

A REVIEW OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF TWO CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART HEROES

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Abstract

The contemporary art and artists of Africa is a period that has been taken from a particular point as a result of positive changes that have occurred. In Nigeria and Africa in general, this period emerged from the point where contact with the western world was established, that is, a break from traditional time. This period did not totally jettison traditional ideas. Various aspects of traditional ideas are fused together with the present ones to make it contemporary art. This paper recognizes and appreciates two artists of this period. The paper also paid attention to their background, art training as well as general contribution to art.

Keywords: *Contemporary Art, Artists, Contribution, African Heroes*

Introduction

The contemporary art of Africa did not emerge by surprise. It is the continuation of artistic developments of the traditional people of Africa, South of the Sahara, starting from the fundamental stages of prehistoric cave paintings, through the pre-colonial, colonial, post-independence and unto the present. As a result, there have been progressions in form and content, medium, function, style and technique. As stated by Banjoko (2009), the new forms that appeared in every aspect of the African genre today were brought about by constant change.

The rich and diverse cultural heritage of Nigeria and Africa at large has made most of the artists of African descent to be committed to the traditional values which have become the nucleus of artistic ingenuity in the continent. Some of the artists combine, to a large extent, the African past with the Western influences, while others create imageries independently, thereby evolving individualistic creative forms, styles and techniques. Cumulatively, there is no clear-cut distinction between the arts of ancient traditions and those of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods of the 20th and 21st centuries in Africa (Uhunmwagbo, 2008).

Contemporary African Art

Various authors have written on the art of Sub-Saharan Africa, especially from prehistoric periods through the 20th and 21st centuries. They

maintained that art in Africa is the material descriptions of the traditions and cultural diversity of the Africans South of the Sahara. As noted by Azeez (2001: 41), the material aspect of culture has to do with artefacts in its broadest forms, which include tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensils and housing, while the institutional aspect deals with the political, social, legal and economic structures erected to help achieve material and spiritual objectives.

Therefore, contemporary African art is used to define the art of South Saharan Africa within the periods of 20th and 21st centuries. It is the totality of all forms of creative practice in Visual arts within the region. This includes materials used, influences, patronage and inspirations, styles and techniques, functions and roles, as well as the cultures and traditions that gave birth to the artistic practices. As noted by Banjoko (2009), it is the products of progressions in form, medium, function, style and technique in the art of black Africans.

Contemporary art in Africa did not just appear from nowhere towards the end of colonial period in the 20th century, rather, it was a gradual process built upon the already existing structures and scenarios, on which the older pre-colonial and colonial genres of African art were made. In many instances, classical traditions like those of the Benin, Nok and Igbo Ukwu still provide a background against the

present expression. It is obvious that majority of African artists have been affected deeply by the colonial and postcolonial conditions, sometimes as a result of their continued economic dependence on foreign or local European patronage; in any case they cannot detach from the original heritage.



Fig. (i): Traditional African Heritage: Luba maternity figure corresponds with the basic canons of African Art. Source: Hamil gallery; www.hamilgallery.com

It is not in all cases that we witness a complete break from the past. For many artists, a commitment to individual values is a fundamental element in the alchemy of creative genius. While some synthesize allusions to the past with contemporary content, others create imagery with mythical or visual references. Though, many of them are rooted in the diverse traditions, they use materials and methods foreign to traditional art and their artworks are usually based on personal aesthetics which sometimes favours the characteristics and elements of African art (Uhunmwagbo, 2008).

However, in order to understand the past, present and future of African art and its diversity, we need to be aware of the minor differences in form and content, as well as the basic elements, characteristics, themes and stylistic identification, otherwise known as 'canons' of African traditional art. The canons are like nucleus for most arts in Africa (Honour, Flemming, 1984). Some of these canons include:

- Works were made for religious purposes and to represent deities.
- Works serve practical utilitarian functions. The use of human figure to portray beauty and to

uphold religious values.

- Symmetry and balance are maintained in art works.
- Objects may be realistic or highly stylized; naturalistic and geometric shapes can be combined to represent a form.

Similarly, the contemporary art of Africa did not negate the common characteristics; rather, there are improvements in concepts, techniques and use of medium. Samuel (2009: 127) maintained that the colonial ideals involved a new course in the art of Africa and the art is fast changing with new media, technique and exploration. These changes and improvements differ within individuals, geographical areas, need of a particular society, prevalent political climate and the influence of technology and interplay of other realms of human endeavour. The improvements were possibly enabled through the concerted efforts of some indigenous Nigerian and African artists. Such as Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan, Kofi Antubam, Momodou Cessay, Ben Enwonwu, Jimoh Braimoh, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo, Vincent Kofi, El Anatsui and Malaganta Valente (Hess, 2014).



Fig. (ii): Negritude, Artist: Ben Enwonwu, Medium: Oil on canvas, Year: 1976. Enwonwu was inspired by the ideals of Pan - Africanism. Source: National Gallery of Art.

These artists have emerged throughout Sub-Saharan Africa in the last seventy years and are working in new ways with new materials. They have continued to showcase their art in a wider public. In the past, their relationships to their communities gave them the structures and styles. It is not so today. Often separated by thousands of kilometres, modern day contemporary artists do connect in a network of literary, performing and visual arts by exhibitions, festivals, conferences, workshops and literary movements. In spite of a catalogue of problems, many of which could be attributed to colonialism, the artists continue to 'redefine' African art, reflecting the changing social, political, economic and cultural environment (Azeez, 2001).



Fig. (iii): Power chair, Artist: Jerry Buhari, Medium: Mixed media, Year: 2008. There is a re - discovery in terms of materials, approach, technique and style.
Source: Artmospere, Now, June 2008.

In comparison, the contemporary art of Africa differs from the art of the Western world of the same period. While the contemporary African artists were been influenced by their traditional heritage and academic factors, the Western artists were occupied with personal and group philosophical approaches, in addition to certain influences from African traditional art. Notable among such groups include Cubism, founded by Pablo Picasso in 1907 and was majorly influenced by African sculptures, Post-impressionism founded by Paul Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin, as well as Surrealism which was championed by Salvador Dali (Annigoni, 2003)



Fig. (iv): *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, Artist: Pablo Picasso, Medium: Oil, Year: 1907. Source: Art in Our Times.

Some Contemporary Nigerian and African Artists

There are some artists that are honoured as 'contemporary' within the Sub-Saharan Africa, due to their individual and collective contributions towards the overall development of Visual art. Some of these artists are designated first generation, while some are classified as second generation. Some of them had formal training in art schools, colleges and universities; others had informal training in workshops. However, there are some contemporary artists who went through neither formal nor informal training; such category of artists was self-trained or traditionally trained by their parents or local masters (Olaosebikan, 1982).

In this regard, two contemporary artists are discussed in this paper, one from Nigeria and the other from another African country. In the discussion, attention is given to their parentage and childhood, art training, art style and technique, as well as general contribution to art.

Lamidi Fakeye (Traditional Carver, 1925 - 2009)

Lamidi Fakeye was born in 1925 into the family of a traditional carver in Ila-Orangun, present day Osun state, Nigeria. By virtue of his birth, he was exposed to the trade of carving at a tender age. He had his primary education in his home town. After leaving primary school, he was encouraged by a Christian Missionary, Father Carroll to enroll as an apprentice at the Catholic Mission Experimental Workshop in

Oye-Ekiti under Bamidele Areogun, who was a popular carver at the centre. Within 1948 - 1951, the workshop experience changed his style from the original traditional technique to a blend of traditional and modern (Flinn, 2006) Experimental Workshop in Oye-Ekiti under Bamidele Areogun, who was a popular carver at the centre. Within 1948 - 1951, the workshop experience changed his style from the original traditional technique to a blend of traditional and modern (Flinn, 2006)

Fakeye later went to Ondo and worked at Father O' Mahoney's Workshop, from where he left to establish his own workshop in Ibadan, Oyo state Nigeria. In his quest to further develop himself, Fakeye travelled to Paris under the scholarship of the French government between 1962 and 1963, where he studied the modern techniques in stone carving and cement sculpture at the Cite Universite due Besancon and Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, France

Art Discipline and Style



Fig. (v): *Equestrian figure*, Artist: Lamidi Fakeye, Medium: Wood. Source: African Art Museum.

Fakeye specialized mostly in wood carving where he blended the Yoruba traditional carving with the Western techniques, but more in the area of themes than in the techniques. He also blended his work with modern architectural demands and conditions. He carved wooden doors, house posts, panels, verandas and statues in the round (Banjoko, 2009).

General Contribution to Art



Fig. (vi): *Ancestral Figures*, Artist: Lamidi Fakeye, Medium: Wood. Source: Smithsonian Institution Libraries.

Lamidi Fakeye was one of the few Nigerian carvers who earned for himself an international recognition. He was a teacher of Yoruba traditional carving, not only in Nigeria but abroad as well. He was in Europe and America between 1963 and 1966, educating in higher institutions, interested people in galleries and traditional Yoruba carving techniques. He was appointed an 'Artist-in-Residence' at Western Michigan State University, Kalamazoo, United States of America to demonstrate his art. Fakeye was employed by the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife to teach the traditional carving techniques in the Department of Fine Arts. He died in 2009 (Smithsonian Institute Libraries, 2014).



Fig. (vii): *Coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie and Citizens*, Artist: Afewerk Tekle, Medium: Oil, Year: 1964. Source: Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia.

Afewerk Tekle (Painter, 1923 - 2012)

Afewerk was born in 1923, in Ankober, Shoa province of Ethiopia. Afewerk was Ethiopia's leading artist, who as a boy, revealed an intense artistic interest in life around him. He was found ever busy with pencil or pen, sketching and

drawing, even during Chemistry, Mathematics or History classes (Voelkel, 2012).

Afewerk Tekle was sent to England in 1947 to study Mining Engineering, but his artistic talent overshadowed his original interest of becoming an engineer. Tekle was therefore accepted at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London and thereafter proceeded to the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of London.

Art Discipline and Style

Tekle was a prolific painter, who broke away from the age long Coptic miniature paintings which are popular in Ethiopian art. He was known for realistic photographic paintings. He gave more attention to portraiture, landscape and murals, as well as stained glass painting. His themes include local and international politicians, national events in Ethiopia, saints and biblical stories. Tekle employed modern perspective and realism in the execution of most of his works (VM - Lila Balisky - Art way.EU, 2011).

General Contribution to Art



Fig. (viii): *Mother Ethiopia*, Artist: Afewerk Tekle, Medium: Oil. Source: VM - Lila Balisky - Art way.EU

Afewerk was one artist who transformed Ethiopian art from Coptic miniature paintings to bold and realistic pictures. He almost single handedly changed the development of Ethiopian art, giving it an international recognition. As noted by Anugwara (2013), the years from 1959 marked an intensification as well as diversification of this remarkable talent. His drawings, paintings, murals, mosaics, stained glass windows and sculptures, playing cards, posters, flags and national ceremonial dresses, all attest to his position as Ethiopia's foremost artist. The playing cards were of particular interest because they embodied a series of known Ethiopian motifs, some of them dating back to pre-Christian times, thereby introduced Ethiopia's artistic heritage to the card playing public.

Through his artistic talent, Tekle helped to bring into play the Pan-African ideals embraced by his country at that time. He was able to achieve this by the use of murals and stained glass works on the African Union and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa headquarters in Addis Ababa. He was recognized by his country as the first to introduce contemporary techniques to Ethiopian subject matter and content. He archived this while still retaining his country's dignity and ideals. Also, to show his loyalty to his country, he made series of paintings of the then emperor, Haile Selassie, the great leader of Ethiopia (Banjoko, 2009).

Some of his great works include:

- *Coronation of Emperor Haile Sellasie and Citizens* (painting). *African Unity* (painting).
- *Last Judgement* (painting). *Window of Military Academy at Hara* (stained glass).
- *Cathedral of St. George and St. Trinity* (mural painting). *Mother Ethiopia* (painting).

Conclusion

The African artist has come a long way. He has been able to rewrite the subjective history, negative and derogatory statements and notions propagated by the West against African art. He has achieved this through consolidated studio practice and theory. The artist is highly commended for his ability to push forth African inspirational ideals, culture, tradition and identity, through which he has climbed the ladder. However, the artist will not be tired. There are numerous local and global challenges he has to surmount within the 21st century and beyond.

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