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Reinterpreting Royal Identity through Portrait Sculpture: A Practice-Based Study of the Sculptural Bust of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II (KBE), the Olowo of Owo Kingdom, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the creation of a portrait bust of His Royal Majesty Sir Olateru Olagbegi II, KBE, the Olowo of Owo Kingdom, as a practice-based investigation into the documentation and preservation of Yoruba cultural heritage through sculpture. Sir Olateru Olagbegi II occupies a unique position in Nigerian history, having ruled Owo Kingdom from 1943 to 1968 before being dethroned and exiled for approximately twenty-five years, then reinstated to rule again between 1992 and 1997; this remarkable political and traditional journey provides a compelling subject for artistic representation. The research employed a qualitative, practice-based methodology involving historical inquiry, photographic analysis, clay modelling, and sculptural interpretation, with emphasis placed on achieving anatomical likeness while incorporating traditional Owo regalia, coral beads, indigenous attire, and symbolic motifs that communicate authority, resilience, and cultural continuity. The finished bust demonstrates how realistic portrait sculpture can function as both artistic expression and historical documentation, extending beyond physical resemblance to preserve collective memory and reinforce indigenous identity. The study concludes that contemporary sculptural practice remains an effective medium for documenting the lives of distinguished traditional rulers while contributing to cultural education and heritage preservation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Portrait sculpture; Royal iconography; Owo Kingdom; Cultural heritage preservation; Yoruba art

Introduction

Portrait sculpture has served as one of the most enduring forms of artistic expression for documenting distinguished individuals, preserving cultural heritage, and communicating

historical narratives across civilizations. Unlike two-dimensional portraiture, sculptural portraiture presents a three-dimensional representation that captures not only the physical likeness of the subject but also conveys personality, status, authority, and historical significance. Throughout history, portrait sculptures have been commissioned to commemorate monarchs, political leaders, religious figures, and other notable personalities whose contributions have shaped society (Gombrich, 1995). In Africa, and particularly among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, portrait sculpture functions as both an artistic and cultural archive, preserving the identities and legacies of important individuals for future generations (Drewal et al., 1989).

The Yoruba possess one of the richest sculptural traditions in Africa, characterized by a sophisticated understanding of realism, symbolism, and royal iconography. Traditional sculptural practices among the Yoruba extend beyond aesthetic appreciation to serve religious, political, historical, and commemorative purposes. Royal portraiture occupies a prominent place within this tradition, as sculptures of kings and titled individuals reinforce cultural values, document historical events, and symbolize continuity of traditional institutions (Lawal, 2001). Features such as coral beads, ceremonial attire, traditional crowns, and royal insignia are carefully incorporated into sculptural representations to communicate authority, prestige, and legitimacy; recent scholarship on handheld regalia in the Owo court confirms that such objects continue to be deliberately arranged and displayed by rulers to assert position within the social and political hierarchy (Poynor & Onibode, 2024).

The Owo Kingdom in present-day Ondo State occupies a unique position within Yoruba civilization due to its rich artistic heritage and historical interactions with both the ancient Benin Kingdom and other Yoruba states. Owo art is distinguished by its refined wood carvings, bronze works, ivory carvings, terracotta sculptures, and elaborate royal regalia, all of which reflect the kingdom's long-standing tradition of artistic excellence (Fagg & Plass, 1964). Consequently, the visual documentation of Owo monarchs through sculpture contributes significantly to the preservation of the kingdom's cultural identity and historical memory.

Among the notable traditional rulers of Owo Kingdom is His Royal Majesty Sir Olateru Olagbegi II, KBE, whose reign remains one of the most remarkable in the history of the kingdom. He first ascended the throne in 1943 and ruled until 1968, when he was dethroned following political developments in Western Nigeria. He subsequently lived in exile for approximately twenty-five years before returning to the throne in 1992, where he reigned until 1997. His uncommon experience of deposition, exile, restoration, and eventual reinstatement represents a compelling narrative of resilience, leadership, and the enduring relevance of traditional institutions in contemporary Nigeria. Historical photographic records, including a well-known series of portraits taken of him in 1959 in full regalia, further document how deliberately he used dress and regalia to assert his position at the apex of the Owo social and political order (Poynor & Onibode, 2024), lending additional visual source material to the present sculptural study.

Contemporary sculpture increasingly serves as a medium for preserving historical figures whose contributions extend beyond their immediate communities. Practice-based sculptural research enables artists to engage directly with historical narratives by transforming documentary sources into visual and material forms. Through observation, archival photographs, historical records, and studio experimentation, sculptors create works that combine technical competence with cultural interpretation. Such an approach not only enriches artistic practice but also contributes to academic discourse on cultural preservation and visual documentation (Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Manghani, 2021).

The sculptural bust presented in this study was conceived as a realistic portrait representation of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II. The work emphasizes anatomical accuracy while incorporating significant

elements of Owo royal identity, including coral bead ornaments, traditional attire, and facial expressions that evoke dignity, wisdom, confidence, and resilience. Rather than functioning solely as a commemorative object, the sculpture serves as a visual record of a distinguished monarch whose leadership profoundly influenced the history of Owo Kingdom. Through careful modelling, surface treatment, and symbolic detailing, the work bridges artistic creativity with historical preservation.

This study therefore examines the conceptualization, design process, fabrication, and artistic significance of the sculptural bust of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II within the framework of practice-based research. It argues that portrait sculpture remains an effective medium for documenting historical personalities, preserving indigenous cultural heritage, and strengthening scholarly understanding of traditional leadership in Nigeria. By analyzing the artistic processes and symbolic content embodied in the sculpture, the study contributes to contemporary discussions on portrait sculpture as a tool for historical documentation, cultural identity, and heritage conservation.

This study differs from existing portrait sculptures of Nigerian traditional rulers by combining historical research, practice-based sculptural production, and critical academic analysis into a single investigation. While previous works primarily emphasize physical likeness and commemorative functions, this study interprets the life, leadership, deposition, exile, and restoration of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II through portrait sculpture. The integration of Owo royal iconography with a documented studio process positions the sculpture as both an artistic creation and a scholarly contribution to cultural heritage preservation.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Portrait sculpture has long served as an important medium for documenting notable personalities and preserving cultural heritage. However, despite the rich artistic traditions of the Owo Kingdom, relatively few contemporary sculptural representations of its past monarchs have been produced and documented in scholarly literature. This has created a gap in the visual and academic preservation of the history and legacy of prominent traditional rulers such as HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II, KBE.

Although Sir Olateru Olagbegi II played a significant role in the political and cultural history of Owo Kingdom through his first reign (1943–1968), his twenty-five-year exile, and his restoration to the throne (1992–1997), there is limited practice-based research that interprets his life and leadership through contemporary portrait sculpture. Consequently, valuable aspects of his historical identity and contributions remain underrepresented in sculptural scholarship. This gap persists even as recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of community participation and collaborative documentation in sustaining Yoruba cultural heritage resources more broadly (Oladeji et al., 2022).

Furthermore, many contemporary sculptors focus primarily on aesthetic representation without adequately integrating historical documentation, cultural symbolism, and academic inquiry into their creative processes. This limits the potential of sculpture as a medium for preserving indigenous history and educating future generations.

This study therefore addresses these gaps by producing and critically examining a realistic sculptural bust of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II as a practice-based research project, demonstrating how portrait sculpture can preserve historical memory, celebrate cultural identity, and contribute to scholarly discourse on Nigerian traditional art.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to create and critically examine a realistic sculptural bust of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II, KBE, as a practice-based investigation into the role of portrait sculpture in preserving the historical and cultural heritage of Owo Kingdom.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The specific objectives are to:

• Examine the historical significance of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II in the development of Owo Kingdom.

• Investigate the role of portrait sculpture in preserving cultural heritage and historical memory.

• Produce a realistic sculptural bust of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II using appropriate sculptural techniques and materials.

• Integrate Owo royal symbols and traditional regalia into the sculptural composition to reflect the monarch's identity and status.

• Evaluate the aesthetic, historical, and cultural significance of the completed sculptural bust within the context of contemporary Nigerian sculpture.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

• What historical significance does HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II hold in the history of Owo Kingdom?

• How can portrait sculpture serve as a medium for preserving the history and cultural identity of traditional rulers?

• What artistic processes and sculptural techniques are effective in producing a realistic portrait bust of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II?

• How do traditional Owo royal regalia and symbolic elements enhance the visual and cultural meaning of the sculptural bust?

• What contributions does the completed portrait sculpture make to contemporary sculpture practice and the preservation of Nigeria's cultural heritage?

Portrait Sculpture as Historical Documentation

Portrait sculpture has long been recognized as an effective medium for documenting distinguished individuals and preserving collective memory. Unlike painting or photography, sculpture provides a three-dimensional representation that conveys physical likeness, character, and symbolic meaning. Across civilizations, portrait busts have been commissioned to commemorate rulers, political leaders, scholars, and cultural icons, serving as enduring records of their achievements (Gombrich, 1995). In African societies, portrait sculpture functions not only as an artistic expression but also as a repository of cultural history and identity, transmitting historical narratives across generations (Vogel, 1986).

Within the Yoruba artistic tradition, portrait sculpture extends beyond physical resemblance to embody the moral character, leadership qualities, and social status of the subject. Sculptors employ realism alongside symbolic elements such as royal regalia, beads, and ceremonial attire to communicate authority and cultural identity (Lawal, 2001). Consequently, portrait sculpture serves as both an aesthetic object and a historical document.

Royal Portraiture in Yoruba Art

Royal portraiture occupies a central position in Yoruba visual culture. Kings (Obas) are regarded as custodians of tradition and symbols of communal unity; therefore, their visual representation is expected to communicate dignity, wisdom, legitimacy, and continuity. Traditional Yoruba artists carefully incorporate crowns, coral beads, embroidered garments, and ritual insignia into royal portraits to reinforce the sacred nature of kingship (Drewal et al., 1989).

According to Drewal et al. (1989), Yoruba royal art reflects the relationship between political authority and spiritual responsibility. Portrait sculptures of monarchs therefore perform commemorative, educational, and cultural functions while reinforcing indigenous systems of governance. Adegbile (2021) similarly situates Yoruba sacred kingship within a broader framework in which the visual and ceremonial trappings of the Oba are understood as expressions of divinely sanctioned authority rather than merely decorative convention. This artistic tradition continues to inspire contemporary sculptors seeking to preserve Yoruba cultural heritage through modern sculptural practice.

Owo Kingdom and Its Artistic Heritage

The Owo Kingdom possesses one of the most distinguished artistic traditions in southwestern Nigeria. Archaeological discoveries and historical studies reveal that Owo developed a unique artistic style influenced by both the Yoruba and the Benin Kingdoms. This cultural interaction is evident in the kingdom's ivory carvings, bronze works, terracotta sculptures, wood carvings, and elaborate royal regalia (Fagg & Plass, 1964).

The artistic heritage of Owo extends beyond aesthetic production to include the preservation of historical narratives and royal traditions. Traditional objects associated with the Olowo—including coral beads, ceremonial staffs, richly decorated garments, and distinctive caps—serve as visual markers of royal authority. A recent detailed study of handheld regalia in the Owo court, including the state sword (adá), the dance sword (ape), and various staffs, whisks, and gongs, demonstrates that such objects continue to be actively commissioned, modernized, and deployed by successive Olowos to reiterate prestige, rank, and position, confirming that Owo's royal material culture remains a living and evolving tradition rather than a static historical record (Poynor & Onibode, 2024). Incorporating these elements into contemporary portrait sculpture strengthens cultural authenticity while preserving the historical identity of Owo monarchs.

Practice-Based Research in Sculpture

Practice-based research has become an accepted methodology within contemporary art scholarship because it recognizes creative practice as a legitimate means of generating knowledge. Rather than separating theory from artistic production, practice-based research integrates studio experimentation, reflection, documentation, and critical analysis into a unified research process (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). More recent accounts of practice-based inquiry reinforce that the creative artefact itself can function as research evidence when it is accompanied by rigorous documentation of the making process, a position increasingly accepted in institutional frameworks for practice-based doctoral and scholarly work (Manghani, 2021).

In sculpture, practice-based research enables artists to investigate materials, techniques, form, symbolism, and cultural narratives through the process of making. The resulting artwork functions both as a creative outcome and as research evidence. This methodology is particularly appropriate for portrait sculpture because it combines historical investigation with technical execution and artistic interpretation.

The Historical Significance of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II

Sir Olateru Olagbegi II remains one of the most influential monarchs in the history of Owo Kingdom. His reign was marked by significant political, social, and cultural developments that shaped both the kingdom and the wider Western Region of Nigeria. His deposition in 1968, followed by approximately

twenty-five years in exile and his eventual restoration to the throne in 1992, represents an extraordinary chapter in Nigerian traditional history.

His life symbolizes resilience, perseverance, leadership, and reconciliation. Despite his historical importance, relatively few scholarly studies have examined his legacy through the lens of contemporary sculpture. This gap underscores the need for practice-based investigations that translate historical narratives into enduring visual forms capable of preserving cultural memory, particularly as broader research on cultural heritage resources in Yoruba communities continues to highlight the urgency of documenting such material before it is lost (Oladeji et al., 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Material Culture Theory and Representational Theory of Art.

Material Culture Theory

Material Culture Theory proposes that physical objects embody cultural meanings, historical experiences, and social values. According to Prown (1982), artifacts should be understood not merely as objects but as material evidence through which societies express identity, beliefs, and historical experiences. Portrait sculptures therefore function as cultural artifacts that preserve the identity of individuals while communicating communal values.

In the present study, the sculptural bust of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II serves as a material representation of the historical and cultural heritage of Owo Kingdom. The inclusion of traditional coral beads, indigenous attire, and royal symbols transforms the sculpture into a visual archive of Owo kingship.

Representational Theory of Art

Representational Theory argues that artworks communicate meaning by depicting recognizable subjects from reality. Portrait sculpture seeks to capture both the physical appearance and the psychological character of the subject through careful observation, proportion, expression, and symbolism (Gombrich, 1995).

This theory provides an appropriate framework for the present study because the sculptural bust aims to achieve a faithful likeness of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II while communicating his dignity, authority, resilience, and historical significance through realistic modelling and symbolic representation.

Together, these theories explain how portrait sculpture functions simultaneously as artistic expression, historical documentation, and cultural preservation.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative practice-based research design, in which the creation of the sculptural bust formed the central method of inquiry. The study combined historical research with studio practice to investigate how portrait sculpture can preserve the identity and legacy of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II.

Sources of Data

Data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of reference photographs of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II, direct studio observations, sketches, and the sculptural

process. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, archival materials, and historical publications on Yoruba art, Owo Kingdom, and portrait sculpture.

Studio Materials

The following materials were used: water-based clay, mild steel armature, plywood base, sculpting tools, measuring calipers, modelling knives, wooden spatulas, wire loops, water spray bottle, sponge, and a camera for documentation.

Studio Procedure

The sculptural process involved the following stages: collection and analysis of historical photographs and documentary materials relating to HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II; production of preliminary sketches to establish proportion, posture, and composition; construction of a steel armature fixed to a plywood base to support the clay model; application of clay in successive layers while blocking out the head, neck, shoulders, and upper torso; careful modelling of facial anatomy to achieve a realistic likeness based on the available reference photographs; detailed modelling of the traditional Owo cap, coral bead necklaces, wrist beads, and royal garments to emphasize cultural identity; surface refinement through smoothing, texturing, and definition of anatomical features, fabric folds, and decorative elements; and photographic documentation and critical evaluation of the completed sculptural bust.

METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

The completed sculpture was analyzed using formal visual analysis, considering proportion, anatomy, composition, texture, symbolism, craftsmanship, and historical accuracy. The discussion also evaluated how successfully the sculpture communicates the identity, dignity, and cultural significance of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II within the context of contemporary Nigerian portrait sculpture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The outcome of this practice-based study is a realistic portrait bust of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II, KBE, the Olowo of Owo Kingdom, executed in clay. The sculpture successfully captures the physical likeness of the monarch while incorporating traditional Owo royal regalia, including the indigenous beaded cap, coral bead necklaces, wrist beads, and flowing ceremonial attire. These elements collectively reinforce the monarch's identity and communicate his royal status within the cultural context of Owo Kingdom.

Visual analysis of the completed sculpture indicates that careful attention was paid to anatomical proportion and facial expression. The facial features—including the eyes, nose, lips, cheekbones, and smile—were modelled to achieve a recognizable resemblance to available historical photographs. The calm facial expression conveys dignity, wisdom, confidence, and resilience, qualities associated with the life and leadership of Sir Olateru Olagbegi II. The realistic treatment of facial anatomy aligns with the objectives of portrait sculpture, which seeks to represent both physical likeness and personal character (Gombrich, 1995).

The sculptural composition demonstrates a balanced arrangement of the head, shoulders, upper torso, and folded hands. The placement of the hands introduces visual stability and conveys composure and authority. The symmetrical arrangement of the coral bead necklaces creates rhythm and harmony while emphasizing the ceremonial importance of royal adornment in Yoruba culture. The folds of the traditional garment enhance the naturalistic appearance of the sculpture and provide visual movement across the composition.

One of the most significant achievements of the work is the successful integration of cultural symbolism into a realistic portrait. The traditional Owo cap and coral beads are not merely decorative components but important symbols of kingship, legitimacy, and continuity within Yoruba royal institutions. Their inclusion strengthens the historical authenticity of the sculpture and transforms it into a cultural document that reflects the artistic heritage of Owo Kingdom. This finding supports the view that portrait sculpture functions as a medium for preserving indigenous identity and collective memory (Drewal et al., 1989), and is consistent with recent evidence that Owo regalia continues to be treated by its wearers, and by artists who portray them, as deliberate and legible statements of rank and authority (Poynor & Onibode, 2024).

The practice-based approach also demonstrated the value of combining historical research with studio experimentation. Historical photographs and documentary sources informed the modelling process, enabling the sculptural interpretation to remain faithful to the monarch's appearance while allowing artistic decisions regarding composition, surface treatment, and symbolic representation. This integration of research and creative practice confirms that studio production can generate scholarly knowledge in addition to artistic outcomes (Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Manghani, 2021).

The study further reveals that contemporary portrait sculpture has considerable potential as a tool for documenting the lives of notable traditional rulers whose historical contributions may otherwise receive limited visual representation. By translating historical narratives into durable sculptural forms, artists contribute to heritage preservation while expanding the scope of contemporary Nigerian sculpture, a contribution that complements calls in the recent heritage literature for broader community and scholarly participation in safeguarding Yoruba cultural resources (Oladeji et al., 2022). The completed bust therefore functions simultaneously as a work of art, a historical record, and an educational resource. Overall, the sculpture achieved the stated objectives of the research by producing an accurate portrait of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II, integrating culturally significant royal symbols, and demonstrating the relevance of practice-based research to contemporary sculpture and heritage conservation.



Figure 1: The first stage of clay modelling on a wooden armature



Figure 2: Continuity of the modelling process



Figure 3: Three-quarter view of the clay work



Figure 4: The completed clay sculptural bust of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II, KBE, the Olowo of Owo Kingdom.
Title: The Legend King.
Medium: Clay.
Size: 75cm/40cm.
Location: Owo.
Year: 2026.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the creation of a realistic sculptural bust of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II, KBE, using a practice-based research approach. It demonstrates that portrait sculpture is an effective medium for preserving history, promoting cultural identity, and advancing artistic scholarship.

The completed sculpture combines realistic modelling with Owo royal symbols, including traditional attire, coral beads, and royal emblems, to represent the king's dignity, leadership, and resilience. It also serves as a visual record of his life, highlighting his enthronement, deposition, exile, restoration, and continued leadership.

The study further shows that practice-based research successfully integrates historical investigation with studio practice, making the sculptural process itself a form of academic inquiry. Its major contribution lies in combining historical research, sculptural production, and critical academic analysis into a single study, distinguishing it from earlier portrait sculptures that focused mainly on physical resemblance and dedicatory purposes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Nigerian sculptors should undertake more portrait sculpture projects that document distinguished traditional rulers, cultural icons, and national heroes.
- Art departments in universities and polytechnics should encourage practice-based research that integrates studio production with historical and cultural scholarship.
- Traditional institutions should collaborate with artists and researchers to commission sculptural monuments that preserve the history of past monarchs.
- Museums, cultural centres, and royal palaces should collect and preserve portrait sculptures of prominent traditional rulers as part of Nigeria's cultural heritage.
- Government agencies responsible for culture and tourism should support sculptural projects that promote indigenous history and strengthen cultural identity.
- Future researchers should investigate the use of contemporary materials and digital technologies in portrait sculpture while maintaining cultural authenticity.

The contribution of this study lies in its integration of historical research, practice-based sculptural production, and critical academic analysis into a single investigation. Rather than producing a portrait solely for commemoration, the study interprets the life, leadership, deposition, exile, and restoration of HRM Sir Olateru Olagbegi II through realistic sculpture, supported by a documented studio process and Owo royal iconography. This positions the work as both an artistic creation and a scholarly contribution to the preservation of Nigeria's cultural heritage.

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