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Classicisms of Color: Transatlantic Exchanges in African and American Traditional Architecture

Clasicismos de color: Intercambios transatlánticos en la arquitectura tradicional africana y americana

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Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

The beautiful city of Charleston, South Carolina, was built by enslaved Africans, and the painful historical connections between classical architecture and slavery have encouraged some critics to see classicism as racist. Contemporary black artist Jonathan Green, however, proposed a new way of viewing Charleston's buildings: as a testament to black creativity and resilience that fused African architectural traditions, such as colonnaded porches and metalwork, with European ones. Following Green, this essay traces a number of trans-Atlantic architectural connections forged during the age of empires. Many different African nations, from Ethiopia to Ghana, developed great classical architectures that traveled to Europe and America through the migration of people or the publication of books. African-American designs also returned to Africa, sometimes with European accents, and found compatibility with indigenous traditions. As Green asserted, a beautiful truth emerges from this study: traditional architecture is bigger than racism. It is African, American, and human.

La hermosa ciudad de Charleston, en Carolina del Sur, fue construida por esclavos africanos y las dolorosas relaciones históricas entre arquitectura clásica y esclavitud han llevado a algunos críticos a considerar el clasicismo como racista. Sin embargo, el artista negro contemporáneo Jonathan Green propuso una nueva forma de ver los edificios de Charleston: como testimonio de la creatividad y la adaptabilidad de quienes fusionaron las tradiciones arquitectónicas africanas, como los porches con columnatas y los trabajos en metal, con las europeas. Siguiendo a Green, este artículo recorre una serie de vínculos arquitectónicos transatlánticos forjados durante la época de los imperios. Muchos países africanos, desde Etiópia a Ghana, desarrollaron grandes arquitecturas clásicas que pasaron a Europa y América a través

de las migraciones o la publicación de libros. Los diseños afroamericanos también volvieron a África, a veces con acentos europeos, y encontraron una compatibilidad con las tradiciones autóctonas. Como decía Green, una hermosa verdad surge de este estudio: la arquitectura tradicional es más grande que el racismo. Es africana, americana y humana.

A bela cidade de Charleston, Carolina do Sul, foi construída por escravos africanos, e as dolorosas ligações históricas entre a arquitetura clássica e a escravidão têm encorajado alguns críticos a ver o classicismo como racista. O artista negro contemporâneo Jonathan Green, contudo, propôs uma nova forma de ver os edifícios de Charleston: como um testemunho da criatividade e resiliência negras que uniram as tradições arquitetônicas africanas – tais como os alpendres com colunatas e os trabalhos em metal – com as europeias. De acordo com Green, este estudo identifica uma série de ligações arquitetônicas transatlânticas forjadas durante a era dos impérios. Muitas nações africanas diferentes, da Etiópia ao Gana, desenvolveram grandes arquiteturas clássicas que viajaram até à Europa e América através da migração de pessoas ou da publicação de livros. Os designs afro-americanos também regressaram à África, por vezes com sotaques europeus, e descobriram ser compatíveis com as tradições indígenas. Como afirmou Green, uma bela verdade emerge deste estudo: a arquitetura tradicional é maior do que o racismo. Ela é africana, americana, e humana.

Introduction

In May of 2016, the curtain rose on an opera at the Gaillard performing arts center in Charleston, South Carolina, revealing the true nature of that city to the world for the first time. Admittedly, neither the city nor the opera were new; Charleston was founded in 1670 and quickly rose to wealth as an imperial fusion of America, Europe, and Africa, as West African rice was grown in vast quantities by enslaved people to feed a hungry British Empire (Smith 2020). The opera, George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, had since 1935 explored the lives of impoverished black Charlestonians, with set designs depicting slummy iterations of the famously beautiful and historic city's courtyards and alleyways (Fig. 1). For the new 2016 production, however,

Spoletto Festival USA asked Jonathan Green (1955-), a popular, black, Charleston-based painter and advocate of African-American history and culture, to transform *Porgy and Bess*. Green agreed to the job on the condition that he also be empowered to transform Charleston: "I wanted to do it from the perspective of Africans coming here just like everyone. What would we be looking at today if Africans had come here...like Europeans?"¹

Using costume and set design, Green worked to reveal a hidden Charleston by visually amplifying the African creativity fundamental to the city's development. Africans had not only powered the agricultural sector of the colony; they had also filled skilled architectural roles as carpenters, bricklayers, and blacksmiths. Because slavery compelled



Figure 1: Theater Guild production of *Porgy and Bess*, Boston, 1935–36 (Library of Congress)

them to conform to European tastes, however, African contributions to the architecture of Charleston are too easily overlooked. Importantly, Green did not believe that foregrounding African contributions would totally alter Charleston’s classical architecture, because he knew that many of the features that make the city beautiful, such as its porches and metalwork, have deep African connections. Green’s sets for *Porgy and Bess* therefore “drew on Charleston’s traditional architecture”,² featuring colonnaded galleries, elegant wrought iron, exuberant arches, symmetry, and proud spires; human-scaled windows and balconies were everywhere to be seen. There was one crucial innovation, however: the buildings confidently displayed colorful patterns and ornaments that Jonathan Green summoned from his studies of African-American and West African aesthetics (Figs. 2 and 3).

When the curtain – actually, the wrought-iron like scrim – rose to reveal his designs, Charleston’s architecture

was finally seen for what it truly is: a hybrid of multiple traditions of equal value, many of them African and all of them beautifully compatible with one another. Critics were enthusiastic about the results, describing the sets as “beautiful,” an “artistic paradise”, a “triumph”, and a “utopian vision.”³ The world that Green revealed, however, was no fantasy. Africa is home to its own classical design traditions that are compatible with European and American ones because they all ultimately sprang from the same human source. Indeed, the traditions of these three continents have been shared for centuries, if not always on equally beneficial terms, and frequently along lines that have been obscured by distance and time. Green’s set designs asserted that studying African and American classical kinships offers new tools for two crucial endeavors: first, supporting the continued flowering of our living traditional architecture, and second, empowering that architecture to serve as a progressive agent of American cultural, social, and political wellbeing.



Figure 2 and 3: Spoleto Festival USA production of *Porgy and Bess*, Charleston, 2016 (Julia Lynn Photography, Spoleto Festival USA)

One of the Most Ancient of All Arts

Some critics insist that classicism is inherently antithetical to black people. The reasons for this argument are as deep and far-reaching as the ocean that unites the continents of the Atlantic World. In 2021, Amber Wiley published an essay entitled, “Firmitas, Utilitas, Profectus: The Architecture of Exploitation in Ghana,” calling attention to, among other things, classical ornamentation on European slave-trade fortresses (2021). Rome scholar Dan-el Padilla Peralta recently argued that classical studies were hopelessly contaminated by white supremacy, recounting how Rafael Trujillo, former dictator of the Dominican Republic, described his capital city of Santo Domingo as the “Athens of the Americas” and claimed to inherit the “impeccable whiteness” of the beautiful Greco-Roman artistic tradition while fomenting hatred against the “darker and inferior” people of Haiti (2020).⁴ Similar abuses of classical history also took place in the United States. The pro-slavery politician John C. Calhoun (1782-1850) said in the early 1830s, as Greek Revival buildings rose all over America, that “if he could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax, he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man.” Some years later, the African-American intellectual Alexander Crummell answered this “crude asininity” by pointing out that Calhoun had studied Greek at Yale, and that black people were not then allowed to enroll at Yale, and that it was unreasonable to expect Greek syntax to blossom in black Americans’ brains by “spontaneous generation” (Crummell 1898: 206-207).

Recent books including *The Ebony Column* and *Classicisms in the Black Atlantic* recount other episodes in which American white supremacists leavened their racist arguments with

appeals to classical history; these books also, however, show how many black intellectuals, ranging from Mary Church Terrell to W.E.B. Du Bois, reappropriated classical philosophy, art, history, and literature throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, deploying it against bigotry by repeatedly pointing out the “intrinsic conflict between American racist, capitalist, materialistic culture and the cultural virtues found in the classics” (Hairston 2013: 14). These black voices argued many times, on many levels, that prejudice and oppression were beneath classicism. Many allies joined the conversation; for example, one white abolitionist reversed the stream of historical association by arguing that it was none other than the corrupting evil of slavery that had, “at last, converted the whole republic [of Athens] into a mass of ruins”, and hastened the decline of Rome (Brown 1844: 453).

Among the leaders of African-American intellectual and cultural life at the beginning of the twentieth century were the earliest black licensed architects in the United States. Their beaux-arts training guaranteed an immersion in classicism. The Macon, Georgia-born architect Wallace A. Rayfield (1873-1941) earned a bachelor’s degree in the classics from Howard University followed by a certificate in architecture at the Pratt Institute and a degree in the same from Columbia University. He returned to the South determined to support the cultural aspirations of black Americans, teaching for a time under Robert R. Taylor at Tuskegee before settling in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1908 for a prolific career (Durough 2010: 2-3). He was heralded in the African-American press as one of the “Beacon Lights of the Race” for his commitment to “one of the most ancient of all arts”, and for his record as a careful teacher and prudent businessman (Hamilton 1911: 451-457).⁵



Figure 4: 16th Street Baptist Church by Wallace A. Rayfield, Birmingham, Alabama, 1911 (Library of Congress)



Figure 5: The Obelisk of Axum in Axum, Ethiopia, ca. 400 AD (Ondřej Žváček)

Rayfield's most prominent designs were monumental brick churches serving African-American congregations in his adopted hometown. Among them is the famous Sixteenth Street Baptist Church of 1911 (Fig. 4), which is still standing despite its horrendous 1963 bombing by the Ku Klux Klan. With twin, domed towers flanking a triple-arched portico, a plethora of open and blind arches, and large central cupola floating on a tiered drum, this church, together with others by Rayfield, reveals a unique classical aesthetic deserving of more study. His proliferation of round arches seems to draw upon Romanesque, Renaissance, and perhaps Rundbogenstil sources, but Rayfield's "cross-in-square" plan and central, domed cupola are similar to Orthodox churches of Byzantine descent (Spinks 2006: 5). The motivations for this eastern turn are unclear; it could have just been an erudite aesthetic choice. On the other hand, there was at least one reason why a black American designer with a knowledge of the classics and great hopes for his community might reach into Orthodox traditions: their connection with African architectural achievement.

In the 1800s, African-American intellectuals had at their fingertips many histories connecting the ancient Mediterranean world to sub-Saharan Africa. Egypt flowered before any European civilization, and just as that kingdom reached east to Mesopotamia and north to the Aegean, it also reached south into its own continent of Africa. Victorian historians struggled to parse historic Upper Nile domains like Nubia, Kush, and Ethiopia, but they knew that connections between them and the Mediterranean

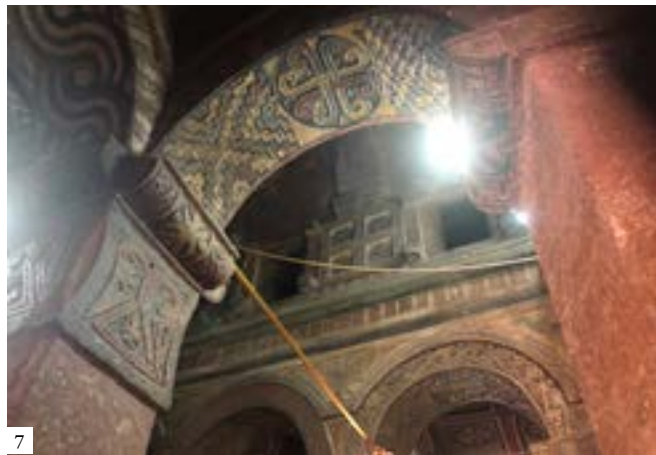
had been sustained since antiquity. By Rayfield's day, such ties were discussed using, among other bodies of evidence, architecture. As early as 1814, the English traveler Henry Salt (1780-1827) published praise of a 400 AD monolithic obelisk in Axum, Ethiopia (Fig. 5), as a "highly wrought and very magnificent work of art." His admiration only grew when he "compared the design... with many of Egyptian, Grecian and Roman structure," as he declared it "as the most admirable and perfect monument of its time," assuming, with a hint of prejudice, that Greek architects had designed it (Salt 1816: 313). In his epic work *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture*, James Fergusson (1808-1886) dedicated a short chapter to Ethiopia, asserting its ancient ties to Egypt as evidenced by the pyramid tombs of Meroë, and citing G.A. Hoskins' 1835 book *Travels in Ethiopia* to argue that some of the earliest true arches were built in that African nation, long before they rose in Rome (Fergusson 1859: 249-254; Hoskins 1835: 157).

In the 1860s, William Simpson (1823-1899) presented a widely publicized report on the ancient Orthodox cathedral in the Nubian city of Dongola, which had been hewn out of solid rock. Simpson observed how its enormous columns stood "upon a square base" and were crowned with capitals in the form of "massive blocks" supporting vaults of solid stone. Unifying the building was a frieze that was "most unlike what belongs to the Doric order, and yet I know of nothing else to which it could be compared." He noted other unique features, including an Islamic arch and "beautiful decoration" in the form of inscribed lines that, to his eyes, resembled ancient Anglo-Saxon metalwork. He returned repeatedly to the structure's overall likeness to other Orthodox churches: "It is curious to note that the Greek church has penetrated such a distance south into Africa, and so far north into Russia, carrying in each direction a similar style of architecture" (Simpson 1869: 239-240).

Simpson had no inkling of the true depth of that observation. Centuries before and much further to the south, at the mountainous site of Lalibela, the great Ethiopian king Gebre Mesqel Lalibela (reigned ca. 1181-1221) had marshalled a veritable army to excavate a representation of the Heavenly Jerusalem out of the stony fabric of his realm. Its many churches exhibit the Greek cross plans, inscribed ornamental lines, Byzantine or Islamic-inspired arches, and beautiful columns and vaults like those that amazed Simpson at Dongola, but on an urban scale (Figs. 6-8). The peerless classical complex of Lalibela is a unique synthesis of many influences, enlivened by locally created forms and construction methods. Old first-hand accounts by flabbergasted Portuguese explorers were available to Victorian Americans, and new descriptions of Lalibela were slowly being published in the 1800s, describing its architecture as "simple and majestic," with "coloured ornamentation" of "a geometrical pattern," and "ogive and horse-shoe curves... seen in combination with the plain round arch."⁶



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Figure 6: The roof of the rock-hewn Biete Ghiorgis (Church of St. George), which takes the form of a Greek cross, in Lalibela, Ethiopia, late 1100s or early 1200s

Figure 7: Column capitals and arches with inscribed and painted geometric and botanic ornament in Biete Maryam (Church of St. Mary), all cut out of solid rock, in Lalibela, Ethiopia, late 1100s or early 1200s

Figure 8: The symmetrical main façade of the rock-hewn Biete Amanuel (Church of Emmanuel), with banded pilasters and human-scaled apertures, some with Islamic or Byzantine-inspired arches, in Lalibela, Ethiopia, late 1100s or early 1200s

If Wallace A. Rayfield came across any of these various descriptions of Ethiopian architecture in the course of his studies or practice, it is possible that he might have chosen to emphasize arches and draw upon Orthodox traditions in his church designs as an affirmation of African significance in classical architecture. Only a few years after the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church went up in

Birmingham, W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) published an influential book asserting constant architectural congress between ancient Egypt, Ethiopia, and Greece, and citing Hoskins to point to the African source for the classical arch (Du Bois 2001: 22). The eager reception of the argument that black Americans could claim classical architecture as a part of their heritage is indicated by a much-discussed 1944 artwork entitled *Building More Stately Mansions* (Fig. 9), by the famous African-American painter and muralist Aaron Douglas (1899–1979), a friend of Du Bois. Insisting



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Figure 9: *Building More Stately Mansions*, painting by Aaron Douglas, 1944 (Nashville, Tennessee: Fisk University Galleries)

Figure 10: Taeke Negest Beata Lemariam by several architects working under Empress Zewditu, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1918–1928 (Kyle Dontoh)



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upon representing black Americans as “a proud and majestic people,” Douglas consistently worked to celebrate the legacy of African art in new ways (Driskell 1976: 62, 153). *Building More Stately Mansions* took its name from the 1858 poem “The Chambered Nautilus”, by Oliver Wendell Holmes – itself a reference to natural beauty of perennial significance to classical architects. It foregrounds black builders and intellectuals, as well as a teacher who gathers two children before a globe and inspires them to contemplate the glorious architectural forms of the black past and future, including a pyramid, classical columns, and a great triumphal arch (Moyer, Lecznar, and Morse 2020: 1-2). Wallace Rayfield’s unique architecture seems more legible when considered alongside such proud assertions of Egypto-African origins for classicism and especially the arch. In any case, nobody then or now could accuse Rayfield’s classicism of being an inherently “white” derivation without insulting the architect and betraying an ignorance of millennia-old Ethiopian design traditions that even a nineteenth-century Bostonian or Chicagoan could have overcome with a small amount of reading, and black writers and artists assertively claimed in the years following the construction of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

A great church with a similar configuration of triple round-arched entryway, twin domed towers, and central dome over a Greek cross plan even went up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1918-1928 (Fig. 10), under the direction of the Empress Zewditu (1876-1930). She hired several architects from multiple countries, including Germany, Greece, and Japan, to bring her monument into being.⁷ While Rayfield’s prominence was probably not such that Ethiopian royalty was aware of his achievements, the similarities between his churches and that of Empress Zewitu at least speak to a common inheritance of architectural forms and ideas that were being claimed by great black builders at nearly the same time. Rayfield’s work may have actually reached a different part of Africa after he became the official architect of the nationwide Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church; they commissioned him to design buildings for South Africa and Liberia, including churches and a great hotel or office tower in Monrovia (Dorough 2010: 111, 113).⁸ More research must determine whether any of these endeavors were built.

West African Classicism: “As a Gift from God”

Rayfield was not the first African-American architect to project his profession across the sea. There was, by this time, already a longstanding tradition of black craftspeople and builders returning, in a reverse diaspora, from the Americas to different parts of West Africa. As recounted by scholar Adédoyin Tèriba, African traditional architecture was profoundly affected by the migration of nearly eight thousand Afro-Brazilians to the Bight of Benin during the 1800s (Tèriba 2017, 2019, 2020). Working alongside other emancipated migrants such as the Afro-Cubans and

the Sàró of Sierra Leone, Afro-Brazilians formed social and economic networks in cities such as Ouidah, Porto Novo, and Lagos, building monumental cathedrals and mosques with great columns and arches, soaring spires with delicately carved floral scrolls, and undulating pediment gables (Fig. 11). Working in a confident Baroque mode, they built colorful monuments for the dead (Fig. 12). They also built magnificent houses for the living, including the

Figure 11: Shitta Bey Mosque by Martin and Porphyrio, Lagos, Nigeria, 1894 (The Trustees of the British Museum)

Figure 12: A mausoleum by Afro-Brazilian architects, Lagos, Nigeria, ca. 1894 (Adédoyin Tèriba)





Figure 13: Ēbùn House by Sàró architect Herbert Macaulay and Afro-Brazilian craftsman Balthazar dos Reis, Lagos, Nigeria, 1913 (Salvador, Brazil: Fundação Pierre Verger)

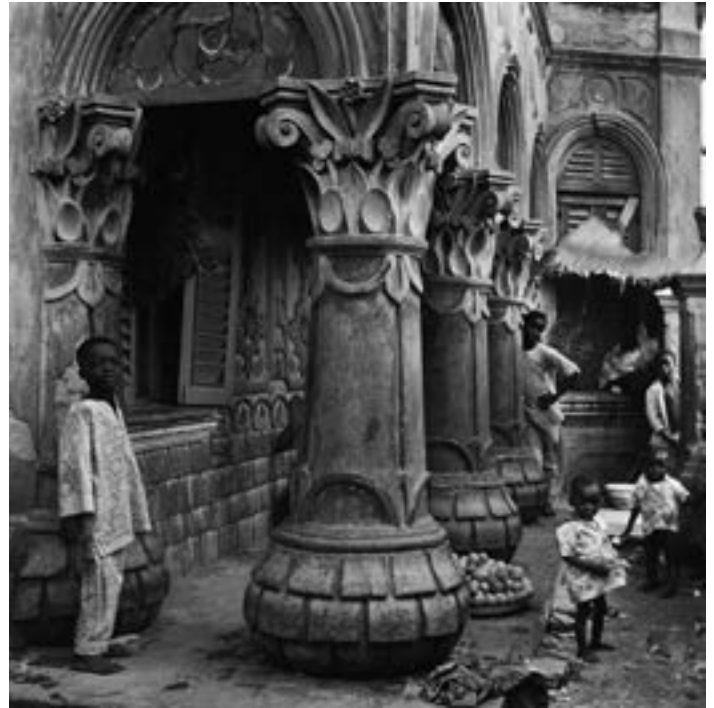


Figure 14: Detail of Ēbùn House by Sàró architect Herbert Macaulay and Afro-Brazilian craftsman Balthazar dos Reis, Lagos, Nigeria, 1913 (Salvador, Brazil: Fundação Pierre Verger)

1913 Ēbùn House by Sàró architect Herbert Macaulay and Afro-Brazilian craftsman Balthazar dos Reis (Figs. 13 and 14). This house took its name from the inscription over its arched entryway announcing in Yoruba and English that it was “a gift from God.” The botanical plaster ornaments that enfolded every human-scaled window and doorway brought it nearly to Edenic life – even its Corinthian columns seemed to burst from seed pods or emerge from baskets brought to the place as votive gifts. These vital forms push the boundaries of the classical orders, even as they also, in the words of Tèriba, reveal “the continuous usefulness of classicism” for these immigrant builders (Tèriba 2017: 77). Sadly, the Ēbùn House was destroyed by fire in the 1980s, and many surviving Afro-Brazilian masterpieces are today at risk of destruction from decay or redevelopment. Where they remain, however, they testify to the talent and skills of American-African migrants who, aspiring to achieve a transcontinental homecoming, expressed their hopes in traditional architecture.

Over time, indigenous West African builders in the hinterlands of Nigeria began to draw lessons from the immigrant work in the coastal metropolis, creating “their own interpretation of what the Afro-Brazilians did in Lagos,” and producing “a regional architectural aesthetic in the process” (Tèriba 2017: 165). This is not surprising, as there were many different design precedents across West Africa, centuries in the making, that were inherently sympathetic with the core features of Afro-Brazilian classical architecture. The Hausa people, the Edo Empire, and the Asante Empire were among the many groups that

had long supported great cities and towns with world-class achievements in design and craft. It is impossible to provide a meaningful introduction to all of these traditions here, but a few examples can be gently touched upon for their commonalities with and links to the broader architectural traditions, including in America.

Adobe is one of the most important building materials in West Africa. It is well-insulating, sustainable, and affordable – if also high-maintenance – and lends a ceramic or “fluid” aesthetic quality to buildings (Morris 2004: 7). In the Sahel, the vast semi-arid sub-Saharan belt across Africa that bridges the desert and the tropics, much African adobe classicism had strong historic links to the Mediterranean world. Here, for many centuries, the Islamic faith has intersected, sometimes beautifully and sometimes violently, with pre-existing indigenous traditions (Blier 2004, Bourdier and Minh-ha 2011, House 2018). In the ancient nation of Mali, the Great Mosque of Djenné was built and rebuilt many times since the Middle Ages until it was consolidated by French colonizers in the early 1900s. This building is well known, but there are many other less studied structures, some of them newly built, that speak the tectonic language of classicism in similar vernacular terms. The ca. 1995 mosque of Nangoyo, for example, contains an orderly grid of great square columns with sculpted capitals supporting arcades (Fig. 15). Thick beads of plaster emphasize round arches, with narrow apertures punctuating their spandrels, adding an upper register to this rhythmic, human-scaled space, which is crowned by a simple but well-proportioned cornice. Half-circle windows, like those of Roman baths,

shower light along every row; these windows are framed on the exterior by spired, pilaster-like buttresses lining up with the columns within, rationally dividing the building's facades into regular bays (Fig. 16).

Mali's *sakho* houses provide a communal residence for single men awaiting marriage. Many of them fuse local and French aesthetics, participating as assertive works of public architecture in the complex power struggles between indigenous traditions, Islamic authorities, and European colonizers (Blier 2004: 199). One of the *sakho* houses in Kolenze presents a veritably Palladian arrangement (Fig. 17). Five human-scaled bays, centered upon an arched doorway, are divided by subtle pilasters that seem to melt into or ripple across the building. The arched windows feature railings that match the earthen balustrade crowning and unifying the house. The wooden ceiling joists jutting out in clusters beneath this balustrade are akin to the posts that famously protrude from mosques such as that in Nangoyo and in Djenné. As the ends of structural members that subtly convey the strength of the roof while providing rhythmic decoration, they are also akin to the rafter tails of Craftsman bungalows or triglyphs of the Doric order.

Another performance of classical rhythm is found in a mosque in Sanam, Niger (Fig. 18). Here, square columns rise in segments that evoke the divisions of the human

body. Many of them feature shallow, blind niches, scaled to human heads, that seem to commit their little arched spirits to the great structural endeavor above. The topmost segments of each column are articulated in a capital-like manner, with delicately flaring corbels that gracefully spring into the soaring adobe arches that carry the wooden ceiling; the columns themselves seem to unfurl branches like great trees, or even spread their wings and fly, lifting the prayers of those below. This mosque was built in 1998 by El Hadj Abou Moussa, a student of the Aga Khan Award-winning Nigerien architect Falké Barmou (1926-). The latter explained, when asked where he found his skills and inspiration, that they came to him "in a dream from God" (Morris 2004: 7).

In Hausa buildings of Niger and Nigeria, geometric ornamentation is often covered with vivid color. Dating back to the 1700s, the Palace of the Emir in Daura, Nigeria,

Figure 15: The prayer hall of a mosque in Nangoyo, Mali, ca. 1995

Figure 16: Exterior of a mosque in Nangoyo, Mali, ca. 1995

Figure 17: Sakho house in Kolenze, Mali, twentieth century

Figure 18: The prayer hall of a mosque by El Hadj Abou Moussa in Sanam, Niger, 1998

(15-18: James Morris, from the series *Butabu*)



features a forecourt with a great arch decorated with flowers and visual assurances from the ruler that he will decapitate all serpents (Fig. 19). This is centered symmetrically upon the entrance pavilion to the palace, or *zaure*, which features two decorated pilasters supporting a prominent lintel, from the center of which scrolls and a diamond rise to crown the heads of all who enter. The *zaure* is flanked by colorful lozenges that read like quoins, tying it into the façade. The entire composition is comparable in many ways to other classical civic structures relying on symmetry and centrality to provide clarity, dignity, and delight. This palace is also, unlike the other adobe buildings discussed in this essay thus far, made of concrete, having been rebuilt in the mid-twentieth century (Blier 2004: 211). Hausa architecture is currently undergoing a Renaissance, but adobe is giving way to cement wherever money and materials are ready at hand. The palace in Daura thus offers valuable lessons to most other modern societies: concrete can be beautiful and ennobling if builders draw upon the traditional forms and principles that Africans have shared and developed for centuries, sculpting fluid materials into elegant forms that poeticize structure, celebrate human bodies, and delight human eyes. Here, great architecture is wrapped in sinuous skin, and sprouts boughs and flowers as gifts from God.

Figure 19: Entrance to the Palace of the Emir in Daura, Nigeria, built in the 1700s, rebuilt in the mid-1900s (James Morris, from the series *Butabu*)



Roots of Iron and Faces of Gold

Just as Du Bois asserted an African role in the early development of classical architecture, he also praised the early development of African metalwork, which had a direct impact on American architecture (Du Bois 2001: 68). A “cautious position” places the origins of ironworking in sub-Saharan Africa between 800-400 BC; some historians believe it was invented indigenously while others argue that it was imported, but all agree that the “story of iron production and use in Africa is punctuated with a great diversity of brilliant inventions and innovations, attesting to local experimentation and adaptation” (Chirikure, Dewey, and MacEachern 2019: 243). To the Yoruba people of modern Nigeria, iron was sacred, linked in name and in characteristics to the deity Ògún, who descended to the world “at the dawn of creation” with an iron chain in his hand (Abiodun 2019: 37).

The great capital of the Edo Empire, Benin City, had straight streets, seemingly infinite expanses of earthen walls, and a vast royal palace. Benin art and architecture exhibited, in the words of historian Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch, an “aesthetic preference for symmetry,” and their craftspeople and architects used metal elements to emphasize the symmetry of facades and colonnaded courtyards as well as invest them with a visual vitality (Gunsch 2018: 143). Eyewitness reports indicate that the palace, first built by Oba Ewedo (1255-1280), possessed “beautiful and long square galleries... resting on wooden pillars, from top to bottom covered with cast copper on which are engraved the pictures of... war exploits and battles... every roof is decorated with a small turret ending in a point, on which birds are standing... cast in copper with outspread wings... cleverly made after living models” (Gunsch 2018: 48). A 1668 Dutch engraving depicts the spires and their naturalistic bird sculptures (Fig. 20). The palace was sacked by the British in 1897, but many of the leaded brass plaques that adorned its great colonnades survive. One example in the British Museum depicts four figures standing in front of a symmetrical façade that probably represented part of the palace (Fig. 21). Four columns, all covered by sculptures, rise to support a shingled roof with a central turret adorned by a great cast-metal serpent and crowned by a metal bird, now damaged. The building’s entryway features an inscribed botanical scroll, perhaps representing an ornamented metal door, and floral quatrefoils sprout everywhere else. The royal palace of Benin City was clearly imbued with many symmetries and deployed high-quality metalwork to accentuate its great towers and human-scaled colonnades.

Further west in the Asante Empire, in what is now Ghana, one could find more metalwork and colonnades. The latter often took the form of domestic porches as well as royal galleries and were built of sculpted wattle-and-daub. Since the capital of Kusami was also wrecked by the British in the late 1800s, early eyewitness reports remain key. Thomas



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Figure 20: *Benin City*, engraving by Olfert Dapper, 1668 (National Library of Portugal)

Figure 21: Lead brass plaque depicting the decorated columns and adorned roof of the Royal Palace of Benin City, 1500s. This plaque probably decorated a column in the manner depicted (The Trustees of the British Museum)

Edward Bowdich visited the Asante Empire in 1817 and used many classical terms to describe its architecture:

(...) the palace is an immense building of a variety of oblong courts and regular squares, the former with arcades along the one side, some of round arches symmetrically turned... the entablatures exuberantly adorned with bold fan and trellis work of Egyptian character. They have... small windows of wooden lattice, of intricate but regular carved work, and some have frames encased with thin gold. The squares have a large apartment on each side, open in front, with two supporting pillars, which... give it all the appearance of the proscenium... of the older Italian theatres. They are lofty and regular, and the cornices of a very bold cane work in alto relievo (Bowdich 1819: 57-58).

Bowdich’s engravings reveal that this arcaded, golden-windowed, intricately carved palace of open porches and geometrically intricate friezes also featured columns with paneled shafts and little medallions serving as understated capitals where they met their entablatures (Fig. 22). Bowdich also recorded a less elite street in Adoom, where a number of captains dwelled (Fig. 23). The architecture consisted of a continuous earthen base tinted by red ochre and sculpted in geometric decorations (Bowdich 1819: 305). Symmetrical columned porches alternated with elaborately carved, pilastered, solid masses; these served, respectively, as the public and private portions of each house. The porches were used for long, idle conversations among friends and family, as well as for “receiving strangers, observing or superintending customs, and evening recreation” (Bowdich 1819: 308). The patterns that were carved on the earthen

Figure 22: Engraving depicting part of the royal Asante palace, modern Ghana, by Thomas Edward Bowdich, 1819 (University of Pittsburgh Library)

Figure 23: Engraving depicting a porch-lined street occupied by Asante captains, modern Ghana, by Thomas Edward Bowdich, 1819 (University of Pittsburgh Library)



22



23



Figure 24: A single temple structure in Kumasi, modern Ghana; usually, these came in groups of four, tightly arranged around a central court. Photograph ca. 1899, from Mary Alice Young Hodgson, *The Siege of Kumassi*, 1901 (University of Toronto Library)

facades of Asante houses had many different sources and purposes. Some of them were *adinkra* symbols with specific meanings, others may have drawn upon the Islamic designs that the Asante encountered to the north, while others were local exemplifications of geometrical and floral beauty, carved to delight the eye. Many Asante dwellings and temples (Fig. 24) survived into the twentieth century, and photographs confirm written descriptions from the century before. Only a handful stand today.⁹

The gold that glittered on portions of the royal Asante palace was, together with their commerce in slaves and textiles, the source of their wealth. Their craftsmanship with that glistening material offers another example of African traditional design with classical features: the *akrafokonmu*, or “soul washer’s badge,” which embodied the light and warmth of the life-giving sun. There is a great deal of variety in these objects, but they always exhibit radial symmetry and usually offer botanical forms, with cast or hammered foliage, petals, and rosettes (Fig. 25). One *akrafokonmu* presents a special case: in 1874, it was set into a larger golden disc designed by the London jeweler R & S Garrad & Co. This amalgam of African and British craft testifies to the innate compatibility of different human aesthetic traditions, as the English jewelers interpreted and replicated the African forms without straying too far

from their own habitual patterns (Fig. 26). In so doing, it visually captures the ancient kinship of the human family, connected by threads that ripple along stone obelisks and arches through Egypt and into Ethiopia and back again, wind through prayer halls from the Mediterranean through the Sahel, weave their ways through the brass colonnades of Benin City and the proscenium porches of the Asante, connect the Alabama work of Wallace Rayfield to Africa, and ascend along the undulating Afro-Brazilian pediments of Lagos. These lines of human connection also, however, made their way to Britain as imperial siphons of loot and tribute, and traveled to Charleston along the hellish routes of slave ships. The London-embellished *akrafokonmu* was, in fact, a trophy of war. What if we summoned these beautiful traditions together to build for peace and equality, as Jonathan Green did in Charleston?

Figure 25: A gold *akrafokonmu* or “soul washer’s badge,” Asante, modern Ghana, before 1874 (The Trustees of the British Museum)

Figure 26: A compound object; at the center is a gold *akrafokonmu* or “soul washer’s badge,” Asante, modern Ghana, before 1874; this is imbedded in a gilt silver plate designed by R & S Garrard & Co., London, 1874 (The Trustees of the British Museum)



Conclusion: New Beginnings for Old Things

Green's sets in *Porgy and Bess* used architecture to celebrate classical Charleston as African as well as European and American. W.E.B. Du Bois and probably Wallace Rayfield would have recognized Green's colorful arch as a feature with deep African ties. The wrought iron that Green summoned also has direct African connections, and while the nature of slavery makes them hard to trace with specificity, evidence has been available for years. Gerald K. Geerlings, for example, noted in his landmark study, *Wrought Iron in Architecture*, that "Boston, New York, and Philadelphia have a certain amount of early iron work, but scarcely any in comparison to the quantity produced... in New Orleans, Mobile, Savannah, and Charleston" (Geerlings 1983: 123, 143, 190), the four most important North American port cities for enslaved Africans. While Geerlings apparently knew nothing about African metalwork and therefore attributed what he saw in these Southern port cities to French and German immigrants, he noted that the craftsmanship of white blacksmiths seemed strangely transformed when it was practiced in the American South, becoming "far more influenced by local work" than that of Europe (Geerlings 1983: 144). He also noted that the ironwork attributed to a white blacksmith, such as the German-born Christopher Werner, was in fact often made by the black craftsmen they enslaved, such as Toby Richardson, who is remembered to this day as a "top rank artist in iron" who did much of the "actual work" in Werner's shop (Geerlings 1983: 144, Shuey 1935: 5, and Vlach 1991: 25-29). Looking at specific examples, such as the ca. 1840 wrought-iron gates of St. Michael's Church

in Charleston (Fig. 27), also traditionally attributed to a German, Geerlings observed that different portions seem to have been made by different hands (Geerlings 1983: 144). Some of those hands were certainly black, and if they had arrived in chains from Africa, their veins may have been coursing with the same ancient metalworking traditions that produced the decorated columns of Benin City and the solar flowers of the *akrafokommu*. Surely many enslaved African metalworkers also noticed that the s-curves and other forms of European-style ironwork had direct parallels in African aesthetics, such as the plaster ornament on Asante dwellings. The ethnic convolutions of the slave trade meant that most of the enslaved would have had complicated relationships with politics on all sides of the Atlantic Ocean, but no matter which particular empires had torn their lives to pieces, they held the power to hammer songs of home into sacred iron, formed into familiar shapes on foreign shores. Those songs echo in the streets of Charleston, and every other place that Africans built, as a painful and powerful testament to the humanity that slavers tried to deny.

Jonathan Green also pulled colonnaded porches and galleries into his vision. There have long been many debates about the origins of the American porch, given their paucity in British domestic architecture and proliferation in places like Charleston. Some scholars have pointed to European models, but Jay D. Edwards has traced direct links between American porches and Caribbean precedents, such as those in Barbados, and a web of connecting lines tying all of the above to West Africa (Manca 2005, Edwards 2005, Edwards 2011). There is no question that many porch-lined American streets resemble Adoom at least as much as do the lanes of Bath or Bristol. Green's exemplification of a Charleston porch does not require us to disbelieve in the potential for multiple historic sources, but it does ask us to acknowledge and honor African ones. For centuries, in Africa as across much of the world, great architects and craftspeople have drawn upon sources near and far, combining different ideas and techniques and summoning many materials to fashion brilliant buildings with proud columns, soaring arches and domes, vivacious lines of floral and geometric pattern, and symmetries and spaces that frame and ennoble human bodies. We can build upon our shared architectural heritage by drawing close, in great halls and on intimate porches, as the sisters and brothers we have always been.

Figure 27: The wrought- and cast-iron gates of St. Michael's Church, Charleston, by J.A.W. Justi and, inevitably, the enslaved craftspeople in his workshop, ca. 1840



¹ Felder, Lynn. May 22, 2016. S.C. artist bringing fresh, authentic look to 'Porgy and Bess', *Winston-Salem Journal*, Section D, 1.

² Parker, Adam. October 4, 2015. Spoleto announces production of 'Porgy and Bess' – Gershwin opera to feature sets and costumes by Jonathan Green. *The Post and Courier*, Section: Arts & Travel, 1.

³ Oestreich, James R. May 26, 2016. 'Porgy and Bess,' a Spoleto Festival USA Homecoming. *The New York Times*, Section C, 2; Felder, Lynn. May 29, 2016. Latest vision of 'Porgy and Bess' brings artistic paradise to Spoleto, *Winston-Salem Journal*, Section A, 10; Toppman, Lawrence. June 1, 2016. Charleston goes wild over everything about 'Porgy and Bess', *The Charlotte Observer*, 5A; Parker, Adam. May 26, 2016. Spoleto Festival's

'Porgy and Bess' reimagines Catfish Row, *The Post and Courier*, Section Arts and Travel.

⁴ In addition to Peralta's essay, see: Poser, Rachel. February 2, 2021. He Wants to Save Classics From Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?, *The New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/magazine/classics-greece-rome-whiteness.html?searchResultPosition=1> (accessed February 25, 2021).

⁵ Business Efficiency: How W.A. Rayfield Is Proving His Genius in Special Field. May 3, 1913. *The Denver Star*, 7.

⁶ Clerke, E.M. July 1884. Abyssinia and Its People. *The Dublin Review*, vol. 3, no. 23, 332.

⁷ Gebrewold, Frehiwot (Ed). June 2016. Taeke Negest Beata Lemariam: Hidden Gem in Bustling Addis, *The Eminence*, vol. 20, 58–59.

⁸ Boyd, Ashley. January 31, 2010. Work of Tuscaloosa's First Black Architect Shines in Churches. *Tuscaloosa News*: <https://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/DA/20100131/News/606109647/TL> (accessed March 3, 2021).

⁹ Asante Traditional Buildings, official website of UNESCO: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/35/> (accessed March 22, 2021).

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Biography | Biografía | Biografia

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