



SUSANNE WENGER: A FULFILLED LIFE

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Graz, Austria—Osogbo, Nigeria

Eulogy by Gusti Merzeder-Taylor 2009

How do you describe a person who was so many different things to so many people from all over the world?

To most of us, she is known as a great artist of course, but there was so much more to Susanne Wenger and her life.

Susanne was born in Graz, a town in southern Austria, during the First World War. From a very early age, Susanne was drawn to nature and spent a lot of her time in the woods and mountains around the town.

Her artistic journey began at the College for Arts and Crafts in Graz where she started by experimenting with different techniques such as drawings in pencil, ink and crayon, ceramic works and clay sculptures.

She then moved to Vienna where she spent 4 years at the Academy of Art and lived through the horror of the city during the occupation, the war and finally the liberation.

Susanne refused to accept the Nazi regime and helped to hide Jewish friends and other people listed by the Nazis as 'unwanted'. Her art was considered 'degenerate' by the regime and she was forbidden to paint but found refuge in books about eastern religions and far away countries.

During the nights when the bombs fell on Vienna she was haunted by dreams which she put on paper during the day – surreal picture-worlds born of fear and despair. These are now regarded by experts as the first surreal works of art by an Austrian painter.

The role of modern artists during the Second World War was the subject of an exhibition in Graz in 2001 'Moderne in dunkler Zeit' ('Modern Art in Dark Times') which paid special tribute to the efforts of Susanne Wenger, the only surviving artist of the period, for maintaining human values, risking her own life and helping others against the regime.

In 1946 she was a founding member of the 'Art Club' in Vienna. The Art Club was an international association proclaiming 'the right for artistic freedom'. Its centre was in Rome with sections in Belgium, Brazil, Egypt, France, Israel, South Africa, Holland, Turkey, Uruguay and Austria. Its chairman was Pablo Picasso, then thought of as the embodiment of the 'horror' of the modern art movement.



After recovering from a serious fall into a lift shaft just before the end of the war, she travelled to Rome and Sicily in spring 1948 and later that year to Zurich and Paris.

In Paris Susanne was attracted to the bohemian life with its artistic circles, their intellect and critical attitude. Here for the first time in her life she could paint happily free of troubles and restrictions.

She met Ulli Beier in Paris, who, at the time was working with handicapped children, and had just accepted a posting at the University of Ibadan. They got married (using a pair of curtain rings as wedding rings) and set off for Nigeria driving across North Africa, the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara Desert before arriving in Ibadan in early 1950.



After spending a couple of years in the university compound, the Ulli shifted his work to promoting art, drama and music in the University's Extramural Department.

The couple moved to Ede where Susanne met the Obatala Priest Ajagemo who became her mentor, 'guru' and great friend. After a long process of learning not only a new and very different language, but also gaining knowledge about the complexities and spiritual dimensions of the Yoruba Religion and its traditions, she was initiated as a priestess for Obatala, the God of Creation.

A few years later she was also initiated into the Ogboni and Sonponna Societies.



After 4 years they moved to the village of Ilobu, where Susanne was further integrated into the Yoruba Culture. This is where she painted vivid pictures echoing the experiences she had had during her apprenticeship and initiation.

In Ilobu she also learned the ancient technique of Adire – where cassava starch is used to create patterns on material, which is then dyed in indigo. Using this technique she started painting interpretations of Yoruba mythology on pieces of cloth stitched together to create huge monochrome canvasses.





In 1957 Susanne moved with Ulli Beier to the beautiful old stone house built in the 'Brazilian' style on Ibokun Road in Oshogbo, which became her home for the rest of her life.

In 1958 Susanne Wenger and Ulli Beier were divorced as a consequence to the separate paths taken - one into intellectual research and the development of contemporary art in Nigeria and the other continuing her personal journey into the depths of Yoruba culture and sacred art.

1958 brought another important turn in her life, she was asked by a high ranking priest to help restore an important shrine. Together with a few local craftsmen she started rebuilding the shrine known as 'Idi Baba' which is located away from the Groves on the road to Ibokun.





This was the beginning of what would become Susanne Wenger's most important artistic achievement. In more than 40 years of continuous work she not only created the sacred shrines, monumental sculptures and statues for which the Groves are now famous, but she also managed to defend this area of unspoiled forest from the encroaching town, from determined farmers who wanted to cut down the trees for farmland and from poachers who wanted to hunt there. At one stage Susanne said they wrapped white bed-sheets around the large trees to save them from being cut down.

The first restoration project within the Sacred Groves was the shrine dedicated to Osun, the goddess of the river Osun, the 'Waters of Life'. This shrine, 'Ojubo Oshogbo', had been destroyed by termites, and some people had already started on repairs when Susanne was asked by the Osun priestess for help. Slowly, inspired by Susanne's example, the local woodcarvers, blacksmiths, carpenters and bricklayers began to develop their own artistic potential.





Adebisi Akanji, who had mastered the technique of cement sculpture passed this knowledge on to Susanne and was most important and instrumental in the subsequent building of the monumental sculptures and structures.

Kasali Akangbe was responsible for most of the scaffolding and wooden roof structures but he is also one of the acclaimed woodcarvers who, together with Buraimoh Gbadamosi, created most of the woodcarvings in the Groves. Buraimoh Gbadamosi is also a stone carver and is best known for his stone figures of 'Earth-spirits' – or as Susanne called them 'Kiliwis'.





After the Osun shrine was completed many others followed: 'Iledi Ontotoo', the 'Obatala shrine complex', the impressive 'Iya Mopoo', the majestic 'Ela' and many more.

Whilst the work in the groves was going on, at home in her atelier, she developed a technique that was a mixture of textile-painting, wax batik and indigo dye. This is how she created her impressive batiks – some of which measure 7 by 3.5 metres!

The theme of these cloth paintings, are again, stories from Yoruba mythology, which in her own words: “present a sort of metaphysical snapshot”.

Between 1952 and 1970 Susanne also illustrated and designed books by Yoruba authors and wrote children’s books, both in English and Yoruba and also contributed to the legendary Black Orpheus Magazine, which was founded by Ulli Beier.

In the mid 1960’s she once again took up oil painting and as there was no canvas available, she painted on plywood panels from old tea chests. During this period, her paintings covered a wide span of themes from the history of mankind, the Bible, world literature and environmental issues as well as themes from Yoruba mythology. Unlike the monumental sculptures in the groves or the large batiks, her oil paintings express her philosophy on a relatively small canvas, but they are just as powerful.³⁰ Bild 27 02 01 1

Susanne was a very spiritual and religious person, religious in a sense that has nothing to do with following a doctrine or script but with the acceptance of a different, mystical dimension that is inherent in all that exists. In her own words: “creative thinking and art are not measurable since they are testimony of the truth, and this truth, the only truth, has many faces. Who can count the faces of truth? All religions are ultimately the religion of mankind. Art is ritual.”







From the mid 1980s, Susanne Wenger had many important exhibitions in Europe, the first marked her 70th birthday in 1985 and brought her art back to Vienna for the first time in 35 years.

Ten years later the Kunsthalle Krems staged a large retrospective exhibition in the Minoritenkirche, which included works from the Nigerian New Sacred Art Movement. Her hometown Graz then followed with an exhibition in 2004 'Along the Banks of a River in Africa'.



Other venues included Prague in 1992, Beyreuth in 1993, Gmunden in 2001 and in the same year she took part in the exhibition staged by Okwui Enwezor 'The Short Century - Independence and Liberation movements in Africa 1994-1945', which was shown in Munich, Berlin, Chicago, New York.

Her work in the Groves was first formally recognized in 1965 when the Oshun Groves were declared a National Monument by the Nigerian Government; in Austria she received awards in 2001, 1985 and two in 2004; UNESCO declared the Groves a World Heritage Site in 2005 and in December 2008 she was declared a Member of the Order of The Federal Republic by the Nigerian Government.

Her work in the groves, her involvement in the Yoruba Traditions, her paintings, drawings and batiks found international acclaim and Susanne met people from all over the world and corresponded regularly with a large number of friends. I remember coming back from Oshogbo with a wad of envelopes to be posted for her. Those of course were the days when the only working telephone was in a neighbour's house, computers, emails and mobile phones were things of the future and months-old newspapers and magazines the only source of news from Europe.



Besides all this, she still found enough time to dedicate herself to her growing 'extended family'. She was entrusted by one of the last truly great Oshun Priests, Layi Olosun to bring up most of his children, one of those children is Doyin Faniyi, and Susanne also adopted Shangodare Gbadegesin Ajala at the age of 5. Both of them are now very significant personalities in the hierarchy of Yoruba Tradition and are dedicated to the protection and preservation of Susanne's legacy.



Over the decades, many more children grew up in her home in Ibokun Road and many friends and fellow artists have found support and help within its walls. One way of supporting the emerging artists of the New Sacred Art Movement was to buy their work, which Susanne did, and these pieces now form the mainstay of her substantial private collection of traditional but mainly modern Nigerian art. This collection was documented in a recent publication by the Adunni Olorisha Trust: Susanne Wenger, her House and her Art Collection.

Her death has not only left an empty chair at her favourite spot along the river, it has also left us with the enormous task of preserving her legacy.

Looking back, these are only some of the many things Susanne Wenger was: the student, the activist and resistance fighter, the survivor, the traveler, the wife, the drop out, the apprentice, the teacher, the sponsor, the environmentalist, the animal lover and protector, the matriarch, the friend, the philosopher and above all, the artist.

She was all this - and more - and there is only one thing, Susanne Wenger most certainly was not: a materialist. Money to her was a means to an end but not something she ever wanted for herself. She lived an extraordinary life and made a remarkable contribution to Nigeria and the world. May her legacy be preserved.

