

African Textiles as Inspiration to Other Art Forms for National Development

¹Pamela. I. Cyril-Egware & ²Margaret Ajiginni

^{1&2}Department of Fine Arts & Design,
University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Nigeria

Abstract

Textiles, the manipulation and production of fabric from fibre was originally taken to mean woven fabric. With creativity, industrialization and technological advancement, textiles have gone beyond woven fabrics to include non-woven fabrics and have in recent times served as inspiration to other art forms, which include but not limited to sculpture, painting, pottery and fashion accessories. They are referred to as decorative arts. This paper discussed African textiles as inspiration and an innovative transformational tool to other art forms and crafts for national development. It is aimed encouraging and sustaining reusing and transformation of discarded textiles and other waste materials to create historic cultural art. It analyzed the works of artists documenting and preserving history and style. They are, El Anatsui and Yinka Shonibare who are sculptors, Odun Orimolade, an installation artist, Godfrey Williams-Okorodun, a painter, Victoria Udonian and Peju Alatise, mixed media artists, who have carved a niche for themselves in their style of art production using African textiles. African textiles in this paper are those indigenous products and foreign acculturated textiles which include *Kente*, *Aso oke*, *Adire* and *Abada* also referred to as *Hollandis*. These fabrics can be incorporated in other art forms depicting African culture in various ways souvenirs and for tourists and historic works housed in museums. The study noted that African textiles have gained recognition worldwide, enhancing and promoting embellishment of other art forms formational development.

Keywords: *African textiles, Inspiration, Art forms, National development*

Corresponding Author: Pamela. I. Cyril-Egware

Background to the Study

Art is human creation for others to see, use and enjoy, tied to man's cultural, technological and creative skills. It is a visual means of self-expression, using plausible materials with skills and techniques to produce functional materials of aesthetic value for human needs and satisfaction. It serves various functions and is classified as visual and non-visual arts. The visual arts consist of Fine and Applied or Industrial Arts, while the non-visual arts are the performing arts and literary arts. This paper is however concerned with the Fine and Applied or Industrial Arts. Fine Arts is traditionally an area of aesthetic appreciation, which comprises of drawing, painting and sculpture. On the other hand, the Applied or Industrial Arts are commercial arts, which are functional in man's daily living. They are Textiles and Fashion design, Graphics, Ceramics, Photography, Furniture design, Interior design and several forms of Crafts and Installation.

Textile is the production and manipulation of fibre to fabric. It is an area of the visual Arts grouped as applied arts or industrial art. According to Cyril-Egware (2013), textiles is the manipulation and manufacture of fibre to fabric, from the raw stage to the designed and finished functional stage. It was originally taken to mean woven fabric, but with creativity, industrialization and technological advancement, textiles have gone beyond just woven fabrics to non-woven and designed fabrics, and have in recent times served as inspiration to other art forms. The process could be by weaving, knitting, lacing, branding, felting, embroidery netting, and bonding, tufting and laminating. Kukoyi (2013) opines that textile is an aspect of Art that employ designs, patterns and construct fibers for the production of fabrics of all sorts for body adornment and home application. She further stated that textiles is an act of fabric production and decoration.

The manufacture of textiles encompasses production and design, from fibre to end product. It could be described as a two or three dimensional art, depending on its end product. Textile design on the other hand is an ordered arrangement and rhythmic repetition of motifs, colours and texture on fabric to add value and beauty. It is the process of creating designs, patterns and structures for knitted, woven, non-woven fabrics and the embellishment of fabrics.

Textiles play a significant role in the daily lives of a people, reflecting their environment, society and community. As clothing and interior decoration, textiles reveal a peoples identity, history and culture. Aronson (2007), states that cloth in Africa functions as a kind of language and facilitator of speech as an important role in communication. Textiles are a central vehicle for the projection of social and cultural relations. Like food and shelter it is a basic human need. The earliest form of textiles used by man was animal skin and the bark of trees which were carefully prepared to make them easy to wear. Oyelola (1981). Simply put according to Cyril-Egware & Peters, (2016), textiles is the art of making cloth from the fibre stage to the finished fabric or cloth which could be constructed by weaving, tufting, plaiting, braiding, felting, embroidery, appliqué or any fabric production technique. On the other hand, textile design is the ordered arrangement and rhythmic repetition of motifs with an appropriate application of the elements and principles of design.

Textiles design is about creating patterns on fabric during the process of manufacture as structure and part of the process or introducing designs on fabric. Designs could be introduced in the process of weaving, knitting lacing or on the surface inform of painting, dyeing embroidery, beading and lacing at some point. This is seen in the works of textile artists and

designers, sculptors, painters, potters, put up in public and private places such as airports, hotel, offices, museums, government house, hospitals, fashion houses and schools which are prominent places for publicizing people's culture. They are referred to as decorative arts or crafts.

Innovation in fabrics in one way or the other serve as a source of documentation of the history, culture and environment of a people, thereby highlighting its value. This has led to the transformation of textiles in form of installation and surface embellishment with embroidery, beading, sequence application and appliqué techniques. African textiles are very colourful, beautiful and easy to manipulate for various creative art forms. They have been evidently functional in many respects, being interwoven with the culture of the people, which cuts across religion, education, entertainment, decoration, commerce and industry, social unity, prestige, international understanding, expression of culture and maintenance of civilization.

Artists the over world have established different styles and interest in the use of textiles in painting, sculpture, installation, jewellery design, pottery and other forms of decorative arts. They have created artistic and innovative techniques in the use of textile fabrics to enhance their works in two and three dimensional art forms. There are Art Schools which have developed their own styles and are recognized with basically such styles. According to Odiboh (2008), some Art Departments of Nigerian higher institutions have since been identified with one trait or the other and are also classified with one trait or the other or classified as 'art schools'. This idea gives the Nsukka Art School of University of Nigeria, Nsukka, a recognized identity with Ulli and the Zaria art School of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. According to Egonwa (2015), Nigerian artists are also drawing from the pool of techniques, ideas and materials for art production as their counterparts worldwide. He further stated that the difference is in the degree of intensity which is a function of national technological and economic growth.

This paper analysed the works of El Anatsui and Yinka Shonebare who are sculptors, Godfrey Williams-Okorodus, a painter, Victoria Udondian, Odun Orimolade and Peju Alatise, mixed media artists, who have carved a niche for themselves in their style of art production with inspiration from African textile fabrics. The selected artists have in their various art forms delved into different innovative techniques of creatively using textile fabrics to promote African art, history and cultural heritage bringing about national development.

National development depends on the economic strength of a nation, being able to empower its citizens. Raji & John, (2009) opines that the economy of a nation has to do with the generation and distribution of wealth for the general well-being of the citizenry since the state and nature of every nation's economic activities are always associated with the behaviour of total income, output, employment and the general price level in the economy. This study encourages the use of tailors off cuts, recycling old clothes and new fabrics from the textile market for arts and crafts at small, medium and large scale levels. This will create jobs for more people especially artists, thereby leading to national development.

The selected artists have also trained and mentored several artist, engaged people in their production and have contributed to tourism in major cities in Nigeria and the world. Their works have served as a guide to the use of African textiles in various and varied ways in the visual arts other than wearable clothing. For development and sustainability in Nigeria, the techniques and materials used have created employment for job seekers and helped to put discarded waste materials into artistic innovative use.

Types of African Textiles

African fabrics in this paper refer to indigenous fabrics produced and used by Africans. They include hand woven, dyed fabrics and factory produced waxed prints generally referred to as Dutch wax, *Hollandis* or *abada*. Other African textiles are *Kente* and *Adinkra* produced in Ghana. In Nigeria, the Yoruba's are associated with the *Aso Oke* and *Adireas* they are the producers. Kalabari people in Rivers State produce *peletebite* and *fimate bite* from *plain Indian madras george*. Other fabrics are *feni,inziri* and *popo*, all acculturated as part of their most cherished textiles. The Aniocha people are associated with *Akwa Ocha* produced by them, and the Akwete people of Abia state produce *Akwete*. Others are the Hausa people of the Northern states in Nigeria who are known with their traditional attire made with intricate hand embroidery and the Benue people who are identified with the *Anger* produced by the Tiv to mention but a few.

These fabrics are produced for the basic function of textiles which is to cover man's nakedness, body adornment and for protection against harsh weather conditions. Africans textiles are a major means to express themselves, their social, political, religious and cultural activities. Currently, it is seen as the melting pot of ideas and cultures among groups and nations in Africa and also used for embellishment in other art forms thereby making textiles a veritable source factor for influencing artists in disseminating and documenting the history and culture of people. These textile fabrics have been creatively used by various artist to create and embellish their artworks. Some of such works are currently promoting African arts as decorative arts in homes, public places such as museums and in the fashion industry. The artworks studied in this paper are not produced solely from new textile materials but are also replica of textile motifs created from recycled objects. Nigerian Textile industry according to Sunmonu, (2009), grew to become the second, single largest employer of labour in Nigeria, second to government, but declined, due to myriad of economic, social, technical and high-level management problems. Nigerian Textile industries unfortunately have short down without a blink to resuscitate them due to poor infrastructural facilities, shortage of raw materials and machineries, smuggling activities and cost of production. The indigenous industries however are still waxing strong at the local level. Motifs, structure and drapes on African textiles are very beautiful, with attractive colours and shapes depicting various symbolic meaning in the culture it represents.

Analysis of Selected works from various Artists

In this paper, some art works from some artists are analyses. Their styles are synonymous with African textile fabrics as inspiration for their artworks. The artists include, Yinka Shonibare, a painter and sculptor, El Anatsui, a sculptor, Victoria Udondian, a painter, Peju Alatise, a mixed media artist, Geoffrey Williams, a Graphic and advertising artist who practices painting as a full time job and Odun Orimolade who is an experimental artist whose practice spans from drawing, painting, collage, costume and sculptural installation.

Art expressions in Nigeria conform with European styles, with limitations on reality which later evolved with a blend of African concepts and European perceptions, transforming art to new forms. It is evident in the words of Egonwa (2015) who says that Nigerian Art is responsive to trans-national sensibilities from the double perspective of conceptual validity and tool of social commentary. African contemporary artists have awoken to the cultural and economic strategies of international environment which have far-reaching implications in modern art practice.

In the 1960s according to Odiboh (2015), when Nigerians were awakening to contemporary art, Europe had been saturated with various movements and stylistic trends. Ulli Beier and Michael Crowder among other Europeans and American agents were already engaged in conventional attitudes to make people understand the mechanics of painting, and teach them to see forms dissociated from literary content and worn out imagery. He also pointed out that the Osogbo Mbari Mbayo experiment, which also recognized in Nigeria was initiated by Beier in the 1960s, and later became a success in Europe and America.

Textiles used by artist in the selected works include *Dutch wax Hollandis*, *aso oke*, *kente*, and other textile fiber. They are either incorporated as part of the artwork in sculpture, or installation, mixed media painting, used as embellishment or the designs are adapted in their paintings. This brightness and distinctiveness of African fabrics referred to as *Abada* was originally produced in Dutch, Indonesia, where no market was found for it. Subsequently, it was copied and produced by the English, who eventually sold it to West Africans, for whom it became a popular everyday item of clothing. It also, crucially, became a sign of identity and authenticity for Africans. *Dutch wax Hollandis*, as it is call, is a colonial invention which offers itself as an authentic sign of Africanness.

Kente is a strip chequered woven cloth in Ghana by Asante and Ewe tribes. It is a silk and cotton cloth made of interwoven cloth strips. Akan refer to kente as *nwentoma*, meaning woven cloth. The patterns and colours created on the cloth are all related to the culture of the people, symbolizing wealth, royalty, excellence, elegance, honourable achievement and spiritual purity, bond for family unity, responsibility and cooperation. Anawalt (2007) opines that that Kente cloth has been adopted as an emblem of African identity, a famous cloth originally used by the royal and highly restricted wrapper of Asante. Figure 1 & 2 are *kente* cloth which inspired and influenced El Anatsui's sculpture wall installations which he calls cloth.



Figure1& 2: Asanti Kente cloth woven in Bonwire village in Ghana

Aso Oke in figure 3 is another African textiles that influenced Anatsui. It is a hand loomed cloth woven by the Yoruba people (men) of Ondo, Oyo, Ogun Ekiti, Lagos and Osun in south Western Nigeria. *Aso oke* literally means top cloth. It is used to make men's gowns, called *agbada*, women's wrapper, called *iro*, and men's hats, called *fila*. Figure 3 has an influence on El Anatsui's installation in figure 16.



Figure 3: Aso oke woven cloth by Yoruba men in western Nigeria

Wax Print (Hollandis), figure 4, is a special wax product with one or two core colours 'fitted' into the Wax Hollandis design. The designs are always mirrored on the front and back of the fabric (cotton cloth). The range and combination of colours used is extremely varied and emphasizes the unique styles of Vlisco fabrics. It is made of patterns and prints that present looks of the African culture. One of the colours is often used to highlight a natural bubbling effect, which contributes to a unique and lively appearance. This is the true sign of a quality Wax Hollandis block print. The appealing pattern and unique colour combinations ensure that everyone can express their individual taste and personality in their clothing. We use a unique collection of shades like yellow, blue, green, red, pink, purple, orange and brown. The fabrics are available in 6 yard, sometimes also in 2, 4 or 12 yards. Since 1846 we have been creating unique Real Dutch Wax fabrics in Holland that have influenced the African fashion landscape.



Figure 4: Wax print, factory manufactured cloth identified with Africa

Works of Yinka Shonibare

Yinka Shonibare is a London based Nigeria artist. Yinka Shonibare in his works, incorporates colourful African fabrics and ornaments, that often have multi-layered historical meanings. Shonibare's work in this paper explores issues, through the media of painting, sculpture and installation including construction and clothing. Using this wide range of media, Shonibare examines in particular the construction of identity and tangled interrelationship between Africa and Europe. Describing the fabrics he uses in his sculptures, Shonibare says he likes the multi-layered nature of the fabrics with the fact that they have an interesting history that goes back to Indonesia. He is also excited that the fabrics are appropriated by Africa and now represent African identities. Shonibare uses beauty to introduce viewers to specific issues and themes.

In his use of wax print fabric, which he has used both as the ground of his paintings (figure 9& 10), and to clothe his sculptures, (figure 5, 6, & 7), Shonibare's use of fabrics in his paintings and sculptures also accentuates a politics of authenticity by simultaneously presenting both the ideal of an “authentic” identity and identity as a “fabrication.” (Figure 8) Although he has been producing mostly installation-based work of late, Shonibare is also an accomplished painter, and that is where his practice began in the 1980s.



Figure 5
Title: How to Blow up Two Heads at Once (Ladies)
Medium: Installation
Year:2006.



Figure 6
Title: Leisure Lady (with ocelots)
Medium: Installation
Year: 2006.



Figure 7
Title: Scramble for Africa.
Medium: 14 life-size fiberglass mannequins, 14 chairs, table, and Dutch wax printed cotton
Year: 2003

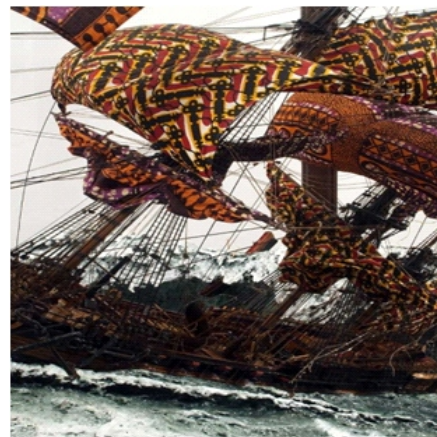


Figure 8
Title: "La Méduse," detail
Medium: Wood, foam, Plexiglas, Dutch wax printed cotton, and acrylic paint, 83 1/2 x 66 x 54 inches
Year: 2008



Figure 9
Title: Line Painting
Medium: Emulsion and acrylic on Dutch wax printed cotton, and painted wall
Year: 2003

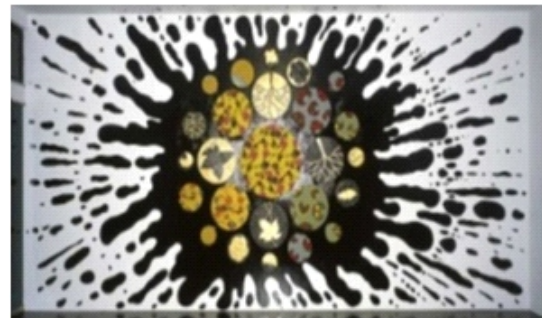


Figure 10
Title: Black Gold I
Medium: Emulsion and acrylic on Dutch wax printed cotton, and painted wall
Year: 2006

El Anatsui is a Ghanaian-born artist who has lived and worked in Nigeria for decades. He is a sculptor and a Professor at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka. His sculptures are mostly installations assembled on walls. El Anatsui is inspired by the structure, drapes, colours and designs on *kente* and *aso oke* fabrics which he has incorporated into his art, hung up on the wall of museums, public and private places in major cities in the world. The beauty and history behind the African textiles, *aso oke* and most especially the Ghana *kente*, have inspired El in his artwork. He transforms discarded waste materials and found objects like bottle corks, canes, plastics, metals and several other waste materials which he cuts, cleans up and put together with copper wire or stings.

Looking at El's works, and his materials, artists and others may call or refer to them as recycling waste to wealth, but he says he does not call it recycling, that he transforms to something else. This gives a creatively beautiful replica of the *kente*, *aso oke* and lace textile of the Ghana and Yoruba people respectively. His works have flexible forms and are able to be shaped the way he wants it at different installations. (See figure 11 to 16). The works of El Anatsui in this paper are not sold as a whole because of its size, originality, intricacy, and cost. Rather copies are sold and rights paid. His works are documented in books and are sold all over the world so he has made his statement and he is heard everywhere. El Anatsui has his works in museums in New York, Los Angeles, California, Tokyo, and Britain to mention but a few.

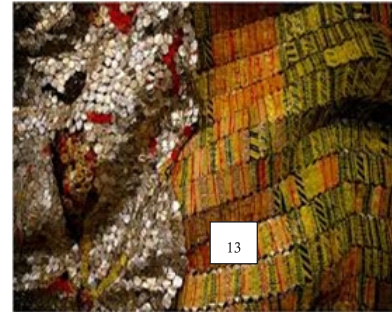


Figure 11, 12 & 13

Artist: El Anatsui

Title: Between heaven and earth (Replica of the Ghana *kente* cloth figure 11 & 12 and sequenced lace in figure 13 using bottle caps and shiny aluminium plates. Figure 11 is a close view of the large work)

Medium: Aluminium, bottle caps and copper



Figure 14

Artist: El Anatsui

Medium: Aluminium and copper wire



Figure 15

Artist: El Anatsui

Replica of lace

Medium: Aluminium and copper wire



Figure 16

Artist: El Anatsui

Replica of *Aso oke*

Medium: Waste aluminium and wood

Works of Victoria Udodian

Victoria is a Nigerian female artist. She has used her paintings and installation to depict cloth as an important aspect of man's livelihood. Victoria's work captioned table cloth is a collection of fabrics, cut into strips and woven as a wall decorative piece. It shows the technique of weaving and documents same for historic purposes. Used cloth is an installation of a collection of fabrics also depicting the value of cloth to mankind.



Figure 17
Artist: Victoria Udodian
Title: Table cloth
Medium: Mixed media Painting



Figure 18
Artist: Victoria Udodian
Title: Used cloth
Medium: Installation

Works of Peju Alatise

Peju Alatise is a mix media and installation artist. She used fabrics with the intension of telling a story and the tendency to flirt with as many media as available to her. *Wrapture: The story cloth*, for Alatise (2015), in figure 19 & 20, emphasis is on the use of cloth/ textiles as an advocate / narrator of would-be wearers as women. Alatise in her work, represents cloth as a contributing factor in her western Nigerian background where cloth is called 'Wrapper', a symbol of covering all human secrets and shame. She collects a variety of local fabrics (mostly Ankara designed from 1070 to date), both used and old, cut with colour, symbols and motifs to create collage of a new visual language. Every piece of fabric used she says gives a symbolic relevance to the overall composition. The fabric is then sculpted to keep the memory of its wearer. It is a technique which Alatise achieved by what she calls freezing with resins as the main ingredient, and then the cloth story is told in visual representation and abstraction.



Figure 19
Artist: Peju Alatise
Title: Wrapture: The story cloth
Medium: Installation



Figure 20
Artist: Peju Alatise
Title: Wrapture: The story cloth
Medium: Installation

Works of Godfrey Williams

Godfrey is a Nigerian Graphic artist practicing painting in Belgium. He has used the designs on different types of textiles as inspiration for his paintings. They range from woven African textiles through Knitwear, blanket and adire motifs. The masquerades are embellished with woven textiles while others are inspired by motifs from knitted woollen textiles. His use of lines and colours show rhythm in the movement of the figures and flexibility. Figure



Artist: Godfrey Williams
Title: *Egungu and Gelede*
Medium: Water colour Painting
Year: 2012



Artist: Godfrey Williams
Title: *Modern Agbobo Mmuuo*
Medium: Water colour Painting
Year: 2012

Works of Odun Orimolade 2013

Odun Orimolade is a visual artist who lives and work in Lagos Nigeria. She is a broad experimental artist whose works span through paintings, drawings, collage, etching, costume, sculptural installation, performance and other mixed media techniques. Her works in this paper depict installation addressing the cultural values a particular society to make up traditions and the way of life within a community. "The baby and the bath water" encompasses their religion, roots, songs, histories, and dress sense among other forms. *Aso Oke* has been used extensively to document the proverbial baby and the bath water. An art installation of this nature can be sold as a CD in performance or as framed photograph.



Artist: Odun Orimolade
Title: *The baby and the bath water*
Medium: Installation and performance
Year: 2013

Cost Implication and National Development

A nation that is economically endowed is said to be developed and this can only be possible if there is diversification in economy and the people are economically productive. (Uhunmwagho 2015), states that Nigerian Art has much to offer in the economic development of the nation, viewing art practice from traditional, neo-traditional, tourist and college tradition. These are different forms of art that have incorporated textiles to develop economic potentials for the nation. Traditional art forms made from diverse materials have potentials for innovation, introducing changes. Such materials include but not limited to wood, clay, stones, metal, bones, thorns and calabashes. Textile fabrics are used to embellish some of such materials to enhance aesthetic quality and add value.

Art patronage is actually poor in Nigeria. According to (Uhunmwagho 2015), there was a great boost in the 1970s and 1980s during the oil boom and the hosting of the second world Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). By the mid-1990s, Art patronage suffered a great fall till the present day which led artists to drift to other professions. In most cases, the artist is the producer and marketer so he has little or no time to study the market and develop new ideas to improve his style for viable collectors. This is done most especially at exhibitions. Most art patrons are foreigners who prefer light weight and small art pieces. Artist can therefore produce souvenirs to certain specification with African textiles for tourists and stile pass on the desired message.

A lot can be done with African textiles as inspiration to other art forms for national development. African textiles have beautiful and intricate designs which could be studied critically and in cooperated into other arts forms in diverse ways to document and highlight the African culture. The works analysed in this paper are examples from some big names in art. These have been used to show how art can move individuals and a nation forward in development. They started small and gradually got to where they are today. The idea of using African textiles as inspiration to other various art forms was conceived to break off from the conventional materials and styles to achieve uniqueness.

This paper suggests that Artists in their various fields should look into ways of diversifying their materials and techniques like the big artists have done with African textiles.(Odiboh 2015), States that Artists cannot delimit their artistic expression but should be able to faithfully express themselves in a manner most explicit to their message and adapted to forms that will be readily understood. This goes to accept the fact that art is dynamic and so artists should be more prolific in carrying out their works and in the use of new materials and techniques. They should own studios where they will practice and train people, organize and attend workshops, conference and exhibitions nationally and internationally for exposure and acquisition of new knowledge. Artists should be reasonable in costing their works for easy and fast sales.

There should be division of labour for diversification leading to employment of skilled and unskilled labour in the arts. This will in turn involve collection and study of textiles, cleaning and polishing as the case may be and assembling for installation, as an area of specialization which will lead to employment to enhance national development. Cost of production will be very minimal with the reuse of waste and the infusion of textile design on other art forms.



Figure 25 : Example of marketable art works designed from reused materials. These are bangles designed from tailors off cuts for women's dressing. Same can be used for earrings, sandals, applique on cloth and collage in painting, and several other art forms. From Ankara jewellery workshop held at the Women and youth Foundation, organized by Professor Peju Laiywola in Lagos.

Conclusion

Artists create and bring about cultural and social change to the world in their various medium and styles. With the emergence of conceptual and non-representational art currently in vogue in the international artistic idioms, textiles are found in almost all forms of art as embellishment. It gives individuality and style, and artistic standards to the artworks, breaking further development of European ancient art styles of realism. It is established in this study that Art in Nigeria has grown comparably with global trend, in their artistic use textiles for installation, performing art, sculpture, painting, and pottery. This is evident in the words of Egonwa (2015) who opined that Nigerian Art is responsive to trans-national sensibilities from the double perspective of conceptual validity and tool of social commentary.

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