

Patronage and the Contemporary Nigerian Visual Artist

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Abstract

Patronage means materials help and encouragement given by a person or institution to support some kind of endeavour. It is a compensatory pointer to the human creative effort in the task of nation building. No artist, no matter how professional sophisticated or theoretically competent can survive in heroic isolation. Art involves a process of 'Doing' and 'Making'. The process and the product, which satisfy man's creative urge also serve as a means through which his materials needs are met. For this to be accomplished, the product must reach and be appreciated or better still acquired by a consumer. However, for this product to be appreciated, it must satisfy certain criteria. Firstly, it must be functional or meaningful, it must believe certain human aesthetics appreciation. It could serve personal or physical needs or in a wider sense perform a public service. There is the need for relevance in every artistic endeavour. Man (the artists), is a socio-economic milieu. For him to satisfy his mental, physical and spiritual needs, he needs to be compensated for his efforts. However, it is ironical that inspire of the magnanimous contribution of the artist to nation building, his efforts are not appreciated or recognized most times even ignored. This paper therefore identified certain factors responsible for the lack of patronage and the eventual (though not total) change in attitude towards this vocation. Consequently, it proffers remedies to this dearth in the patronage of the Visual Arts.

Keywords: *Patronage, Visual Arts, Dearth, Proffers, Factors responsible*

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Background to the Study

The visual arts in Nigeria is bedevilled by a plethora of problems; patronage is just one of them. It is a fact that no art tradition or artist no matter how professionally sound can survive in heroic isolation. Patronage is central to the growth and promotion of the arts in Nigeria, as it is, the world over. Its presence in a country's artistic heritage, acts as a booster to creative exploration and also a barometer through which the level of advancement or appreciation of the acts are measured. The artist sources of livelihood and economic well-being dictates his output or level of creativity. Since Art is both a process and product, it must seek an audience. For a product to be complete it must reach and be appreciated by its targeted audience. It becomes imperative therefore that, for the Arts to survive, for the artist himself to be empowered and the creative genius of our people enhanced, our culture preserved for posterity and the ultimate realization of a national development, the awareness, appreciation and patronage of the visual arts by the public becomes a necessity.

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Patronage

The patronage of Arts dates back to ancient times. the kings, Obas, Princes, Chiefs, priests of delities and secret societies were known to be the major patronage of the arts and were also the custodians of the culture and traditions of their people, who were seen as God ordained and a representative of his will on earth. Because of this and other factors, they weld great influence and control over the people of their domain. This influence also extends to the harnessing and utilization of the creative abilities of these subjects to deify themselves and to create the symbols and paraphernalia of their authority and power. While satisfying the whims of the authority through his work, the artist earns his living and also gains respect from his community thereof. The services of the artist were also in perpetual demand to carry out certain religious functions or beliefs, thus the 'arts have been on the progressive growth, because creativity and originality are being encouraged' (Omuari, 1996).

The Visual arts in Nigeria witnessed another phase of patronage during the colonial period. Due to the international recognition our arts have received in European museums, world attention has focused on Nigeria and her arts. The demand for these arts works became a compulsion for Europe, which degenerated to a level, where our precious arts facts were 'stolen with such a reckless abandon that tend to render the antiquities and its anti-theft decree important' (Jegede, 1983). According to this authority, as early as 1938, Duckworth had cause to complain about the disappearance of some of our art works.

In the modern parlance, patronage is an organized affair. The encouragement the traditional rulers and priest used to artists have met a stiff competition with the emergence of galleries and cultural institutes. At this point, it is pertinent to note that the active art periodic exhibition only. It would also be erroneous to posit that it thrives from public commission and occasional government sponsorship, which are few and not consistent. Patronage transcends buying of art works. It entails encouragement, financial support, funding or sponsorship. It embraces both motivation and appreciation of art and the artists in his quest for beauty and excellence. This form of patronage is conspicuously absent in Nigeria. Fundamentally the patronage of art, as a creative endeavour, is affected by the following factors: the concepts of 'art for arts

sake', ignorance and misconception, lack of adequate government policy on arts and cultures, the negative attitude of private museums and galleries, high prices of art works depressed economy insecurity and political instability.

Factors Militating Against the Patronage of Contemporary Visual Arts

The Concept of Art for Art Sake

One obvious reason for the lack of patronage of the arts in Nigeria is the emergent factor of 'art for art sake'. Before this time, art in Nigerian like anywhere in the world has been under the consistent patronage of religion, kings and nobles. In this light, art was needed to perform significant functional and necessary social, political and religious function. However, art fell from this vintage position with the emergence of modern concepts like art for arts sake. Most of the visual art lost its direct functional values, so the success of the artist is now unfortunately dependent on the goodwill of those who are buoyant enough and in the same vein willing to patronize him. According to Grillo (undated: 53) as cited in Aig-Imoukuede (undated). Art has changed from being a social necessity to something you think of only when you have surplus". He concludes by saying that Art for Art sake is alien to our culture.

Ignorance/Misconception

Most people about two or three decades ago views art as a vocation for dropouts and mediocre. As a result, less attention were given to students, art professionals and their products besides, they did not see it as a gainful career. These adversely affected the professional artists as they were seen as second rated especially when compared to otherwise lucrative vocations like medicine, law engineering e.t.c. All these prejudiced the mind of the general public, supposed patrons or collector and naturally, it affected patronage of artistic products. Oloidi (1983) highlights his problem thus: "The picture of art was grotesquely painted and framed by underdevelopment and ignorance". Most Nigerians are yet to understand the essence of modern artistic endeavours. Majority of people still think art works are fetish objects or idol images. According to Jegede (1983); "The average Nigerian attitude to arts and artist is pathetic; he sees them as curious and object to be tolerated". Okeke, (1982) sees this as a much more fundamental problem than has been already admitted. There is no understanding at all between the artists and the local audience. He asserts; "The truth is that the artist and his products were placed very low on scale, or indeed, outside the scale of the emergent elite". Ignorance and misconception of the role at art in the humanizing rites of development, has thus become, an immobile boulder on the way of meaningful patronage and shall remain so as long as the degree of public appreciation of the arts remains poor.

Lack of Viable Economy

Patronage leans directly on the economy; since it requires finance and other resources to remain relevant or patronize artistic products. Though, this is not an end in itself. However, the artist needs to be adequately patronized to maintain a stable professional life. Such genuine patronage is conspicuously absent in Nigeria. Some Nigerians are knowledgeable of the positive role of art in society and are willing to commission or acquired works of art, but they complain of lack of finance and thus consider acquisition a luxury. There is also another category of persons who appreciate art and have standard aesthetic taste and sensibilities but

are actually incapacitated by lack of resources. These factors have otherwise affected the acquisition of art pieces and the attendance to art exhibitions, museums and galleries. It will be erroneous to say at this point that, no lofty acquires or commissions artists to produce works of arts, the fact is that the number and frequency of these collection or commissions are low coupled with the unrealistic prices of the artwork. The pertinent question is what hope of redemption for the visual arts in a bastardised economy like ours where the vast lot of people are living within subsistence level? There is no doubt that the buying and selling of art works is a vital aspect of the concept of patronage and could also mean the possible acceptability of the building artist and essential factor in building a virile artistic legacy. Lack of proper documentation of contemporary artistic art. To add salt to wound or ignorance and misconception is the issue of lack of proper documentation.

Lack of Government Policy and Implementation on Art and Culture

Government involvement and participation in the art over the years is negligible. It does not have a well-defined policy on art and culture. There are no arms of the government or trust fund in Nigeria that administer aids or grant to art. For science, there is PRODA, etc and also a ministry of science and technology, but there is no ministry of arts. The government is ignorant of the fact that Art is the midwife if science and technology. Because if this trend, the contemporary art scene could be linked to the primal state of nature, where the survival of the fittest reigns. This leads to the bastardization of professional practice, since artist are forced by circumstances to combine their vocation with other occupations, and most times sell or “hawk2 their works below subsistence level in order or survive. Ikwuemesi (1997) puts it succinctly when he said “Inspite of occasional official mouthing of support for the arts, successive policy makers in Nigeria have not given enough practical encouragement to the nations artists”. The government is oblivious of the enviable role art has played in civilized societies and its capabilities in transforming the Nigerian society into the lofty stage of technological advancement.

The foregoing does not imply that the Nigerian government has not done anything towards the patronage or upliftment of arts, but that the approach has been to African collection, and this is attributed to the relative lack of publication focusing on African art, which in itself limits one say the least, doing the right things with a wrong disposition. let us isolate the case of FESTA and the National Museum and Gallery for instance. One of the aims FESTA was to promote art and culture in its entirety and to utilize the creative genius of the people for the greatest benefits of the Nigerian people. This aim was hardly realised for the talents of the artist were not adequately utilized. They were not tasked professionally to exercise the best of their ability during the organization of this most expensive and extravagant festival in black Africa. According to Okeke (1982); “Even the banners other decorative effects that could have been profitably designed and produced in the country were imported”.

This situation portrays an arrant loss of confidence in the national artist and an eloquent example of the retrogressive aspect of government decisions on art and the artist and culture as a whole. The museum is grossly ill equipped. Apart from the lack of adequate curatorial services, the museum does not have a holistic national collection from the length and breath of

the country, which it can rightly call its own. The National Gallery made of works mostly donated by Nigerian and foreign artists. The Nigeria government's patronage of its art and artist is a farce. The budding artist finds himself in an environment rendered increasingly turgid by unbridled lip service and no reward for creativity and excellence. This has constituted the major problem of art patronage coupled with a lack of a rationally designed cultural policy and implementation.

Private Museums and Galleries

A lot of private museums and galleries have been established in some of the major cities the country especially in Lagos; their role in the patronage is far from encouraging. Some, if not all of them, set terms that are hard to meet. They charge very high sums of money for exhibitions, and some insist on commissions that defeats the idea of sales or exhibition. Some of these galleries could be rightly described as the shylock of art. Apart from the high exhibition fees, some of them demand the donation of outrageous number of art works by the end of the show. This is an unhealthy development, since the artist is forced to become his own salesman thus descending to bare faced commercialism. The quality of his work drops since he spends more time trying to reach out to buyers and collectors. Consequently, the artist no longer works on a consistent basis, so works produced is hollow and devoid of substance capable of moving society forward.

High Prices of Art Works

The contemporary Nigeria artists complain of low patronage but at the same fail to realize that over-pricing of artwork constitute a jinx capable of underselling him. Conversely, a low-price tag does not necessarily attract a sale. The pricing of art works is a complex problem to make things worst, it is not taught by schools. Every Artist feels a form of attachment to some particular set of works or the other, which tend to attract high price tags. Some look at materials inputs, time, and energy expended on the work. And these categories of artists who balloon the price of their works hide under the conception that artwork are expensive. As far back as 1966 Cyprain Ekwenu in an article in the Nigerian magazine as quoted in Okeke (1932) highlighted the frustration of the new Nigerian elite in filling the vacuum of the outgoing colonial patrons of art.

For that price (300 guineas) a large percentage of jobless Nigerians would happily give their services for 13 calendar months. How many Nigerians were appreciative enough to write a cheque for that figure and have the painting delivered?

As mentioned above, the complexity of pricing is based on the fact that every individual artist has different backgrounds with unique set of basic experience, exposure idiosyncrasies and conception of art and life. These and other factors could influence his work and thus price of such works.

There should be some degree of sanity in the pricing of art works. It would amount to professional suicide if an artist under prices himself, but at the same time it will be grossly unreasonable and unrealistic to catapult price beyond the narrow margins of his compatriots' resources.

The Role of Institutions and Organization in the Promotion of Arts

The establishment of art institutions, museums and galleries (both government and private), the activities of foreign cultural centres and expatriates have been instrumental to the growth of patronage in the visual art.

Art Institutions

The establishment of art institution like Nigeria College of Arts Science and Technology, Zaria (NCAST) later Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The university of Ife (OAU), University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Yaba College of Technology, etc led to the growth and patronage of the visual arts. This is evinced in the emergence of distinguished art practitioners, historians and critics, who became vehement advocates, of the cause of arts; names like Yusuf Grillo, Shina Yusuf, Jimoh Akolo, Bruce Onobrapkeya, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko etc.

Though these art colleges were few and as such its practitioners could be bring much pressures to bear on the artistically biased and ignorant public of the eole of art in society, but the effort helped in no small measure in moving contemporary arts forward. The campaigns of the 1960's like that of the Zaria art society, especially those of individuals like Bruce Onobrapkeya, Yusuf, grillo, Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, was geared at transforming budding artist into true Nigeria artists, projecting through their work, socio cultural background. The establishment of art centres like the Oshogbo by three foreigners, Giogina and Ulli Beir and Suznne Wenger, which later gained international exposure; and the Mbari club were all established primarily to asset the uniqueness of the visual arts. These marked a new phase in the development, application and patronage contemporary art. One major role art institution in Nigeria can play in the promotion and patronage of the visual arts in through informed literature and well-researched or documented materials which in itself, will help to correct exiting distortions in order to redirect the disposition and trend of art development along the channel that portray our real achievements and reserve our cultural heritage.

Museum and Galleries

The establishment of both government and private museum and galleries has contributed to the exposure of contemporary and galleries art and artist, through exhibition, festivals, symposia and workshop on art. These have given a wide range of experience in art practitioners. One of the cultural objectives of the museum and galleries is the preservation of our art and culture. The National exhibition mounted during the 2nd world black and African Art Festival (FESTAC) in Igos in 1977 is an eloquent example. It was all-embracing collection that featured the works of artist, from the different art schools mentioned earlier. The recent move of the National Galleries of Art in exhibiting contemporary art at the major cities in Nigeria; a case in point is the “Dimension of humanity” exhibition in Port Harcourt civic center.

Private museums and galleries, as has been demonstrated through their activities, have made invaluable contribution to the growth and patronage of the visual arts. Some of these establishments are Didi museum, Signature Gallery, Aragon, Geobl. Something special

ovimaroro, Mydrim, quintessence national gallery etc. Though some of the attitudes of these galleries may run counter to the growth and aspiration of the artist, but at the same time, are helping to season and exposes the artists to the vagaries of the profession. The exhibitions held by this Galleries affords the artist the opportunity to reach collections, patronage and a wider audience. During these exhibitions press coverage or reviews of the artist's works are made which goes a long way to expose them.

Foreign Cultural Centres/Nationals

Since the attainment of independence in 1960, foreign and cultural centres have played a great role in the promotion of Nigeria Art both in Nigerian and abroad. There are the Geo the institute, French cultural centres the Italians cultural centres, the United State Information Services (USIS) and the British Council. These centres have sponsored art exhibition, seminars and workshops. Many contemporary artists have benefited from the immense patronage of this institutes and centres in the form of sponsorship of exhibition and tours. Foreign patronage of contemporary visual art is significant in the history of Nigeria art. Okuwosa (2014) conbosates this view when the contents that the contemporary art serve in Nigeria.

However, some scholars have argued that this form of sponsorship has been largely unsatisfactory since they tended to derail rather than place most contemporary artist on sound artistic development. The patrons have to like the artists wok for him to succeed. The implication is that the artist is often constrained to do the type of work he believes the patron likes. Grillo (undated:53) aggress with this school of taught ehen he asserted that “some foreign art patrons would frown at any work of art which had trace of academic training or was in anyways reminiscent of what a European artist mighty do. They wanted “Genuine African art which as far as they are displaying in abundance, African traditional spiritual beliefs and myths”.

This state of affairs affected adversely many a struggling artist, hungry for patronage who unfortunately did not have any strong personal convictions, started consciously to paint frightening monsters, ghost and distorted people in order to give the impression of an African Artist. This is pathetic since true patronage should ginger pride in the artist of occupying an indispensable position in the scheme of things and also encourage individualism and freedom of expression.

The Mass Media

The role of mass media in the promotion and patronage of the art cannot be over emphasis. Its effort at the moment is not enough. In fact, it is at the moment haphazard and not well channelled to achieve optimum result in providing the much-needed catalyst for developing proper national consciousness and promoting the revenue potentials of Nigeria arts. The visual arts should be given permanent and prominent exposure in the print and television media like its other count parts like sports, medicine and business. There should be consistent art features in all the daily and weekly newspaper and magazines and television. The already established Association of arts writers are to the view of this writer mere paper tigers, their

present is yet to be felt. They should wake up to their responsibility and work aggressively to achieve the necessary impact.

The Role of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA)

The society of Nigeria artist funded in 1963 made invaluable contribution to the promotion and patronage of contemporary visual art. One of its cardinal objectives is to champion the cause of art and to determine what is it that constitute a great work of art and a lesser one, the different between arts and crafts, and the distinction between a complete artist and a craftman etc. They may not have achieved all of their objectives, but some of these activities like organizing seminars, workshops and the publication of art journals have come a long way in the promotion and patronage of the visual arts.

The Visual Artist: The Need for Relevance

The contemporary art scene is plaque all sorts of philistine escapades in the name of art. There now exist, a dire need for relevance. Rescals and Chariatans who paintings have invaded the art market. Creativity, originality, consistency and hard work, which are priceless virtues in execution of works for posterity are thoughtlessly ignored. Consequently, works produce is in relevant and devoid of meaning with no philosophical axe to grind. The artist here qualifies as his own major problem. Because professionalism has degenerated to commercialism, his attitude to work and his vocation as a whole is nothing to attribute to a committed artist. The effect of such attitude is a loss of confidence by his clients, serious, collectors and the public. The society's misconception of the artist as an unserious person, man of hands and not of brain will now be justified.

There is also the need for artist to specialize in a particular area of the visual arts. Painters should be truly painters and devoted to the cause and artistic problems of painting, sculptures should also devote themselves to the exploration of form, rather than, being a jack of all trade, a painter, sculptures, graphic artist and ceramic artist and gate designer. This writer wishes to be understood clearly; that versatility is not a crime, but a virtue, however, professional specialization should be scarification the alter of versatility. Through the strides of modern art makes it difficult to draw a rigid barrier between the various areas of specialization in the arts, it should be done with caution so that confusion does not result when serious critique is done on the life and work of a particular artist. He could still be placed as painter, sculpture, graphist, ceramist, textile designer etc.

This trend may be attributed to the economic distress and the changing realities within the country but must be stressed that any art propelled by subsistence is sure to decline, a mere survivalist last hope. Ikwemesi (1997) justifies this claim when he said, "Creativity motivated by hunger or want is shallow and unsound and can mar a whole tradition. Artists need to re-examine themselves; when they are coming from, where they presently stand stylistically and where they are going to artistically. That today, artists are traders, is a disturbing trend. Works should be properly executed, materials and philosophical inputs and otherwise. If an artist is working towards an exhibition he should plan very well, and concepts should be properly internalized and executed. The rate at which artists go for exhibition by the end of the day,

reduce the quality of their work and make a laughing stock of this noble show. Oloidi (1995) describes this attitude of Nigerian artist; “The neck-braking speed with which artists featured exhibitions reduced many art forms to degrading leaves of inefficiency and mediocrity”.

Conclusion

Patronage has remained a persistent problem in the contemporary Nigerian art scene. In this paper, attempt has been made to look at precolonial and colonial patronage of the arts and the factors militating against the patronage of the visual arts in recent times. It went further to discuss the role foreign nationals and cultural centres, art institutions, the SNA and other organizations have played and still play in the encouragement, promotions and patronage in visual arts and also to suggest remedies to the dearth of patronage and funding in the visual arts. The overall picture that emerges is that for the artist to gain patronage he should package himself adequately in order to make himself relevant, that patronage does not lie in the hands of the individuals alone but that it is holistic in nature, it involves the individuals' members of the society, groups co-operate organizations Nationals and foreign cultural centres and Arts institutions. All these bodies have their various roles to play in the promotion and consistent patronage of the visual arts.

Recommendation

The Nigerian contemporary artists have three major problems his self-image societal recognition and the absence of rationality designed cultural policy and implementation. The artist should work hard to make himself professionally articulate. There should be high degree of emotional and material commitments to his work. He must strive to maintain his integrity by shunning sheer commercialism. This would make him gain respect from his clients and thus patronage. The artist should try not to prostitute his work in order to appeal to a collector or attract any form of patronage, if not he will lower the standard of his work and reduce it to mere craft.

The government should liaise with artist to fashion a cultural policy favourable to the artists. Well-planned programmes of artistic activity should be initiated to upgrade the skills of creative individuals and also expose them, both at home and abroad. The government should establish a ministry of art and culture with an artist as minister, who is abreast with the problems and prospects of art propagation and patronage. The government should make the recently established Arts endowment fund work like those in the socialist system where it maintains the artist through the artist union. Here all professional artists are provided with tools and materials needed for his work, he is accommodated and paid salary by the government. In the Scandinavian countries budding artist who cannot subsist on their works are given monthly allowance till they are able to do without the allowance and start paying taxes on their sales. The SNA should address the unwarranted invasion of charatan and arts philistines, to instil some sanity in the profession. It is also paramount for the SNA to organize seminars to educate the pricing of art work and the need to maintain their artistic integrity through standard practice. It should even establish a gallery to cater for the need of its members, especially upcoming artist. In the same vein, art fairs should also be organized by the SNA to break the monopoly of unscrupulous art collectors, dealers and galleries. Every

artist should see it as a matter of duty to preach the gospel of the role art play in society. This would educate the public and make people have a positive disposition toward the arts, which is capable of leading to a sustainable patronage in the visual arts.

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