

A Chronicle of the Emergence of Modern Nigerian Art

by

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Abstract

The divergent views being held by most art historians concerning the emergence of modern Nigerian art have been very worrisome. This disharmony if not meticulously handled would throw posterity into an unwarranted dilemma. This paper seeks to unravel chronologically all the important art activities that form the genesis of modern Nigerian art. This will demystify the contradicting propositions and help establish a reliable authentic view with regard to the forerunners. Previously published materials concerning this issue were consulted and critical comparative analysis was carried out. The result is a logical chronological revelation of all the pioneers' contributions and a convincing resolution of who first handled the baton in the relay race of modern Nigerian art formation and who he handed it over to.

Introduction

The arrival of the expatriates in the late 19th century in Nigeria brought about a whirlwind that shook the foundation of her tradition in all ramifications. Politically, it enslaved the nation through colonization. Economically, the citizens were exploited for the enrichment of the colonial masters' purse. Religiously, the pride of the land was trampled upon contemptuously and thenceforth replaced with an alien religion. Certainly, there was uproar in the clash between the embattled natives and the oppressive colonizers. There was intensified struggle for resistance and futile attempts to revolt, but the fully armed colonial masters subjugated the land and brought men and women under their heels. Everlyn Nicodemus rightly points out that:

Ijebu Ode before the coming of the colonial masters was widely known and dreaded among other communities in the region as possessing strong magical power.... But, the British had brought stronger medicine – machine guns that massacred the defenders wholesale.... In such traumatizing event, not only were the traditional carved idols, which they had revered and relied upon, annihilated, a whole belief system which this functional visual art had been built upon had fallen into pieces.¹

Unfortunately, the traditional religion that was disbanded was one of the main reasons for the production of African traditional art. Consequently, that prevailing era experienced an unmitigated inertia in the field of art, for the fundamental aim that prompted the production of traditional art objects had been defeated. Africans were erroneously stereotyped incompetent artists, incapable of producing realistic oeuvre by the Europeans. The stylized traditional images were termed barbaric and idolatrous. It was this unwarranted contemptuous disregard that galvanized Aina Onabolu into action, which culminated in the production of realistic portraiture,

in the fight for the redemption of Nigeria's dented image. Again, this fact is corroborated by Evelyn Nicodemus who states that, "Onobolu had painted one of his first portraits.... At that time, in the first years of the 20th century, most people called in question that an African at all could paint portraits."²

Onobolu's astute effort which led to his creation of portraits that were peculiarly European gave him the leverage to deliberate with the colonial masters about the inclusion of art in the school curriculum. Hitherto, the colonial masters never considered Africans worthy of offering art as a school subject. Therefore, art was not a part of school curriculum. He judiciously utilized that opportunity and solicited for the inclusion of art as one of the school subjects, which was subsequently granted. The young Onobolu by then was neither a politician nor among the native elite and couldn't have had any logical means of approaching the all-powerful colonial masters. It was that his singular artistic achievement that gave him the leeway to persuade and convince the colonial masters to entrenching art as a school subject. Onobolu's nationalist patriotic battle as at then was unassailable and should remain generally acknowledged. Should he have created anything else other than realism, the colonial masters could not have realized the Africans' ability in figurative art. The colonizers saw the then reigning stylized traditional art, which they met, as African's best artistic creative ability. Creation of any work of art other than realism by then could only have buttressed their fallacious conclusion that Africans were incompetent.

Incontrovertibly, thenceforth a new art stage was erected. Onobolu had gallantly sown the seed of modernism in African art. Afterwards, through Onobolu's insistent persuasion, expatriate art teachers were injected into the field of art to assist him in the teaching of art. That consoling intervention brought in a committed expatriate art teacher in the name of Kenneth C. Murray. He scouted around for interested art students and highlighted the import of cultural integration in one's art production. Among his students was Ben Enwonwu, who worked tirelessly for positive sustenance of art and later grew up to the cadre of Art Adviser to the Federal Government. This set of people commendably was responsible for watering the sprouting seed sown by the great Onobolu. Afterwards, Uche Okeke and his peers at the then Nigerian College of Art Science and Technology, Zaria were the set that saw to it that the tree planted by Onobolu blossomed and metamorphosed into forms that are peculiarly African. Their art practices drew a lot of inspiration from Africans' tradition and integrated local motifs amply. Though, they were ostensibly diametrically opposed to Onobolu in their vision owing to misinterpretation of intention.

Misconception of Intentions in the Formation and Growth of Modern Nigerian Art

A critical meticulous scrutiny of the honest artistic struggles of all the Nigerian modern art pioneers reveals nothing less than patriotism. The trajectory which commenced with the noble activities of Onobolu has been largely acclaimed by many, but still ignominiously treated by others. Such disdainful reactions from some individuals including native Nigerian art historians have largely been provoked due to misunderstanding which this paper seeks to clarify.

Contextually, Onobolu was a true nationalist who used his portrait painting to prove a salient point that Africans were greatly endowed artistically. His laudable achievement was admired and applauded by the Europeans who initially were disappointed in the artistic products of the nation. Onobolu's initial grand stride was a step in the right direction and it signaled the institutionalization of modern Nigerian art. This fact was corroborated by Evelyn Nicodemus who asserts that, "the academic realism that Onobolu appropriated from Europe signified in the African context nothing less than a first step in a modern art revolution, namely as a sign of abandoning the traditional art form and as a matter of the new."³

Unfortunately, some Nigerian great art historians see Onobolu's wholesale consumption of alien culture as a stumbling block that should better dissipate to facilitate the emergence of a truly modern Nigerian art. Ola Olodi states that, "the natural synthesis ideology of the Zaria Art Society formulated by Uche Okeke was to eventually demoralize and destroy the authoritarian acceptance of Onobolism or the naturalistic style of art representation."⁴ But, was Onobolu's portrait painting really an obstacle or a stepping stone in the sphere of modern Nigerian art? A critical look and a contextual examination of his portrait painting production would betray his genuine intention as a true nationalist. Besides, Olu Oguibe highlighted with an ill-concealed condescension as reported by Everlyn Nicodemus that, "It was increasingly fashionable to begin the history of 'modern' or so-called 'contemporary art in Africa' from the Nigerian painter Aina Onobolu."⁵ He was of the opinion that the erstwhile Zaria Rebels, whose works of art were peculiarly African, should deserve the ultimate pioneering honour. Similarly, Everlyn regrets that, "two years later, Chika Okeke omitted Onobolu when curating the chapter on Nigerian modern art in the London exhibition 'Seven Stories of Modern Art in Africa'. Instead, he let modern history begin with the Zaria Rebels."⁶

If a building foundation is removed because its essence to the actual visible structure that fascinates the eyes is not defined, the looming consequence would be an irreparable collapse of the entire building. Onobolu was the first to produce an art piece radically different from the then traditional art. He also gallantly sought for the inclusion of art in the school curriculum, which eventually materialized. He worked tirelessly to inculcate the rudiments of art to students in diverse schools and further requested for expatriate teachers who later joined him in the crusade. Zaria Art Society was formed in a perfectly functional Western education system, which Onobolu single-handedly fought for inclusion of visual art in its curriculum in Nigeria. Without a formal institution of learning offering art in Nigeria before 1950s, there could not have been any society like Zaria Rebels. Their activism was only possible because they were offered admission in an already existing institution. But Onobolu as the unassailable forerunner was in charge of the production of a stably placed ladder from where others started climbing. There was no school that was offering art in Nigeria when Onobolu commenced his journey in the field of art. It cannot but be erroneous and misleading to count two without counting one. Art historians and critics should not lose sight of the fact that art history of any society is like a paginated narrative novel. Any conscious or unconscious attempt to tear off a page creates a glaring gap that renders the novel incomprehensible. To omit Onobolu in the history of modern Nigeria art is figuratively equivalent to the removal of the entire chapter one of the story of modern art in Nigeria. The havoc such omission would cause is gravely enormous and unimaginable.

In addition, Chuu Krydz Ikwemesi bemoans that, "though Onobolu may have excelled in European realism, was it not necessary that art in Africa should be fired primarily by the African Weltanschauung and addressed to the African world rather than engage in the frivolous attempt to out-do the European in his own game?"⁷ This is a very vital question, but what Onobolu did was in pursuit of a nationalist agenda not a competition. If critical analysis is to be employed, is realism really a game that was peculiarly European? Did the production of realistic works happen for the first time on African soil at the coming of the colonial masters? A profound examination of African traditional art proves this wrong. Nothing is more naturalistic than Ife art which took place many centuries before the coming of the Europeans. Undoubtedly, it was just the prevailing unfavourable condition of art in the country by then that galvanized Onobolu into the production of realistic portraits to prove a point, which salvaged Africans' dented image, before the Europeans.

Furthermore, the same misconception of intention hovers around Ben Enwonwu's art professionalism. It was during Enwonwu's era as the Art Adviser to the Federal Government that the important decision of moving Ibadan College to Zaria was realized. Glaringly, Enwonwu was seen as an anti-nationalist, an unpatriotic fellow and an incorrigible cynic, who was completely under the heels of the colonial masters, attending to their incessant whims and proclivities. He was opprobriously criticized and scorned by many including the Zarian duo, Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, who saw Enwonwu as a betrayer of national trust. According to Ola Oloidi, "the movement of the college from Ibadan to Zaria was not only unbelievable, painful, unnecessary and harsh; it was also considered an unwarranted and perverse display of administrative interference with stunting and mouldering implications on the on-going development of visual arts in Nigeria."⁸ But, it is said that what a man sees sitting down, a child will never perceive even if he climbs a gigantic mulberry tree. No doubt, as the Art Adviser to the Federal Government, Enwonwu must have deliberated convincingly with the Ministry of Education, which ensured the success of such relocation. The artistic enthusiasm, the unequalled creative verve and unyielding dynamism that soon characterized the Zaria art zeitgeist proved Enwonwu a hero and not a betrayer.

Regrettably, even after the laudable success recorded in Zaria, which so positively shaped the admirable nature of modern art in Nigeria, some still do not see Enwonwu as deserving any accolade. If Enwonwu deserved to shoulder the blame when the Ministry of Education moved the college from Ibadan to Zaria amidst such uncertainty which prompted negative reactions from most quarters, was it not right that he at least shared in the glory when the Zaria Art School became a huge success? Indeed, he deserved a befitting crown for his meritorious achievement.

The Growth of Nigerian Modern Art from Onabolu to Zaria Art Society

Whoever consciously or unconsciously starts recording the career of a footballer from the year he became a professional, ignoring his amateur years knows that such documentation cannot attest to the person's footballing history. Metaphorically, the growth of modern Nigerian art is a child, who must have to crawl, stand, stagger, and walk before he will start running. All these are inevitable stages a baby must cross in his journey to maturity. To expect perfection right from the cradle is to wish the impossible. One must bear these in mind while weaving the tapestry of the history of modern art of Nigeria into a complete garment, if one has to be unbiased.

Right from the beginning, Africa has profound inclination to art. In the traditional days, before the coming of the Europeans, art reflected in almost all they did and was an integral part of their religion. But the advent of colonization brought in a radical change in all spheres of her existence. This fact is corroborated by Babasehinde Ademuleya who highlights that, "the beginning of the 20th century in Nigeria witnessed a gradual replacement of political, economic and religious institutions with the colonial ones."⁹

The changes affected drastically African traditional art which the West perceived as idols, and a gross display of incompetence in art production. It was at that moment that Aina Onabolu emerged as a saviour to salvage the misconstrued artistic ability of the Africans. He demonstrated bravura in portrait production which instantly put a stop to the obnoxious erroneous conclusion of the West. Babasehinde Ademuleya rightly points out that, "Onabolu's effort had a political undertone. Through his painting and classroom efforts, he was able to make the colonial masters recognize Africa's competence in an area arrogantly thought to be the preserve of the white."¹⁰

Having made that bold step, as already pointed out in the introduction, Onabolu became an icon and that paved the way for easy accessibility of the colonial masters by him. He judiciously

utilized that opportunity and solicited for the inclusion of art in the school curriculum. That was granted by the colonial masters and Onabolu worked assiduously to ensure a successful and rapid development of academic art in Nigeria. Seeing that a lot was required to be covered in the field of art and there were no competent hands to help in the teaching, Onabolu requested for expatriate teachers. It was his request that prompted the coming of Kenneth C. Murray and few others who joined Onabolu in the teaching of art at the formative stage.

The appearance of Murray in the Nigerian art scene ushered in a new vista, for his ideology was a further step in the right direction. Egonwa as cited by Babasehinde Ademuleya observes that, “during Kenneth Murray’s classroom career, he was able to establish ‘*preserve our culture philosophy*’.”¹¹ Egonwa in addition states that, “Murray encouraged his students to apprentice to local craftsmen in order to imbibe the indigenous creative spirit.”¹² Ben Enwonwu was one of the students of Kenneth C. Murray. Consequently, Enwonwu adopted Murray’s philosophy and partially integrated African cultural themes in some of his works, especially in his later days. According to Jean Kennedy, “there was Murray and Enwonwu’s insistence that the works of African artists be judged by set of canons appropriate to their own culture.”¹³ It was evident that Enwonwu worked in both African and European styles. Most of his early products are typically figurative, while his later oeuvre are mostly stylized, a reflection of both styles.¹⁴

So, strictly speaking, the formative period of modern Nigerian art was galvanized by Aina Onabolu. After that came the second phase, which was piloted by Kenneth C. Murray, an expatriate art teacher and Ben Enwonwu, his renowned student. The third phase later emerged as the most culturally integrated phase, with its particularities. According to Ola Oloidi, “though there were two major ideological art schools in Nigeria before 1955: Onabolu’s school and expatriates’ school, symbolized by Kenneth C. Murray, it was the Zaria Art School that gave birth to nearly all the present art schools in Nigeira.”¹⁵ The Zaria Art Society with their amplified ‘natural synthesis’ incorporated cultural motif like uli (as utilized by their leader Uche Okeke) into realism which excellently metamorphosed into a unique form of art that was very intriguing. The Zaria Art Society members were very resilient and were able to surmount all the looming intractable problems. Ola Oloidi corroborates this fact by highlighting that: “Zarianism (Zarianist) is a philosophy of creative revolt, artistic pride, standard, originality, art intellectualization, experimentation and liberty.”¹⁶ Natural synthesis was really an ice on the cake, a blossoming flower that beautifies the tree and its utilization by the Zaria Art Society undoubtedly brought in lasting verve into modern art of Nigeria. Uche Okeke himself as cited by Don Akatakpo (2001) highlights that, “natural synthesis is the unconscious effort to assimilate what is the cream of foreign influence and marrying them to our native art culture.”¹⁷ There is no culture that is holistically good or totally bad. Based on this, synthesis demands conscious sieving of two cultures to distill the good qualities among them and amalgamate same for a better formation of a halfway house, which guarantees a prosperous future.

The Blossom of Nigerian Modern Art through the Struggle for Freedom and Nationalism

A critical analysis of both the formation and growth of modern art of Nigeria reveals nothing but the pioneers’ quest for freedom and their resolute love for the nation. Undeniably, it was Onabolu’s patriotic love for the nation that made him feel personally insulted when a general statement about Africa’s ostensible incompetence in art was made. That fury was the sustaining

force that guided Onabolu and made feasible his portrait production without a teacher. It was the same resilient spirit of nationalism that propelled his insistence for the inclusion of art in the school curriculum.

Similarly, Enwonwu's instant acceptance of Kenneth Murray's ideology of synthesizing local and alien culture in art despite his intimate romance with the colonial masters showcases his deep love for the nation. He was the first to introduce what he called '*African Style*' of art in modern art platform, which guided his works' production in his later years. He was not afraid of losing the lucrative official position as the Art Adviser to the Federal Government to which the colonial masters appointed him.

Spectacularly, the zenith of them all was the spirit of Zarianism. The Zaria Art Society's boldness, their zeal and determination to surmount all odds in defence of national goal was incredible. Such can only be compared with an overwhelming nationalism spirit that prompted the little biblical David to fight and win the great Goliath. The Zaria Art Society members neither feared expulsion nor failing of their academic courses and went ahead and challenged the alien teaching statusquo. Ola Olodi highlights that, "the members of the Zaria Art Society waged war on all those things which eroded their identity. But more importantly, they rejected the formalistic order of their purely academic tradition of instruction."¹⁸ Their unequalled love for the nation propelled them to struggle for a unique artistic identity by incorporating Nigerian culture in their works despite the danger of jeopardizing their academic future. The natural synthesis was realized according to Ola Olodi when:

Uche Okeke extracted and modernized his Igbo uli and folklore traditions. Onobrakpeya fell back on his traditions and heavily relied on Urhobo folktales. Grillo, in spite of his highly cosmopolitan nature, returned to his Yoruba art idiom to select the geometric and angularized forms of the Yoruba wood tradition. Simon Okeke was excitedly in love with the well patinated character of Benin bronze, African traditional wood sculpture and the Igbo world of spirits. Demas Nwoko began to exhume that classical stylistic and methodical art tradition of the antiquities of Nigeria, for modern artistic consumption.¹⁹

The sacrifices made by the members of the Zaria Art Society in their struggle for nationalism can never be over-emphasized. Such positive rebellious moves could only be made by dogged men with a lion's heart. According to an interview *with TheEye as reported by Jari*, "Jimoh Akolo who claimed to be one of the founding members of the Zaria Art Society withdrew from the society when it appeared that some members were insisting that they should completely ignore their European teachers."²⁰ It was the particularity of Zaria Art Society activities that brought the already existing modern art of Nigeria into limelight. That is always the typical nature of every successful rebellious movement. Because of the radicalism that accompanied the Zarian Art Society's activities, they were termed rebellious at the onset. But, because of their triumphant achievement at the end, their activities automatically were regarded as a revolution. In essence, rebellion can be positively or negatively characterized depending on the outcome.

The Prospects of Nigerian Modern Art

There are many forces against the practice of art in Nigeria today. These ranges from lack of patronage caused by abject poverty in the land, low spirit of art appreciation and unreasonable academic bureaucracy entrenched in most Nigerian higher institutions as yardstick

for promotion. Numerous studios have become moribund and there are sporadic art activities going on these days in the country. Many sound academic artists have resorted to scrambling for Ph.D. certificate at the expense of practical works production, which is the fundamental aspect of art. Few who are still active are struggling to meet up with the European dictated standard in order to attract sales. This ugly situation of partial inertia had made the art activities of the era of Aina Onabolu to that of Zaria art Society to be the cynosure of almost all the academic art discourses in Nigeria. Krydz Ikwemesi opines that, “if art history must be progressive as a discipline in Nigeria, it must constantly interrogate the realm of practice, while reappraising old landmarks as a means of anticipating shifts in paradigm.”²¹ Nigerian artists these days should be conscious of the fact that without practice in art, there would be no art history. Artists should be active in their production and should put into consideration the societal needs, while creating artworks to enhance patronage and sustainability.

Conclusion

Art as a discipline of study shapes the society and its activities are majorly influenced by the social, economic, religious and political events as obtainable in a given geographical region. Such events as witnessed in Nigerian history right from pre-colonial period up to the post-colonial era served as barometer which dictated artistic productions.

The pre-colonial period was the era when traditional art was in vogue. The traditional Nigerian art was profoundly functional and was largely used as religious objects. Art was also an integral aspect of the socio-economic and political lives of the people.

Suddenly, the colonial masters, who scornfully disregarded the traditional art and fought zealously to see to their utter destruction, came. They perpetrated mayhem, which frustrated traditional artistic activities. It was at that point in time that Aina Onabolu emerged and produced figurative portraiture which were in consonance with the European realism. That convinced the colonial masters that Africans were not artistically inferior to them and they were persuaded into entrenching art in the school curriculum.

Sequel to the approval, there arose the need for competent art teachers who could handle the subject at that formative stage. Having no sufficient indigenous art teachers, some expatriate teachers were invited which included Kenneth C. Murray. Murray had some art students whom he taught the importance of cultural representation in art products. Prominent among them was Ben Enwonwu who grew professionally and was once appointed Art Adviser to the Federal Government. There was evidence of cultural values’ integration in their works with reference to European and African cultures.

Later, the group that brought about fully defined synthesized artistic style that was unique and peculiarly African came. Uche Okeke was their frontman and they were known as Zaria Art Society.

The paradigm shift from traditional method of artistic production was observed at the coming of the colonial masters. Thenceforth, the nomenclature changed from traditional Nigerian art to modern Nigerian art.

The sequence of all the forerunners’ contributions is quite conspicuous and their positions remain incontrovertible if just judgement is proffered.

The unwarranted disputation of who is who among the pioneers of modern Nigeria art is causing more harm than good to the image of modern Nigerian art. Art historians and critics should endeavour to eschew sentiment and prejudice in their analysis. They should approach academic issues meticulously with sound reasoning and unbiased judgement.

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