William Hansen on

HENRY GLASSIE, PRINCE TWINS SEVEN-SEVEN:

His Art, His Life in Nigeria, His Exile in America

There are many things to celebrate in Henry Glassie’s new book, which explores the life and the world and the art of a particular Yoruba man.

There is, first of all, the fact that the man whom the book focuses upon is really interesting. Prince Twins Seven-Seven, as he calls himself, is a spirit being, an abiku, who was sent into this world by other spirit beings. He tried six times to enter this world, to be born and survive as one of a set of twins, but without success. On each occasion his mother gave birth to twins who died in the womb or within a few years of their birth, so that he returned to the spirits who had sent him. An abiku child is born to die, to return shortly to the spirit world. When however his mother was pregnant for the seventh time, she consulted a babalawo, who informed her that she was bearing an abiku, and explained that to keep him alive she was to perform a sacrifice and drink certain water, that of the goddess Osun. When the seventh set of twins was born, a male and a female, the boy survived but the girl lived only to the age of three, whereupon she migrated into her brother, joining her soul with his. So this Yoruba man is the incarnation of a spirit being who succeeded on his seventh attempt to enter our world; having fused with his twin sister, he is both male and female; and as a spirit being, he possesses the ability to mediate between worlds, bringing us glimpses of another world. Although he was given a conventional Yoruba name at birth, he subsequently took the name Twins Seven-Seven in acknowledgment of the fact that he was the sole survivor of seven sets of twins; and after he learned that his family was of royal lineage (his father was a prince from Ibadan, from the royal family of Osuntoki), he added Prince to his name. Hence, Prince Twins Seven-Seven.

An abiku comes into this world to torture its parents. To keep her child alive, the mother of such a child must humble herself in some way such as to go to the streets and dance, reducing herself to the status of a beggar. Since Prince’s mother was not allowed by her family to lower herself to such an extent, her son paid off her spiritual debt, becoming, as a young man, a dancer and singer in his native Nigeria. So it was as a dancer that he showed up one day, at the age of twenty, at an artistic event in the town of Osogbo, where, for the first time in his life, he got an opportunity to draw and paint pictures. Extraordinarily, within a year Prince had major art-
shows in Nigeria, Czechoslovakia, and the USA, and within a few years he was the leader of the Osogbo School of Nigerian art. Soon he emerged as perhaps the most famous contemporary artist in Africa, enjoying an international reputation.

The circumstances that brought the artist Prince Twins Seven-Seven and the folklorist Henry Glassie together were perhaps not what you would expect. Following his initial successes, Prince’s life became one of ups and downs—mixed success in the art world and personal troubles of one sort and another. In the year 2000 he left Nigeria for the United States, settling in Philadelphia, looking for a new start. Things did not go well. In time he was hired to do odd jobs at an import-export business that, as it happens, is operated by Henry Glassie’s long-time friend, George Jevremović. One day George chanced to mention to Henry that he had hired a character named Twins Seven-Seven. Henry was shocked. How could this man, whose work Henry had admired since the 1970s as that of an innovative Yoruba artist, be down and out in Philly? Henry went to Philadelphia to meet Prince, and a relationship began. Someone—George or Prince or Henry—had the idea of Henry’s writing a book about Prince’s life and art, and five or so years later, the book that we are honingoring today is that book. It rests upon extensive interviews with Prince, upon travels the two men took together to Osogbo, and upon Henry’s observing the artist at work.

So one grand theme of the book is the man Prince. The other one is Prince’s art. Happily it is liberally represented and excellently reproduced in the book, some 180 color-reproductions in all, climaxing in a gallery of twenty-nine paintings selected for special comment at the end of the book. Just as Prince the person is fascinating, so also is the art he produces, in which flamboyance in the form of large, curvaceous rhythms is complemented by patient, ant-like attention to small detail. The paintings themselves are colorful, varied, imaginative, and accessible; but they are not obvious. Although we are able on our own to enjoy the paintings as artistic surfaces, we require the guidance of their creator, facilitated by Henry, to enter inside them.

As in his treatments of traditional artists in other publications, Henry lets Prince tell of his own life and explain his own art. Henry prompts and listens. The portrait that results is intimate, affectionate, respectful, detailed, and revealing. But there is more to the author’s work than folkloristic ethnography; there is also scholarship. This book could not have been written by a young scholar. It is the work of a mature scholar who draws upon a lifetime of reading about,
engagement with, and reflection upon the arts and artists of the Americas, Great Britain, Europe, Africa, Turkey, Bangladesh, Japan, and elsewhere. Henry guides his readers masterfully through different artistic traditions, delineating what is Yoruba about Yoruba art and in Prince’s art. His chapter on modern art is a dazzling essay that situates Prince’s art in the context of contemporary art, not just of African art.

Henry brings, in addition to ethnography and scholarship, his own artistic sensibilities to the making of this book. This aspect is most obviously evident in the volume itself as an aesthetic object: the author himself designed the book, with his handsome font, its fine photos, its coordination of text and illustration. Even the text is artful, characterized as it is by poetic prose. Enjoy, for example, the image that awaits you at the end of this sentence, in which Henry speaks of the revolutionary generation of modernists such as Picasso, Yeats, Gropius, Freud, and Einstein; he writes: “We tinker, revise, and proclaim new paradigms, all the while fluttering in the cage they crafted.” Unusual words pop up here and there, and ordinary words are sometimes used in pleasantly surprising ways. There is rhythm, too; listen to this sentence: “Painting is now, as English is now, as Christianity is now, a part of the general cultural resource; it belongs to the tradition of the Yoruba people.”

Finally, I see the author’s artful touch also in the open-endedness of the narrative. Henry brings us into an ongoing story, where we are invited to participate in the unfinished business of Prince’s art and life. The man is, after all, still quite alive. One ongoing question is that of the quality of Prince’s art. Henry discusses differing assessments of the man’s art and then invites his readers to view a selection of Prince’s works arrayed at the end of the volume, and make up their own mind. Does Prince merit the artistic recognition that he seeks? Another ongoing question is what lies ahead for Prince as a royal personage. Prince has returned to Nigeria, where he is fourth in line to the throne of Ibadan. He expects to be installed as the Mogaji, or clan head, of the Osuntoki family in Ibadan. Will he get the royal honors that he seeks?

In his book Henry Glassie brings us the life and art of a gifted and fascinating man. We in turn are pleased to celebrate the maker of this splendid tome.