

# African Research Review

---

*An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*

*Vol. 5 (1), Serial No. 18, January, 2011*

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

---

## **Art Pricing and the Nigerian Economy, 1960-2008; the Rising Profile of Modern Nigerian Art (Pp. 524-533)**

**Odiboh, Freeborn** - African Humanities Postdoctoral Fellow, American Council of Learned Societies, West African Research Centre (WARC), Dakar, Senegal\_2010-2011  
**E-mail:** freeby1121@justice.com

### **Abstract**

*The turbulent situation in the socio-political and economic terrain of Nigeria since the 1960s and the chaotic years from the time of the incursion of the military in Nigerian politics from 1966 to 1999 signaled systemic regression. From the 1980s to 1990s, despite the negative factors prevalent as a result of corruption and mismanagement in the nation, sale of art works was favoured by an astronomical growth in local clientele.. Although Ben Enwonwu, Nigeria's foremost modernist artist opined in 1966 (Ekwensi, 1966; 36) that for a piece of painting by a Nigerian artist to be priced for so much as five hundred guineas (about five hundred British pounds), then the artist should be much older with years of experience including the artist's quality of training. The state of art pricing in modern Nigerian art has defiled such limitations. Many factors have come to influence the contemporary proclivic developments and this paper adopting the Marxist art historical approach of approach of the inter-relationship of art, power and economy in the society, examines the development*

**Key Words:** Patronage, Art Commission, Expressionistic, Art Contracting, Road- side- art, Connoisseur

## **Introduction**

The turbulent situation in the socio-political and economic terrain of Nigeria since the 1960s and the chaotic years from the time of the incursion of the military in Nigerian politics from 1966 to 1999 signaled systemic regression. From the 1980s to 1990 however, despite the negative factors prevalent resulting from corruption and mismanagement in the nation, sale of art works was incongruously favoured by an astronomical growth in local clientele. 'Art contracting' became a feature of Nigerian art practice as some artists turned contractors, sourcing for art commissions and subcontracting them to other artists. This development was favoured by the emergence of a new dawn for Nigerian art as art thrived and the living status of the Nigerian artist appreciated.

Although Ben Enwonwu, Nigeria's pioneer modernist artist opined in 1966 that for a piece of painting by a Nigerian artist to be priced for so much, then the artist should be much older with years of experience and quality of the artist's training (Ekwensi, 1966; 36); the state of art pricing in modern Nigerian art has defied such limitations. Many factors have come to influence these developments and this paper examines them. Today, there are different categories of artists, old and young whose works are highly priced. At independence in 1960 and immediately after, there was that lethargic attitude of Nigerians to Nigerian art. At the time, the orientation of many Nigerians especially the educated elites had been to view art works as fetishes, therefore most avoided the objects. It was resentment, an attitude aggravated by the colonial administration anti art posture and it was amplified by the intolerance of Christian as well as Islamic preachers of that period. More so, at the time, the traditional institutions, which supported artistic production in the traditional society, had waned seriously, and in some cases, obliterated.

Ironically, towards the end of the colonial period to the immediate postcolonial period, most of the patrons of Nigerian art were the Catholic Church and Euro-Americans and a few Nigerian elites; and the works were often collected a pittance. This was the situation of art patronage in 1966 when Ben Enwonwu, considered five hundred (500) guineas as being too high for a piece of painting by a Nigerian artist. He insisted that for a Nigerian artist to charge 500 guineas for his painting, he would have to be sixty or seventy years of age, before people would spend money on his work because of his name.

Perhaps Enwonwu's statement would have been true at that period in the 1960s when only the name and age of a Nigerian artist could justify the price put on his art works. Events in the Nigerian art scene have taken positive dramatic turnaround between that period in 1966 when Enwonwu opined thus and the present, especially since the middle 1980s. Presently, many Nigerian artists are priced quite reasonably high in monetary value and relevance.

### **Worth of Nigerian Art: From the Pre-Colonial To the Postcolonial Period**

From the preliterate period in Nigeria, Art and artists were invaluable components in the highly religious, superstitious and broadly non-scientific traditional society. The artist enjoyed a pride of place as well as glorified positions in the courts of the kings and chiefs; priests also found the artist and his art quite indispensable. However, as earlier mentioned, colonialism dealt a blow on all that. Patronage for art therefore experienced a declivity within the immediate society as new roles for art produced under different rules of aesthetics began to emerge.

In 1960, Nigeria had just become a sovereign nation from British rule and it became a republic in 1963. More over, there was the establishment of a federal government run by Nigerians. In spite of this, the import-export economy of the new government remained firmly in European hands. During all that period, the worth of contemporary Nigerian art was a pittance and artists were mere struggling professionals with little or no price for the products of their skills. (Ottenburg 1996; 70). More so, the Nigerian experimental political terrain coupled with an economy that was run by a group of Nigerian leaders, still grappling with ideas of governance, did not help matters.

Patronage of art during all that period was largely in Lagos; and the worth of contemporary Nigerian art was a pittance and artists were mere struggling professionals with little or no price for the products of their skills. However, the patrons were Nigerian elites and expatriates. Immediately after independence, ethnic rivalries, suspicion and official corruption committed by the political class manifested in numerous crises all over the regions of Nigeria; first in two military coups in 1966, and eventually the Nigerian civil war, 1967 to 1970. These events slowed development and altered artistic activities, particularly on the Biafran side (ibid). Before and during the civil war years, the Osogbo 'primitivistic expressionists' (Picton, 2001) founded

by Ulli Beier in 1962-gained international fame after the successes of its exhibitions in Europe and America in the 1960s.

The Osogbo group of artists occupied the centre stage of Nigerian art from 1962 and gradually grew almost overshadowing other developments. Through the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s the ripples of their fame, which started in 1962, reached such a wide range and did not fizzle out. The period from 1969 to 1973 also featured other artistic experiences including the Ori-Olokun experimental school anchored by Michael Crowder and Solomon Wangboje, at the University of Ife (now Obefemi Awolowo University). Although a few of the elite class were interested in modern Nigerian art, the art works of the Osogbo and the Ori-Olokun group of artists were actually packaged for export to Euro –American art market. Western art enthusiasts and connoisseurs like Ulli Beier and his wife Georgina Beier were the facilitators of this market then in Nigeria.

With the end of the civil war in 1970, the modern Nigerian art space that continued with the overbearing presence of the Osogbo School came alive again with other artistic features. In the decade towards 1970, there was considerable increase in foreign and Nigerian business activities, and the beginning of a Nigerian manufacturing industry (Ottenburg 1996). In 1973, with the euphoria of the successful conclusion of the civil war, and with oil monies that seemed limitless, the federal military government headed by General Yakubu Gowon decreed an across-the board *Udoji* wage increase for civil servants, which in most cases doubled existing salaries of workers (Vogel.1991, 246). The copious cash now in the purses of government workers, the largest workforce in Nigeria, also reflected in their buying powers. The new monetary status also made some of them to acquire art works for their newly rearranged or refurbished apartments.

By 1977, the Second World Festival of Black and African Culture FESTAC, held in Nigeria and the experience awaked more artistic consciousness in Nigerians. Numerous exhibitions were held and new artistic talents, styles and art forms also evolved. In that period, many Nigerian artists were commissioned to produce works for the interior and exterior of the National Theatre building, Iganmu, Lagos, which was completed during General Olusegun Obasanjo's reign as Nigeria's Head of State, 1976-1979. It was the same for many art complexes that were built all around Nigeria by state governments.

Although the taste for Nigerian art grew gradually, with patronage consisting mainly of a few Nigerian elites the artworks of the elite artists were often considered too expensive for majority of people outside the elite class (Ekweni, 1966, 36). The works of souvenir or airport artists or 'road side artists', the referential nomenclature for the self-taught and other street or popular artists in Nigeria, readily filled that need for quick and cheap art. This Kind of art yielded profit for some young Nigerians, who found ready jobs painting, making or hawking and selling art, especially in Lagos and other capital cities not just to Nigerian buyers, but most especially to foreigners (Kasfir, 1994),(Vogel.1991, 246). The 'road side' or popular art type is usually kitschy, with forms that are always vague and technically unprofessional, but usually attractive.

From the middle 1980s, an aesthetic revolution or reformation took place in Nigeria, a new generation of educated and wealthy Nigerian art patrons emerged. Most of them are business people, owners of large commercial concerns, while others hold enviable positions in paid employment. This group of Nigerian art connoisseurs lives in the big cities, town as well as the rural suburbs, but most especially in Lagos, Kano, Kaduna, Ibadan and Benin. To the newly emerged group of art patrons, possession of Nigerian art works became a symbol of wealth. The magnificent architecturally designed homes and office blocks erected in places in the cities or in the suburbs by this group of newly emerged art patrons were hardly completed without art commissions adorning them. This revolutionary turn in the appreciation and acquisition of Nigerian art works by the group of educated and wealthy is better explained in the views expressed in Harold Osborne's *Aesthetics and Art Theory* (1968) that 'when men have no need to work for a living there are broadly two things left for them to do. They can "play" and they can cultivate the arts'. The immediate motivating factor for the sudden emergence of this group of art patrons as well as the rise in price of art can be linked to the market economy vigorously pursued by the Nigerian government's policy during the period.

The market economy policy especially intensified during the administration of the Nigerian president, General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida frustrated many Nigerians to establish at all cost money yielding ventures that brought them a times questionable wealth in the midst of a large economic debilitation. The reasons were not far fetched. In the middle of the 1980s, the education sector in Nigeria began to be under funded and by 1986 the government headed by Babangida subscribed to the International Monetary

Fund (I M F) education loan under the United Nations Educational Programme for Sub-Saharan Africa (EPSSA). As a result, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which encouraged export and putting restrictions on import, was recommended as panacea or conditions for ensuring that the Nigerian government show more commitment to payback the loan. An aspect of the IMF conditions was 'liberalization' and 'market economy' policy, pursued by the Nigerian government. This had untold repercussions for the Nigerian economy which had been fundamentally consumerist.

Paradoxically during the period, at a time when professionals in other fields of endeavour were finding it almost impossible to survive and largely unemployed, some Nigerian artists had a thriving time. This was accentuated in 1990, because of the wealth that came into Nigeria's economy, resulting from the 'windfall' revenue, from excess sales of Nigerian crude oil, during the Gulf War, 1990-1991. There were speedy award of government contracts and construction works all over the country. Suddenly, art assumed a status symbol and the value of art appreciated in the eyes of the Nigerian public. The frequency of art exhibitions held all over the country during the period was an evidence of the thriving state of art and the price tags on the art pieces on display became unusually staggering, a difference from the pittance it used to be.

Thus, in 1990, when the average total salary of a graduate was less than N3, 000.00 naira, and the price of a brand new Tokunbo Toyota car cost between N10, 000.00 and N12, 000.00, a small work of art could carry a price tag ranging from about N5, 000.00 to N30, 000.00. Commissioned works were even higher than that. The *Daily Times newspaper* featured in its September 17, 1990 issue, (Udoani 1990; 24) a budding Nigerian Sculptor who was relatively unknown, whose art was thriving in Lagos. The artist, Olufemi Rhodes gave an analysis of the price of his art. According to him 'A burst made of clay costs about N10, 000.00, that of cement N15, 000.00, bronze N35, 000.00 He also said that life sized statues made of fibre glass by him could cost as much as N15, 000.00.

Again, commissions for artwork all over the country whether by individuals or corporate bodies were executed for high amount of money, the price rose to as much as million of Naira and above. It has been said that the abstracted drummer sculpture piece by Ben Enwonwu on the building of the Nigerian External, Telecommunications Limited Marina, in 1978 was executed for

N75, 000.00. Eyo Adamu Orisha masquerade sculpture commissioned by the Lagos State Government in 1987 and executed by Yusuf Grillo a Nigerian artist for a price of about N400, 000.00 The Rotary Foundation of Lagos commissioned another Nigerian sculptor, Abayomi Barber in 1968 to execute a piece of abstract sculpture and this cost N136, 000.00. It was said that about two million was expended by the Kaduna State government to execute some of the abstracted sculptural and artistic monuments along the Hamada Bello Way, Kaduna (Odiboh 1990; 24). Over the years, the panorama of art in the nation had proved that age, name, level and mode of training are not necessarily a determinant to putting a price on the works of contemporary Nigerian artists.

### **The Rising Profile of Nigerian Art**

The Daily Times of September 29, 1990 (Tijani 1990; 9-11) in the article; *Nigeria's Modern Art: Years after Independence Nigeria's Artists Are Catching up on Lost Traditions* affirms the rising profile of Nigerian art and artists. The article insists that the modern Nigerian artist has at last come of age and he has emerged' from the traumatic ruins of the slavery years, through the trying period of colonialism, to become, respected at home and abroad and given his right of place as a full fledged member of the guild of the world's oldest profession'. 'Even at home, there has been a dramatic manifestation of love for the arts' the article insists. Further the paper opines that like never before, since after the celebration of Festac '77, art has won so much public admiration and acclaim as we now experience. Besides, Abayomi Barber, one of Nigeria's leading artists and one of Africa's greatest portraitists, bared his thoughts in the same article on the rising profile of Nigerian art in the interview in the article .He says, 'its gladdening to experience the rewarding changes in Nigerian art. Now our art has come a long way. And, the new generation artist virtually lives in paradise when compared to our experience in the early years. People now easily make a profession from it', he affirmed. The artist- Abayomi Barber maintained that although art materials were in abundance during the colonial period, the artist had less patronage than now. As a result of limited patronage, he asserted, the artist could not build a profession on art. He said 'I personally had to dabble into music at night while taking to producing pictures and sculptures by day. I had to dabble into music to make ends meet. All this had to do with the question of survival, the "man –must –wack" factor.

A new wealth resulting from the "windfall" from huge revenue derived from increase in oil sales because of the American-Iraqi Gulf war came into

Nigeria's economy. Surprisingly, despite the negative factors prevalent in Nigeria as a result of corruption and mismanagement, sales of art works was favoured by a growing local clientele and artists were commissioned to put up sculptural pieces, mural, or mosaic works on new buildings built all over the country.

By beginning of the 1990s a new wealth came into Nigeria's economy, resulting from the 'windfall' from oil revenue derived from excess sales as a result of the Persian Gulf War from 1990 to 1991, it was again mismanaged. Surprisingly, despite the negative factors prevalent as a result of corruption and mismanagement, the sale of art works was favoured by an astronomical growth in local clientele. The increase in patronage inspired diverse creativity; but artistic professionalism also suffered a set-back. 'Art contracting' also came into Modern Nigerian art practice, some artists turned contractors by sourcing for art commissions and subcontracting them to other artists. There were clients, some of whom suddenly became wealthy and knew little about art, there were others 'quite knowledgeable about the art they collected' (Ottenburg, 1996a, 8).

This period was remarkable for its material elevation of the status of the Nigerian artist much more than the early periods, because artists began to own their cars and lived in upward social status like their counterpart in other professions. Nevertheless, not all Nigerian artists, including scholars and intellectuals could survive the very dangerously corrupt terrain of that period. Consequently, many of them were forced to immigrate to other parts of the world, especially Europe and America. The brain drain which resulted destroyed all the efforts that were made to propagate fertile intellectual activities in almost all fields that began towards the early independence period, some of which continued through the 1970's.

Most notable of all the developments is the presence of Nigerian art and artists in western space. The turbulent situation over the years justified the virile presence of many Nigerian modern artists at the international scene like late Egonu, Taiwo Jegede, Yinka Shonibare and Sokari Douglas Camp who found their abode in Britain worthwhile, the list is comprehensive. Obiora Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe, Moyo Okediji, and Bolaji Campbell among others are located in the United States.

Apparently, the situation has changed now for Nigerian art and artists as many artists have broadened their zeal for the trade. Most of them are knowledgeable about their trade and often widely travelled. They are even



writers on art. Ottenburg submits (1996; 18) that ‘Surprisingly, the sales of art works in the country have been good in recent years, mature artists do have opportunities to go abroad, exhibitions are held, works sold help to supplement teaching and other salaries, and the contemporary art world appears to be still expanding. How much better it might be if political and economic conditions in Nigeria were to improve!

### **Conclusion**

Nigerian artists must begin now to reason on how to use their art to lift and influence society’s thoughts especially as we move ahead in this century; so that, they can establish themselves as a forceful group within Nigeria’s polity. Kunle Filani (1999, 58) exhorts artists to wake up from the slumber of indifference to national cultural policies and participate more actively in creative dialogue and practice. He says art works and artistic means of expression must be made relevant to the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that it is only when the cultural sectors of the society are activated by artists, government and non-governmental organizations, that the benefit of artistic dynamism will accrue to society, especially the art practitioners.

Right now, artists are just tolerated, but they have to be accepted and respected in the society. Like the avant garde artists in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century whose task it was, to consciously direct the conscience of the people, the Nigerian artist must get to the people through aggressive involvement of art in politics. Ulli Beier (1960) rightly puts it that the most sophisticated artist cannot survive in isolation and Dele Jegede (1987) insists that there is perhaps no other time more auspicious than now. Above all, it is noteworthy that studying Fine arts in tertiary institutions was regarded as time wasting; now the story is different as the discipline is gradually becoming accepted by many in the Nigerian society.

## References

- Jegede, D. (1987). 'How Does the Nigerian Artist Market His Product?' in *Nigerian and Foreign Patronage of the Arts; Symposium organized by the Goethe-institut On the Promotion of occasion of its silver jubilee celebration* Lagos, June 3
- Odiboh, Freeborn (1991). 'The Rising Profile of Nigerian Fine Arts' *the Herald*, Saturday April 13, 1991; 30
- Ulli, Beier (1960). *Art in Nigeria*, Cambridge.
- Filani, K. (1999). 'Social Status of The Artist in Nigeria: Towards Improving the Living Conditions of The Artist'; in Paul Dike and Patricia Oyelola (Ed). *Aina Onabolu: Symbol of the National studios of art, National Gallery of Art*, Lagos,
- Ottenburg, S. (1996). *Notes towards A History of Contemporary Nigerian Art*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Library,
- Tijani, A. (1990). 'Nigeria's Modern Art: Years after Independence Nigeria's Artists are catching up on Lost Traditions', *Daily Times*,
- Osborne, H. (1968). *Aesthetics and Art Theory; An Historical Introduction*, Longmans,
- Kasfir, S. (1999). *Contemporary African Art*, London: Thames and Hudson.
- Vogel, S. (1994). *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*. New York: The centre for African Art.
- Ekwensi C (1966). 'High Price of Nigerian Art', *Nigerian Magazine*, Lagos;