

Masud Olufani



“Art is magic,” says Masud Olufani. He isn’t just a sculptor, he’s like a wizard who creates pieces that make you think, feel, hear, and even smell! He uses all kinds of materials – wood, steel, fabric, and clay, as well as video, audio, and food. He wants you to relate to his artwork with *all* of your senses.

Born in California, Masud loved drawing as a kid. It helped him stay calm when his parents argued. They divorced when he was about seven. Masud lived mostly with his mom in New York, and she encouraged his creative spirit.

Masud studied art at Morehouse College in Georgia. He searched for his creative path for about 15 years while working as a waiter. In 2013, he earned a master’s degree in sculpture from the Savannah College of Art and Design.

Since then, Masud has shown his work around the world and won many awards. He also writes, acts in movies and plays, and teaches in schools, colleges, and prisons. Today, he lives in Atlanta, Georgia, and uses his creative powers to invite us into his enchanting world!

Q: What’s one of your favorite childhood memories?

A: Going to Disney World with my whole family . . . my older brother, my mom, my dad, and me. I think I was five . . . It was one of the rare times when we were all together and happy.

Q: What was the most challenging experience for you as a kid?

A: The dissolution of my parents’ marriage. The thing that still sticks in my mind was their fights . . . When my father left, my older brother left too . . . I must have been six or seven, and . . . I thought if I cried or pleaded in just the right way, I could get [my dad] to stay . . . But it didn’t work.

Q: What early experiences set you on the path toward your career?

A: I started drawing when I was four. I remember the first drawing that [my mother] flipped out on—it was some cowboys . . . They had dimension and depth. I wasn’t drawing stick figures . . . She loved the arts . . . She got me lessons, bought me books, took me to museums, all that stuff.

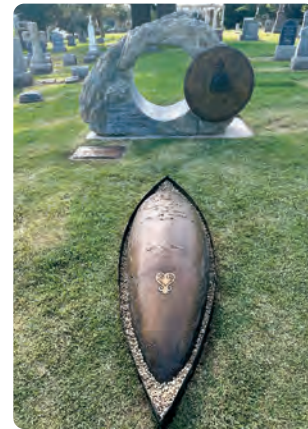


Though he mainly grew up in New York, at about age 14, Masud lived with his mom in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Q: Some people say they aren’t creative or good at making art. How would you encourage them to try?

A: I think *everybody* has the capacity to be creative . . . I’m starting to take African dance, and I have no intention of opening on Broadway anytime soon. It’s a hobby, a fun endeavor, a learning endeavor. I think so much of life is about finding ways to open ourselves up to the creative spirit that’s inside of all of us . . . I’m all for creative play. I think that’s the arena for some remarkable discoveries about ourselves.

Questions and
Answers with an
Inspirational Bahá'í



Top left: In 2024, Masud starred in *No Cowards in Our Band*, a play about Frederick Douglass, who escaped from slavery and became a civil rights leader.

Above: Masud designed the Robert Turner Monument in 2020. **Left:** Masud's *You Can't Cage My Strut* is a response to the U.S. prison system, which unequally ensnares Black men. The strutting chicken conveys survival in African culture.

Q: You designed the monument for Robert Turner, the first African American Bahá'í. What was most meaningful about that process?

A: The diversity of the crew and the committee that did it . . . that was really rich. Obviously, there's a lot of historical significance—the first African American Bahá'í, the first time that a person of African descent within the Faith has designed any memorial of any significance in the Bahá'í Faith. It's about representation, which is so important . . . And it's about providing a space where people can contemplate . . . this man's life and what he meant, not only to the Bahá'í community, but also to the world. Whether the world recognizes it or not, in the future, they will . . . [understand] the impact that his acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation ultimately has . . . I'm honored that I was [chosen to design it] . . . It was really a joyful process.

Q: What impact do you think art can have on social change?

A: Art . . . is a stimulus for the spirit, for the soul . . . It can draw out qualities in human beings. It can inspire us to think differently about the world . . . [and] help us to envision a different future . . . When [I'm] dealing with the issue of race, obviously I have personal interest in that, given the history of my family and watching the struggles in my family and in my community . . . At a very young age, I was listening to the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I developed an interest in issues of racial justice. And that found its way into my work.

Q: What virtues are essential for you to practice in your work?

A: Perseverance, dedication, commitment, risk, failure, sincere humility. Courage—courage is so big. Creativity, of course . . . I always like to be almost at the very edge of what I think I can do . . . because I know that I'll learn something. Even if there's failure, there's learning in the failure.

Q: How has the Bahá'í Faith influenced your career choices or your work?

A: I believe fundamentally that if the teachings have penetrated your heart in a sincere way, you don't have to micromanage how they're going to manifest themselves in the world, in the work. They will be there . . . One [young Bahá'í artist] asked me . . . "What do you wish for us?" I said, "Freedom. I want you all to be free to explore your ideas, your concepts, the things that are important to you, trusting that the Faith is part of who you are, and that will guide you . . . Trust that it's in you."