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## **Nigerian Visual Arts (1970-2003) and the Impact of Some Stylistic Tendencies** (Pp 1-13)

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### **Abstract**

*The paper made a critical appraisal of the diverse visual art practices in Nigeria. The writer observed that Nigerian art has not only carved an identity for itself but indeed has come of age. The art productions and techniques from the stylistic tendencies have created vista of possibilities for artists to explore. From this study, two phases namely; Phase III (1970 – 1988) - Harvest /Flourishing of Artistic Styles, Movements and Expansions, during which Nigerian art blossomed and became dynamic and Phase IV (1989-2003) – Period of Experimentation, Globalization and Creative Consciousness where different windows of interpretation were opened to further extend the frontiers of art globally were clearly discerned. It is a flowering phase, which bore fruits giving rise to a variety of stylistic tendencies, culminating in the conceptual art of the present. Apart from borrowing extensively from indigenous African imagery, they also lend themselves to modern trends which are reflected in the ways they experiment with materials and techniques without losing touch with their African identity.*

**Keywords:** Stylistic tendencies, conceptual, African imagery, expressive, art genre.

## **Introduction**

Nigerian visual arts (1970-2003) witnessed progression and gained international attention and recognition in the world's art scene. A number of artistic styles flourished coupled with the high level of creative consciousness among practicing artists and art enthusiasts. The 1970s witnessed the re-emergence of artistic practices, which were in the lull occasioned by the civil war in the country. However, it should be noted that before the civil war, Nigerian people were basking in the joy of the newly won political independence, coupled with the artists' articulation of the concept of natural synthesis in their artistic endeavours.

The invitation of Uche Okeke (b.1933-) to the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka at the end of the hostilities in 1971, further increased the tempo of his experimentation on the Uli stylistic tendency. He then infused it into the art department exposing his students into the concept and thus elevated Uli art as a notable formal stylistic tendency in Nigerian visual art. Nsukka School has the largest number of students as a school of art and perhaps the largest number of imitators as well. Their drawings and paintings show a lyrical quality and a certain organizational approach that belongs to the best of Igbo mural painting tradition (Okeke 1979).

Prior to the visual art practices in the 1970s, a graphic examination of the stylistic tendencies of Nigerian art, according to (Oloidi 1995), indicates that the 1960s witnessed:

a period of artistic experimentation which was not really universal to the Nigerian artist. Only a handful of these artists were genuinely and emotionally controlled by their modernistic forms. The Nigerian artists had been trained formally in the tradition of the academy with recognizable reproduction of nature. It was not easy for them to depart from this. The best possible creative strategy was the denaturing, or in purely traditional African context, the re-organization of nature which easily portrayed them as perceptual realists. It must be understood that some artists like E. Emokpae, Ayo Ajayi, Okpu Eze, Ayo Okiti and few members of the Zaria Arts Society with its radical attitude to art creations could seriously sustain this formalistic ideology.

From the above, it has been observed that there is some fluidity in the mode of artistic expression tilting towards the academic mode of the pre – independence era. However, a number of “self made” artists during the pre-independence era maintained the realistic style occasioned by their mode of study. This is art training through inspiration got from pictures found in some European magazines, newspapers and some textbooks of the period (Oloidi 2008). In the early 1960s, from the euphoria of political freedom gained at independence and the emphatic state of affairs in Nigeria occasioned by the civil war of the late 1960s, an attitudinal change in artistic styles became evident. Theme and subject matter reflected these scenarios. These forms are essentially highly stylized with culturistic elements.

### **The Visual Art Scene of the 1970s**

The rejuvenation of artistic practices after the civil war influenced a number of artists of the 1970s such as Kolade Oshinowo (b.1948-). The freedom of artistic expressions became pronounced thus giving rise to a variety of art movements. The artists in this era were highly expressive. The period witnessed an influx of foreign ideas. New materials especially with the oil boom in the country and methods crept into art, and a radical development in form and content became inevitable. In 1977, we had what is referred to as FESTAC 77 - 2<sup>nd</sup> World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, which led to the establishment of the FESTAC village in Lagos. It was a show or display of cultural and technological skills from all black people of the world (Africans) hence the colloquium which among others took the task of Black civilization and the arts. According to Obasanjo in 1977, the aim of FESTAC is not to underrate or debase the cultural values of other race or races, rather, it sought to extend African value in a world which is highly competitive so that the Black and African cultural heritage can co-exist with the cultural values of other people from other lands without much conflicts. In other words, the African seeks cultural harmony based on human dignity and mental respect. This epic event revolutionized and engendered a lot of ideas and a number of things (Obasanjo 1977).

This gave rise to the “New National Policy on Education” (N.N.P.E) in 1979, revised in 1981. With the cultural fiesta (FESTAC 77), artists were rather encouraged to develop the African personality and cultural identity in their artistic creation. A number of artists became so conscious of contemporary issues in society and thus used their art to inform, express the pains of contemporary life and for the purpose of beautification. These include Ifeta Emmanuel (b.1945), Kolade Oshinowo (b.1940-), Chuks Anyanwu, P. S.

Igboanugo (b.1940-), Dele Jegede (b.1945-) Obiora Udechukwu (b. 1945 - ) and David Dale (b. 1947-). This period witnessed increasing use of indigenous materials to forge ahead with the creative process. There is also a high degree of abstraction which task the intellect in attempt to appreciate the products of this stylistic stream as seen in Yusuf Grillo's work titled *African Women with Gele* produced in 1973.

The artists of this period also imbibed the creative philosophy and ideas of the artists of the previous period. Their dynamism has great impact on their works. They have skillfully advanced their creative abilities, making their works unique in form and content. For example, Obiora Udechukwu is known as one of the direct offsprings of Uche Okeke, Kolade Oshinowo of Yusuf Grillo ( by association), David Dale and Tayo Quaye of Bruce Onobrakpeya. They are highly influenced by their masters but propagated their ideas through schools, exhibitions, workshops, seminars, and lectures where most of them teach. They also combine realistic, abstract, landscaping and illusionistic ideas with ethnic motifs to create their popular and unique art. Also, through their various art works, they made commentary on social, political, economic and religious life of the people. They are also involved in various experiments targeted at creating artworks which are devoid of foreign elements.

### **The Visual Art Scene in the 1980s**

In the 1980s, there was a resurgence of practicing artists with increasing experimentation with local materials and forms, thus defying the harsh economic realities of the times to produce artworks which are quite unique and distinct. The *Ona* concept of artistic expression, which evolved towards the end of the 1980s, is pre – occupied with the recreation of Yoruba ideas and cultural identities in contemporary arts. There is a wide range of themes and subject executed with a balance of traditional forms and western arts styles and techniques (Onipede 2005).

There is the use of unconventional and modern materials such as Fibre glass in sculpture and greater awareness about this creative enterprise was further extended. The artists of this era include Omotayo Adenaiké (b. 1954-), Egonwa Osa D (b.1955-), Olakunle Filani (b.1957-), Ebigbo Christopher (b. 1948-) and Erimona Ellis (b. 1950-) whose artistic creation reflect positively in the development of Nigerian art. With the creative awareness of artistic styles globally, artists of the 1980s combined their academic heritage with their home grown ideas to create essentially art forms that are unique, thus

carving an identity for contemporary Nigerian art. In the quest for innovation, there is a rigorous manipulation of media thus bringing about the expressive potentials of the artists.

### **The Visual Art Scene from the 1990s**

From the eve of the 1990s up to 2003 (where the study covers) there seems to be a re-invigoration of the creative consciousness among practicing artists and radical tendencies at experimentation rose to a level that installation art became something to marvel upon. Academic discussion emanating from the stylistic tendencies stimulated art discourse among Nigerian artists from all nooks and crannies of this country. There is exploration of a wide range of materials, which were improvised for the purpose of making art. Themes were derived from the traditional sources such as myths, religious activities and philosophical views as manifested in proverbs, maxims, allusions and aphorism.

Bruce Onobrakpeya (b.1932-) made a lot of impact during this period, especially with his organization of the Harmattan Workshops and the establishment of the Ovuomaroro Art Gallery, Agbarha – Otor, after the earlier one based in Lagos. Through practice according to (Oloidi 1995) in a foreword titled “Imageries of contemporary Nigerian art”, he carved for himself the image of an institution. His disciples became a school. Furthermore, he stated that Onobrakpeya’s school propagates folklorization in modern Nigerian art, manifested in the opulent use of virtual artefacts in printmaking, pictorial prolificity, folklorisation of themes, very uncanny compositions, pyramidization of pictorial motifs or forms, heavy but harmonious compositional complexities, decorativeness and profuse ornamentations.

Installation art during this period is a West - sponsored globalization in the visual art scene, as exemplified in *New Energies: Beyond the Conventional Styles*. This art trend gained public glare in 1999 with the conceptual works of ten young artists from the Nsukka axis of the Nigerian visual arts (Amifor 2001). Conceptual art is revolutionary; concentrating more on the idea behind the image created rather than the image as a replica of something. It arose during the 1960s out of the happenings staged by Alan Kaprow in which the event itself became the art. Conceptual art challenges our definition of art more radically than pop, insisting that the leap of the imagination, not the execution, is art. According to this view, since the works of art are incidental by-product of the imaginative leap, they can be dispensed with altogether, so too can galleries and by extension, even the artist’s public.

The creative process needs only be documented in some ways. Sometimes this is in verbal form, but more often it is by still photograph, video or film show in an installation. Conceptual art, instead of abolishing contents, eliminates aesthetics from art. Performance art which originated in the early decades of this century belongs to the history of the theatre, but the form that arose in the 1970s combines aspects of happenings and conceptual art with installation (Janson H and Janson A 1992). For instance, the installation of Judy Pfaff(b.1946-) can be likened to exotic indoor landscape. The inspiration of nature is apparent in the jungle-like density of *Dragon* aptly named for its fiery form and colours. Pfaff uses painting together with sculpture and other materials to activate architectural space. The treatment of the wall surface will remind us of the collage in *Odalisk* but Pfaff playfulness is closer to Calder's *Whimsy* than to Rauschenberg's *ironic wit*.

The same can be seen in the works of El Anatsui (b.1944-) who re-ordered the forms of nature to beget art and to evoke pleasant surprise in the spectator. Drawing from the rich repertoire of Ghana's *Adinkra* textile motifs and Uli motifs in Nsukka, Anatsui experimented with circular wooden plaques, ceramic-induced manganese body and glasses, piece of vertical planks, terrazzo, free standing chain-sawed woodworks, old woods and mortals. To these can be added his series of installations and performance which no doubt, had extended and amplified the channels of his creative vent. He encouraged students and colleagues alike to seek new materials and new methods to meet the art challenges of the time.

To him, art works and experiences may not necessarily be beautiful but they must be expressive. They should delve deeper below the surface of the events, objects, people and experiences in an attempt to seek for unusual meaning and truth, to distil essence, to decipher symbolic contents. Local cheap materials were used to make strong statements. In his *Ghana must go*, Onyishi used wire to join vegetable sponge tubules to create a form which reminds one of the types of bags used by Ghanaian deportees from Nigeria in 1980s. Eva Obodo (b.1975-) with his soft and stuffed sculpture explored the characteristics and temperaments of unconventional sculpture materials like jute, clothes, tarpaulin and foam. The third member of this group, Anene Iroh (b.1973-) experimented with water-based colours mixed with detergents to produce a unique bubble effect on paper (Onuora 2001). Exploring new ways of expressing various aspects of life, gives limitless opportunities to the artist to create great art as characterized by the art of this phase.

## **Contemporary Creative Currents**

Most artists working during this period have been affected by contemporary creative currents in the various aspects of visual arts.

### **Drawing and Painting**

In drawing and painting, which perhaps is the most popular approach used by artists, there are varied media, materials and techniques in the execution of their works. They interpret and express their own cultural heritage. In their work, we see people taking part in religious, recreational and economic activities in both rural and urban setting. The human figure is often treated in a stylized or expressionistic manner but is always recognizable. Sometimes, the artist enters the realm of gods, spirit, and heroes and their fantastic semi abstract forms appears with brilliant colours and elaborate surface decoration with forceful brush strokes. There is manipulation of the canvas with sand, gums and appliqué in order to create new effect.

### **Textiles**

In the area of textiles, the resist techniques which developed from traditional sources have been interpreted into contemporary language. With the discovery of new materials, the traditional embroidered works and the partitioning starch resist techniques have been transformed into what could be termed as Nigerian Textile Identity. Old ideas have been polished to meet up with the realities of today. Chukwuanugo Okeke (b.1941-) did a lot of work on the translation of traditional Igbo woven pieces and adapting them into his style of work (Okeke 1998). Abayomi Adetoro (b.1939-) worked extensively on the modern concept of Yoruba and Hausa design. Local materials have also been developed. This can be seen from Abayomi Adetoro's screen printed works titled *Soothsayer* produced in 1987 (Adetoro 1987). There is also Chukwuanugo Okeke's *Ancestor* produced in 1989.

### **Sculpture**

In sculpture, technology has influenced artistic production. Mike Bamidele (b. 1945-) has combined the traditional Ekiti carving experience with cement modelling approach. His group have tried to achieve semi realistic results. Ben Ekanem (b.1944-) and Emmanuel Ifeta (b.1942-) have both been using various modelling approaches to create monumental works, portraiture and mobile sculpture. This is exemplified in *Queen Amina of Zaria* produced by Ben Ekanem in 1981. Very few sculptors have sought new forms but maintained the humanistic approach of their ancestor. This area has become so industrialized and its patronage is both in the domestic and secular cum

religious purposes. Metal gates which are well designed, adorn prominent buildings as seen in the gate at the entrance of Aina Onabolu symbol of National Studios of Art, at the National Gallery of Art in Lagos. Painters are creating with a combination of mosaic, stained glass and fibre glass. But these stylistic tendencies appear to be affected by commercial interest as seen in recent commissions.

### **Ceramics**

In ceramics design, most of which bothers on sanitary, decorative and industrial/electrical wares, there is utilization of materials for industrial purposes. In the purely aesthetic variety, one sees a combination of tradition and modernity as an interesting aspect of Benjo Igwilo's (b.1938) ceramics. The traditional elements are of course, inherent in the synthesis of form and function. But a striking element of the traditional is the use of the Uli motifs and designs in a significantly technical sense. Modernity is exhibited in Igwilo's highly sophisticated glazing techniques which comprise pouring, dipping and spraying. The pouring technique involves the element of chance which often results in very expressive colours and shapes. This is exemplified through the work titled *Onu-Ekwu-Otu* (Stoneware) produced in 1996 and *Water/Punch Pot* (stone ware), also produced in 1996. Benjo Igwilo is an exponent of the *Uli* School (Igwilo 1996).

### **Graphic Design**

The Graphics and Advertising design components have gone computer. Computer literacy has thus become a necessity in the study and practice of graphic design. The graphic art style in production evolved through old methods via improved industrial methods to the present computer method. At the earlier periods in the 1960s in art institutions such as the *Yaba Technical Institute* which later became *Yaba College of Technology, Yaba*, and now referred to as *City University of Technology, Yaba*, started with commercial art from the days of the *West African Publicity*. The type of designs thus was prints produced essentially with block, etching and stencil methods. These proved very slow and energy sapping in the reproduction of art works to meet the demands of the ever-increasing commercial activities. From this humble beginning in style, it progressed to the letter-press and off-set printing processes of the 1970s and 1980s. The output of production was facilitated by these methods. But at the twilight of the millennium year – 2000, the computer resulting from advances in technology was developed to overshadow the slow pace of graphic reproduction processes. Presently the process is highly digitalized.

Graphic design is computerized as a result of advances in technology for social and economic activities, advertising, book production and communication explosion. Because of the increasing use of materials, devices are made to meet these demands although lacking in originality and western dominated concept except in few cases where research in traditional advertising is quite upcoming (Irivwieri 2005).

### **Printmaking**

In printmaking, there is the use of traditional forms and themes from folklores to execute various works. There are discoveries about etching and use of various gums and relief decoration on plain surface before printing. The printmakers of Bruce Onobrakpeya group have continued to break forms into series of lines and mass area while using textured ground. This is different from the style of Professor Solomon Wangboje who used the technique of painting and mural decoration as seen in one of his works titled *Romance of the Headload III* produced in 1981 (Wangboje 1992).

In all, these creative effort in various specialized areas have come to be used more on utilitarian and functional purposes 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 of art.

### **Impact of these Stylistic Tendencies in Nigerian Visual Arts**

The various stylistic streams have made a lot of impact in the Nigerian visual art practices. Nigerian artists are becoming more and more eclectic in their approach irrespective of individual training background. Apart from borrowing extensively from indigenous African imagery, they also lend themselves to modern trend which is reflected in the way they experiment with materials and techniques without losing touch with their African identity.

That some Nigerian visual art relies on folklores and traditional forms is the handiwork of the Murray school. Its characteristic features cut across the different “schools” with institutional training to an extent, providing the springboard for rationalizing the unwritten (oral) rules of design and form in traditional art, for conscious application to today’s modern art. This is manifested in architectural wall decorations, body adornment, carved wood and reliefs, appliqué works and textile designs (Adire and Ankara). In all these, attempt is made to recreate and establish contemporary art aesthetics and the fusion of the folkloric tradition and modern aesthetics. In sculpture,

Nigerian artists are engaging all the nuances of our folkloric tradition and aesthetics to develop themes within the same time space continuum and are establishing necessary harmony of opposite in the unity and resolution of paradoxes.

### **Onabolu School**

Onabolu School has had a lot of impact on the visual art of Nigeria. The academic portraiture tradition of Aina Onabolu persisted. The hallmark of which is the landscape genre typical of most polytechnics such as the Yaba School in Lagos. Its earlier form is reflected in conceptual focus of Murray's art. Most of the paintings then were monochromatic in character. However, a number of their works were lavishly coloured. The artist of this period metamorphosed from the superficial naturalistic representation to full grown art of naturalism. This is exemplified by Josy Ajiboye's *Fulani Shepherd's Boy with Flute*. They are conscious of their cultural background and so adopted traditional symbols in the art works. Apart from paintings which were common, other artistic creations in the form of sculptures were produced. There were increasing art of portraiture of prominent citizens in both public and private life such as the ones executed by Abayomi Barber that is well engrossed in this naturalistic tendency.

In an attempt to satisfy their clients, artists of this school found themselves enveloping their own ideas and concept and produce what appears to be a popular art that is in vogue. But in their private practice, they introduced various forms of stylization into naturalistic works. They skillfully blended aspect of both African and European cultures and achieved a uniquely modern conventional style showing their own modern education and training. There is that individualism rather than ethnicity in style and form even though they are artistic elements borrowed from ethnic group in an attempt to reflect national ideals and character.

The artist made impact through the use of various traditional imageries and stylization of their works. They vigorously expressed their individualism in various styles and techniques. They injected new philosophy into the contemporary Nigerian art scene. A strong stylization taken from both European and traditional values which further added to the development of truly contemporary Nigerian art based on Nigerian culture. They have through exhibition and other art programmes – Workshops, and seminars exerted a lot of influence and importance to the visual art tradition in Nigeria.

### **Uli School**

The Uli lexicon, though varied and dynamic consist mainly of abstract form derived from nature, animals, plant and cosmic forms. The artist distils formal elements of the design through manipulation of line. Brevity of statement and spontaneity are fundamentals of Uli technique (Udechukwu 1974). This is exemplified in the works of Chuka Amaefuna titled *Ulistm* produced in 1981. The use of space was in accordance with quintessential Uli design but this has changed with time. Apart from the power of line, there is also evolving Mbari geometric design patterns and ideographic forms. The fundamental negative – positive space dynamics evident in earlier Uli is replaced by dense pictorial compositions that leave no major area of positive or negative space. The expressive, illustrative form recurs due to a strong need to engage in social criticism and political commentary thereby giving the resulting picture several levels of meaning (Iriwieri 2008).

### **Murray School**

As for the impact of Murray school to visual art in Nigeria, it should be noted that it set the stage of modern art development in Nigeria. The dispersal of the members of the Zaria Students Art Society all over the country played an important part in raising awareness in Nigerian contemporary art.

Students were taught to look at the beauty of masks and ignore the stigma which had been destroying them since Christianity had condemned them. Exhibitions enabled their parents to learn that art could be a progressive instrument in society. These new art professionals lived respectable, honoured lives. Extra income from private sales enabled them to raise their living standards beyond those of many other professionals. Gradually, the prejudice against art and artists began to crumble and parents no longer hesitated to sponsor their children through art studies (Okafoizuna 2001).

### **Ona School**

In *Ona* art, traditional art forms are transmitted in artistic production, thus using it as a point of reference to create modern forms. With good draughtmanship and a mastery of aerial and linear perspective, windows were created in the works and a more interesting solidity of forms was achieved without losing the presence of patterns all over the picture. The patterns are not after thought additions, but a systematic build up of symbols, motifs, and signs integrated within the structure of the composition. For instance, Tola Wewe's paintings are suffused with signs, symbols, motifs and clichés from Yoruba culture, such as images of ghost, gods and goddesses, all living in

harmony with mankind. Wewe allows the use of structural depth by creating windows through which images and motifs are seen (Filani 2002).

### **Conclusion**

By and large, these visual arts genre are “masquerades” which could best be described as summation of a people’s culture and philosophy. The artists continually change their interests, attitudes and the techniques as dictated by their individual enquiries into the nature and essence of art or due to associative influence from other artists (Okpu 1995). Visual artists will continue to engage their imaginations in order to be able to fashion out through ideas, facts, relics, secrets, techniques and other documents, necessary symbols for communication and change.

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