

# African Research Review

*An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*

*Vol. 9(4), Serial No. 39, September, 2015: 176-187*

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v9i4.14>

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## **Art and Professionalism in Nigeria: The Artists of the Universal Studios of Art, Lagos, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The Nigerian Heritage is translated through her arts and culture. Traditionally, these two expressive ways constitute a factor of identification of any group, but were further strengthened and sustained by the introduction of schools and churches. Art flourished with the contributions of, mostly, schools, workshops and studios spread around the country. The Universal Studios of Art, Lagos happened to be a stakeholder to the growth of art professionalism for more than fifteen years. The studios accommodated sculpture, painting, metal design, graphics and ceramics. It is a centre for art development for the formal and informal youths and art enthusiasts in our society. The studios aim at improving a candidate equipped with qualitative draughtsmanship for employment or self-employed through studio practice. Interestingly, the Universal Studios of Art under the Founder Bisi Fakeye and other artists who are co-founders have turned out many artists over the years including students on industrial training programme and others. The studios artistic qualification and disposition remained on the strength of instructors in various disciplines that had heightened the creative concepts and styles of the school. This dissemination of knowledge had remained a

dormant factor without adequate documentation. It is therefore, the objective of this study to document the activities of the Artists of the Universal Studios of Art since inception. The research would examine, their professional dispositions, biographical position with their styles, conceptual qualities and development.

### **Introduction**

Art is the ability to create with the functionality of the elements and principles of design like colours, space, texture, movement, lines and forms, to mention but a few. The constant use of these principles, complimented with adequate training, is it in a workshop or in a school, leads jealously to proficiency in art. In the fifteen and sixteen centuries in Europe, an amateur artist working under a master in workshops and schools became very popular.<sup>1</sup> This popularity blossomed with young unemployed youths yet art enthusiasts wanting to work and use the history of great masters in art who had practised under great masters to learn a devotion.<sup>2</sup> At this period, very interestingly, the high demand to practise art stimulated probably movements in Europe. These movements include Renaissance, Cubism, Impressionism and many others.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is important to state that, the European experience was not new to Africa and to Nigeria in particular. In Nigeria, many artists have worked under masters unnoticed in studios and workshops to improve their skills. For example, the Ori-Olokun workshop trained some artists, the Mbari experience was another; the Abayomi Barber School trained many students and not the least the Oshogbo School and the Agbaro-Otor Harmattan Workshop of Bruce Onabrakpeya. Among them also are the popular Igun and Igbesanmwan guilds of Benin Bronze Casters and Carvers that produced many sculptural pieces in the palace of the Oba of Benin.<sup>4</sup> In all, knowledge dissemination characterised these places where activities are the same compared to the activities of the Universal Studios of Art: a place of creative, ideological and social commune under Bisi Fakeye, a leader of great and talented artist, the Universal Studio of Art (USA) has become not only an educative centre but also a tourist arena.

When Bisi Fakeye took up the “Sole Responsibility and Leadership of the Universal Studios of Art, the National Gallery of Art probably did not really foresee his artistic potentials, capabilities and leadership qualities that were made possible by several years of professional practice.<sup>5</sup>

As a traditional sculptor who had successfully, over many years, professionalized between traditional and modern sculpture styles, he was easily known for his huge art works and ideas. Instead of regimenting his huge works to students to carry out as sources of improving their skills, he gladly sculpted to the admiration of all. Not only that, “his exceptional attitude developed the students psyche and artistic talents to credit professionalism, which remained a factor, that is, the attainment of good standard in art in Nigeria”.<sup>6</sup>

The Universal Students of Art began primarily in 1980, as National Gallery of Art Studios with some key artists who found practising there as an opportunity to develop themselves. The studios assembled professionals in painting, sculpture, graphics, textile, ceramics and other areas of visual arts. After fifteen years of active practice, precisely in 1996, its founders welcomed a re-constructive development that brought about a new name known as the Universal Studios of Art Artists in 1996.

### **Historical Development**

A workshop is the most important place the artist must go for his or her career. “It’s a voyage into ones destiny and exploration of one’s talent”. “A workshop practice can help the artist to confront without limitations from drawing, painting sculpting and others.”<sup>7</sup> The National Council of Arts and Culture (N.C.A.C.) with its collaborative effort with government established the National theatre, which was completed in 1975 and used to host Festac ‘77.



**National Theatre. Orile-Iganmu, Lagos.**

**(c) Augustine Bardi**

After the successful hosting of Festac ‘77, the Department of Culture, invited some professional independent visual artists.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, at this period in 1980 to be precise, Bisi’s first contact with the National Art Theatre was through late Sina Yusuf, a Senior Cultural Officer as a result of an exhibition, to this invitation Bisi joined other professionals.

The aims of this gesture were to use the gallery to groom young artists and other art enthusiasts. The initial membership of the National Studio included Bisi Fakeye, Erahabor Emopkae, Garba Ashiwaju, Felix Osieme, Olayinka Ali, Joe Musa,

Olu Ajayi, Amos Odion and Kunle Akran. The artists were magnanimous and filled with the spirit to deliver, took over the challenges to work, but as soon as all was going well with the studio, with more youths developing interest because of the quality of names associated with the studios, something happened. Dr. Paul Dike, Director of the National Gallery Art served a quit notice to occupants of the studios, who were already well settled professionally in their much loved art environment. The situation united Bisi Fakeye and all members of the studios against the National Gallery of Art decision. For several months, both the Gallery and the Studios were at war of words. But eventually, the artists were forced to move, but to a nearby location, where they eventually operated under a new name, Universal Studios of Art (U.S.A).



**National Studios and Workshops. Aina Onabolu Ccomplex**

National Gallery of Modern Art

(c) Augustine Bardi

### **Organisational Structure**

All over the world, no social, political, professional or other association or commune can succeed without adequate organisation and structure. The Universal Studios of Art is not an exception; because of their novelty to administration, planning, sectional responsibilities and the functionality of all members of the studios.<sup>9</sup> Shortly after Festac '77, to keep the spirit of art at the National Gallery of Art, some art professionals were invited to give art instructions to talented youths in order to help them actualise their creative potentials. Before the inaugural exhibition of 1996, Bisi's administrative experiences were already very enormous. It was not surprising, therefore, that some structures needed to make the studios operate very professionally

were not in place. For example, the studios had a Board of Trustees with individuals whose commitment to the development of the visual arts was held in high esteem. The Board included late Chief Segun Olusola, Chief Rasheed Gbadamosi, Sammy Olagbaju, Femi Akinsanya and Afolabi Kofo – Abayomi. The executives of the Universal Studios also included Bunmi Babatunde (Chairman), Moday Akhidue (Vice-Chairman), Mufu Onifade (Secretary) Joshua Nmesirionye (Assistant Secretary) and Fidelis Odogwu (Finance), other members whose effortless artistic activities ensured the sustenance were Bisi Fakeye, Abiodun Olaku, Iyomona Osatuma, Francis Uduh, Patrick Agose and Wallace Ejoh.<sup>10</sup>

Besides, the studios ran three vibrant sections in painting, sculpture and metal design. Painting was headed by Abiodun Olaku, sculpture under Francis Uduh and Patrick Agose, Fidelis Odogwu was in charge of metal section while drawing was generally taught by selected instructors. The studios admitted the following into its programmes: artists from secondary schools as trainees, graduates from universities, polytechnics and colleges of education, who were however attached to instructors, and students for industrial training or on industrial attachment. Also, at the studios are apprenticeship programmes. The gates of the studios usually opened at 8 am, and lectures start at 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, except on public holidays. Unlike other institutions, where school fees were demanded, the Universal Studios, instead, provided materials for students, without any additional charges.<sup>11</sup>

The following courses were taught by Industrial Supervisors or instructors as they were addressed in the studios: life drawing, still life, imaginative composition and landscape drawing for fresher'. Students got to other levels of programmes through compliances to assignments and continuous assessments on weekly bases. But this is not to say that practical works did not take place every day. Theoretical examinations are not part of the studios' curriculum for now, since such students are shared into sections of specialisation and are unanimously graded by all members of the studios. Periodic meetings between students and management also take place any time the management considers necessary.<sup>12</sup>

### **Professional Activities**

The attributes of a professional artist must lay in "his ability to face challenges thereby acquiring skills to better "his trade".<sup>13</sup> Training remains therefore a factor, which is primarily needed in this case. The establishment of the Universal Studios of Art was to impart knowledge, discover talents and help youths to be self-employed. Transformation of our youths in the art will bring about creativity, originality and excellence by the activities of art. This trade the artists of the studios had successfully been carrying out for over two decades, as seen in the aesthetical transformation of the walls at the entrance and at the exit of the studios. Initially, the studios had five vibrant sections: sculpture, graphics, ceramics, painting and textiles. However, as few

professionals got disengaged from the studios, more joined and more art courses or areas were introduced.<sup>14</sup>

As a notable centre for activities, the studios organised her inaugural exhibition titled *Stride in Time* from the 12th to 25th April, 1996 just barely some months after a quit from the National Gallery of Art. The Exhibition was a collective experience of young vibrant artists, most of whom were members of the Society of Nigerian Artists (S.N.A). The studios proudly presented key exhibitors like Bisi Fakeye, Monday Akhidue, Shyngle A. Alex, Olubunmi Babatude, Olaku A.D. Karunwi K.K., Buma Temietan, Agose Patrick, Alli Olayinka, Olatunbi Lekan and Osatuma Iyomona. The exhibition “partially healed the wounds of 1995 which was eventful and” memorable”.

Other exhibitions that kept the studios vibrant and productive were *Rejuvenation* organised by the Society of Nigerian Artists 2005 and *Resurgence* April 8 – 18, 2006. The exhibitions were to encourage members to know the importance of art practice. The studios later added five members after four had left and with the passing away of Alex Shyngle. Activities continued in an exhibition *In Due Season* which took place from December 15 - 22, 2007. This period showed a high level of commitment by the artists. The event was quickly followed by the 1st African Regional Summit and Exhibition Visual Art (ARESUVA) and Dar’art. The year 2008 “remained a remarkable and fulfilling year for the artists of the studios going by participation”.<sup>15</sup> Another activity that kept some members of the studios working was “When Nigerian Artists Stormed Las Vegas Art Expo”, with Abiodun Olaku and Mufu Ouifade and other representatives. From August 27 – 30, 2008 was another exhibition Art Expo Nigeria where artists of the studios equally participated.

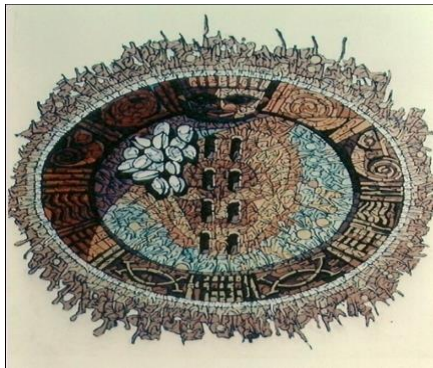
As the studios had a tradition of exhibitions, conferences and seminars, as well as participating in Symposia, conferences and seminars. The exhibitions were both national and international and both solo and joint. Since more than half of the artists of the studios are members of the Guild of Professional Fine Arts of Nigeria (GPFAN), and the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) and index, it has been activities without break.

It is evident that the Universal Studios of Art Artists spend virtually all days, all months and years churning out exquisite art pieces in sculpture, painting and metal works. Majority of these works touch and tackle essentially all facets of socio-political experiences.

### **Socio-Political**

The artists of the studios have produced works that message hope, consolations and the necessity for a better Nigeria as well as those works that sang in praise of realistic development. Many of the works are also essentially political as seen in Bisi Fakeye’s *June 12*, Bunmi Babatunde’s Statue of M.K.O. Abiola of blessed memory.

Abiodun Olaku has expressive encounter with his Okobaba series on slums in Lagos. Mufutau Onifade has reflected some societal philosophy in his *Asoro Dayo and Ooyamayawa*; the hospitality of the Yoruba to a stranger. Patrick Agose's *Homage to Ancestors*, which addresses a dress code of an ancestor while Joshua Nmesirionye's *Spaghetti* reveals a mode of dress common with young girls in contemporary Nigeria. Monday Akhidue's mask echoes the spiritual world of the African.



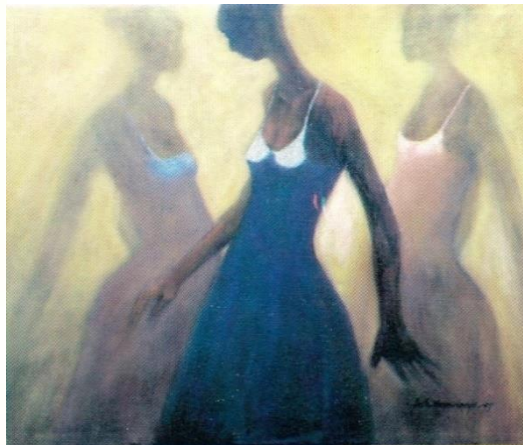
Asoro Dayo (Harbinger of Joy)  
By Mufu Onifade. Acrylic on Canvas  
© Universal Studios of Art



Ooyamayawa (2006)  
By Mufu Onifade. Acrylic on Canvas  
© Universal Studios of Art



Homage to Ancestors By Patrick Agose.



Spaghetti (2007)

Cold Cast Bronze  
© Universal Studios of Art

By Joshua Nmesirionye. Oil on Canvas  
© Universal Studios of Art

### **Training of Young Youths**

The eventual acceptance of the present location put the Universal Studios of Art to action. One of the primary objectives was to provide an enabling atmosphere for cross fertilisation of ideas, techniques, and styles by training young artists. The subjects taught included sculpture, painting, graphics, ceramics textile and metal design; however, in order to make the functions of the studios known and acceptable to people, the studios introduced industrial training (I.T.), apprenticeship programme without compromising standard, the studios management added to their curriculum what would quickly make these youths benefit financially.

The parameters of the Universal Studios of Art Artists remain inconclusive and in exhaustive. The qualities of programmes are such that could equal programmes taught in institutions of higher learning. The artistic activities of the Universal Studios of Art date back to sixteen years, but the tradition of residency for independent artists at the National Studios under the Gallery of Modern Art is about thirty-one years old. "This is why the centre has been a breeding ground of excellence as countless number of young artists" have benefitted from the studios programme for over two decades.<sup>17</sup>

### **Tourism**

The geographical location of the National Theatre, Orile-Iganmu, Lagos was not by chance, because this location was carefully studied and selected to host Festac '77 and other activities. These patriotic initiatives, brought honour to Nigeria as people of the world were able to locate on map where Nigeria was. Fortunately, the eventual formation of the Universal Studios of Art further brought awareness or appreciation to people's concept of art through exhibitions, seminars and conferences. As the standard of the artists of the Universal Studios kept improving, so also, many curious persons from all over the world who had learnt through the media about their activities began to visit. The studios also became a delective centre for various students' excursions. Meanwhile, a global awareness brought by the internet services, e-mail, face-book and other avenues of communication have greatly improved the touristic potentials of the studios, which could be reached through ([w.w.w.universalstudiosofart.com](http://www.universalstudiosofart.com)).

### **Promotion of Nigeria's Heritage**

As knowledge dissemination remains a tool to the growth of one's cultural heritage, the artists of the Universal Studios of Art, through various means of communication and effective commercialisation, have sold many works that identify Nigeria's cultures and traditions. Over the years, Bisi Fakeye and other professional members of the studios, through exhibitions, have produced works like the



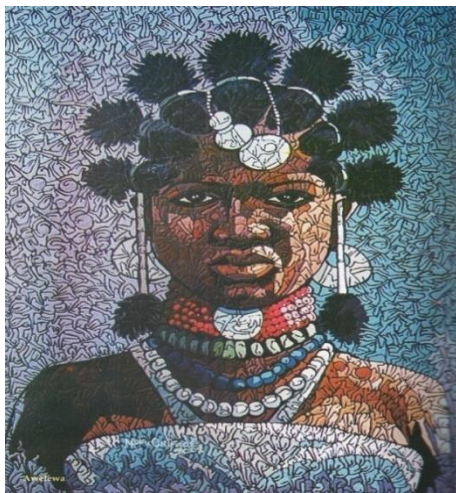
***Contemporary Mask, June 12, Passage of Hope, Sango's Harem, Osun Olomoyoyo and Awelewa.*** These works have symbolic and cultural interpretation, particularly their Yoruba titles that have deep philosophical meanings. Some other titles are ***Dancing Torso, Water Bearer, Before Census, African Panorama, A Feel of Okobaba, Benin Chief, Natures Composition*** and many others.



June 12 (2003)  
By Bisi Fakeye. Camwood.  
© Universal Studios of Art



Peoples Passage (2004)  
By Abiodun Olaku. Oil on Canvas  
© Universal Studios of Art.



Awelewa (African Beauty) (2008)



Dancing Torso (2006)

By Mufu Onifade. Oil on Canvas  
© Onifade's Library.

By Bunmi Babatunde. Wood.  
© Universal Studios of Art

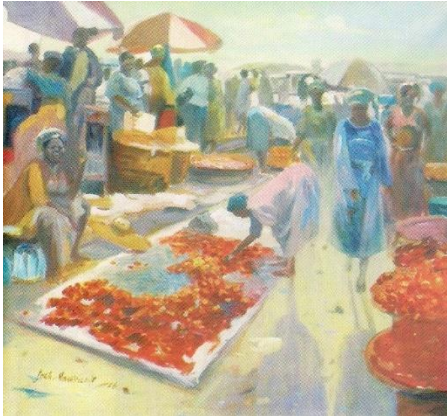
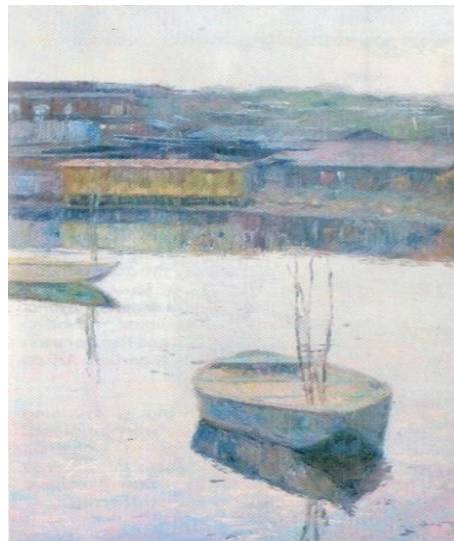


Plate 90. Before Census (2006)  
By Joshua Nmesirionye. Oil on Canvas  
© Universal Studios of Art

The Feel of Okobaba (2009)  
By Abiodun Olaku. Oil on Canvas  
© Universal Studios of Art



Benin Chief (2006)

Nature's Composition (2006)

By Monday Akhidue. Wood.  
© Universal Studios of Art

By Wallace Ejoh. Oil on Canvas.  
© Universal Studios of Art

## Conclusion

During the course of development in Europe, the Europeans introduce vocational trade schools to benefit their society. Among these trades is art, because of its aesthetical and beautification qualities. Art blossomed which stimulated movements like the Renaissance, Cubism, Impressionism and others. These movements had followers which led to the establishment of studios, schools and workshops of apprenticeship that trained the formal and the informal artists in Europe. The European experience is not new to Africa and particularly to Nigeria where informal training has existed in studios and workshops. For example, the Ori-Olokun workshop trained some artists, the Mbari is another; the Abayomi Barber school trained many students not forgetting the Oshogbo school and the Agbaro-Otor Harmattan workshop of Bruce Onabrakpeya. Also are the Igun and Igbesanwan guilds of Benin City Bronze casters and carvers and mostly the Universal studios of Art, Orile-Igunmu, Lagos. In all, knowledge dissemination Characterize these places where art activities are fully functional.

The establishment of the National Theatre to host Festac'77 is not by accident, in that after Festac'77, the authorities invited some independent artists in the likes of Bisi Fakeye, Amos Odion, Erhabor Emopkae, Joe Musa, Monday Akhidue and others to train youths and art enthusiasts, but unfortunately as more participants joined the workshop, the independent artists were served quit notice to leave. The position occupied by the Universal Studios of Art Artists and other Studios and workshop in Nigeria were commendable. Though the artists and art were tagged with many demoralising connotations, art as a profession has come and must stay. It is on record that the National Council of Arts and Culture (N.C.A.C.) had a focus, the National Gallery of Arts had a project, but Bisi Fakeye and his team saw very much beyond the present despite circumstances. The Universal Studios of Art stands adorned and as a promising centre for excellence going by its contributions to the society. The survival of Bisi Fakeye and the eventual establishment of the studios in 1996 with other artists remain history. The resilience of the artists after the episode remains unforgettable in the memories of art admirers. Though the Ori-Olokun workshop, the Mbari experience, Oshogbo school and others remain very good simulative names in the arts, the Universal Studios of Art despite neglect by past government have developed through self-effort.

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