © Chijioko Onuora:  
Akala Unvi



Fig. 5: *Hangedman Also Dies*,  
Charcoal 1995. ©Aesthetic  
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the Modern Igbo Artist. (Ph.D  
Thesis)

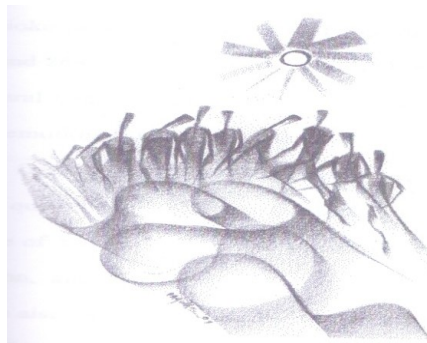


Fig. 6: *Emissaries*, Charcoal 2009.  
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of the Modern Igbo Artist. (Ph.D Thesis)



Fig. 7: *Ogolo*, 20'' X 24'', Charcoal, 2014. © Chijioko  
Onuora: Akala Unvi





Fig. 8: *Ikwu Nne Cannot Reject You*, 11.5” X 8”, Charcoal, 2011. © Chijioke Onuora: Akala Unyi



Fig. 9: *Whirl Wind*, 20” X 24”, Charcoal, 2011. © Chijioke Onuora: Akala Unyi