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Yoruba Transition

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Those of you who have read about or seen my work with “fantastic embellishment” of antique domestic artefacts, and botanical forms from spent armaments, may be a little surprised by this piece, but it actually represents a long-standing interest of mine, in the craft of mask-making in African and other ancient cultures. I have in fact made several pieces in this style over the years (the first more than 20 years ago).

The title of this piece – “Yoruba transition” – uses the name of a large group of African tribes living in an area now covered by the countries of Nigeria, Benin and Togo; who incidentally became known for the use of (cast) brass and other metals in their art. Many of the slaves taken from West Africa to the Americas were from the Yoruba tribes, and their descendants can be found in the United States, Brazil and the Caribbean (including Cuba).

The “transition” part alludes to the massive changes that have taken place in the lives of African people during the last century or so (and even during the last few decades) – which are still taking place – leading to a generally much less stable and often quite violent civilization. This is also reflected in parts of the work – the mouth for instance is constructed from 56 spent shell cases, previously fired from a .44 Magnum gun. The “silver metal” parts are made from modern aircraft-grade aluminium.

This piece is 71” (180cm) high by 29” (74cm) wide, and weighs 20lb (9Kg). It’s probably the tallest piece I’ve made to date. As well as the aforementioned shell-cases and aluminium, it is constructed from new and re-cycled copper tubes, brass plate, and copper sheet.

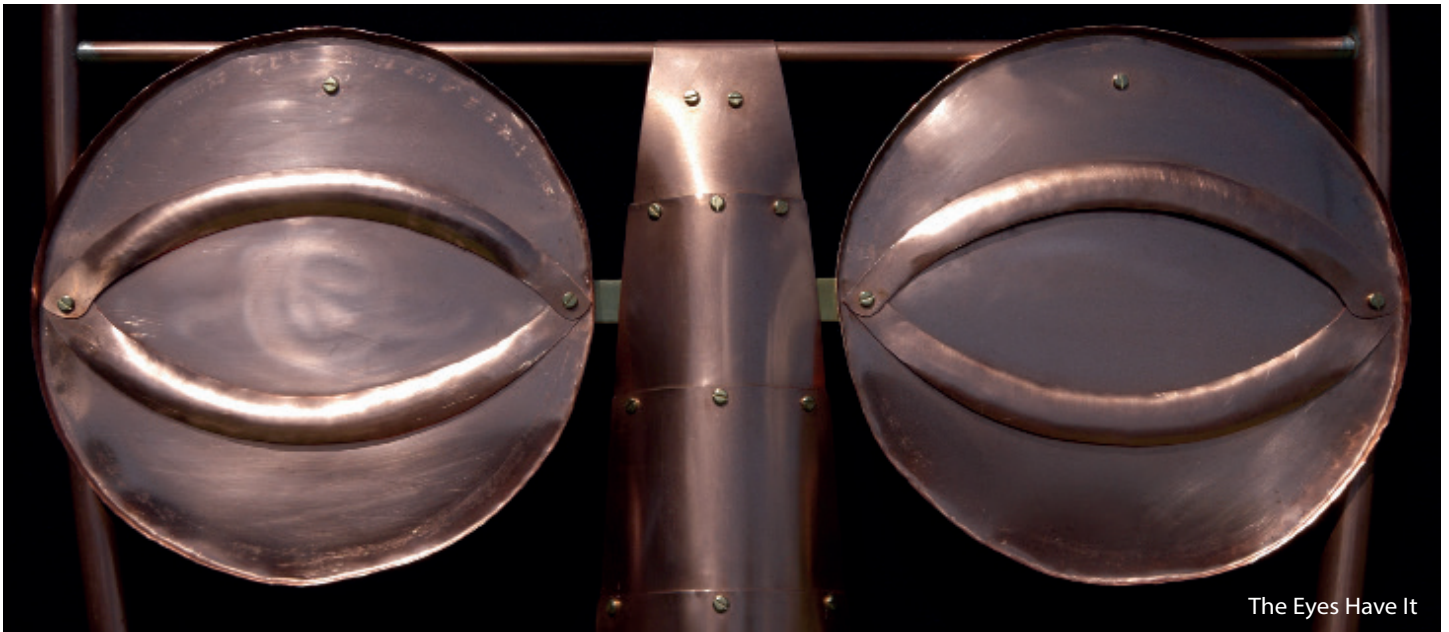
The main frame was built using copper tubes. The curves were designed, not with special b-spline curves in a computer-aided-design system (in a former life, I developed training courses for automotive designers learning to use computer systems for conceptual design), but with those most basic tools: carpet and string! The carpet hangs on to the string just enough to build curves based on the natural tension in the string, facilitating the creation of fine flowing curves (with a bit of care and a lot of patience...). The string is then taped to the carpet and overlaid with a large (very large!) piece of white paper (also taped), to which the string “line” is transferred using a kind of “brass-rubbing” technique!

The tubes were then bent to fit the curve on the paper. Getting them to curve whilst keeping them in one plane (i.e. flat) is extremely difficult! I did actually manage it without discarding any mis-bent tubes, but there were several occasions when I had to open the workshop door to allow sufficient room to mount the tubes in the vice at the right angle!

The other major constraint in all this is that each side-tube had to be made from one 2m length – 3m lengths are just too long to fit in my car to bring home! Although I cut them in half later (to facilitate



Yoruba Transition

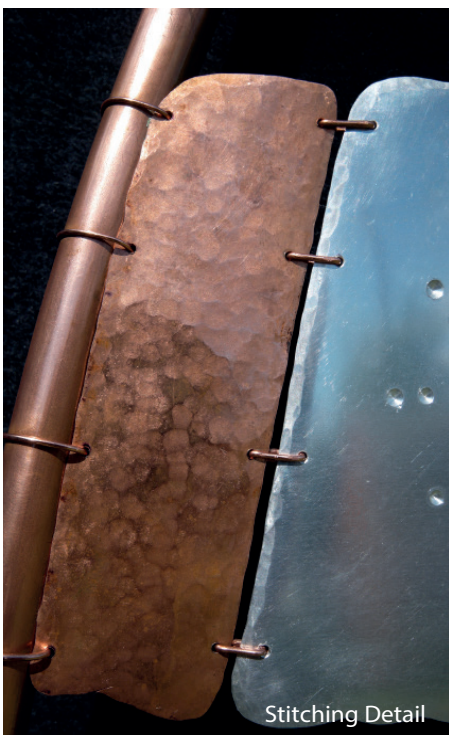


sensible transportation of the finished piece), I would never have been able to achieve the “continuity of curve” if I’d attempted to make each curve in two pieces.

The two tubes (one for each side) were then fixed together by creating two short lengths of spare tube (one for the top and one for the bottom), slitting it lengthwise to precise amounts such that it slides inside the frame tubes, and then soldering it all together (whilst trying to keep it all flat, and avoiding setting fire to the workshop floor!).

The nose is formed from 4 pieces of copper sheet, bolted together, with the “tip” shaped over suitable steel dollies (reminiscent of the brass bodywork of the “Golden Ford” Model-T racing-car of 1911!).

The eyes are constructed from copper sheet, with the edges again hammered and shrunk over a dolly. The “eye-rims” were made by hammering over several sizes of spoon dollies (really: normally used for hand-making spoons!). One (but only one) eye has been given a subtle polish-swirl before lacquering, to give the faintest impression of a pupil. This has led to the intended result of several viewers commenting (unprompted) on experiencing a feeling of being “winked at”!



The parts of the upper forehead decoration panel are in tension across the frame, “stitched” together using copper wire (re-cycled from discarded mains house-wiring), with copper parts finished by extensive hammering against steel, and the whole thing “stitched” onto the main frame at each end (ever tried stitching with a gas torch at 800 degrees C?), with no other support.

The previously-mentioned shell-cases were

polished with walnut-shells, and made to form the mouth by bolting each one onto a custom-made open brass backing-plate (barely wider than the shell-cases themselves, so almost invisible behind them). Fifty-six holes drilled in the backing-plate, fifty-six holes drilled in the shell-cases (any idea how you drill into the end of a tapered circular thing?), and 56 sets of brass nuts and bolts! Cardboard templates everywhere (no idea how many cereal packets were employed during the creation of this piece... and yes, I do have a cardboard version of the nose!!).

Like the forehead panel (but in the opposite direction), the



nose, mouth, and brass “beard” are all in tension, between the bottom of the tubular frame and the horizontal cross-piece half way up – they are connected together with custom-made hidden brass brackets, with nothing else supporting them, to give the impression of parts simply “drawn” on the background, rather than deliberately bolted together (the open mouth with no obvious means of support on either side is a major contributing factor to this). It’s reasonably stable and strong, but transport logistics do have to take all this into account!

The whole thing is displayed hanging on the wall (from a bracket bolted to the back of the brass “crown”), and looks particularly good against brickwork or dark-stained timber.

Yoruba can be seen ‘sucking in the sky’ on the front cover. Hope you like it!

For more information on my sculpture, photography and books, please have a look at my website www.orlogikbooks.com or contact me by email at NigelWilliams@orlogikstudio.com.