

The Concept and Evolution of Art Styles/ Schools in Contemporary Nigerian Art

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Abstract

Students of African Art Historical Studies have often been overwhelmed with the issue of misconception in the evolution and usage of these terms – Art Styles/Schools in Contemporary Nigerian Art. It is therefore the intention of the writer to examine these terms so as to illuminate their essence and use in the proper art historical perspective. An evolutionary incursion into these terminologies indicates that Style is a manner of treatment or execution of works of art that is characteristic of a civilization, a people or an individual. The style of any art work has very much to do with its historical context, subject matter and symbolism which is observable at four levels namely personal, group, regional, and period. By and large, the evolutionary trend of styles in Nigerian art has been developmental, starting with the Naturalistic style of the pre-independence era, through the Abstraction of the post – independence period to the highly expressive post-FESTAC years to the present radical experimentalist tendencies – inspiration, exploration and installation of the post – modernist era.

Introduction

There appears to be some misconceptions as to the concept of art styles, art schools and their evolution in contemporary Nigerian art. As it is often perceived that “Charity begins at home”, it is proper therefore to examine this basic concepts to further illuminate their essence in not only national art discourse but in world art. These varied forms of Nigerian art that we see and experience today evolved in the quest for creative experimentation over the years. And this has carved an identity for itself in world art. Consequently, contemporary Nigeria art refers to art works produced in the last ten decades by indigenous Nigerian artists who have been exposed to western oriented art programmes either directly through attendance of universities, polytechnics, institutes, academies and summer schools or indirectly through self-education. It is not institutionally controlled or guided, but that it is intensely a personal expression and removed from the strictures of traditional ethnic usage and functions. It is inward looking and relies on traditional forms and conventions. It’s characteristic features cut across the different schools with college training providing the springboard for rationalizing the unwritten (oral) rules of designs and forms in traditional art for conscious application to modern art (Aig – Imuokhuede 41.).

Concepts of Art Styles

Style is a manner of treatment or execution of works of art that is characteristic of a civilization, a people or an individual. The style of any art work has very much to do with its historical context, subject matter and symbolism. The historiography of art proceeds by sorting art works into stylistic classes on the basis of their similarity and the time or period when they were produced. Since artists in every age express in their works a meaning of some sort intelligible to themselves and others, then, one can get at that meaning only by setting a particular work in relation to others like it that were made about the same time. From works grouped in this way we can infer a community of meaning as well as form. Then, we would have outlined a style (Horst de la Croix and Tansey 3). From the foregoing, it is obvious that historical context is a major determinant in the classification of works of art into diverse school styles since most of the forms emerging may come from a common ideology, which is in vogue at the time. However, style in visual arts is observable at four levels namely personal, group, regional and period. The personal style of an artist is like his/her handwriting, peculiar to him/her which could change within a span of time. When a number of artists share the same technical or conceptual ideology, it is referred to as group style which culminates in what could be described as a “School”.

Regional style is derived from an exchange of creative ideas within a geographical region while period style is reflective and dependent on given historical period. Stylistic analyses seek to address peculiar and general characteristics of art works from which a lot of historical inferences can be made and logical conclusions reached. Despite the diversity of styles and the frequency of their evolution in contemporary Nigerian art, a traceable pattern is discernable. According to (Egonwa 3) in an article titled “Patterns and Trends of Stylistic Development in Contemporary Nigerian Art”, stylistic development in contemporary art could be the evaluation of evolution and historical context of styles or as a technical language. In whatever measure, this art historical study of style evolution will address the issue of origin, context, distributive patterns, source of style index and the creative exponents of these styles.

Furthermore, in a statement on the issue of styles in Nigerian Art by (Egonwa 66), naturalism, expressionism, and abstraction could be used as broad descriptive terms for Nigerian artistic styles but subtle variation of these styles are not given. In his words: There is yet a diversity of opinion among important Nigerian artists over what should constitute Nigerian art in terms of stylistics. Never the less, the definition of Nigerian art as indeed of African art is a non-issue since the second World Black and African festival of art and culture (FESTAC '77) has made some clarifications. It is the view of FESTAC colloquium that since art is a factor of cultural identity and technological progress in a civilization, an art work bears unmistakable stamp of its environmental form preferences (66).

Consequently, style could evolve from particular training background and orientation. For a given society (Oloidi 37) in a paper titled “Zarianism: The Crusading Spirit of a Revolution in Nigeria” posits that it takes a revolutionary action to effect a change. This change positively builds upon the works of the previous phases and thereby contributing towards the development of such an endeavour. In consequence, Zarianism as an artistic concept has been able to promote in major Nigerian art schools, the culture of creativity, intellectualism, socio-cultural and political consciousness”. This is the only recipe for its actualization. In the words of Grillo Yusuf (b. 1932-) in an interview with Babalola on “The development of contemporary Nigerian Art”, style is a vehicle for conveying a statement. This mode of artistic expression helps the artist to drive home a message which the realistic interpretation would have watered down or killed (97). In the contribution of Jegede towards Nigerian artistic styles in a paper titled “The visual Arts and the Nigerian Copyright Law” he stated that Nigeria has made significant impact on modern art by borrowing, adapting, sifting and synthesizing elements from folklores with foreign ideas and processes. In his words:

Bruce Onobrakpeya synthesized mythological, folkloric and popular themes from Urhobo as well as Yoruba Cosmology. Some of his prints bear eclectic traits traceable to the adire motifs and ancient Benin plaques. Oshogbo art resides in Yoruba folklores. Ulism as an artistic concept is an organic type of drawing which found its root from the Igbo traditional body decorative designs. The seminal terracotta sculpture of Demas Nwoko and the highly romanticized, super realistic sculptures and paintings of Abayomi Barber (59) Looking through the activities and manifestos of the art schools under study, one can isolate the following peculiarities among them. These stylistic streams are fully committed to the uplifting of African art and aesthetics by adapting forms and designs exclusive to our indigenous traditions for drawing and painting and in the process have been able to highlight different African world views and philosophies. They have also generated new ideas and acculturated lexicons of images which have become a reference point for every experimental artist in the visual art practice in Nigeria. All these art schools evolved from two main artistic current of the pre-independence era – the academy or what may be referred to as Onabolu’s formalistic school. The other is Murray’s school with its cultural advocacy.

Modern Nigerian art to a large extent may have succeeded in establishing its own character in her quest for identity, by going back to tradition – oral history, folk idioms and communal metaphors which thus form a unique style for Nigeria in the art universe. Therefore, Nigerian artists should be steadfast at exploration to generate new ideas and material functionality, for, in the words of Amifor in his essay titled “*New Energies: Beyond Conventional Styles*”, he stated thus, There is a lot of skills in installation located in appropriation of available local cultural materials within a global paradigm as several Udechukwu Onyishi objects of art prove. The Igbo have it that “**Ada-akwu ofu ebe enene umuo**” (You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade). In Yoruba “**Ona kan ke na oja**” (There are many roads that lead to the market). Conceptual art offers the widest option for artists today than any other style in view of our level of technological development (34) The import of this is that the exploration of various art forms and styles in the creative endeavours add some spices to creativity and thus a new language to art.

Concept of Art School

The issue of what constitutes an Art School in Nigeria has attracted a lot of attention in recent times among art critics, art historians, modern scholars and contemporary Nigerian artists. The concept of art school appears to have diverse meanings. To the uninformed, art schools reflect academic art departments where creative activities are taught in the different specialized areas. To the informed, art school is a collection or group of persons working with the same philosophy/manifesto. In spite of variation in theme or subject matter, there would be strong recognizable elements in their works that tend to suggest that such works may have been produced by people of one school of thought in art.

Writing about “Art School” in contemporary Nigerian art (Jegede 2) in a paper titled “Art-E-Facts” stated that it means a group of artists who share the same artistic principles. He goes further to classify these schools into formal, also referred to as academic school and informal, known as experimental or workshop school. This classification is fraught with misconception from the art historical point of view. College training or formal training in art institutions do not automatically make art schools since an art school must conform to a set of criteria of working with a common ideology, form, theme, style and technique. Nigerian colonial experience to a large extent according to Egonwa in an article titled “Patterns and Trends of Stylistic Development in Contemporary Nigerian Art”, shaped stylistic development in her visual art. This, he said, emanated from the appearance of Kenneth Murray in the Nigerian art scene, the establishment of experimental art workshops such as the Mbari group sponsored by Ulli Beier, the establishment of tertiary art institutions with art courses and the fight against colonialism. Murray’s preserve our culture philosophy is seminal to current concepts in the visual arts such as art of national identity or natural synthesis popularized by the Zaria Art Society, which served as stylistic model for very many practicing artists (Egonwa 6).

According to Okeke in a paper titled “An introduction to Contemporary Nigerian Art”, Nigerian art today is rich and diverse in form and content as a result of the general attitude of the artists toward discovering what was there even if it is for selfish practical purpose. The result is a fair blending of psychic aspects of design (Okeke 17). Stressing further in the area of creative growth, Diogu posits that the development of art forms through structural innovations is rooted on the following:

- a. Knowledge of indigenous art and design culture of the people.
- b. Knowledge of design techniques or processes.
- c. Consolidation of knowledge and skills of indigenous technology.
- d. Innovation of obsolete equipment and materials by the application of scientific and artistic methods or attitudes (89 – 90).

In consequence, Murray’s stress on art based on the culture of the Nigerian people paved the way for Enwonwu’s culturistic philosophy in his later artistic creations, which was the compass for the Zaria Art Society’s concept of Natural Synthesis. This is thus an evolutionary trend in the adaptation of indigenous forms in the creative process in the country. Professor Wangboje’s effort at the Ori-Olokun workshop whose purpose was to release the creative energies which were taught to lie deep within the individual participants could be said to have directly affected the Ife art philosophy. This was further re-enacted and projected by Olakunle Filani (b.1957-) with his artistic concept of Onaism. Professor Uche Okeke (b.1933-) is the patriarch and propagator of the Nsukka Ulism as an artistic concept. Also significant of mention is the Oshogbo School by Susanne Wenger. The evolutionary trend of styles in Nigerian art has been developmental starting with the naturalistic style of the pre-independence era, through the abstraction of the post independence periods to the highly expressive post FESTAC years to the present radical experimentalist tendencies – inspiration, exploration and installation of the post-modernist era.

By and large, from whatever angle this concept is looked at, what is basic is the inclusion of a basic ideology in the propagation of our indigenous creative skills and the positive impact or bearing that they may have in the stylistic development and growth of the visual arts in the country. Art schools should not be looked upon as merely places for the dissemination and acquisition of various art skills but aimed at the development of a unique idea in art. The evolution of art school in this country is continuous, for as long as there is the enabling creative environment where art practitioners could experiment and have the freedom to express themselves in their own unique way. The search for the restoration of a socio-economic order parallels the artistic search for national cultural identity. When modern forms are created with symbolic or functional philosophy of African art, this will sincerely help to restore the place of Africa in the study of modern art.

Evolution of Art Styles in Nigerian Visual Arts

Styles have continued to evolve in Nigerian visual arts but with various degrees of formal re-organization. In all, man still remains the centre of artistic expression in modern and post – modern Nigerian art. From the early stages of man’s history and to a large extent, trends in contemporary Nigerian art, three modes of artistic styles manifest themselves. These are essentially representational – naturalistic, the abstract and the symbolically expressive, which had been earlier mentioned at the beginning of this paper. This diversity of styles has continued unabated as seen from the works of contemporary artists with possible influences in the various art schools in the country. According to Okeke Uche as collaborated by Wangboje Solomon, Egonwa and Janson, the Nigerian art universe is diverse in stylistics and media like its producers but has been agreed to consist of four broad stylistic categories – the traditional, transitional, and modern and post modern. Thus, there are the traditional artists who took over from the ancient cultures of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Benin, etc. This group of artists did not have the privilege of getting western art training. Their mode of training is through the apprenticeship system where a master craftsman holds sway with observation, imitation and practice being the main basis of training. Into this group are the experimental and summer-school – Mbari Ibadan, Mbari Mbayo, Oshogbo, Mbari Mbaise and Oye-Ekiti Experimental center. In consideration of the diminishing rate at which this group is going out of practice they are sometimes referred to as Neo-traditional (38).

However, it should be noted that Naturalism, which was the most favoured style of artistic expression during the first and second generation of Nigerian art, influenced the style of artistic production of these traditional artists. The efforts of most first generation artists such as Akinola Lasekan (1916 – 1972) and Omotayo Aiyegbusi (b. 1921-) who opened their art workshops and got a number of apprentices taught in this stylistic tendency, which was considered the most elitist mode at the time bore fruit. These apprentices after graduation carried over this style to advance and popularize Nigerian visual arts. The next stylistic group which is the transitional are artists who perhaps due to their relatively improved world view cannot be said to be producing what can either be referred to as traditional or modern. The product of their art experiences could be described as a formalistic medley of traditional art and modern art. Into this group are found most Benin artists along Igun Street producing airport art and a number of roadside artists based in both rural and major cities in the country, whose artistic drive is pecuniary. The naturalistic school and to a large extent, some degree of abstraction are evident in a number of their artworks.

In consideration of the African philosophy of art and with the advocate of the concept of Natural Synthesis, in an attempt to bring about culturization of their artwork, most of the artistic creations have been seriously influenced by these stylistic tendencies. This is done perhaps in the spirit of seeking the African identity and the African personality. Therefore, it is no gainsaying to state that culturisation characterizes most of the artworks produced by this group of artists. The third group is the “Modern” artists whose style is a demonstration of proficiency and diversity in the manipulation of media, technique, idioms due to their total opening up to ideas from various parts of the globe made possible by western education. Into this group, fall the college-trained contemporary Nigerian artists whose artistic creations have projected the image of Nigeria in the art scene. The Natural Synthesis concept which gave rise to the other emergent art schools such as the Uli and Ona School influenced the artistic production of this group.

Most of the art practitioners are now being exposed to the technique of art production in both formal and informal art centers. Armed with this knowledge and their creative ingenuity, a sort of artistic renaissance is created with vistas of possibilities opened for exploration by these artists. The last group is the “Post – Modern” artists. This group finds itself in the web of globalization with the increasing drive at experimentation and carved a niche in Nigerian art. Post-modernism constitutes a broad repudiation of the mainstream of art of the twentieth century. It represents an attempt to reinstate meaning in art as against the self-contained designs espoused by the modern traditions. It includes a variety of tendencies. Art since the 1980s has been called post-modern. It is marked by an abiding skepticism that rejects modernism as an ideal defining twentieth century culture as we have known it. In challenging tradition, however, post-modernism resolutely refuses to define a new meaning or impose an alternative order in its place. It represents a generation consciously not in search of its identity. Hence it is not a coherent movement at all, but a loose collection of tendencies which all told reflects a new sensibility.

Post – modernism can be seen as a stratagem for sorting through the past while making a decisive break with it that will allow new possibilities to emerge. Having received a rich heritage, artists are faced with a wide variety of alternatives.

The principal feature of the new art are a ubiquitous eclecticism and a bewildering arrays of styles. Taken together, these pieces provide a jigsaw puzzle of our times (Janson and Janson 453). This is exemplified in installation art as can be attested to in the works of a group of artists from the Nsukka axis of Nigerian Visual arts. Their 2002 exhibition titled “New Energies – Beyond the Conventional Style” consists of conceptual works (installation and performance). These four broad distinct groups exist side by side presently though, in varying numbers and thus provide a basis for proper articulation and appreciation of Nigerian art. It is therefore not surprising to note that with the advent of the colonial art masters with their foreign art media and motifs, the minds of these indigenous artists were fertilized and this reflected on the new patterns of art production. Stressing further on the issue of the evolution of styles, Egonwa in a paper titled “The Evolution of the Concept of Natural Synthesis” posits thus:

Stylistic issues will remain current as styles continue to evolve. Zarianist holds an important position in the evolution of style-trend in contemporary Nigerian art. The creative ideology which they popularized, has paved the way for the growth of artistic styles at regional, national and continental levels. The impetus provided by the pre – independence struggles for the search for a Nigerian identity in the visual arts was occasioned by Mr. K. C. Murray’s pioneering culturistic advocacy in the development of modern art. Through his “Guided discovery” method of instruction, some of his pupils developed their talents without any imposition of foreign techniques or subject matter, resulting to new African art styles (52). The above suggests an apt description of the stylistic evolutionary trend in the visual arts in Nigeria. In consequence, the principle of style evolution provides for progression from the conceptual stage to the practical one.

Conclusion

Nigeria’s attainment of political independence in 1960 generated the urge to project a Nigerian personality in the arts and other aspect of life. This resulted in a return to the ancestral root for inspiration and self-determination. In the words of Babatunde Lawal (b. 1943 -) the need to project traditional art from total extinction coupled with the crave for it in international art circles has encouraged a revival of ancient forms with or without modification (Lawal 44).

The present day Nigerian artists have responded to the dynamics of continuity and change within the frame work of art and culture in a way that their distinctive features seem emerging within contemporary Nigerian art. Significant styles have been adapted from the indigenous motifs, signs and symbols. With the introduction of new forms and patterns which derive from tradition, the visual lore has therefore been greatly enlarged. A careful study of the visual art landscape of the geographical entity called Nigeria indicates that there are varieties of styles, techniques and material usage in artistic practices.

An exposition of these philosophical viewpoints helps to highlight the root of the varied forms of artistic expression by a number of modern and post-modern Nigerian artists and art. Therefore, the fact is clear that a quiet evolution is taking place in Nigerian art whereby on the basis of uniformity of style, theme, subject matter, even technique, materials, patterns and forms, a number of art schools have emerged. There is therefore the need to stress and develop the African personality and the need to reflect various creative ideologies. Consequently, Nigerian artists have been central to the evolution of new artistic thoughts with consequent identities, which have become national, regional, Pan-African or international. By and large, three modes of artistic styles manifest themselves in the evolution of styles in contemporary Nigerian art. These are essential representational (Naturalistic), the abstract, and the symbolically expressive.

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