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## **Aina Onabolu and Naturalism in Nigerian Visual Arts**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on Aina Onabolu's creative exploits in the Nigerian Art Scene. There is the contention as to whether his techniques of artistic expression promoted or marred the realization of true Nigerian art. The writer seeks to examine the work of the artist and his techniques, the evolutionary stages of this naturalistic tendency, contemporary creative currents and possible contributions to visual art practice in Nigeria. Through intensive search of the literature on the artist and his contemporaries and students, one observed that his astute commitment to his work culminated in the integration of Art into the school curriculum as a subject to be recon with. Onabolu was part of an African current of modernization for which came the advocates of African nationalism and progress. He used his art as a critical tool to confront and challenge the racist rhetoric of colonialists, thereby laying a more solid foundation for art training in Nigeria. With Onabolu's insistence on the representation of forms based on certain fundamental principles of Art and Design, the intellectual content of art is brought to bear on the populace. Naturalism continues to be explored by a large spectrum of contemporary Nigerian artists as a model of creative expression.*

**Keywords:** Naturalistic tendency, objective, representational, modernistic, imitative, Nationalist

## **Introduction**

A study of the visual art practice in Nigeria indicates that the Onobolu stylistic tendency appears to be the highly acknowledged form of artistic expression spanning through the early decades from the time of Aina Onobolu (1882 - 1963) to the present with slightly varying techniques and usage (functionality). But in spite of these variations, there appears to be points of commonality in the various works reflecting naturalism. The Onobolu School involves a group of artists whose creative expressiveness is based on careful observation of natural forms. It is characterized by the recording of fragment of nature, painting with meticulousness in detail or life drawing in an objective and scientific spirit as impersonally as possible (Osborne 1975, 954). This school also examines forms as they really are in themselves. This artistic movement is linked to realism in which the interest is in the objective recording of contemporary life and actual experiences. The painter who gave the name realism to the movement was Gustave Courbet (1819-1979). Courbet wanted to be a pupil of no one but nature and to paint truth not prettiness. Therefore realism is based on careful observation of natural forms. This school thus appreciates forms as they really are in themselves. Examples of practitioners in this group are the pre-independent artists with their Naturalistic fervours of representation, sometimes referred to as photographic realism. Furthermore, the perceptual rules of academic art to what is seen are meticulously followed. That is, there is an aim towards a technical perfection to convey a convincing image of external reality.

## **Evolution of this Stylistic Medium**

From the very early times, the Greek and Roman standard of artistic expression indicate that the naturalistic mode appears to be the only standard with which art works be it in two or three dimensions is measured. In consequence, it is thus regarded as the academic model which span through a long time in Europe, America and the developing nations. From the early decade of Nigerian visual art practice as subsumed in the first phase (1900 – 1938) referred to as a period of sowing the seed of formal Art training in Nigeria, notable works in this stylistic tendency involved the representation of local scenery, portraiture and common folk objects which are essentially meant for decoration by the early practitioners. A number of self – made artists during the pre – independence era maintained the realistic style occasioned by their mode of study – art training through inspiration got from pictures found in some European magazines, newspapers and some textbooks

of the period. They worked in pencil, charcoal, pastel and watercolour (Iriwieri 2005, 119). In the 1960s from the euphoria of political freedom gained at independence and the empathic state of affairs in Nigeria occasioned by the civil war, of the late 1960s, an attitudinal change in artistic style became evident. Themes and subject matters reflected these scenario. The forms are essentially highly stylized with culturistic elements (Oloidi 1995, 1).

### **Aina Onobolu (The Artist)**

Aina Onobolu was born on September 13, 1882, at Ijebu – Ode. He is often referred to as the patriarch of modern Nigerian art due to his commitment and efforts at promoting the study of art at the earlier decades of the twentieth century. He attended Caxton house school Lagos and he later worked with the customs Department. He had his early artistic inspiration from pictures and illustrations seen from available European textbooks and magazines of the period. He started practicing as an artist in 1900 without any formal art training (Lagos State Cultural Centre 1977, 8).

By 1906, he had developed high artistic skill at visual representation of forms in spite of his informal art education. From 1920 – 1922, he trained at St John wood’s Art school, London and at the Julien academy, Paris where he bagged a Diploma in Art. He was able to impress on the colonial administrators of the period, the ability of the average African, albeit Nigerians, to represent forms impeccably like their European counterparts (Oloidi 1986, 113). It is no wonder, therefore, that he convinced the colonial administrators to send to Nigeria an expatriate Art teacher, Kenneth Crosswaite Murray to assist in this creative enterprise.

Onobolu believed that African art was a living, developing phenomenon, not an activity, which had come to an end with the achievements of the sculpture of earlier period (Okeke 1979,14). He perfected his philosophy of photographic realism of artistic representation of forms. Before his death in Lagos on February 3, 1963, he made tremendous impact as a nationalist in the creative enterprise. The year 1915 to 1920 was a landmark in the history of art education in Nigeria for this was the period Onobolu contacted several primary schools in Lagos for a possible informal part – time position, teaching art.

Onobolu according to (Oloidi 1986,114), in an article titled “ Growth and development of art education in Nigeria (1900 – 1960),” emphasized professionalism before functionalism, giving priority to aesthetic standard in

students' works. Students were encouraged to base their pictorial themes on subjects and highly secular and genre experiences of a city. To make these students understand the technical aspects of art, he dosed them heavily with science of perspective, proportion, colour technology and chiaroscuro thus making students to take courses like drawing, basic design and painting. This brings about naturalistic representation thus producing the first art school, Onabolu School.

Onabolu School or philosophy of art produced artists or artistically capable minds and art teachers, which succeeded in giving Nigeria fully developed Western forms of art and art education. Onabolu was part of an African current of modernization, from which came the advocates of African Nationalism and progress. (Oloidi 2008,4). Onabolu's works and skill were highly exhibited in the first stage of this stylistic tendency. From 1900 – 1920, his subject matter was essentially portraiture and landscape drawing and painting where not too detailed features were noted. A number of them were derived from pictures taken from magazines and books of the period. Attempts were made to represent the subjects as they are seen to appear. From the 1920s after his acquisition of an art certificate, his technique progressed taking into cognizance the basic elements and principles of art. Compositions became more detailed and the uniqueness of perspective became more pronounced, thus leading to a facsimile of what is being represented. Local sceneries were prominent.

### **Contemporary Creative Currents**

Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972) evolved academic realism to an outstanding level. He painted highly accomplished portraits of Nigerians in traditional costume as well as scenes from rural life. He presents an idealized picture of humanity, where people glowing with health and beauty are enhanced even further by dignifying, richly coloured costume. C. C. Ibeto's (1918-1995) simple line drawings and paintings of rural domestic life and folk life generally were executed with sympathy and understanding. His colours were subdued and in washes in the manner of traditional British water colourists. Omotayo Aiyegbusi (b. 1921-) generated motifs that were adapted from indigenous art and craft objects. The early style explored accurate proportion and perspective to propagate Naturalism in modern Nigerian art. The style of the middle period showed Naturalism with moderate expressiveness. The artists of this period include Abayomi Barber (b. 1934-). Muri Adejimi (b. 1951-), Olu Spencer (b.1956-) and Shina Yusuff (1945-1995). Others are Kolade Oshinowo (b. 1948-) and Dele Jegede (b.1945-) amongst others.

Eke Okaybulu (1916-1958) was very much aware of the cross current of political thinking of his time. He painted in oil *Kwame Nkrumah*. His greatest contribution to contemporary art is his naturalistic presentation of the cultural life activities of his people especially war dance scenes as displayed in his village, Eben Ohafia. Ben Enwonwu (1921 - 1994) sought to resolve his personal problems of identity by merely using African motifs to cloth the western concept of art and society. The drawings are simple in conception and fine in execution. Aina onabolu (1882 – 1963) tried to render faithfully and in detail, the anatomy and custom of the sitter, sometimes exaggerating certain areas for the sake of emphasis. His paintings and drawings show a wealth of details and a high degree of craftsmanship. There is also a wealth of movement in his pencil works, which are generally highly texturised. Examples of works in this stylistic tendency are “A Market Scene” and “A Yoruba Girl” by Akinola Lasekan, “Portrait of a chief” by Aina Onabolu, “A great hunter” by Charles Shainumi (b. 1909 -) “Still life” by Geoffrey Okolo (b. 1958 -) “Abang Dancer” and “Mother feeding her baby” by Eke Okaybulu (1916 – 1958).

For instance, an appreciation of the work titled “A Market Scene” by Akinola Lasekan indicates that all the compositional elements were carefully ordered. The picture plane is made up of the sky plane and the ground plane. Following the rule of perspective, one observes that from the fore ground, middle distance to the background and the lower and upper sky plane, the forms are carefully positioned so as to create the illusion of a third dimension on a two – dimensional surface and thereby bringing about a true representation of the features presented before the artist. Basic elements and principles of art were brought to bear in order to achieve this artistic feat. Such are the stylistic and technical criteria involved in this naturalistic tendency of artistic expressiveness.

In the same vein, looking at the works “Negritude” by Benedict Enwonwu, one can identify the elongation of the forms whose naturalism cannot be disputed. The various parts of the body can readily be identified without difficulty because it is a representation of the subject matter being expressed. In the decades following the pre – independence era and post independence through the FESTAC period to the present day reality (1940 – 2008), one can appreciate the fact that this stylistic tendency has been expressed to meet the present day challenges. For instance, artworks are used to illustrate calendar, post cards and other printed matters and even involved in either building or

carving of statue, which are used as memorial figures that are easily identified by the viewer.

It is worthy to note that due to the prevalence of art materials in modern times, the naturalism being expressed show some degree of reactionary spirit at creation of form when compared with the works of earlier decades. Josy Ajiboye's work titled "Fulani Shepherd boy with flute", Erhabor Emokpae's (1934 – 1984) work titled "Mai Idris Alooma of Bornu" and even Abayomi Barber's (b. 1934 -) work titled "Nigerian Girl" are reminiscence of naturalism being practiced in modern times owing to effervescence of foreign and indigenous art materials at their disposal. The colour scheme is quite cool to the eye and appears quite solid compared to earlier productions

In phase III (1970 – 1988) – Harvest/flourishing of artistic styles, movement and expansion, naturalism is significant but detailed features, which were initially expressed, were not too pronounced. Compositions moved from portraits to more complex motifs and themes reflecting both folk – historical and issues of their times. In this group is Yusuf Grillo's (b. 1934 -) work titled "Mother and Child". He is known to combine various styles, which pre – supposes various influences. His figures are usually simplified without descriptive details. Flattened, exaggerated and elongated in a mannerist tendency. His designs are cubistic and when his subjects are viewed critically, such naturalistic elements are evident.

The independence granted to Nigerian artists through their expressiveness gave room to the effervescence of styles. The vibrancy of this artistic phenomenon embraced by a number of artists led to the first international symposium on contemporary Nigerian art in 1976, with the eventual organization of the FESTAC "77 Art Exhibition in Lagos and the revitalization of the society of Nigerian Artists conference at Nsukka 1978. These events are important landmarks to the development of modern Nigerian Art.

During the phase IV (1989 – 2008) referred to as a period of Experimentation/Globalization and creative consciousness, Naturalism continued to be expressed using isolated materials that were initially not considered appropriate in artistic expressions to create forms, which have that aesthetic value. This is evidenced in artworks such as Alagada by Abayomi Barber and the Athlete by Onosakhale Ehizele (b. 1958-). The preponderance of materials has given rise to stylization and modification of

forms to create themes, which are essentially imbued with naturalistic characteristics.

This stylistic tendency brought about a total change in the method, technique, concept and function of art. It became a solid foundation for the present reality of Nigerian Art training. It thus brought dignity to art as a subject suitable for the development of Nigeria. This prevailing art practice which started from the early decades later yielded fruits in later decades. This changed European negative concepts of the African creative conquest and with a number of Nigerian disciples displaying the formalistic (technical) excellence, the conceptual foundation of Nigerian art was indeed being laid. This development led to the establishment of the Yaba Technical institute, in 1952 and the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST) Zaria in 1953.

In furtherance of this creative awareness, more art departments were created in the universities and colleges and a number of artists started articulating indigenous forms and philosophies by using them to explore new visual possibilities. Many graduate artists explored themes of day to day activities using the Naturalistic style. These naturalistic portrait paintings and sculpture pieces were indications of the independence struggle of the manifestation and feeling of Africans being capable politically, intellectually and creatively. These portraits serve as means of immortalizing all those Europeans and Africans that helped in the national cause. These monuments, which abound in major cities in the country, are intellectual properties, which tend to elevate the creative status of Nigeria.

It is worthy of note that with the experimentalist spirit of this later phase, only a few were controlled by their modernistic forms. The average Nigerian artist having being trained formally in the academic model found it difficult to depart from the imitative representation of forms. Their creative strategy thus was the denaturing or in purely traditional African context, the re-organization of nature which easily portray them as perceptual realists which they could hardly sustain like Emokpae (1934 – 1984) and Okpu Eze (1934 – 1995). In consequence, one observes that while Onobrakpeya's (b. 1932-) style changed from elemental to structural, Kolade Oshinowo's (b. 1948-) paintings have unique painterly disposition, while Jegede's (b. 1945-) paintings became during the period more impressive in the use of colours. In spite of these seeming variations in technique, naturalistic tendency was evident in their works.

In naturalism, it is pertinent to state that the pioneering efforts of Aina Onobolu (1882-1963) to modern art in Nigeria, as documented by Oloidi, is a major contribution to the development of naturalistic representation. This had its far-reaching effect on the first and second generation of Nigerian artists and art practices. With his naturalistic portraiture then, Onobolu sought to prove that the African artist also had the capacity for realistic representation and Naturalism. Consequently the inclusion of art in the curriculum of secondary school as new found intellectual experience during the colonial era thus became a break through for the discipline

During its early period, this stylistic tendency engendered modern forms with considerable shift in traditional themes to reflect the prevalent colonial experience. It also engendered the establishment of both formal and informal modes of training for artists in Nigeria. The two methods of training remained the most convenient broad basis for classifying contemporary Nigerian art. The academically trained artists, that is, those that are formally trained to articulate art concepts eventually came out with a synthesis of both traditional and modern visual expressions.

The Onobolu School has given some kind of academic touch to visual art practice in Nigeria. By insisting on the representation of forms based on certain fundamental principles of Art and design, the intellectual content of art is brought to bear on the populace. Furthermore, Onobolu and other academically trained artists such as Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972) and later Omotayo Aiyegbusi (b. 1921-) explored accurate proportion and perspective to propagate naturalism in modern Nigerian art. Onobolu, an exponent of this stylistic tendency pioneered art training by pressing the government to appoint more art teachers such as Kenneth C. Murray (1902-1972) in 1927. Artists' efforts at depicting naturalism debunked the racist prejudices of the Euro-traditionalist position, which assumed that Africans are incapable of realistic representation.

Onobolu main focus was to use his art as a critical tool to confront and challenge the racist rhetoric of the colonialist. The indigenous art teachers who are products of Onobolu's artistic philosophy according to (Oloidi 1986,118) in an article titled "Growth and development of Art education in Nigeria (1900-1960)", espoused the essence of aesthetic excellence in art thus giving rise to the production of art literature for both students and teachers and thereby laying a more solid foundation for art training in Nigeria. Notable journals of the period include *Nigerian Field* and *Nigeria*

*Magazine*. Notable writers and authors during the period include Udo Ema (1913-1996), Akinola Lasekan (1916 – 1972), A.P. Umana (b.1922-), G.I. Okolo (b.1913-) and Uthman Ibrahim (b.1913-). Both Akinola Lasekan and Udo Ema's intellectual research activities were overwhelming. They combined the writing of textbooks on art training with other essays.

Udo Ema's works include articles such as "Making of Akpan Aforo," "Art and handicraft in Methodists Boys High School, Oron", "How to teach drawing and painting in elementary schools", A.P. Umana's (b.1922-) articles include, "The preparation of local colours for Mural and Paper Paintings". G. I. Okolo's essays include "Teaching the use of Papier Mache in the Nigerian Secondary Schools" published in *Nigeria Magazine* which became an indispensable reference to many Nigerian art teachers. Uthman Ibrahim's article – "How to make pictures" stressed on methods and techniques of art teaching. These intellectual activities gave rise to the idea of giving Nigeria a truly professional college or school of art.

This development in art training were influenced by the intellectual activities of some expatriates in Nigeria especially between 1930 and 1938. They include Kenneth C. Murray, one of the pioneers of documentation and scholarship in art, and the greatest preserver of Nigerian antiquities. The subject matters in most of their writings are based on Nigerian craft, traditional art and culture as well as the new western form of art. These writings were mainly documentary, educative, instructive and expiatory in nature.

Akinola Lasekan (1916 – 1972) known for portrait and scenic paintings brought his socio-political functions to bear in his cartoons in the *West African Pilot* thereby bringing value to art in Nigeria. Apart from cartoons, Lasekan Akinola published some articles and books. Notable ones include "Drawing and Painting Simplified", *Drawing made Easy* published in Lagos in 1940 with a forward written by E.H Duckworth, the inspector of Education for the Nigerian Colony. Commenting on the book, Onabolu stated "...The book has given us clearly as it could, hints which like sign-posts, show which way to go". The effort of these art teachers in this stylistic tendency made the study of art universal in Nigeria rather than provincial and thus seen as a dynamic part of the newly acquired western education. This possibly led to the tradition of most Nigerians leaving the shores of Nigeria to foreign countries to update their creative powers formally such as Akeredolu (1915-1983) and Etso-Clara Ugbodaga – Ngu (1925 – 1988).

Akeredolu pioneered the popular tourist art of miniature, thorn carving which depicts common social life of the people in delicate naturalistic forms. Omotayo Aiyegbusi (b.1921-) who trained as a graphic artist in the USA and Britain in 1950 is known for generating forms that were adapted from indigenous art and craft objects. In the formal and informal mode of training, the propagation and sustenance of this creative discipline is a vital contribution to contemporary Nigerian art. For instance, the meeting of a number of visual and performing artists such as Wole Soyinka (b. 1934-), John Bekederemo Clark (b. 1935-) Uche Okeke (b. 1933-) amongst others at Ibadan in 1962 with the formation of the Mbari Art Centre, served as a springboard for creating proper awareness and showcasing the importance of art to the populace.

Akinola Lasekan's Correspondence College enrolled budding artists at the time, such as Uche Okeke (1933-), who later became an enigma in the Nigerian art scene. This was indeed a very popular form of early Nigerian art training. S. A. O. Chukueggu (b.1919-) also operated the modern equivalent of artists - in - school at the Mbari Art Centre, Mbaise where he taught sculpture and craft to a number of contemporary Nigerian artists. All these efforts coalesced in making positive impact in the development of visual art practices in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

Naturalism continues to be explored by a large spectrum of contemporary Nigerian artists as a creative model of expression. This Onabolu school has produced artists or artistically capable minds and art teachers which succeeded in giving Nigeria fully developed western forms of art and art training. Onabolu's effort at promoting this stylistic tendency in Nigeria throughout his life time could be considered as part of an African current of modernization, from which came the advocate of African nationalism and progress.

According to Adejumo (1990,49) in isolating the features of naturalism as a creative ideology, stated that Aristotle's writing in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B. C. discussed in his poetic why imitation should give man pleasure. Naturalistic work of art enables us to recognize the familiar world and enhances communication between the artists – creator and the viewers of his works. (Vasari 1960,122 – 125) lends support to Aristotle's theses on Naturalism by regarding perspective diminution, however surprising, in convincing images that makes for effortless recognition. (Gombrich 1969,223) accepts the merit

of perception but observes that most cultures for example, African cultures are quite happy with schematic presentation. There is not so much a desire to imitate nature but there is a specific demand of plausible narration of sacred events. The object may disclose to him both its aesthetics and its transcendental meanings and values.

Naturalism has a large followership especially during the pre-independence era. This mode of artistic expression is more easily appreciated by the populace who do not experience any difficulty in having an understanding and greater perception of whatever theme that is being expressed and presented. Abayomi Barber and a host of past and contemporary Nigerian artists belong to this school. This mode of artistic expression is not only Western - Oriented but is wide-spread among conventional art institutions in the country.

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