

**PORTRAITS OF POWER: A STUDY OF  
PROMINENT INDIVIDUALS BY ABAYOMI  
BARBER IN *THE NUCLEUS* CATALOGUE BY  
THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF MODERN ART**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the artistic representation of influential figures through the works of Nigerian artist, Abayomi Barber. It delves into Barber's portrayal of power dynamics, examining how his portraits reflect socio-political contexts and individual identities. By analyzing Barber's works within the Nucleus Catalogue, a pivotal resource in contemporary art, this research highlights the intersection of art and authority. The portraits serve as a lens to understand the artist's commentary on leadership, influence, and the nuanced power structures within Nigerian society and beyond. The study employs a decolonial approach to critique the Eurocentric narratives that often dominate art historical discourse, offering a more inclusive perspective on the significance of Barber's portraits. This analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how modern African artists navigate and depict concepts of power and prominence.

**Keywords:** Abayomi Barber, Decolonial Perspectives, Nigerian Art, Portraiture, Power, Dynamics

## **Introduction**

Portraiture has long been a significant genre in art history, reflecting not only the physical likeness of individuals but also their socio-political contexts and personal identities. This study focuses on Abayomi Barber (1928-2021), a prominent Nigerian artist known for his impactful portraits that engage with themes of power and influence. Barber's works, featured prominently in the Nucleus Catalogue by the National Gallery of Modern Art, provide a unique lens through which to explore the intersection of art and authority (Galitz, 2024).

Abayomi Barber's portraits are celebrated for their ability to capture the essence of prominent figures while commenting on broader socio-political issues (Egonwa, 2006). Barber's approach to portraiture is notable for its emphasis on both the individual's role within power structures and the artist's perspective on these dynamics. By examining Barber's works, this study aims to elucidate how modern African artists engage with and represent power through their art.

The methodology for this research involves a detailed art historical analysis of Barber's portraits within the context of the Nucleus Catalogue, complemented by a decolonial perspective that challenges traditional Eurocentric narratives in art history (Smith, 2023). This approach not only highlights the significance of Barber's work but also contributes to a more inclusive understanding of art history.

## **Historical and Cultural Context of Portraiture**

Portraiture has evolved significantly over centuries, serving as a crucial medium for capturing individual

identities and societal roles. In Nigerian art, portraiture has traditionally been linked to ceremonial and ritualistic practices, often reflecting the social status and spiritual significance of its subjects (Smith & Osei, 2022).

The sculptures of the Ooni in Ife and the Oba in Benin represent the cultural and political identities of the Yoruba and Edo civilizations, respectively. In Ife, naturalistic bronze and terracotta sculptures depict the Ooni as a divine figure, emphasizing his role as a spiritual intermediary and leader, which reflects the kingdom's focus on religious authority (Blier, 2015; Ojoniyi, 2024). In contrast, Benin's sculptures highlight the Oba's military and political prowess, often adorned in coral regalia symbolizing power and protection, underscoring the kingdom's expansionist ethos (Ben-Amos, 1995; Ezeluomba, 2022). While both traditions use durable materials like bronze to immortalize royal authority, Ife art centres on the king's divine connection, whereas Benin art accentuates the Oba's leadership in warfare and governance (Atairu, 2024). With the advent of modernity, Nigerian artists began integrating Western styles and techniques, leading to a hybrid form that bridges traditional and contemporary aesthetics (Odokuma, 2011; Osei, 2021).

Abayomi Barber's work represents a critical point in this evolution. His portraits blend traditional Nigerian motifs with modern techniques, illustrating the complex interplay between cultural heritage and contemporary artistic practices (Asamoah et al., 2024). Barber's portraits often incorporate symbolic elements that reference both pre-colonial African art and the impact of

colonialism, creating a rich dialogue between historical and modern narratives.

### **Overview of Abayomi Barber's Artistic Career**

Abayomi Barber is a significant figure in contemporary Nigerian art. He is known for his distinctive approach to portraiture. As a pioneering Nigerian painter and sculptor, he received significant training both in Nigeria and the United Kingdom which influenced his unique style. Initially self-taught, Barber's talent gained him an opportunity to study at the British Museum in the 1950s, where he explored traditional African art and combined it with Western artistic techniques (Abokede & Kalilu, 2024). This exposure allowed him to develop a distinct approach that melds surrealism with African mythology and spiritual elements. Upon returning to Nigeria, Barber established the Abayomi Barber School, where he mentored artists to adopt a style characterized by precision and imaginative representation, a style that has become known as “natural surrealism” (Barber, 2007).

His career is marked by a deep engagement with themes of identity, power, and social dynamics. Barber's work often features prominent individuals, including political leaders and cultural icons, depicted with a focus on their symbolic power and societal roles (Adeyemi, 2022). Barber's artistic practice is characterized by a blend of realism and abstraction, using vibrant colours and dynamic compositions to convey his subjects' personal and political significance (Okwuosa, 2021). His portraits serve as a medium for commentary on leadership and authority, reflecting both his perspectives and broader societal issues.

## **Analysis of Abayomi Barber's Portraits in the Nucleus Catalogue**

The Nucleus Catalogue, curated by the National Gallery of Modern Art, features a diverse array of portraits by Abayomi Barber, each selected for its representation of notable individuals within Nigerian society (National Gallery of Modern Art, 1981). Barber's selection criteria focus on figures who hold significant political, social, or cultural influence. This approach not only highlights prominent personalities but also provides insight into the socio-political landscape of contemporary Nigeria (Aremu, 1989). Barber's portraits in the Nucleus Catalogue exhibit a range of techniques and thematic concerns and the analysis of these pieces will focus on various elements such as composition, technique, historical context, and symbolism.

**Portrait One: President Shehu Usman Aliyu Shagari**

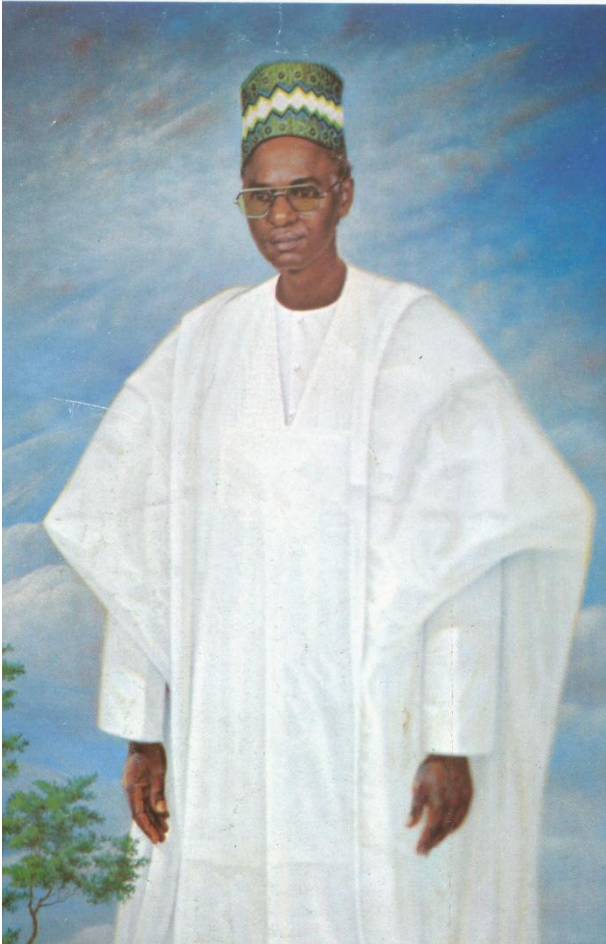


Figure 1. Barber Abayomi, 1979, *President Shehu Usman Aliyu Shagari*, Oil Paint, 183 x 122cm, National Gallery of Modern Art, Lagos

Abayomi Barber, a prominent Nigerian artist, is known for his detailed and realistic portrayals. In this painting, Barber employs a traditional portrait style, with President Shagari (Figure 1) standing upright, exuding an aura of dignity and authority. The subject is dressed in traditional Hausa attire, comprising a white agbada, which signifies purity and high status. His green and gold embroidered cap is an indicator of his cultural and regional identity.

The background is rendered in soft, muted colours, likely to focus the viewer's attention on the subject. The use of light and shadow in the painting is subtle, enhancing the three-dimensionality of the figure. Barber's technique reflects a blend of Western academic realism and African traditional art forms, a common characteristic of modern Nigerian art (Nyongesa, 2024). The period during which this portrait was created is significant in Nigerian history. Shehu Shagari was the first democratically elected President of Nigeria, serving from 1979 to 1983. His presidency marked the transition from military rule to civilian governance, a pivotal moment in Nigeria's post-colonial history. By capturing Shagari in traditional attire, Barber not only highlights his identity but also the broader cultural identity of the Nigerian people during a period of political transformation (Falola, 2001).

Symbolism in this painting is rich and multifaceted. The choice of white agbada represents not only Shagari's purity and integrity but also the aspirational purity and integrity of the Nigerian state of then. The cap with its intricate design signifies wisdom, leadership, and cultural heritage, while Shagari's calm and composed demeanor reflects his political philosophy and approach

to leadership. The background, though not overly detailed, seems to imply a serene and hopeful sky, possibly symbolizing a vision for a peaceful and prosperous Nigeria. The presence of a tree in the corner can be interpreted as a symbol of growth, stability, and rootedness, which aligns with Shagari's policies aimed at developing the nation's infrastructure and economy (Adejumobi, 2002).

**Portrait Two: Oba Adesoji Aderemi, the Late Ooni of Ife**



Figure 2. Barber Abayomi, 1972, *Oba Adesoji Aderemi, the Late Ooni of Ife*, Painted Plaster, 1.3 Life Size, National Gallery of Modern Art, Lagos



Abayomi Barber's portrayal of Oba Adesoji Aderemi (Figure 2) is a striking representation of the Yoruba monarch. The composition places the Oba centrally, emphasizing his prominence and authority. Barber uses a monochromatic palette, which may reflect the solemnity and respect associated with the subject's stature. The texture and detail of the king's attire are meticulously rendered, showcasing Barber's adeptness in capturing intricate patterns and the richness of traditional Yoruba clothing.

The Oba is depicted wearing an agbada, adorned with elaborate embroidery, and a beaded necklace that signifies his royal status. His crown, intricately designed, is a symbol of his sovereignty and the cultural heritage of the Yoruba people. Barber's technique blends realism with a deep respect for the traditional regalia, capturing both the likeness and the dignity of the Ooni (Nyongesa, 2024). Oba Adesoji Aderemi was a significant figure in Nigerian history, serving as the Ooni of Ife from 1930 to 1980. He was not only a traditional ruler but also played a crucial role in Nigeria's political landscape, including serving as the Governor of Western Nigeria. His reign was marked by efforts to modernize and develop his domain, as well as to preserve Yoruba culture and traditions.

Barber's decision to paint the Ooni in traditional attire underscores the importance of cultural heritage and continuity amidst modernity. This portrait thus serves as both a historical document and a cultural artefact, reflecting the enduring legacy of Oba Adesoji Aderemi (Falola, 2001). The symbolism in this portrait is rich and layered. The agbada and the beads are not mere clothing but are deeply embedded with meanings of leadership,

spirituality, and tradition. The crown represents the divine authority bestowed upon the Ooni, believed to be a direct descendant of Oduduwa, the mythical progenitor of the Yoruba people.

The calm and dignified expression of the Ooni conveys his wisdom and strength as a leader. The monochromatic scheme could symbolize timelessness and the lasting impact of his rule. The detailed patterns on his attire highlight the artistry of Yoruba textile traditions, emphasizing the cultural identity that the Ooni embodied and promoted (Oguibe, 2004).

### **Portrait Three: General Murtala Muhammed**



Figure 3. Barber Abayomi, 1976, *General Murtala Muhammed*, Painted Plaster, 1.3 Life Size, National Gallery of Modern Art, Lagos

Barber's sculpture of General Murtala Muhammed (Figure 3) is a powerful representation of one of Nigeria's most influential military leaders. General Murtala Muhammed served as the Head of State of Nigeria from 1975 until his assassination in 1976. The sculpture is a dynamic and lifelike representation, capturing the essence of the military leader's persona. The sculpture is rendered in a traditional heroic style, with the General depicted in full military regalia. The attention to detail in the uniform, including the creases, pockets, and insignia, demonstrates Barber's commitment to realism and his technical proficiency.

The posture of the sculpture, with Muhammed standing tall and looking forward, conveys a sense of strength, determination, and leadership. The facial expression, characterized by a slight upward gaze, suggests a vision for the future and an unyielding resolve. This technique of combining realism with symbolic elements is a hallmark of Barber's artistic approach (Nyongesa, 2024). General Murtala Muhammed's short tenure as Nigeria's Head of State was marked by significant reforms and a strong stance against corruption. His administration is remembered for its efforts to streamline the government, combat graft, and improve efficiency. Muhammed's legacy is one of decisive leadership and transformative governance, making him a revered figure in Nigerian history.

The creation of this sculpture can be seen as an effort to memorialize Muhammed's impact and to celebrate his contributions to the nation. By immortalizing him in bronze, Barber ensures that Muhammed's legacy continues to inspire future generations (Falola, 2001). The

symbolism in this sculpture is rich and multifaceted. The military uniform signifies General Muhammed's role as a soldier and leader, emphasizing discipline, authority, and patriotism. The upright posture and forward gaze reflect his visionary leadership and unwavering commitment to Nigeria's progress. The use of plaster for the sculpture—a material often chosen for commemorative statues due to its adaptability and lasting quality—emphasizes the enduring influence of Muhammed's legacy. This medium choice reinforces the timeless significance of his contributions, while the sculpture as a whole honors his resilience, integrity, and the deep imprint he left on Nigeria's political history (Oguibe, 2004).

### **Barber's Artistic Contribution**

Abayomi Barber's contribution to Nigerian art is profound. As a leading figure in the "Barber School," his work has been instrumental in blending traditional African aesthetics with modern techniques, creating a unique genre that speaks to both local and global audiences. His work often aims to preserve and celebrate African cultural heritage while engaging with contemporary artistic dialogues. This ability is evident in his paintings and sculptures, which capture the essence of his subjects while embedding deep cultural and historical narratives. Barber's paintings, such as the portrait of President Shagari, exemplify his skill in capturing the essence of his subjects while honouring their cultural and historical significance. Similarly, his portrait of Oba Adesoji Aderemi showcases his mastery in combining traditional aesthetics with modern techniques, bridging the past and the present through detailed and respectful

representation. The sculpture of General Murtala Muhammed is another testament to Barber's skill in creating art that is both realistic and symbolically potent. Through his sculptures and paintings, Barber has significantly contributed to the preservation and celebration of Nigerian history and culture, ensuring that the legacy of his subjects continues to inspire future generations (Adejumobi, 2002; Oguiibe, 2004).

### **Representation of Power and Authority**

To indicate power and authority, Barber employs "proportion of significance", a prominent feature of traditional African sculpture, especially, in Benin Court Art, where the Oba, or the most important figure on a Benin bronze plaque is given a "larger-than-life" representation. Barber adopts this in his treatment of President Shagari's figure. By the proportion of the tree branch/foilage included in the composition, Barber alludes that President Shagari and the tree are standing on the same ground, and part of the tree's foliage is seen touching Shagari's pure white clothing, yet he renders the tree as a shrub before the colossal figure of President Shagari.

Barber's portraits are not mere representations but active commentaries on power and authority. His portrayal of influential figures often includes visual cues that comment on their societal roles and the dynamics of their influence. For instance, Barber's use of grandeur in the depiction of leaders contrasts with more subdued elements in portraits of less powerful individuals, highlighting the varying degrees of influence and authority (Smith & Osei, 2022).

## **Decolonial Perspectives: A Critique of Eurocentric Narratives in Art History**

Eurocentric perspectives have historically dominated art history, often marginalizing or misrepresenting non-European artistic traditions and contributions (Smith, 2023; Close, 2024). This dominance has led to a skewed understanding of art that overlooks the rich, diverse practices of African artists and their historical contexts. Decolonial perspectives challenge these biases by advocating for a more inclusive and nuanced interpretation of art history that acknowledges and elevates the contributions of artists from previously marginalized regions (Onibere, 2023; Onyebuchi Eze, 2024).

Abayomi Barber's works, particularly as featured in the Nucleus Catalogue, serve as critical counterpoint to Eurocentric narratives. His portraits offer a re-evaluation of how power and identity are represented in art, shifting the focus from Western-centric views to an appreciation of African artistic traditions and contemporary practices (Asamoah et al., 2024). By foregrounding Barber's innovative blend of traditional and modern elements, this study highlights the importance of considering non-Western perspectives in art historical discourse.

## **Barber's Contributions to Decolonizing Art Discourse**

Barber's portraits are instrumental in decolonizing art discourse by subverting traditional power dynamics and questioning established art historical canons. His approach integrates indigenous symbols and narratives into a modern artistic framework, challenging the conventional boundaries set by Eurocentric art history

(Osei, 2021). Barber's work not only reflects African experiences and histories but also critiques the Western dominance in art historical narratives.

### **Impact of Barber's Work on Understanding Power Structures**

Barber's engagement with themes of power and authority in his portraits provides a fresh perspective on how power is visually constructed and understood. His works critique how power is represented and negotiated within the context of both historical and contemporary African societies (Aremu, 1989). By presenting influential figures through a decolonial lens, Barber's art contributes to a broader understanding of power dynamics beyond the confines of Western art historical frameworks.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

The analysis of Abayomi Barber's portraits of President Shehu Usman Aliyu Shagari, Oba Adesoji Aderemi, and General Murtala Muhammed reveals a complex interplay between tradition and modernity, power and representation. Barber's works, characterized by their vibrant use of realistic detail and symbolic elements, challenge traditional Eurocentric art historical narratives and offer a nuanced perspective on power dynamics (Aremu, 1989; National Gallery of Modern Art, 1981). His portraits not only capture the physical likenesses of these prominent figures but also provide critical commentary on their societal roles and the structures of authority they embody. Barber's integration of traditional African motifs with contemporary styles creates a dialogue between historical and modern artistic practices,

thereby decolonizing art discourse (Osei, 2021). This approach emphasizes the importance of considering non-Western perspectives in understanding art, highlighting how Barber's work contributes to a more inclusive art historical narrative (Smith, 2023).

### **Implications for Art Historical Scholarship**

Barber's portraits have significant implications for art historical scholarship. By presenting powerful figures through a decolonial lens, Barber challenges prevailing art historical frameworks and promotes a broader understanding of how power and identity are represented in art (Smith & Osei, 2022). His work underscores the need for a more inclusive approach to art history that recognizes the contributions of African artists and their impact on global art practices.

### **Broader Impact on Contemporary African Art**

The impact of Barber's work extends beyond art historical scholarship, influencing contemporary African art and its global reception. His innovative approach to portraiture encourages other African artists to explore and assert their cultural identities within the broader art world (Agujiobi-Odoh, 2024). By redefining how power and prominence are depicted, Barber's work contributes to the ongoing evolution of African art and its role in the international art scene.

### **Conclusion**

The examination of Abayomi Barber's portraits within the Nucleus Catalogue provides a valuable contribution to understanding the intersection of art, power, and identity



in contemporary Nigerian art. Barber's innovative approach, which blends traditional African motifs with modern artistic techniques, not only challenges Eurocentric art historical narratives but also highlights the rich, multifaceted nature of African artistic practices. Through his portraits, Barber offers a critical commentary on the representation of power and authority, reflecting both historical and contemporary socio-political contexts. His work exemplifies the potential of art to question and redefine established narratives, making significant strides in decolonizing art history and broadening the scope of art historical scholarship.

The insights gained from this study underscore the importance of integrating diverse perspectives into art historical discourse, advocating for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of global art practices. Barber's contributions are pivotal in advancing contemporary African art and fostering a more equitable appreciation of artistic expressions across different cultures. Future research should continue to explore how African artists like Barber are reshaping art historical narratives and influencing global art discourse. By further investigating the impact of such works, scholars can deepen their understanding of the dynamic interplay between art, power, and identity in a globalized world.

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