



# Nnamdi Okonkwo

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### How did you get started with your art?

I have always loved drawing and have always been fascinated by it. However, it took a series of experiences, which I now believe to have been orchestrated to guide and keep me on my destined course, to lead me to the serious pursuit of art.

Without my mother's encouragement and support, it would have been almost impossible for me to get on the path of my artistic career. It was she who persuaded me to take the study of art seriously. My first artistic training was in painting but it was when I discovered sculpture that I felt that a profound connection was made.

### What is your work about?

My work is about the beauty, nobility, and majesty of the human spirit, which I express with sculptural forms and elements that, I feel, are befitting such grandiose feelings that arise in my heart in connection to the ability and true potential of man. These feel-

ings and emotions that I am drawn to express, are those which seem to suggest a character that embodies the transcendental powers of the soul over the daily cares and worries of life. For me, human attributes such as love, resolve, serenity, and humility elevate man's soul, and allow the extraordinary powers of the human spirit to shine through.

### You're also a painter, but you've stated you prefer three-dimensional work. Why?

I feel a deep spiritual connection with sculpture. I like the physical nature of the process of making sculpture, and sculpture offers me the opportunity to create art that, because it exists in three dimensions, is corporeal, and can have a life that more easily evokes reality.

### Tell us about your style.

I was led to my forms and shapes through a strict obedience to my inner artistic voice, rather than to any external influence or contrived notion of

reality. Right from the beginning, there was something about volume and mass in sculpture that was compelling and arresting to me. I was easily led to render everything in a scale that was uncommonly outsized and larger than life. For me, it seemed the only natural way to create in three dimensions, so I really cannot completely explain the logic, or understand fully my predisposition to the rotund forms.

But in seeking for the logic behind these forms, it is tempting for me to see these early and still persistent artistic intuitions as a way of expressing the expansive capacity and the largeness of the human soul. Perhaps my sculpted figures are but structures or edifices which must be weighted down, and which must be large to have the capacity to house the monumental spirit of man. The abundant and expansive forms express an inner opulence and a generosity of spirit. So words like *nurture*, *love*, and *abundance* easily come to mind as one contemplates my work.



Photo courtesy Nnamdi Okonkwo















Photo courtesy Nnamdi Okonkwo

### How does your work reflect your feelings about the gospel?

I believe that man, as the crowning jewel of God's creation, embodies inherent godlike attributes which can be summoned to the fore to help overcome the challenges of life. These attributes of man also point back to a reservoir or a matrix from which these attributes originate. For me, that

matrix is God, and my expression in sculpture of any human attribute I see as ideal, is an expression of divine character. So my work becomes an avenue for me to seek to capture a little bit of divine grace and perfection as expressed in the life of man. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, once said, "The soul of a man shines out when he faces with composure one heavy mischance

after another; not that he does not feel them, but because he is a man of a high and heroic temper." The high and heroic capacity of the human soul is intriguing and fascinating to me.

### At what point in your evolution as an artist did you decide to make this your livelihood, not just an avocation?

Not only was it not difficult for me to decide to make my living through art, it was also not difficult for me to believe that I would be able to do so. First of all, as far back as I can remember, I have always been keenly aware of the voice within, which I believed and still believe will never lead me astray. And I have been blessed with the courage to obey this voice religiously, even when it appears to be leading me against conventional wisdom and logic. So in a sense, I did not have any choice, since the voice was loud and clear regarding the path I must follow.

Also, because of my spiritual underpinnings, I've always believed that talent is from God, and He that gave the talent, gave it for a reason, and He would also take responsibility for providing the way for that talent to be used to obtain the necessities of life. My own responsibility was therefore to do my very best in honing that talent, and as long as I did my best in the pursuit of my daily bread, He would do the rest.

Such has been my outlook, and it has proven to be a correct one. It is rather an inspirational philosophy, simple but profound, for what can be better than believing in a divine mandate in one's endeavors? I have learned not to expect an entirely rosy road without thorns, but when the challenges come, because of my perspective I am undaunted, and I don't see the challenges as a sign or reason to doubt the correctness of my chosen field—rather, I see them as opportunities to learn other important lessons of life. Experience has proven and continues to prove to me that this idea that God provides is a true and beautiful philosophy.

Coupled with this mindset is the good fortune I have to be blessed with a wonderful mother and a wonderful wife. These two have uncompromisingly sacrificed and supported me in every way on my artistic journey.

### How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

Just like in any other calling one feels comes from God, I believe mine is given for the benefit and service to others. As I learn to genuinely approach it in this light, and bend my mind away from pride and selfishness, not only do more opportunities arise for me, but also my mind becomes more enlightened, and I see the way before me a little more clearly. I feel that I, as an artist, am only an instrument in the hands of the real and great creator. Whatever I am able to do with my talent that is good is really that which God allows to be done through me for the edification of his name and the benefit of his children. I find hard work to be indispensable to success. However, I also, through experience, am learning that even though hard work is indispensable to success, yet it is not through hard work alone that success comes. I believe firmly that to do great things with one's talents, one must find a reason and a motivation greater than any selfish interests and wholeheartedly believe in it.

I hope that my work adds beauty and meaning to the world. From my earliest remembrances of my first thoughts about art, I have always felt that there was something noble and inspiring about art, almost as if art has within it the power to lift man's soul beyond the bounds of the physical world into an eternity of peace and joy. Like Picasso, I believe that "art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life." And in the same spirit of what Handel was reported to have said, I hope my work not only beautifies the environment, but also in a more personal way reminds and encourages the viewer towards a higher ideal, and offers him solace from the daily cares and worries of life. 🌱



Photos courtesy Nnamdi Okonkwo