

## **The Relevance of Art Appreciation in Visual Art Practice**

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### **Abstract**

This study showcases the essence of engaging the tools and language of Art Appreciation by the studio artist in generating interest, understanding and entertainment in a given art form. It is observed that many budding and practising visual artists who produce good works of art are not able to speak to their works and this keeps the meaning embedded in these works out of the purview of the consuming and buying public. This does not help to promote the visual art culture in society. This paper thus aims at enlightening practising visual artists on the need to be fully equipped with the desired skill to illuminate the essence and sensibilities of their creation, for it to be better appreciated by the populace. Several literatures were reviewed bothering on the concept and history of Art appreciation, Aesthetics- meaning, goals and judgmental criteria for ascertaining the beauty of art forms produced. An analysis of an untitled Mural painting to exemplify the subject matter under discourse is thus presented. It is found that the knowledge of art criticism is a "sine qua non" for the artists who are expected to verbalize their artworks to make them more meaningful, academic and entertaining thereby pushing forth visual art productions to the frontiers of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Art Criticism, Studio artists, Aesthetics, Verbalize, Art forms, Art Appreciation, Evaluative concept, Subjective, Objective and Relative.

### **Introduction**

One unique feature that makes the studio artist stand out among his peers is the ability to speak to his artworks. This is because producing artworks without relating them to their historical context, style and meaning could be considered a worthless exercise. Consequently, it is considered necessary for studio artists to learn and understand the basics and language of art appreciation in visual art practice for them to be able to push art to the frontiers of knowledge. The visual arts are a very subtle form of expression, a complex network of intellectual, emotional and sensuous perception which cannot be fitted into any absolute pattern or formula, but which on the contrary, may be open to several different interpretations. The creation of a visual artwork starts with the conception of an idea from the ethereal. This idea is presented literarily and then concretized in visual, tangible form, be it in two-dimension or three-dimension. It is tangible because we can see, touch and feel the art object in context. The entire processes of creating these art forms task the intellect of the studio artists. The appeal of art thus comes not only from conscious perception but also from intuitive appreciation. A work of art is not present only in thought but also in feeling. It is a symbol rather than a direct statement of truth. Art appreciation, therefore, requires training the eyes and ears to perceive and enjoy specific qualities of forms in art and developing a standard to distinguish between good and bad. It is not imposed but recognizes the distinctive value in each work of art. The

purpose is to sensitize and broaden the student's background of experience and ability so that he will be ready to appreciate and enjoy whatever he encounters later on.

The writer has observed that many studio artists produce art forms which attract the admiration of consumers and buyers of artworks but an embarrassing scenario is when some of these artists are called upon to speak about their works. The cat is often let out of the bag because they are not able and equipped with the tools to articulate the concept, idea, content, process and essence of such beautiful creation. In Akinnukawe (1983), Dele Jegede (b. 1945 - ) noted that "in the universities where art is studied as a discipline, they have concentrated on studio art, almost to the exclusion of equally important aspects like art education, art criticism and aesthetics. What you find as a result are graduates who are very fast on the brush, on easels, but who are not bold at verbalizing their art". This is the crux of the matter. This paper is aimed at educating budding and practising artists on the relevance of art appreciation in visual art practice. It is hoped that the knowledge of the basic principles and language of art appreciation will throw more light on his works which will elicit further comprehension of these works that will make for better enjoyment by the viewing and buying public. In this paper, therefore, an effort will be made to state clearly the concept of Art Appreciation with a brief history, Aesthetics-meaning, Goals and Judgmental criteria. Furthermore, an exemplified model of art appreciation with an untitled Mural painting will be presented. It is hoped that this will illuminate the mind of practising artists and rise to the challenge of verbalizing their artworks in a succinct manner that will win the admiration of the art-consuming public.

### **The Concept of Art Appreciation**

Art appreciation is the description, interpretation and evaluation of works of art. It is concerned with judging the aesthetic value or quality of art objects in such fields of the visual arts as painting, sculpture, decorative arts, drawing, printmaking and photography. It is also manifested in the selective patronage of artists, the public and private collection of their works and even in the restoration and conservation of these works. It encompasses a wide variety of approaches ranging from rigorously logical critical judgments based on philosophically derived aesthetic criteria to more personal and subjective reactions that attempt to communicate to the reader some of the emotions inspired in the critic by viewing the work of art<sup>2</sup>. It involves the ability to rightly estimate, recognize, understand and be sensitive to, as well as value the artwork. In appreciating an artwork, the following indices will be looked into – colour, motifs, the arrangement of forms, style and dimension of the artwork.

Indefinite phrases such as, “it appears”, and “it seems”, probably are employed. It is not a hero-worship affair. It requires the involvement of the basic tools and principles to be able to conjecture the right situation. To be able to appreciate better, one should frequent where artwork is produced, move with artists and move from one place to the other. Art criticism is thus linked with aesthetics (the evaluation of beauty and of art in general) since art critics frequently assess particular works of art following some pre-supposed criteria of aesthetic value, thus putting aesthetic theory into practical application.

### **A Brief History of Art Appreciation**

Art Appreciation has been a distinct profession only since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It grew from two modern institutions- Commercial art galleries and Newspapers. The Art Galleries which first appeared in Paris when the French Academy was no longer able to handle all the works produced by French artists provided a marketplace for works of art. The Newspapers through journalistic practice published articles about art for an interested audience. The Gallery system and regular art criticism in Newspapers freed painting from official patronage and made it a part of public life.

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, criticism tended to judge art based on what all arts had in common. Criteria for painting and sculpture were the same as for Literature. In ancient Greek and Roman view, all art was an imitation of nature and the artist's skill was measured by his ability to create life-like images. Plato regarded art as immoral and anti-social primarily because it calls forth emotions at the expense of reason. Aristotle insisted that art has two-fold purposes- to instruct and to delight<sup>3</sup>.

Art criticism in the West before the 19<sup>th</sup> century frequently consisted of broad and imprecise generalizations about art’s moral purposes and higher ideals (truth, beauty, etc.) rather than of a close and demanding scrutiny of individual works of art. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, commercial art galleries came into being to cater for the growing art market represented by the emerging middle class and newspapers with wide circulations that appeared through which art criticism could be disseminated to the public. Art critics thus began functioning as tastemakers for the new art-buying public. These critics began to focus on specific artists and their works to determine their relative merits and worth. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the breakdown of established conceptions of meaning in the visual arts and the many rapid changes in artistic style enabled certain perceptive critics to attain the role of champions of a new artistic movement. The English critic, Roger Fry helped accustom the public to the post-impressionist movements (which he named) and the American critics, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg did the

same for Abstract Expressionism. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, art criticism had become a well-established if not a widely diverse field<sup>4</sup>.

### **Aesthetics: Meaning, Goals and Judgmental Criteria *Meaning***

Aesthetics is derived from the Greek word “*aisthesis*”, meaning “sense perception”. It has traditionally been conceived as the branch of philosophy concerned with beauty and the beautiful in nature and art<sup>5</sup>. The way to get the most enjoyment from a work of art is to experience it in the light of good criticism. The way to separate good criticism from bad is based on sound principles of aesthetic judgment. Art is part of life concerned with every aspect of human activity. It can be a piece of well-composed music known for its harmony, rhythm, variety and contrast of tones. A study of art leads to the development of our sensual organs, all of which are involved in the appreciation of aesthetics. Traits in human behaviour reveal that man has an unbeatable natural love for the good and therefore may be guided to recognize things that are noble as against ignoble- the beauty of the universe as against its ugly forms. One is then able to appreciate the qualities of things within one's environment or criticize them constructively. Children exposed to art practice have the chance of developing their potential skills and the habit of awareness regarding matters that may seem commonplace to them.

Under the colonial education system, two traits in the teaching and learning processes were teaching by percepts and learning under the influence of regimented discipline as opposed to guided freedom. The effect was to lower the cultivation of aesthetic values in every facet of the human experience. On the learner's part, there was a natural urge for creative venture and on the teacher's side, the zeal, organizational ability and technical aptitude were deficient. Good taste is never acquired by proxy nor by a coercive approach to aesthetic problems, but rather by experience and a deliberate attempt to assimilate facts from nature. To this end, both the eye and the mind can be trained. Art teaching also faces the challenge of directing the individual towards the realization of noble ideals of developing precision of the mind and potential skills. He is thus able to develop consciousness of self his true character as opposed to mere nominal or physical identification. The approach to aesthetic appreciation differs according to the individual and the nature of the many branches of creative and performing art. In art, it is the material effects, chromatic or solid, formal organization and the message that are desirable for true creative expression. This can be seen in paintings which make effective use of colour, tone and linear rhythms. Aesthetic practices enrich the mind as well as prepare the individual to approach world problems from the standpoint of the art educator. Art through

the ages has been motivated by two distinct factors-Mysticism involving magic, social and religious beliefs and instincts<sup>6</sup>.

### **Goals of Aesthetic Education**

Aesthetic education is necessary because of its importance in human development as stated thus:

- Helping in the development of the ability to conceptualize and compare works of art.
- Develop critical views of art, artists and art objects.
- Exposes students to physical theories and concepts.
- Developing individual ability to look inwards to study and to understand personal feelings and values.
- Exposes students to the identity of contemporary artists through their works.
- Exposes students to the domain of learning and the basic principle of art.
- Motivating students to help in making innovative and useful suggestions on an existing standard to aid development and growth through art.
- Encouraging individuals to be independent in judgment no matter what others perceive it to be.

Art is often defined as a visual language of expression and communication. This may come through three kinds of visuals- Perceptual, Conceptual and Expressive which implies “what we see accurately from one’s point of view”, “what the mind conceives it to be” and “the artist’s feeling”. All these phenomena form the three visuals.

When further narrowed down literarily, the objectives of Art Appreciation can be stated as follows:

- To cultivate interest in art as a foundation subject for all learning processes.
- To observe with enquiry mind and interest all natural and man-made forms.
- To recognize beauty and ugliness in their preparation.
- To recognize the dignity of labour and the joy of using one's products.
- To draw inspiration from nature and other works of art for the improvement of products.
- To understand that the role of art in society is to keep a record of the thinking pulse and attitude of the day.
- To recognize Nigeria’s contribution to world culture through her arts.
- To enable students to enjoy and criticize works of art including architecture.
- To enable the students to develop a general understanding of the historical development and cultural values of art and crafts and the artist and his relationship to his time and materials<sup>7</sup>.

### Criteria for Aesthetic Judgment

Dispute over evaluations has always been of great interest to philosophers. A variety of theories of evaluative concepts have been worked out, such as good, bad and beautiful, ugly, intrinsically valuable and instrumentally valuable, which have frequently, although not always, closely paralleled theories of ethical concepts. There are several important contemporary evaluative theories thus:

1. **Intuitionism:** This theory holds that evaluative terms such as "good" refers to an object's non-empirical qualities that must be intuited because it is difficult to characterize intuition positively. It is usually defined negatively as a mode of knowing something that cannot be known by ordinary sense perception. Plato's theory of beauty is an earlier version of intuitionism.
2. **Subjectivism:** This theory holds that "good" is to be defined with reference to the state of mind. In one version of subjectivism, "good" means "I like it" or perhaps "I approve of it". On another level, "good" means it is approved by a particular group of persons (the group may be specified in a variety of ways the majority of cultured people in my community, informed critics and the like. Although subjectivism is probably widely adhered to but it is rarely, if ever, put forth by a philosopher as an explicit view.
3. **Emotivism:** This is a view widely held in the recent past and defended by A. J. Ayers (1910-1989) and Charles Stevenson (1908-1979). They maintained that this evaluative term does not refer to anything at all. Good, bad and the like serve to express or evince the feelings of the speaker who uses them. Emotivism is sometimes confused with the "I like" version of subjectivism but it is a distinct theory. The theory that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder may be associated with either emotivism or subjectivism.
4. **Instrumentalism:** This theory avoids the problem of defining evaluative terms used in aesthetic judgment, instead it characterizes a good work of art as one that produces in a spectator a good or valuable aesthetic experience. It is assumed that a certain kind of experience can be identified as aesthetic and good. Good appears in both the expression characterized- "good work of art" and in the expression used to characterize it – "produces a good aesthetic experience". Hence, "good" is not defined by instrumentalism but is assumed as given<sup>8</sup>.

To isolate problems of aesthetics, three different kinds or levels of statements and questions may be distinguished. First, there are the critical statements that describe, interpret or evaluate particular works of art. Secondly, there are more general

statements that are made by literary, musical or art theorists to describe the characteristic features of artistic genres. Thirdly, there are those questions that are not always easily distinguished from the questions implied.

Having stated these evaluative theories, the artist still needs to be well-equipped with the tools to make his work quite discernable. The artist needs to verbalize the supposed sensibility of the artwork contained to enable one to understand better the nature of the work. Art appreciation is the art of rightly estimating, recognizing, understanding as well as being sensitive to bringing about a rise in value. It is not far-fetched about the artistic value of the artwork. This knowledge helps us to manage resources rightly. To appreciate rightly in terms of *subject matter*, *value*, *understanding* and *recognition*. This will prepare the Connoisseur to be able to estimate rightly the visuals before he put them together. In the Nigerian setting, the above keywords are very significant to the Art Historian from the point of view of the culture that it belongs. This will form the basis of his estimation and thus make the right judgement. The entire estimation involves the sensitivity, value, and ability to look at, sniff, taste, test and listen to the object. An understanding of works of art is a complex art of the human spirit. It is a fallacy to state that there is only one way to art judgment. There are three notable ones as stated thus:

**1. *Subjective Approach***

This approach is coloured by one's thoughts based on personal experiences. It is limited by one's environment, level of education and exposure.

**2. *Objective Approach***

This is a convention or standard known to several people. It relies on what has been researched; a set of laid down principles.

**3. *Relative Approach***

This involves looking at the artwork from the point of view of the culture that it belongs. What one sees within an area.

Other criteria are subsumed under these three approaches. Following the above, it is necessary to state that the critic is an interpreter, a conservator. He is not meant to praise but to point out some salient characters in a work. He talks about art in a unique way for a better understanding to advance the frontiers of knowledge. There is that aesthetic autonomy where the views of the artist are necessarily taken and accepted. These art forms are created to attract, and sustain attention and are meant for documentation. As a critic, one should be at a distance.

Further insight into this should be that evaluation is not one-directional (mono-causal evidence)<sup>9</sup>. Evaluation should not be based on one's point of view. This can be seen in the instance of the art of governance where an opinion poll is conducted to take a decision.

### **An Exemplified Model on Art Appreciation of an Untitled Mural Painting**

This untitled Mural Painting (2.7m x 4.5m) was executed by Samuel O. Magbegor on the wall of the Drawing Studio of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria for the aesthetic appeal that it offers. It is a visual essay on the activities of the different specialized studio areas.

Fig. 1: Untitled Mural Painting



**Magbegor, Samuel, *Untitled Mural*(Oil paint)(2.7m x 4.5m) 1998.**

A mural is a large picture or design subject that decorates a wall. This could be done in the interior and external walls or even the ceiling of a building. In doing this, various motifs that are either geometric, floral, human or zoomorphic are employed to tell a tale on the subject matter and thereby advertise and project an idea inherent in it<sup>10</sup>.

In analyzing this Mural painting, a holistic approach is employed in appreciating this creative effort. The painter employed a schematized and essentially linear, solid with selected colours toned down so as not to impinge too much on the eyes. While it is not shouting, it is all the same quite illuminating and pleasing to the senses. On the two-dimensional surface in which this work is executed when viewed from a close range, one can see that the numerous activities in the picture plane are well achieved owing to the careful manner in which the different forms were organized from the onset. The picture plane is broken down into two major sections- the Sky Plane and the Ground Plane.

While the Sky Plane is broken into the lower and upper Sky Plane, the Ground Plane is further divided into the foreground, middle distance and the background. The arrangement of



the visual forms on the various planes listed above by the Muralist made it possible for him to create the illusion of depth and distance on the two-dimensional surface. On the Sky plane, the colours used are well blended and harmonized with the entire colour scheme. Three major art activities – Sculpture, Textile and Painting projected into the Sky plane right from the base of the background, solidly painted in Black to show depth. The Sculptor can be seen working on a human Bust, the Textile designer weaving on a harnessed local loom with a piece of fabric beautifully coloured with a combination of Uli and Akika designs. The Painter can be seen painting a landscape with a large Hat – a trait which characterizes working under the scorch of the Sun and also armed with paints on a palette. The landscape scenery on the board is a good sight to behold<sup>11</sup>.

On the ground, planes can be seen in activities from Ceramics, Graphics and the conventional Draughtsman –drawing being a common factor in these creative experiences. Consequently, stretching from the foreground through the middle distance to the background these artists engaged from one creative endeavour to another. These visuals have been well arranged and organized to tell the desired story. One unique thing in this work of art is the blend of colours used. They flow very smoothly from one part to the other. There is also the attempt to bring out the forms in the various visuals to make for the solidity of the subjects. There appears to be the use of a binder with the enamel paint to help illuminate the painting more and to have a longer impact. This technique gives a better outlook which is an extension of the numerous ideas involved by designers in the creation of mural design<sup>12</sup>. These designs are more intricate and thus show a clear-cut distinction from the conventional naturalistic cum abstract forms of creating a mural design. This technique can be used to decorate Church buildings, Motels, Resort centres, and School buildings especially the kindergarten section, Town Halls, Conference rooms, Arrival Hall of the Airport building, etc. Furthermore, the pigments are fused with the surface for enhanced absorbance. The Mural in its location helps to promote and project the activities of the Fine and Applied Arts Department. It also exposes viewers from all walks of life to appreciate better the aesthetic appeal that it offers and by extension popularizes the visual arts in society. Artistic and functional paintings such as the Mural in context create and enhance the living environment for a better quality of life<sup>13</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that Art Appreciation involves thinking and talking about art. It is the interpretation of images to discover meaning. When you denote

something, you place it down and show it openly and clearly. What you see is the surface meaning, but on the connotative level, it has a derived meaning. Denote indicates a sign or symbol while connote suggests an addition to the fundamental meaning.

In appreciating an artwork, therefore, information needs to be collected about it and subjected to analysis.

Its dimension and quality have to be stated. An art object could make a profound statement. An artist thus needs to be fully equipped with the tools and language of verbalizing the supposed sensibility contained in the artwork to enable one to understand better the nature of the artwork.

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