

An Appreciation of the State Of Visual Arts in Nigeria (1900-1970)

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ABSTRACT This study chronicles the evolution and state of visual arts training in Nigeria. Sequel to the seemingly incomprehensible concept and doubt as to the existence of Nigerian art, the writer attempts to demystify the erroneous impression to state the character of Nigerian art in the global art scene - an art with a culture-bound philosophy. Through review of relevant literature, the study has created a benchmark through the following periodization depicting the postulated chronological trend in Nigerian visual arts - Phase I: (1900--1938) - Period of Sowing the Seed of Formal Art Training in Nigeria and Phase II: (1939 - 1970) - The search for Identity/Promotions of Nigerian Art. These creative and conceptual landmarks are attempts to provide ideological handles for the historical narrative of the state of Nigerian visual arts. Within this period, Nigeria witnessed great creative awareness in the global art scene, which shows that Nigerian art has indeed come of age.

INTRODUCTION

In a dynamic society such as ours, attempts to find a common language for Nigerian art appears to have been difficult. This is as a result of the tremendous distribution of ethnic groups, languages, customs and dialects which cannot be easily divorced from her arts. According to (Babalola 1994) in an article titled, "Problems of Perception and Definition of Contemporary Nigerian Art", there seems to be no difficulty in the perception and definition of Nigerian art. He notes that even with the multiplicity of ethnic cultures, the art is ingrained with the various social, religious and cultural settings cherished by the people, which is spiritually, conceptually and technically fashioned by the artists.

From the above, it can be deduced that the multiplicity of diverse groupings in the Nigerian art scene have little impact on the character of Nigerian art. What is more significant is the visual expressiveness in terms of theme (philosophy), material and subject matter which have bearing on its Nigerianness. In a further argument as to the term "Nigerian art" (Ikwemesi 1996) in an article titled "Nigerian Art and the Politics of Identity" states that there is a Nigerian art in the geo-political sense, but in a practically stylistic sense, such an art does not exist, since most of the art being practiced since colonial times are done with tools and based on standard which are essentially Euro- American. He posits that Nigerian art at present can only refer to art made in Nigeria rather than of Nigeria

In spite of this postulation, Nigerian art has come of age having evolved from seemingly comprehensible experimentation with diverse materials and technique. Thus, this has produced unique art forms which have not only carved an identity for Nigerian art but have produced works with common ideology, style and even technique. These have further sharpened the nature and meaning of Nigerian art. It is on this backdrop that the writer seeks to appraise the state of visual arts in Nigeria over the years to show their uniqueness amongst other global art practices.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the radicalization of art in Europe, which brought about the assimilation of African philosophy of art, changed the European perception of African art. To a number of Europeans, nothing had been so rebellious against their age-old creative culture, a culture that highly appreciates the naturalistic excellence of the art of classical Greece, the life-like representations of the Roman Emperors, whose feat at capturing nature produced the High Renaissance. This reactionary attitude to art rather than being regarded as burial of creativity, was in fact the birth of creativity (Oloidi 1988).

In Nigeria, (Egonwa 1995) states that:

There is a relationship between the creative expression of the various people of Nigeria, in terms of form, subject matter and meaning. The stylistic diversity in Nigerian art is only naturally reflective of her various and numerous ethnic groups and does not in any way deny them their birthright. Any valid work from any of these groups is capable of touching others aesthe-

tically. Communication problems of the past among the culture groups, adversely affected the creation of a fairly uniform style. No art from any nation of the world can be international, as societies have only influenced one another due to natural movement or an excuse of political, economic and military domination

Nigerian art therefore, could not have taken the style of one ethnic group according to him. Egonwa is of the view that contemporary Nigerian art has now attained some measure of national character. Being able to maintain the Nigerian identity despite one's global exposure, is the uniting factor and an important index of contemporaneity in modern Nigerian art.

More people now understand the idioms of other groups and could use these to create irrespective of their own ethnic group. These borrowing of idioms from diverse groupings within the visual landscape and entity called Nigeria have provided a sign-post that has formally led to what could be described as Nigerian art. Consequently, traditional Nigerian art refers to the original art style and cultural phase before contact with other people of the world. However, because art styles persist, art today in Nigeria has not completely broken with that style. Admittedly, it has been seriously affected by forces of modernization.

Typical examples of art works that show the concept of true Nigerian art include the Gift of the Talents painted in 1960 on the wall of the cafeteria of Tedder Hall of the University of Ibadan by Demas Nwoko (b. 1935), a print titled, Facing the Unknown by Obiora Udechukwu (b. 1945-) and a mixed-media painting titled Black Friday produced in 1986 by Mohammed Sanni Muazu (b. 1959-), reflecting the Students/Mobile Police saga at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. From these art works listed above, one can decipher a work that is truly Nigerian in terms of form, meaning, subject matter and material. The uniqueness in style sets it apart from the arts in other parts of the world and thus carving an inroad into the world of post-modern art. (Irivwier 2005)

State of Nigerian Visual Arts

An overview of the state of Nigerian visual arts spanning through the decades is hereby attempted with the postulated chronological periods in tracing the development of these stylistic tendencies. These are in phases:

PHASE I (1900-1938)- Period of Sowing the Seed of Formal Art Training in Nigeria

By the end of the 19th century, formal art training was yet to be implanted into the Nigerian school system. Historical records show that attempts to include art courses in the school curriculum was made in 1897 at the Hope Waddel Training Institute, Calabar, founded by the United Free Church Mission in 1895 (Wangboje 1969). It was not until the 20th century through the effort of Aina Onabolu (1882 - 1963) that the foundation of modern art training in Nigeria was laid. From 1900 till about 1919, Onabolu was already conscious and confident of his artistic competence and the need to get art introduced into Lagos Schools. He made relentless efforts to convince the colonial government of his creative potentials and that he was biologically fit to express himself so as to deter the colonial stereotype that no black man was capable of drawing and painting like the whiteman.

In fact, he had already made good impression of himself to a number of persons through his naturalistic drawings and paintings nurtured from experiences got from the few available European books and magazines brought into the Country by these colonial adventurers. It was in 1906 that his painting titled Mrs. Spencer Savage let him out and brought him to limelight in the art circle. He reinforced this stance by the further acquisition of an art certificate from London and Paris in 1922 (Oloidi 1986).

With the eventual arrival of Kenneth Murray (1902 - 1972) in Nigeria by 1927 on the advice of Onabolu, the promise of art training was further strengthened. The artistic activities of Murray's students became pronounced between 1937 to 1940. In terms of style, Aina Onabolu's drawings and paintings show great sensibility in the discipline, which he acquired in the art academies in London and Paris. Some of his works remain to this day the finest naturalistic portrait paintings of contemporary Nigeria art. Other apostles in this naturalistic fervour include Akinola Lasekan (1916 - 1972) and Eke Okaybulu (1916 - 1958).

PHASE II (1939 -1970) - The Search For Identity /Promotion of Nigerian Art

Murray (1902 - 1972) changed the course of art training in Nigeria) through what (Egonwa 2001) in an article titled "The Evolution of the

Concept of Natural Synthesis” calls his “culturist advocacy”. Murray’s school encouraged the study of traditional customs and usages, which formed the central theme of their genre paintings. The trust of his artistic ideology was on culturalisation that is encouraging students to create art works reflecting Nigerian traditional values. Murray insisted on grounding the students in their own local systems of knowledge and artistic practice as a deep interest in preserving these traditions.

Murray’s teaching of many artists who imbibed cultural concept in their art continued to be a reference point in search for the Nigerianisation of our visual art practice. (Oloidi 1995) in an article titled “Art and Nationalism in Colonial Nigeria” stated that Murray stimulated cultural rehabilitation, parity and pride to the arts and indeed the entire cultural heritage of Nigeria. He advocated traditionalism in art as opposed to Europeanism or conventionalism. This made the indigenous artist to be local in conception, interpretation, characterization and general attitude to art. Some of his students include A.P. Umana (b. 1922-), J.O. Ugoji (1917-1981), D.L.K Nnachi (b. 1909 -) and Benedict Enwonwu (1921 -1994).

Murray’s school was the earliest and most impressive for its pioneering achievements in the area of formal art training in this country. There is also the Mrs. Kurian Williams experiment at the Uzuakoli Methodist school of the 1930s, in which students were instructed to create art works from folktales and stories told in class about the traditional lives of their people. She thus showed her interest in the utilitarian aspect of art training and made her creative impact felt till 1939 when she left Nigeria.

There is also the establishment of an art department at both the Yaba Technical Institute which later became Yaba College of Technology in 1952 now City University of Technology, Yaba and at the Ibadan campus of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST) which was eventually transferred to Zaria in 1953. This later became the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. This, according to (Oloidi 1986) in a paper titled “Growth and Development of Art Education in Nigeria”, elevated the status of art among other academic discipline. This encouraging development in art training was complemented with local art centres such as Father Kevin Carrol’s Oye Ekiti Experiment of the late 1940s.

Father Kevin Carrol’s Oye - Ekiti workshop

encouraged a number of wood carvers, weavers, bead workers and a whole group of craftsmen, who employed the indigenous arts and crafts practices of Sculpture, weaving, embroidery, leather and bead work to create a vast array of forms that were then adopted by Catholics all over Yoruba land. The Oye - Ekiti experiment impacted much on contemporary Nigerian art especially on the use of forms and motifs of indigenous art and craft works into new art forms such as painting, Textiles and printmaking.

Lamidi Fakeye (b. 1925 -) a neo - traditional carver, and a product of the Oye - Ekiti experiment is a renowned contemporary Yoruba artist who among his colleagues such as Bamidele Arowogun, often employs indigenous tools, materials and iconography which have been in use for centuries to depict modern and foreign themes. There existed various experimental art centres inspired by Ulli Beier such as the Mbari Summer Schools at Ibadan in 1962 and at Oshogbo in 1963 which prepared people for diverse background to a kind of creative freedom.

Beier (1968) noted that the launching of Mbari Club in Ibadan in the early 1960s generated much cultural awareness in Nigeria, the most successful being the Mbari Mbayo of Oshogbo held in 1962 by Dennis Williams. The idea of running a workshop for untrained artists developed from a need to service the design needs of the theatre artists and a carryover from a previous workshop experiment conducted in Ibadan first by Pancho Guedes and Julian Beinart and later by Beinart and Dennis Williams.

The Mbari workshop provided a new approach to art. They drew upon vernacular culture, folkways, folklores and their work is narrative, visually figurative. It is one of the efforts in the search for new forms and content, the exploration of fusing tradition and modernity. Student artist participants include Jacob Afolabi (b.1945-), Taiwo Olaniyi (b 1944-), Jimoh Buraimoh (b. 1943-), Muraina Oyelami (b. 1940-) Asiru Olatunde (b.1918-), Adebisi Akanji (b.1930-) and much later Nike Davies Okundaye (b. 1951-) who worked under Susanne Wenger, who initiated a project in 1962 to generate a modern Yoruba folk art.

There is the Zaria students Art society (1957 - 1961) - a group of creative artists who according to Uche Okeke in an article titled “Panorama of Nigerian Art”, formulated a guiding principle for themselves - a manifesto, as it were, which accept-

ed change as an important element in the art and life of a people. Thus, the concept of Natural Synthesis was promulgated. This involves the resuscitation of what is best in our traditional culture and harmonizing it with what is best elsewhere in the world (Okeke 1975). This idea espoused their pre-occupation with the search for identity. A number of artists started articulating indigenous forms and philosophies by using them to explore new visual possibilities. This gave rise to a new mode of artistic expression such as the Uli School, style of elongation, abstraction, stylized naturalism with perhaps more purposive goal of carving an identity for Nigerian art.

There is the Mbari club at Oshogbo (Mbari Mbayo) in 1963, organized by Dennis Williams and Susanne Wenger with the help of Duro Ladipo. The Oshogbo School explored the world of Yoruba folklore - expressions on dreams, nightmares and weird pictorial elements. This is quite different from Kenneth Murray's earlier experiment or Father Kevin Carroll's work at Oye - Ekiti. The participants at the Oshogbo school were at liberty to recreate the traditional folklore of Yoruba. They were enabled to pour out Spirit images, which found ready acceptance in Europe and America. Exponents of this school are Taiwo Olaniyi (b. 1944 -), Jimo Buraimoh (b. 1943 -) and Jacob Afolabi (b. 1945 -).

There is also the Ori - Olokun cultural centre established at the University of Ife, Ile-Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in 1968 by Micheal Crowder and which was later directed by Solomon Irein Wangboje (1930 - 1998) in the late 1960s. The theme of their work is essentially on traditional Yoruba folklores and the river goddess and Spirit images. There is the exploration of a wide range of materials, which were improvised for the purpose of making art. Themes are derived from traditional sources such as myth, religious activities and philosophical views as manifested in proverbs, maxims, allusion and aphorisms. The workshop explored whatever opportunities the ancient and historical environment provided. Participants were sufficiently motivated to create. A number of artists including Wale Olajide (b. 1940 -), Adeniji Akanmu and Labayo Ogundele began their training and career in this workshop.

At this centre, workshops were held not only in the visual arts, but also in the other areas of creativity, particularly drama, Music and dance. Other researchers and artists including Agbo

Folarin (b. 1936 -), Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972), Akin Euba, Ola Rotimi (1938 - 2000) and Peggy Harper joined Wangboje in the workshop. Artists like Yinka Adeyemi, Muraina Oyelami (b. 1940 -), Jimoh Buraimoh were invited from Oshogbo to help with the training of the workshop participants. New talents such as Rufus Oritsayomi, Ademola Williams (b. 1947 -) and Peter Badejo were discovered and developed. With the departure of Wangboje, the visual art section of the centre collapsed. The performing art section survived under Ola Rotimi.

After a while, almost all the visual artists who trained in the workshop left to found an independent centre, called Oguntimehin Art Gallery. Agbo Folarin also ran a workshop in textile design for a while. Ige Ibigbami ran a similar workshop in Pottery at Sabo Ile-Ife (Okediji 1990). By and large, the Ori- Olokun workshop while it lasted did not only mark a flowering phase of the visual arts in Ile-Ife, but was also like a creative art consortium on which a brand of that formalism in the present visual and performing arts in Nigeria is based.

Then, there was the Mbari centre, Mbaise where Chief S.A Chukueggu (b. 1919 -) displayed significant skill amongst other established neo-traditional carvers which no doubt had influence on modern Nigerian art, East of the Niger. There were experiments and brief workshops like the one at Oshogbo in 1963 and 1964 for printmakers in which Solomon Irein Wangboje (1930 - 1998) featured prominently. The famous Dutch graphic artists, Ru Van Rossem also conducted one. Most of the participants including Wale Olajide (b. 1940 -) and Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932 -) and their followers became involved in creative works and are making names for themselves in Nigeria and abroad. These workshops and experimental centres no doubt influenced the growth and development of contemporary Nigerian art. This is through creating and promoting that artistic orientation and consciousness to a number of persons who, due to their less privileged position, would not have had access to academic art institution and training.

CONCLUSION

A study of the visual art practice in Nigeria indicates that naturalism appears to be the highly acknowledged form of artistic expression spanning through the early decades from the time of Aina Onabolu to the present with slightly

varying technique and usage (functionality). But in spite of these variations there appears to be points of commonality in the various works reflecting naturalism. Furthermore, Nigeria's attainment of Political independence in 1960 generated the urge to project a Nigerian personality in the arts and other aspects of life. This resulted in a return to the ancestral roots for inspiration and self-determination. In the words of Babatunde Lawal (b. 1943 -), the need to project traditional art from total extinction coupled with the crave for it in international art circles has encouraged a revival of ancient forms with or without modification (Lawal 1988).

Consequently, the erroneous impressions previously held as to the existence of Nigerian art in the face of global visual art practice has been demystified. There is a need therefore for a reconstructive history of the entire phenomenon. An examination of the state of Nigerian visual arts have revealed positive features as it affects its evolution and practice which before now have been hazy in outlook. This study so far shows that most of our artists have produced art forms, which have created an identity for Nigerian art. To a large extent, they have produced works with common ideology, style and even technique. In that way, one can see a new vista of popular learning in Nigerian Visual Art world. Contemporary creative currents in the various aspects of the visual arts affect most of the artists working presently. From drawing, painting, Sculpture through ceramics, Textiles to Graphic Design, varied media are employed in the execution of their works. Old ideals have been polished to meet up with the realities of today. In all, these creative efforts in the various specialized areas have come to be used more for utilitarian and functional purpose rather than the aesthetic intent of the Academy model of artistic expression. In this

context, contemporary Nigerian art of the present century has carved a niche for itself in the world art market place.

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