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This paper looks to the various forms of pictorial modernism of a specific place and time. It looks to the ways in which these forms operated within the wider context of a decolonising situation in the 1960s. Ultimately the paper poses a question about the form of representation of Africa and the entanglement of race and ethnicity within the modernist movement; a movement that in its Euro-American iteration proclaimed freedom; for the individual artist but also for the nation, as long as they were white. That notion of freedom is destablised both by the works of black artists in the representation of Africa and people of African descent, but also questioned by the politics of the post-colonial moment.

The central subject of this essay, Jacob Lawrence in Nigeria and particularly his 1964 work *Street to Mbari*, (Figure One) seems to offer a moment of optimism and inspiration; a moment of shared community for both the artist and for a generation of young Nigerian artists struggling to develop forms of modernist making that develops from and within a newly independent nation. On the surface this moment appears as a moment of genuine freedom, but it t is not without complications from within the colonial and the (white) state that both sides needed to negotiate. At its heart is a work of art that looks to escape the European modernist fashioning of Africa that placed its art as a primitivist (timeless, authentic) source of aesthetic novelty and which denied agency to people of Africa and its diaspora.[1]

Jacob Lawrence and Nigeria

> '.. the greetings of the many Afro-American artists who have drawn intellectual inspiration and aesthetic knowledge from the great art of the Ashanti, the Mendi, the Warega, the Bakuba, the Bafo, the Alangua, the Bambara, the Mano. And to you we especially owe a debt for the aesthetic contributions made by the Yoruba, the Ibo, the Ibibio and the Bini.'[2]

In this quote Jacob Lawrence acknowledges the place of Africa in the development of an African-American artistic practice. The quote stands against the appropriation of Africa in the Primitivist modernism of Paris or New York, it demonstrates an affinity very different in meaning to that purveyed by the champions of that moment.[3] Lawrence acknowledges Africa in a way that the founders of modernist art practice, Picasso, Brancusi or Modigliani never would, or indeed never could. He makes visible the people, by name, who made the art that Picasso would regard as types of formal construction or appropriate makers of emotional resonance for a Western audience – offering shock or the sublime grotesque.[4] As Gikandi notes, iterations of western modernism used the form and the sign of Africa, while

[1] Simon Gikandi Picasso, Africa and the Schemata of difference. *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 10, Number 3, September 2003, pp. 455-480

[2] Jacob Lawrence, AMSAC newsletter V, December 1962, 2. Quoted in Ulansky G 1965 Mbari the missing link, Phylon 26 (3) 247-254

[3] . See William Rubin Primitivism. See also Clifford

[4] See Frances S Connolly The sleep of reason; Primitivism in modern European art and aesthetics 1785-1907. Pennsylvania University Press, Pennsylvania. 1995.

ignoring Africans other than as subject matter while denying their subjectivity.[5] Lawrence makes them present. The statement, in this context, is remarkable. The most famous artist of African-America as supplicant, acknowledging the contribution of African art as intellectual and aesthetic inspiration. It immediately offers a divergence of modernist attitude toward the art of Africa that Lawrence no doubt imbibed during his training and associations in Harlem and beyond. However, it also touches a debate that was central to the fashioning of Nigerian modernism.

The quote is taken from a speech that Lawrence made while visiting the Mbari Mbayo club in Oshogbo, Nigeria, a cultural 'club' set up by Duro Ladipo (Nigerian theatre artist) and Ulli Beier (German outreach teacher and impresario), that followed the model of the Mbari Centre in Ibadan. Lawrence was talking in the context of a journey that that would result in important works, works that demonstrate his debt to Africa, but which refuses the terms of engagement with Africa as set by European modernism. It was also a journey that, if not exactly marking a start, did offer affirmation for various forms of Nigerian modernism. In between these two poles, however, sits a legacy of colonialism and American anxiety.

The road to the 'Street to Mbari'

Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) can be reasonably credited as the bearer of 20th Century African-American modernism. His work spans the post-Harlem Renaissance to the late twentieth century. His was a life driven by the African American experience of the Depression in the 20s as well as by personal bouts of depressive illness. His works are characterised by colour (in every sense) and narrative. It is the narrative form that characterises his best-known mode of practice – the extended series of related pictures. Harlem provided Lawrence with his art education (at Utopia House and then the Harlem Art workshop with Charles Alston and where there can be little doubt that he learnt from Augusta Savage's critique of modernism's treatment of African subjects). Harlem was also the setting for his narrative interest. *The Migration Series* (1940-1941)relates the African American experience of migration from South to North during and immediately after World War I, but it was also Lawrence's own experience.

Lawrence's first visit to Nigeria occurred in relation to his *Migration Series.* Parts of that work were exhibited at the cultural centre of the Lagos branch of the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC). The exhibition was arranged as the major visual contribution to the 1961 'Festival of Negro Art in Africa and America'. The festival was prompted by the stimulus of Independence gained by many African countries in 1960 but also reflected a concern amongst AMSAC members in America that the relationship between African-Americans and Africa was being strained by 'false' reporting in the African press about the situation of African Americans in America.[6] It was a paradoxical relationship whereby a

[5] Simon Gikandi "Picasso, Africa and the Schemata of Difference". *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 10, Number 3, September 2003, pp. 455-480

[6] MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 6, folder 3, 'Report on African attitudes Towards the American Negro and the American Negro Attitude towards Africa. (Adopted by the Special Meeting called by AMSAC, May 27, 1961).

paternalistic desire to 'help' the new African nations was coupled to a feeling that the newly de-colonized African states were showing more progress than the four 'bitterly racist' (Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina and Louisiana) states of the American South.[7] The members of AMSAC felt that African Independence represented both a challenge and an opportunity for their communities in the US and that colonial propaganda from Africa needed to be countered. That AMSAC was also being funded by the US state in its ongoing promotion of 'freedom' within a newly independent Africa, a ' freedom' based on existential fear that African states such as Nigeria would fall prey to Soviet 'equality' is one more paradox.

The AMSAC delegation to Lagos in 1961 included a number of important African-American performers and celebrities. Langston Hughes was accompanied by Nina Simone, Randy Wilson and the returnee jazz drummer Michael Olatunji. The festival was particularly inspired by Hughes' developing intellectual connection with Negritude but his relationship with Nandini Azikiwe, Nigeria's Governor General, (they were classmates at Lincoln University in 1923) was also important.[8] The festival performances were not entirely successful. Suspicion and cultural difference from both sides meant that the festival was freighted with a certain wariness – the Nigerians resentful of American paternalism and the Americans bemused by Nigerian cultural events as well as caught within the spectacle of a *de facto* colonial staging of "African authenticity".[9] This wariness was unsurprising given that the underlying motive of American cold-war politics in Africa and British imperial legacy was never far from the surface.[10]

The exhibition of Lawrence's work was one of the more successful events of the festival. It travelled to Ibadan and then, by popular demand, was transferred to the smaller town of Oṣogbo. Lawrence was not unknown in Nigeria; the organisation of the exhibition in Ibadan and Oṣogbo was largely due to the admiration that he was held in by Ulli Beier.

Part III', 1–6, 2.Cited in Lonneke Geerlings Performances in the theatre of the Cold War: the American Society of African Culture and the 1961 Lagos Festival, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 2018 16:1, 1-19.

[7] The quote is from AMSAC director John A Davis, MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 11, Folder 33, Letter John A. Davis to Alioune Diop, October 3, 1961. Cited in Lonneke Geerlings (Performances in the theatre of the Cold War: the American Society of African Culture and the 1961 Lagos Festival, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 2018)16:1, 1-19.

[8] There is no space here to fully map the transatlantic connections, but Azikwe's pan-Africanism owed much to thinking of WEB Du Bois.

[9] See Geerlings. See also Tobias Wofford "The Black Cosmopolitans," in *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic: 1945-1965* eds. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes Munich, Stiftung Haus der Kunst, 2016, 574-579.

[10] A detailed analysis between the CIA tax pass throughs and its funding of African and African American cultural relationships is not possible in the space here. See Wilford H. (2014) The American Society of African Culture: The CIA and Transnational Networks of African Diaspora Intellectuals in the Cold War. In: van Dongen L., Roulin S., Scott-Smith G. (eds) Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War. The Palgrave Macmillan Transnational History Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London. 23-34.

By the late 1950s Beier had a central position in the development of Nigerian Modernism, primarily due to his position as founding editor of *Black Orpheus*, a journal of writing and criticism published by the Western Region Ministry of Education (Figure 2).[12] Always keen to introduce forms of new modernist thinking into the promotion of his particular view of contemporary art in Nigeria, Beier had written on Lawrence. In issue No. 11 of *Black Orpheus*, Beier praises Lawrence's attention to compositional form and abstract design. Astutely he notes the way in which Lawrence uses dimensions in the pictorial frame to cut across the flat surface of the picture. Importantly he also takes issue with critics of Lawrence, such as Cedric Dover, who regarded him as a mere illustrator. For Beier, Lawrence was a humanist whose severe composition is an end toward his 'chief means of expression' – gesture.[13]

Lawrence's first experiences of Nigeria were relatively short lived, but they clearly left an impression. Referring to the 1962 trip he stated that,

> 'I became so excited then by all the new visual forms I found in Nigeria – unusual color combinations, textures, shapes, and the dramatic effect of light - that I felt an overwhelming desire to come back as soon as possible to steep myself in Nigerian culture so that my paintings, if I am fortunate, might show the influence of the great African artistic tradition.'[14]

The suggestion is that, by the end of 1962 there was a double order of desire surrounding Lawrence and Nigeria. For Beier, Lawrence had an importance for the development of Nigerian modernism; for Lawrence, Nigeria represented something vital for the development of his own artistic understanding. Nevertheless, despite petitioning the US State department for funds for a return visit, it was not until 1964 that he was able to self-finance a return, accompanied by his wife, Gwendolyn.

The Road to and from Mbari

The Lawrences' visit to Nigeria lasted for eight months. For much of that time they stayed at Ulli Beier's house in Oṣogbo.[15] At least eight works are known to have been produced from this period. In the main they concern marketplaces. The best known, most ambitious and perhaps best of these works is *Street to Mbari*.

It is a painting of sensory richness that captures the immediacy of Yoruba marketplace lives, of the bustle and the crowds. It is a stunning representation of a Yoruba town's central space. As a painting it is almost fractal in its repetition of figures as they disappear down a road of corrugated iron roofs toward an exploding townscape in the distance. Any clear sense of perspectival viewing is fractured by the colour and composition of both foreground and background. As Chika Okeke Agulu writes,

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[12] With anonymous assistance from Longman Nigeria, Publishers.
[13] Ulli Beier Two American Negro painters *Black Orpheus*, 11 (1962) p25. See also Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth Century Nigeria*, Duke UP, Durham 2015, p172.
[14] Jacob Lawrence – Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Oral history interview with Jacob Lawrence, 1968 October 26. p.17
[15] Okeke-Agulu p. 171

> 'The painting captures the sensory intensity and tropical exuberance of the Ibadan/ Ọṣogbo environment… His use of a strong black pigment for skin colour and the retention of the brilliant white of the paper in combination with the reds, blues and yellows makes the painting sensorially taxing.'[16]

Lawrence captures an essence – as in his other work the compositional concerns, the precision of his pattern, the point of his gesture allows something that is immersive. This is not a 'narrative painting' in the form of his great historical cycles, yet it does not stand apart from the themes and forms that are a part of his work on the African-American experience. It is not an 'exotic' painting, inspired by an equally 'exotic' Africa. Nor is it a work that draws on an imagined pre-colonial African past. There is a very real sense that this is an actual market. Is it Ọṣogbo? Is it Ibadan? Does it matter?

In a sense it does. This is not just any market. It is a textile market. The stalls in the front of the picture are selling bolts of cloth, identifiably bolts of Aso-Oke narrow strip woven cloth and Lawrence has identified one of the most important Yoruba textiles, which he places at the centre of the scene – Adire cloth, the patterned indigo dyed cloth that Ibadan was known for producing.[17] Is this Oje? The great textile market of Ibadan, or perhaps Dugbe market known for selling adire in the 1960s? Should it matter? Only to the extent that cloth matters and that this might plausibly give a hint to the significance of the title – *Street to Mbari*.

Mbari is not a locale, in either Ibadan or Ọṣogbo. Mbari was a club, jointly founded by Wole Soyinka, Ulli Beier, Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark and Ezekiel Mphahlele. Located in Ibadan's Dugbe Market, the site of the Mbari Club was an old Lebanese restaurant converted into an open-air performance venue, an art gallery, a library and an office. Over the past forty years Mbari has assumed a sometimes mythological status as the fulcrum of Nigerian post-colonial modernism; both in literature and in fine art. Yet it is a mythology with foundation. Mbari was a meeting point between the various intellectual currents in Ibadan in 1960, the meeting place of Nigeria's artistic and intellectual elite.

Mbari, particularly Mbari in Ibadan (the Ọṣogbo iteration founded in 1961 had a somewhat different perspective), represents a very distinct form of modernity. It is the modernity of the modern nation, the institutions that work toward the making of a new nation state – a cultural project that drew in universities, hospitals and media alongside the artists. Few bureaucrats or businessmen were members. Soyinka is correct – Mbari is the *akowe* crowd – the literate and educated - the intellectual elite.[20] But Lawrence is not portraying that Mbari – he is interested in the street outside Mbari. The focus of his work is the marketplace, the people of Ibadan (or wherever the painting is set). He represents them as

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[16] Okele Agulu p.172

[17] Alongside the town of Abeokuta, Ibadan was production center and market for Adire. While Abeokuta was known for its stencil work, Ibadan had developed a specialization in free-hand starch resist pattern making. See Doig Simmonds, Pat Oyelola and Segun Oke (eds.) *Adire Cloth in Nigeria 1971-2016*. Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 2016.

[20] See Wole Soyinka *Ibadan*: *The Penkelemes Years, A memoir 1946-65* Methuen London 1994, p.24.

entirely modern and in a style that seemingly corresponds with the form of a Nigerian modernity.[21]

From market street to polity: Art in Nigeria

Lawrence's painting is not the only modern painting of a Nigerian marketplace. A contrast with another painting of a marketplace made ten years earlier is instructive. This work (Figure 3) dates from 1955 and was created by Akinola Laṣekan (1916-1972,). Laṣekan is perhaps better known as a political cartoonist whose satirical caricatures for Nigerian newspapers such as the *West African Pilot* were determinedly against the British regime.[22] As Ola has argued Laṣekan's cartoons come from a deeply held tradition of satire in Yoruba art making. It is a tradition that was unafraid to lampoon any institution that held power. Laṣekan was as able to turn his satire on Nigerians complicit in the colonial power structure as he was upon the colonial regime itself. Although largely self-taught, he established a reputation as an illustrator of bible stories and by 1940 had set up as an independent artist. Lashekan's work has often been compared with that of Aina Onabolu, pioneer of modern art in Nigeria.

Both shared a commitment to challenging the low expectations of colonial educators – the belief that the African artist was incapable of practice compariable to the European tradition. A consequence was Onabolu's and Laṣekan's focus on demonstrating and emphasising realist modes of representation, a mode that Okeke-Agulu correctly points out, was associated with a logic of 'rationality', the motivating logic of modernity.[23] The contrast was that while Onabolu concentrated on portraying a Yoruba elite, Laṣekan was interested in a common folk, 'not at all fractured by their colonial experience.' [24]

Laṣekan's market concentrates on what would be a familiar scene (is still a familiar scene) outside of the major metropolitan areas. A woman haggles over the price of yams, sold in the marketplace of a local village. The background, painted from a standard perspectival point of view, offers a scene of village life, albeit one in which women are the dominant characters. In many ways though the painting is the antithesis of Beier's notion of modernism; it offers an academic realism of a type he rejected as a model for Nigeria's new modernist vernacular.

There is however a meeting point between this work and that of Lawrence. Both, in their own ways, are based on the landscape of the urban. Laṣekan's work might be phrased in a realist mode, but the women he portrays are, as Okediji notes, living unfractured by their colonial experience. While the figures in Lawrence's work are undoubtedly more stylised, and the whole corresponds to the form of modernism embraced by Beier, his figures also retain their own sense of agency. Is this what an African and African American modernism

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[21] See John Picton, Fetishising Modernity: Bricolage Revisited, in Gabriele Genge and Angela Stercken (eds) *Art History and Fetishism Abroad: Global Shiftings in Media and Methods*, Verlag, Belefeld 2014.
[22] Yomi Ola *Satires of Power in Yoruba Visual Culture,* Carolina Academic Press, Durham 2013 pp86
[23] Chika Okeke-Agulu p50.
[24] Moyo Okediji, *African Renaissance : Old Forms and New Images in Yoruba Art*, University Press of Colorado Boulder, 2003 p 41. Cited in Ola 2013 p36.

share? An understanding of the human subjectivity of their models that marks a difference from Euro-America's appropriation of the African?

Street to Mbari is, at face value, based on an obvious subject. Entering into a Yoruba town, especially the town of Ibadan, the market offers the immediacy and vibrancy of Yoruba life. Just as Lawrence has managed to capture an element of that life through his handling of pattern, creating in paint the fractured sounds and smells, the scenes of everyday life (a telling detail is the gutter running through the middle of the street), it is not hard to see why the market appealed.

However another dimension deserves some consideration. The Yoruba market is more than simply a place of economic transaction. The traditional town functioned by drawing together in a single sacred centre the political, economic, ritual and geographical range and focus of the state. In many Yoruba towns the market and the palace are spatially and ritually related to each other as an expression of the relationships between sacred authority and profane existence, between governors and the governed, between male aristocrat authority and female economic power. Markets also had a widely recognized ritual importance. A common feature of Yoruba town markets is a shrine, housing a laterite pillar that witnesses the presence of the Orișa Esu, the mischievous lord of misrule of the Yoruba pantheon.

The city state, especially the dominant patriarchy of the palace became the central archetype of colonial power in the Lugardian iteration of indirect rule.[25] Nigeria was not only divided into its ethnicities imposed from above, but was forced to adopt a patriarchal model that dismissed the power of women in state politics. The market place was a rebuke to the authority of the palace and the colonial polity.[26]

To the artists and creators of Ibadan in the 1960s, the ancient city-state had a conservative aesthetic appeal as an archaic trace of lost cultural identities. But to the modern elite that state's introspective focus upon the divine king was also seen as an unviable model of the postcolonial nation. And yet, the myth and model of the ancient polis is crucial to an understanding of the role Ibadan plays in the imaginary of the emerging state of Nigeria. The myth of the polis as an archaic trace and as a current political reality lies beneath Ibadan as a constant example and reminder of what Ibadan is not, and what it could never be.

Ibadan has always been modern. The history of its founding, the political structures that developed there, based on individual aggrandisement and warfare and its mix of refugees and strangers place it at the heart of Modernity. It never conformed to the notion of the Polis defined by ethnicity. By 1960 the population of Ibadan had become more diverse and heterogeneous in its ethnic, social and economic characteristics than any other city (with the exception of Lagos), and this new urban culture gave rise to new myths of the nation.

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[25] . Frederick Lugard (1858-1945) was the central figure in the colonial administration of the unified Nigerian state. He drew upon the model of indirect rule established in India. A model that conformed to the aristocratic patriarchy of Victorian England.

[26] . See Andrew Apter The blood of mothers: Women, money and markets in a Yoruba Atlantic perspective *Journal of African American history* 98 1 (2013) 72-98

There is a paradox at work. The ancient polis could not stand for the new political dispensation of an independent state, but that polis, in its ethnic purity also underpinned the form which the independence movement was forever condemned to reproduce; the myth of the ethnos. In order to grasp the position of speech, the colonial state, in its refusal to admit political judicial equality, forced the speaker to do so from a position of authentic ethnic identity. It is there in the work of Soyinka, Achebe and Okigbo, as it is in the work of the visual artists associated with Mbari.

The shift from the 'nationalist modern' mode of 'reverse appropriation' adopted by Lasekan, (and of Onabolu), was pioneered by the artists who were graduates of the Zaria School of art, particularly those who set up the Zaria Art Society, more colloquially known as the Zaria Rebels . It was this group of artists that were at the forefront of what is now regarded as Nigeria's major contribution to a modernist aesthetic – Natural Synthesis.[27] Underlying this philosophy were three principles, outlined by its leading member Uche Okeke.

"In our difficult work of building a truly modern African art … we must fight to free ourselves from mirroring foreign culture…We must have our own school of art independent from European and Oriental schools, but drawing as much as possible from what we consider, in our clear judgement to be the cream of these influences and wedding them to our native art and culture."[28]

What emerged (to seriously compress its complexity) was a movement dedicated to the development of a post-independent Nigerian modern art. Certainly one that was wary of the formal experimentation of a New York avant-garde but also determined to assert the centrality of of African art, not by mimicking the artists of Paris in some primitivist / imitative fashion, but which that through marrying the formal skill of the modern artist with a determined emphasis on the world that they encountered around them – the forms, the patterns and aesthetics of Africa would produce work that was uniquely Nigerian. That these forms were derived from the ethnos was the political point of the work.

Does Lawrence's view from outside the dynamics of Ibadan and Nigerian nationalism afford an escape from the structuring myths of Nigerian nationalism? If so, does this allow a particular sense of an African American modernism that transcends the Atlantic, in a fashion that would be recognised by Du Bois? As noted at the beginning of this essay, Lawrence acknowledges the work of an ancient Africa, the influence that the various peoples of Africa had on the development of an African-American artistic tradition. But that does not appear in Lawrence's work, certainly not in the form that it might in a European modernism, the unacknowledged Black form taken by Picasso or Giacometti. Lawrence produces something that is undoubtedly about Africa, but it shows the way toward a practice that is absolutely modern.

That form comes in a detail. It is one that encompasses an history of Yoruba identity, but which is especially resonant in this work. The detail is in the attention Lawrence pays to

[27] The full range of complications of modernism in Nigeria are too broad for this article.
[28] Okeke- Agulu p89

cloth, and particularly to the *Adire* cloth that he places in the foreground of the picture. As noted before, Adire is particular to Ibadan as a place of production. But a particular cloth is associated with the town. The name of the cloth is *Ibadandun* (Ibadan is sweet). It suggests that to live in Ibadan is a good thing. The cloth is identified by its patterns, but particularly the motif of columns interspersed by spoons. The cloth, far from being a token of ancient Yoruba culture is a very modern cloth – but it is also an appropriation – albeit one from another side.

The columns make reference to Mapo Hall, the building that dominates the skyline of Ibadan, built by the British in 1929 as a celebration of their political domination. The hall stands, deliberately, about a hundred meters above the King's palace. Rather than being intimidated by the grandiose dominance of the hall however, the people of Ibadan appropriated the design into Adire. The wearing of which, as opposed to European dress, also had nationalist overtones. It is unlikely that Lawrence knew the significance of Adire. However, a training that included time under the tutelage of Augusta Savage and her insistence on craft as aspect of the African American tradition would certainly have predisposed him to grasp the significance of textiles. In understanding that Adire, as much as the great sculptures of Ife, was a part of the African traditions that the opening quote describes, Lawrence grasps an African essence in a way Primitivism never could.[30]

Lawrence's two journeys to Nigeria, in 1962 and in 1964, mark moments in the shifting ground of Nigerian modernism. Lawrence was not himself responsible for that shift, but, in the narrative of modern Nigerian art, his presence is one that is routinely invoked. In a sense Lawrence is the king from over the water whose involvement with Ibadan and Mbari occurs at the right time, and in exactly the right aesthetic mode, to provide a substantive base for a Nigerian modernism to enter into an international arena. Lawrence was also drawing on another freedom. A freedom to be an artist outside the formal structures of American cultural politics. Unlike his colleagues on the AMSAC voyage, Lawrence's second journey to Nigeria was made outside the auspices of American funding and therefore outside of the State's use of African Americans to promote the propaganda of American Freedom against Soviet equality. Lawrence not only had freedom, he was able to make that freedom present in his work.

[30] See John Picton, "Modernism and Modernity in African Art." In G. Salami and M.B. Visonà (eds) *A Companion to Modern African Art* John Wiley, London, 2013 pp. 311-329.