

Challenges and Prospects of Contemporary Nigerian Textile Design

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Abstract

Nigerian textile in all its ramifications is one of the oldest art practices in Nigeria. While it is worthwhile to note that textile design repertoire has been a major part of the nation's identity, textile designers who form a considerable part of the workforce are confronted with challenges. On one hand, the current trend in globalisation has exposed textile designers to new materials and techniques as well as the potential influences of other world cultures. This paper contends that in the quest to become globalised, the traditional African cultural heritage is being sacrificed on the altar of modernization. On the other hand, the introduction of new materials and techniques counts among the instruments or tools for positive impact. It is on this premise that one can say that contemporary Nigerian textile designers alongside their designs are reminiscent or reflect a society in the cusps of change in terms of challenges and prospects. Hence, this article offers some useful knowledge on this development as it establishes the extent to which Nigerian textile designers had suffered from several inadequacies that posed as challenges. It also highlights some reasonable prospects for growth or advancement in the industry in Nigeria.

Keywords: Textile designers, Textile design, Prospects, Challenges, Materials, Techniques.

Introduction

Textile decoration is an ancient tradition of the African people, particularly Nigerians (Bakare, 2010). Although its origin is not certain, it can be suggested to be an old tradition. Therefore, the precise origin of surface textile decoration in Africa is lost in time, but archaeological findings have indicated some of the earliest sites. Shaw (1977) supports the fact that, drawing of looms which might have been used for textile production can be seen in the tombs of ancient Egypt, dating back to at least 2000 B.C. History has it that remnants of textiles have been found in ancient Egypt about the 5th century. Cotton cloth remnants with undefined surface decorations have been identified in Meroe, in Northern Sudan. Also, Ajayi (2002) claims that, in Igbo-Ukwu, West Africa, woven fibre piece that bears surface decorations on it dating 9th century B.C. has been found in a burial chamber of a chief. More so, woven cotton cloth dating 11th century has been recovered in Mali.

In other countries such as Mauritania, there is evidence of the use of loom for the production of textiles which dates back to the 11th century. The positive contributory role of textile that bears surface decoration in the developmental history of other areas of the world where it was discovered at different periods is also of importance. The areas include China, Japan, Korea and Europe. With time, the history of surface design on textiles has further enriched itself. A significant aspect of this enrichment is attributable to the introduction of the 21st century compliant tool, otherwise referred to as the computer. Nonetheless, it is rather sad to note that in the quest to become globalised with regard to the modernization theory; traditional African cultural heritage is being neglected. This writer is of the opinion that in the pursuit of modernity and westernization, the traditional aspect of the arts, its Africanness, should be upheld.

Textile Design Processes, Techniques and Material: Traditional to Contemporary

The history of textile designs will not be complete if design techniques and materials are not discussed. Akinbileje (2003) states that: they are important aspect of the history because the end product of textile design processes has informed and enhanced the economic, social, culture as well as the political status of many nations. One can therefore say that textile designs over the years have a reflection of the social and historical forces and the socio-cultural elements of the period in which they were produced

(p. 3). There are several fabrics decorating techniques in Africa. In times past, textile designs were often produced through the following techniques, namely, hand-stamping, stitching, stencilling, dyeing, painting, bead work, appliqué and embroidery. The first decorated fabrics were probably painted directly with fingers or with a simple brush made from twig. However, fabric printed or designed with a plant leaf as stencil and stamps made of sticks are also commonly found. Adeyuyigbe and Ogunlade (1999) report that, the pigments are sometimes obtained from soil, which is also used to make paints and dyes. The pigments were also derived from herbs, leaves, barks, nuts, fruits, vegetable and grasses, these are mixed with water to obtain the desired thickness and hue.

Technological advancement that ensued later made textile designers advance on their designs in various forms. These developments, of course, have great advantages as regards designing with manual processes such as pen, pencil, ruler, ink and paper, among others. The introduction of new technologies or machines and their widespread application for designing, made textiles designing become more sophisticated. The most common modern technology used in textile designing in the 21st century is the computer. With the advent or innovation of computer, textile designing has become a successful venture. Adeyuyigbe and Ogunlade (1999) affirm that, most designers now use computerized pattern making techniques and systems. Typically, the textile designer has to know how to use a computer-aided design programme, and/or other specialized pattern making software to achieve his or her designs effectively. After all, humans developed the creative use of all the materials that are available to them. As technologies continue to evolve, textile designers will be expected to have even more technical skills and education. This, however, becomes fundamental as technological development appears to be extensive, sophisticated and common knowledge which humans utilize in environment to satisfy the human want in manufacturing, industrial art and design (Bankole, 2002). Notwithstanding, with the advantage of computer-aided design and other available software to the textile designer, one can say that the artist's sketching ability also remains an important advantage in textile designing.

Attributes of 21st Century Textile Designer

Globally, the fashion industry would have been non-existent without textile designers. This is because textile designers are key players in the textile and fashion industries. The contemporary textile designers

indigenous to Nigeria represent a wide range of textile technologists found within and beyond Africa. In fact, they are globally visible. African textile designs are highly revolutionized because they have creditably strove to meet up with current rise in demand for aesthetics and quality in textile products. The contemporary or 21st century textile designer need to exhibit certain attributes to be relevant. The textile designer being a creative person should be able to solve the problems associated with design concepts or matters in the production of textile products. Hence, he or she should possess the ability to reason logically as well as rationalise ideas and sensitivities in his or her creative output even though he or she may rely on no small measure of imagination, intuition and available creative resources. Other qualities which will make any textile designer in the 21st century textile market perform above board are that he/she should be equipped with technical skills such as knowledge of computer and design software, have a vast knowledge of principles of design and a strong sense of beauty in terms of details and colour. He or she should also have excellent communication skills to be able to interpret, analyse and explain design concepts when the need arises. Above all, he or she must understand his/her immediate society, as well as be in touch with events in terms of designs in the global textile market to follow up with evolving global trends.

Textile Designs in the 21st Century

Design has become a significant aspect of textile and cloth production particularly in the 21st century. Design on textiles which have become a global trend is considered by scholars as a universal commodity that passes freely without hindrance across cultural frontiers. Ayotade (2002) contends that: "design as an important segment in the textile equation ensures that the aesthetic and functional factors are combined and organized with flair, style, turning and integrity using appropriate technology to produce successful textile and clothing." From the foregoing, one can deduce that the attractiveness of a design in the 21st century is a function of technologically-driven ingenuity, connected with techniques that culminate in the quality of the final work. Newton (1995) posits that design is the greatest asset that any business venture, particularly textile and clothing industry, should have. Design, therefore, becomes the pivot on which textile and clothing industries revolve and thrive. The position of design in the 21st century cannot be overemphasized. Ojo (2002) corroborates that, design on textiles is a

creative decoration of fabrics and other allied products for clothing, drapes and furniture.

Designs over the years have had a reflection of the social and historical forces and cultural elements of the period in which they were produced. Ibigbami (1993) claims that, "it is made up from works of designs that later generations derived much information about the ways of life of past generations, bringing to limelight the events of the day for that on the technological advancement." Iheonye (2002) contends that, "some expository explanation of different types of textile and their creative use shed more light on creativity particularly surface decorations." One can say at this point that, however, aesthetically pleasing a design can be, one thing is certain that design changes to meet with current rise in demand for textile products. It is worthy of note that many design motifs in use for surface fabric decoration both in old and modern times have names. And many designs are associated with or derived from particular plants, animals, events or proverbs, man-made objects and the cosmos. Others incorporate Arabic scripts, Roman numerals and letters. Several others are completely in abstract forms, which cannot be associated with any existing object or idea. They are executed out of imagination or intuition.

Challenges of Textile Design in 21st Century Nigeria

The 21st century textile designers, as it applies to all aspects of creativity, could not have been in visual art practice without challenges or problems. The challenges modern-day textile designers are confronted with are diverse. Some of them are discussed below:

New Materials and Techniques

It is a fact that the problem posed by new materials and techniques is yet to be fully resolved despite their advantages. Even when these challenges are to be resolved, the issue of manipulating them to produce a true design that is of Nigerian identity will be something to contend with. Adeyuiibe and Ogunlade (1999) argue that the "computer as a modern tool for textile designing has been described as a tool that limits the freedom of expression of modern-day textile designers which of course is obtained when working without computer." The computer which is the common technological tool available to the 21st century textile designer is a major pointer to these challenges. The increased reliance and use of computer for concept derivation in design has given rise to the following outcome:

problem definition, physical and functional solutions, and the control of the synthesis of techniques are at the moment thought of being outside the normal scope of the textile industry.

Furthermore, Ayodeji (2002) claims that the need for paper, pencils, rulers, drawing set and other design materials is on the decrease as a result of emergence of the computer. There is no doubt that this software has placed a lot of negative influences on the textile designers of this century in terms of the reduction of designers' creative abilities and ingenuity. One other likely fundamental problem posed by the computer is that it reduces originality in the works of modern-day textile designers. They often rely on the ready-made design packages such as pattern design system and adobe illustrations stored in the computer software. They copy or lift these ready-made designs without alteration or modification.

Forecasting

In the world of textiles and fashion, one of the most difficult problems faced by the 21st century textile designer is forecasting new ideas, which may often vary entirely from the designs that prevailed in previous seasons' portfolio. To a great extent, it is fashion that controls all the designs. In fact, a particular design may last only for one or two seasons, hence, the textile designer needs to update his/her knowledge about suitable or preferable design for the future by being able to articulate or forecast design trends or follow the vogue.

Frequent Introduction of Newer Software

As a result of the high rate of software development due to constant updates and introduction of newer versions within a short period of time, it has become rather difficult for designers to keep pace with the current rate at which new software are introduced. This has created a gap in the level of development expected of 21st century textile designers in a given period. On one hand, they lack the speed, technical skills and knowledge required to understand and master the configurations of newly introduced software. On the other hand, since the understanding of the functions of newly introduced software is not quick and immediate, the problem of them becoming obsolete usually arise which not only is an economic waste but also constitute a psychological challenge to the designers.

Counterfeits

There has been a persistent problem of counterfeit designs in circulation. Designs are being duplicated or reproduced without the permission or consent of their original owners. Consequently, the issue of copyright infringement is brought to the fore. This ugly development does not in any way in favour of the 21st century textile designer. An example that comes to mind is a case whereby some textile industries wantonly reproduce an existing fabric design without recourse to the originator. These textile industries usually mount pressure on their designers or pay token outright to freelance artists to duplicate or reproduce an existing design without modification at the behest of consumers. As a means of curbing these excesses, the federal government and critical stakeholders should put necessary agencies, policies or legislations in place so as to protect the copyright ownership of textile designers to checkmate the trend in Nigeria.

Cultural Influences

Several influences that emanate from diverse cultures in Nigeria have in no small measure posed challenges to the textile designers in this 21st century. Some of these cultural challenges as enumerated by scholars such as Akolo (1982) and Ojo (2002) include religion, psychology, philosophy, sociology, aesthetics, technology as well as politics. The textile designers, however, have to balance their designs to accommodate these phenomena. Such cultural influences may deny designers their freedom of expression to create effectively because their designs must not be seen or interpreted as expressions which affect a particular belief system or an aspect of society negatively. This is even more evident when the design is seen as favouring a particular ethnicity or culture or protects its interests or propagates its beliefs. Experiences over the years have shown that designs on fabrics which a particular ethnic group, religious sect in society viewed as unfavourable or as an indirect attack on it or its members has yielded an unfortunate result.

Lack of Training and Re-training

Textile designers, both in public and private organizations or institutions, have continued to experience lack of training and re-training due to the fact that most employers for economic reasons have failed to send them for training. Some designers, who are willing to undertake such trainings on their own expenses, are often hamstrung by cost of such trainings. As a result of the introduction and constant update of modern technologies,

there is the need for textile designers to be 'in control' and exposed to up-to-date techniques in textile design. This can be achieved through constant training and re-training of textile designers in the relevant areas. "However many teachers and student designers", according to Ayotade, (2002) "who have discovered the importance of training and re-training in some institutions have started embarking on training for computer literacy to surmount these challenges." Furthermore, Adeyugbe and Ogunlade (1999) claim that, "these benefits as have been enumerated include high accuracy, improved alternative design and reduction of drafting labour". Since computer-aided design has been the conventional approach or vogue to textile design matters in the 21st century, there is the need for constant update of creative and technical skills by textile designers so as to key into the benefits of the available technologies.

Consumer Preferences

For many people, a particular type of design is usually their preference. In this situation what pleases the designer may not appeal to the consumer. Hence, the pleasure is based on the reaction to the design to be produced rather than an appreciation of the design. The choice of design to be executed by the designer is based on the aesthetic taste and preference of the consumer. Although the choice of the consumer should not be undermined, such development is not in the best interest of the designer whose creativity is caged at such situations as the freedom to exhibit his design skills will be limited. This new trend as earlier mentioned will negatively affect the creative skills of the designer because he or she will always be at the mercies of the consumer as his or her creative ingenuity will be greatly undermined.

Prospects of Contemporary Nigerian Textile Design

Since there is a need to improve on the various aspects of textiles materials produced in Nigeria in the 21st century, textile designers are expected to improve on their innovation and creative ideas. Textile designers have a lot of prospects and opportunities in developing countries such as Nigeria. Moreover, the government has started resuscitating its textile industries and placed a ban on importation of fabrics. Given this, it is expected that textile design activities will be boosted. Also, the demand for the services of textile designers will increase as more textile design jobs will emerge.

Career Opportunities and Employment Prospects

Textile designing has become a part of the fashion industry. As demand for fashion and fashion makers increase in local and international markets

so the demand for the fabrics and fabric artists increase. With the increasing demand in textile industries, there is a wide range of career opportunities for textile designers. They can either work as freelancers or work in garment manufacturing sectors of the fashion industries. On the other hand, with the introduction of modern technology which is becoming relatively cheap, virtually all textile designers in 21st century Nigeria can afford or boast of one high technological machine or multimedia equipment for designs. This is likely to translate into greater efficiency in their design output. Advancement prospects as well as advancement in textile designing tend to come slowly, as a consequence of textile designers having a combination of technical and other creative skills. They may simply take on higher level pattern-making works, thereby increasing their responsibilities and salaries in the process. They might also advance to become fashion designers or production managers who oversee the entire production processes within an apparel manufacturing company. Furthermore, textile designers are relatively few because it is somewhat a small occupation with less people working in the field. Prospects for career in the field are fair particularly for people who have the appropriate education, experience and technical skills, and are involved in entrepreneurship.

Influence of other World Cultures

Contemporary designers and their designs in Nigeria vary from place to place. Also, they are highly influenced by other world cultures and technological changes. Many textile designers see visual arts from its modern application which is internationally-inclined but adopt the global techniques in their local productions. The major concern and motivation in making their designs is now for identity and mostly to produce western-styled designs for a ready market. The outcome of this trend is that African textile designs are continually blended with western concepts in the local textile art scene in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the faltering steps which are inevitable in any developmental process, contemporary Nigerian textile designers have continued to demonstrate a genuine search for improved career opportunities and authenticity. A new face of textile design concept for Nigerian textile products is continuously emerging by the day; hence, foreign cultural influences are beginning to disappear. The current drive in bringing back to life the Nigerian textile industries as well as the new

wave of public interest in locally produced textile products should be encouraged. A lot of awareness needs to be created to foster a favourable local climate for the development of textile designers as well as the appreciation of their creative output. In Nigeria, the Association of Textile Technologists has been leading by example and has done much by organizing conferences and art exhibitions that will likely raise public awareness on textile, clothing and fashion matters.

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