

YINKA SHONIBARE CBE POST-COLONIAL HYBRIDIZATION

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The Dutch or African wax print fabric—reminiscent of colonial Empire times—is a key element in the work of the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare CBE. The bright and colorful cloth originated in the mid-19th century when Dutch merchants discovered it in the then colonized country of Indonesia. Imitating batik patterns, the Dutch started to print fabric by machine, initially for sale on the South East Asian market. Unfortunately for the Dutch, these industrially made copies did not come into fashion at all in South East Asia. They did, however, find favor in Western Africa. The striking Dutch wax print fabric, a product of the European textile industry combined with colonialism and globalization, became a symbol of “traditional” and “authentic” African culture through the century.¹

Covered in these distinctive patterns, the hand-painted fiberglass sculpture *Venus de' Medici* of 2017 by Yinka Shonibare CBE, presents the public with a multitude of iconographic and historical references. The life-sized body of the mannequin assumes the signature pose of one of the most recognized and reproduced sculptures in Classical history: a sculpture depicting the Greek goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite, carved in Parian marble during the Hellenic period between the late 2nd and early 1st century B.C. The statue is now housed in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. After its discovery in Rome during the 16th century, where it changed hands between various private collections, including the prelate, the d'Este, and the Medici families, Napoleon ordered the transfer of the iconic work to Paris in 1802. It would remain there until 1816, when it was returned to the Uffizi.² The statue has served as inspiration for many artists over the past

centuries, not least for the Italian Renaissance master Sandro Botticelli and his famous painting *The Birth of Venus*, which also belonged to the collection of the mighty Medici family.

In classical fashion, Shonibare's interpretation of this celebrated motif poses on top of a rectangular pedestal. The fluid movement of the colorful body is abruptly interrupted by the cut-off head, which is replaced by an ordinary globe. “The use of a globe in place of the figure's head signifies the idea of the sculpture being Everyman,” the gallerist Adrian Sutton explains.³ Shonibare annotates his sculptures with a complex historical past and a highly charged symbolism. In the same style, he describes himself as a post-colonial hybrid, a global citizen. His work is closely connected to his persona and reflects both his own transnational cultural affiliations, as well as his unique way of exploring identity and authenticity.⁴ Thus, he identifies himself with his sculpture and the sculpture with everyone; he tells the story of an interwoven global citizenship and, vice versa, an internationally sovereign identity.

The subtext of the artwork further conveys the artist's interest in the concepts of cultural origin, trade, commodity, and migration.⁵ Representing the ancient history of European civilization as well as symbolizing status and power, the Hellenic Aphrodite was a treasure of the elite. Using this as a base, Shonibare's sculpture unites all these charged subjects. For Shonibare, the cloth, the globe and the ancient motif are an apt metaphor for the entangled relationship between Africa and Europe and the two continents' influence on each other.⁶ By placing the colorful patterns on implausibly Classical subjects as he did with his work *Venus de' Medici*, Shonibare

invites the viewer to critique Europe's relationship with Africa and the legacy of colonialism.⁷ “Using modernism's own idioms to critique it—the artistic equivalent of his ironic acceptance of his MBE—Shonibare adopted the grid and the seriality and repetition commonly associated with minimalism,” the art historian Judith F. Dolkart suggests.⁸ Ethnicity as a defining social parameter cannot be taken to provide a categorical boundary, but can at the same time, not be transcended by modernity. This is the message the artist wants to scream out loud with his oeuvre.

“... my work is actually not about the representation of politics but the politics of representation,” the artist states.⁹ Even though Shonibare addresses critical international and historical issues, his statements are always enveloped in and embraced by the concept of beauty. Attracting the audience with a sheer aura of elegance, he pulls the curious spectator into a world of controversies and ongoing public discourse.

Venus de' Medici, 2017
Individual fiberglass sculpture, hand painted with Dutch wax pattern,
bespoke hand colored globe and steel baseplate
214 x 60 x 65 cm

