

Edwards draws inspiration from Africa

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"The course exposes students to the art of peoples everywhere except Europe, so they can see things that are going on but are not covered," said Edwards, who has traveled widely through Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. "People are living coherent, creative lives there. Assumptions are little more than that — assumptions."

This country is at its best, he said, "whenever Americans are honest enough to realize we are made up of people all over the world."

For Edwards, inspiration comes from his ancestral home, Africa, which he first visited in 1971 and where he continues to return every year.

In artistic terms, he points to the influence of African art on western modern art.

"European art was often affected by what it got from Africa. Picasso for instance, was influenced by art from countries the French had colonized: Gabon, the Congo, Mali," he said.

As an African-American, "the first member of my family in more than 200 years to go home," Africa serves as "a

confirmation," he said.

The concerns of African artists are similar to those of African-American artists, he added.

"They are dealing with social change, with clarifying their cultural history from their own viewpoint, with doing something about the destructive way of prior societies," he said.

"Africans had the same things done to them through colonization as was done here . . . the only reason I can speak to people in Nigeria is that we were colonized by the same country."

His connection with Africa is a celebratory thread in Edwards' work.

In one of his bigger pieces, "Point of Memory," a large chain rises upward.

"The chains aren't just symbols of oppression. They also represent linkages," he said. They also function as links in a literal context — Edwards hopes to someday make a piece on the east coast and an equivalent piece on Africa's West coast.

While the hammers and nails in "Lynch Fragments" are dangerous, they are also tools that build and mend.

His commissions throughout the country, in public housing projects, libraries,

and urban renewal projects have names like "Confirmation," "The Promise," and "Out of the Struggles of the Past, A Brilliant Future."

A series of kinetic sculptures of circles and spheres is called "Homage to Coco," after Edwards' grandmother who used sit in a rocking chair on the porch of an evening.

Another major influence on his sculpture is architecture — one of his pieces of hollow steel columns is a "reinterpretation of the idea of columns" he saw in a temple in Egypt.

Like an architect, Edwards has to consider the practical aspects of welding sometimes huge pieces of steel together. Structural integrity is important when you're working on a sculpture that measures 18 feet high and 30 feet wide, and weighs 5.5 tons.

The inside of his studio is equipped with heavy operating cranes, welding masks hanging on the wall like medieval helmets in a museum, and huge pieces of shiny, polished steel.

"A big mistake is a big mistake," he said, laughing.

He begins a piece by working it out on

paper, and his "doodlings" are evident on an envelope stuck into the breast pocket of his chamois shirt. He makes a small model before undertaking the sculpture.

Originally a painter, Edwards got interested in sculpture, and welded sculpture specifically, at the end of his studies at the University of Southern California in the early '60s.

While the recent attention amuses Edwards, who's been working for 25 years — an artist friend just sent him a note saying, "Congratulations on being discovered — again!" — he's glad to acknowledge the recognition given to the cultural and aesthetic concerns of modern African-American artists.

For too long, access in the form of acceptance in galleries and by dealers was denied.

"We're seeing a few more. The number of African-American artists of quality who didn't have gallery representation were out of balance. For a period I knocked on doors, but then I stopped knocking," he said.

"I've had a better museum career, which has always been critical corroboration of what I was doing."

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BY ALBERT H. COHEN
Special to The News Tribune

Peabody-Mason competition the sa

...we switched it on you, she roared with glee. "We switched it on you, and you never even knew it!" As she doubled over again with laughter, I had the warm feeling that comes from knowing you've made someone else's day.