

SCULPTING IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF ART AND SCHOLARSHIP IN NIGERIAN SCULPTURE

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Abstract

Modern art making in Nigeria rested on the background of false assumptions and deceit on Africa's concept and philosophy of art and the purpose of its production by the colonialists who manipulated the educational exposure they gave to the colonized. African idea of art and its production was considered and tagged fetish and uncivilized by the colonialist and every attempt was made to destroy and replace it with their own idea of art. Pioneers of art teaching in the colonized territories were made to see the indigenous art as inferior and worthless in a new world directed by foreign ways of life. Sculpture being the most dominant art form in Nigeria suffered desecration, rejection and destruction in the church school system at the grassroots of modern education through the secondary and to the tertiary level. Even with many years of tertiary level of art teaching, public exhibition of sculpture and higher degrees recipient in sculpture, there is still gap in the scholarship of sculpture. This study evaluates the academic status of sculpture as an option of visual arts discipline in terms of scholastic progress, material usage, stylistic bent and resources for its instruction in training institutions. The method used for the study is a descriptive survey of practices by artists linked to training, curricular assessment and examination of teaching resources matched with output. Findings show a bandwagon effect in techniques and material usage, extinction of indigenous styles and techniques, little passion for innovation and craze after hardly affordable imported materials for production. Home grown sculpture text books are not available in the school system even where materials for such are abundant.

Keywords: Art making, scholarship, bandwagon effect, curriculum, academic status, sculpture

Introduction

Modern art filtered into Nigeria in the last quarter of the nineteenth century through trade catalogues church school activities of wives of district officers and missionaries. It gained ground in the second quarter of the twentieth century when Kenneth Murray (1902-1972) a British educational officer was posted to Nigeria to assist Chief Aina Onabolu (1882-1963) who studied art in Europe and had began art teaching in some schools in Lagos and environs earlier in the century. However, according to the account when Murray arrived there was no school for him hence he was sent to Eastern region to teach in government colleges notably at Umuahia (Okeke, 1982, Egonwa, 2016). Aina Onabolu did not see the art of his ancestors, such as the bronze shrine furniture from Igbo-Ukwu, the realistic Ife bronzes, Benin brass, Ikom stone statuary as art. His major goal was to show that Africans can also produce art like, if not better than the European. Modern art was seen as completely different from indigenous art and all efforts were made to promote this new art which was not primitive and an appendage of traditional religion. Art historical study of sculpture is lean despite its prominent position in the fine arts and

its material richness in the development of other genres of the visual arts. This erroneous concept affected the progress of native art and sculpture being the most dominant art form was gruesomely affected.



Fig.1 Ayo, Idubor, Oba Erediauwa 11, Bronze, 59cmHt. 2010

Conversely, Kenneth Murray saw in Nigerian indigenous art tradition an art that must be preserved to develop along its own lines by his philosophy of cultural preservation theory. Invariably, with this divergence of philosophies no appreciable progress could be made on the nature of environmental friendly aesthetic education for growing young Nigerian artists.



Fig.2 .kongo Reliquary Figure, Wood, 18th century. Fig.2a. Igbo Ikenga figure 20th century.

The enunciated problem raises the questions thus : what is the academic status of sculpture in the art scene of present Nigeria? What is the training for would be sculptors like? What learning resources traditional and modern are available in our training institutions? What is the strategies for durable knowledge production and transfer in the sub discipline like?

It is against the foregone backdrop that this study set out to examine the academic status of sculpture in the modern Nigerian art tradition in terms of scholastic progress stylistic evolution and progress, material usage in the self-discipline, techniques and resources for its instruction in training institutions. Major art training colleges and universities were used. A descriptive survey approach was used in the study of sculpture practices, artists stylistic bent and curricular propensity. The National Universities Commission Minimum Academic Standards Benchmark was used.

Art making and Scholarship

The simulation of experience in selected media for self and others, the vocation of artists has guidelines developed from time to time depending on the historical context involving many variables. The training of artists and all it takes, the prevalent ideology in the polity is important as well as the artistic needs of those with patronage capacity is equally significant.

Western art tradition is based on art as imitation of reality and less of imagination and a means of personal or collective expression of important beliefs. African art is more conceptual than factual imitation of outward appearance. So the principles emphasized in the art making and teaching



Fig.3. Ukpohor, Felix, Seated model, cement fondu, 59cm Ht.1988.

procedures are aligned to that philosophy of art. Illusory vision, natural proportion and composition were emphasized. Non Western Art on the other hand are largely a response to conceptual frameworks which guide human behaviour in those societies.

At the inception of modern art Nigerian idea and ideal of art were jettisoned. Our teachers of sculpture would rather use a work by Michael Angelo or Raphael Sanzio than one by any classical masters of Africa from any of the wood sculpture producing zones. Given that many of the artists were anonymous because of the context of

the production of the works, known artists of not too distant past such as Lamidi Fakeye(1928-2009) or Kofi Atunban(1922-64) were not studied and cited as examples for students.

The scholarship in sculpture ever since has been western in approach and any other approach was considered fetish. Modelling, casting in materials other than metal was taught in schools. In many instances the content of sculpture in the curriculum, in terms of coverage, local content, task and time was not adequate to yield reasonable outcomes. Blacksmithing for which many African



societies made name was not taught. The functional dimensions of art in Africa was was alien to mainstream European

Fig.4 Chi-wara , wood, Bamana People.18th Century.

Curriculum for sculpture derived from the first college of art science and technology Zaria. So what was taught at Ahmadu Bello University, was same as University of Nigeria Nsukka, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile - Ife, and at the University of Benin Benin City. Yaba College of Technology provided template for Auchu Polytechnic , the Polytechnic Ibadan while University of Nigeria Nsukka , guided Institute of Management and Technology before the advent of National Board for Technical Education (NBTE). The National Universities Commission (NUC) later harmonizing the curriculum through out the Universities with very little deviation some positive or negative. There is a course called experiments in indigenous designs which cuts across all studio areas but many lecturers find it difficult to develop meaningful content in the course. For instance, basic design ought to incorporate basic African design principles instead of being taught as African traditional Craft a separate course. At Ile- Ife the renowned traditional sculptor Lamidi Fakeye was an artist in residence for a couple of years. Not many other institutions made effort in that direction. At the Abraka art department in the defunct Bendel State University a traditional weaver Mrs. Nelly Ogboru was on the staff list for years.

There is a clear disconnect amongst universities on the one course intended to encourage indigenous or local content. The course generally titled, Experiment in Indigenous Designs, was to cut across all studio areas in Nigerian universities following the BMAS in use since 2008. If there was sufficient inter-University cooperation in research on that subject we would have some teaching textbooks for this very important revolutionary course meant to preserve our art heritage under the auspices of change and continuity. One paper in the Nigerian Field (Aremu, 1992) discussed "textile - like patterns on Yoruba carvings," exemplifies the positive results of rigorous study of our indigenous art forms as basis for supporting home grown aesthetics for the development of Nigerian art. It is an excellent demonstration of the relevance of that course to facilitate the innovative art for global consumption.



Fig.5 . Textile -like pattern on Yoruba sculpture pieces.

Bandwagon Sculpture Practice

Sculpture study at the two lower levels of the Nigerian educational system is mainly restricted to relief sculpture and occasionally clay modelling. Carving which ought to be a major exercise at these stages

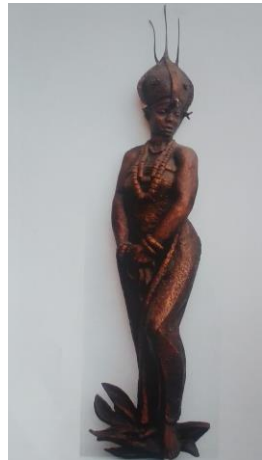


Fig.6. Matt Ehizele, Water goddess, Steel 165cm Ht. 2015. Idufueko ,Uyi , Uvbi, Fibreglass 144cm .Ht.

because it would inculcate skills for creation of functional products is strangely ignored. Materials for teaching sculpture are mostly foreign ones because of the specifications of the curriculum and training background of teachers.

In practice many sculptors operate within the ambit of the training and what they see older colleagues do in themes, material usage and techniques. As a result one finds replications of public sculpture pieces of same material, themes and usage all over the nation. Cement fondue and polyester resin have been so used for almost all public sculpture pieces that it seemed no other materials can be substituted for them. Secondly, when a particular style is invented active sculptors will tilt heavily towards it until it loses appeal and patronage. Two notable examples are El.Anatsui's multiple panel burnt-wood style and the use of waste or discarded materials, traceable to the likes of Olu Amoda(b.1959), Junkman of Africa(b. 1967) and also El Anatsui.

Many follow the notion of "art as a doing thing", for that reason writing about what they do is out of the question. Sculpture is not written but writing about sculpture by sculptors is a better way of knowledge production on the subject. It is only a few in academics to whom publish or perish is a threat that try to publish. This is not to say there are no vibrant sculpture scholars in our prestigious art institutions. The numbers of such people are few compared to the many college trained sculptors who have now turned amateur painters.

When writing is forced or considered to be so on academics there is a problem. In such cases the commitment, zeal and hard work required for the work is often lacking. The result is paucity of quality scholastic materials in the field. A look at the references often accompanying articles by sculpture scholars show over seventy (70%) foreign authored texts and illustrations.

Academic status of sculpture.

The investigation shows that almost all institutions with sculpture options in the country operate a near uniform curriculum. However, from the precision and clarity of the course descriptions of these programs one can deduce how rigorous the exposure or otherwise of the students could be. Many of these art departments are deficient in the appropriate infrastructure for meeting the academic dedicated faculty members have to supplement equipment and even studio consumables for the benefit of students.

There are a lot of creative information both of styles and techniques in Nigeria's indigenous artistic output in sculpture to drive scholarship in the sub-discipline. Master artists like Dr. Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Uche Okeke, El Anatsui have made it globally through studied exploration of Nigeria's artistic heritage. Sculpture is the dominant body of these artistic treasure. The authors of this paper would like more studies to be carried out on African sculpture traditions for rigorous infusion into contemporary sculpture studio practice. The tendency to depict life and natural figures and objects is natural to all human race but the intensity and approaches varies. This helps us to identify the culture and heritage. Scholars in various tertiary institutions should collaborate to write studio oriented texts for our students.



Waribugo, Major Adaka Boro, Reinforced concrete,

General Irabor, Ologbosere, Concrete.

Conclusion

Many undergraduates in the course of choosing specializations would not opt for sculpture for one or two reasons. First is that a high competency in line with Euro – American predominant art convention is required. This entails mainly an ability to engage in imitative representation. The physical strength required to function effectively in it is demanding because of lack of adequate infrastructure in most art departments. The second reason is that sculpture amongst other options such as graphics, ceramics, textiles or even modern painting is not considered as something new to the African. After all traditional art is mainly moulding and carving.

There is the need to preserve the cultural heritage of Africa in an evolutionary way. This is a natural process that makes traditional elements to endure gradually over time as the modern elements are stylishly infused into aspects

of culture. In the artist's practice in town that phenomenon is beginning to show. The scholarship that will catalyse it must be better positioned to drive it pro actively. Presently, there are scholars who share our opinion on the matter. However, the number is relatively low amongst our numerous art instructors, teachers and self styled artists who are unable to sustain practices in the professions of their training. Whatever is the background we advocate for a studious practice of sculpture for better development.

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