

Art Workshop Centres In Nigeria: Issues And Problems

Chinedu C. Chukueggu

Abstract

Art Workshop Centres emerged in Africa towards the middle of the 20th century. It first originated in Southern Africa and later spread to other parts of the continent. Some European colonial administrators and Christian missionaries pioneered the art workshop experiment. In the central and West African Countries, the experiment was initiated by European Missionaries of the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Churches. The project thrived exceedingly and produced prominent African neo-traditional artists, who eventually produced the forerunners of modern African art tradition. In Nigeria, the workshop experiment was a great success. To a large extent, it contributed immensely to the general acceptance of the Euro-Christian evangelism mission in Africa. The employment of the creative ingenuity of the Nigerian traditional artists in the expansion of the new religion, no doubt provoked the development of traditional art and culture. This paper seeks to trace the origin and development of the art workshop experiment in Africa with particular reference to Nigeria. It also notes the positive impact of the workshop towards modern art development in Nigeria. It looks at the wide gulf created by the extinction of the workshop experiment in the country, which has continued to expand. The problems occasioned by the vacuum were also examined. Finally, the paper proffers solutions to the problems.

Keywords

Cyrene Centre, Catholic Church, Oye-Ekiti, Mbari Art, Artists and Pottery

Introduction

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary sees experiment as "new activity, idea or method" which one explores in order to experience its effects or results. Experimentation therefore, is the hallmark of man's quest to investigate and possibly conquer nature or his environment for the betterment of his society. Art Workshop Centres refers to designated places where artists are trained and those already trained enroll into such centres to sharpen their skills.

Also an artist could own a workshop centre, however, non-practicing artists could organize workshops for talented young artists and craftsmen in order to create both patronage and interaction for them. In such cases, they could be formed into art guilds. Typical example was in Benin kingdom towards the first quarter of the 20th century, the Igbensawan which was a popular lineage of traditional carvers in the kingdom, established wood carving and metal casting workshop centres. Interested young apprentices were admitted and trained on how to carve wood and cast metals. They explored new initiatives which attracted more patronages particularly from Europe (Willett 2002: 220-238). In a normal workshop the duration of the training depends on the ability of the young artist.

Following the success of the Benin workshop centres, there appeared several other workshop centres in various parts of Africa. These early workshops unlike the Benin experiment which was purely indigenous were organized by European missionaries. They were fascinated with the creative development of the African artists in their natural environment. Most of the European missionaries watched with the disbelief the creative skills demonstrated by the African artists who were basically self-taught and naturally gifted. The workshop initiators then felt that the coming together of the artists would obviously sharpen their skills and advance the course of visual art development in Africa.

Some of the formal workshop centres that were operational in Africa towards the middle of the 20th century were; The Pierre Roman Desfosses Art workshop centre which was opened in Lubumbashi in 1944. However, in 1954 the centre was merged with another art school to become Lubumbashi's Academic des Beaux. Also, in 1951, Pierre Lod, a Colonial mathematics teacher and amateur painter established the Poto – Poto School which was officially referred to centre d'Art Africaine. This particular art centre became

very prominent through exhibitions held in South Africa and Europe, (Mount 1973:83). The centre which was located in the present day Republic of Congo, produced prominent 20th century African painter; they include Pili Pili, Zighoma and Thango. The centre had unique styles and themes that were generally associated with their artworks. For instance, they painted elongated figures in bright colours which became popular in Africa. In Nigeria, foremost artist Ben Enwonwu painted in similar stylistic trend.

There was also the Cyrene Centre in Bolawayo, Zimbabwe, which begun in 1948. The Cyrene Workshop was organized by Reverend Canon Edward Patterson and Reverend W. Frangeon, who were Anglican Church ministers in Bolawayo. The main targets in their recruitment programme were mostly young talented but physically challenged people who by the nature of their handicap were naturally expected to be domiciled at the centre. Such people would have little or no distraction by virtue of their immobile disposition. Such people are usually adaptive to situations and would be very productive and skillful if well managed. Buoyed by the above conviction, the directors decided to provide both training and employment for the students on graduation. In this way they were prevented from becoming social destitute. Nevertheless, many of them became self-employed after their apprenticeship (Egonwa, 1996:147). The students were encouraged to produce critically analytical paintings that were spirited from their traditional backgrounds.

Complex compositions with definitive vertical perspectives were the trade marks of the centre's creative works. Prominent African artists who emerged from the centre include; Sango Sam and Lazarus Kumalo. The major inspiration behind the success of this centre was Rev. Cannon Patterson, who was also an artist. However, he did not compel his students to imbibe the European artistic canon but rather, encouraged them to draw inspiration from the African environment with little touch of the essence of the European art. He ensured that their art works were detailed irrespective of the approach that was adopted (Egonwa 1996:148).

Frank McEwen established a workshop centre at the National Gallery of Rhodesia in 1957. McEwen, the who director of the Art Gallery was astounded with a painting produced by an untrained museum guard Thomas Mukarobgwa (Mount 1973:117). As a result of this, he made available art materials to the museum guard and other young men he was able to gather together at the museum premises; thus was the genesis of the Salisbury

experiment. The workshop eventually turned out to become one of the best centres for grooming young talented minds in Africa at that period.

McEwen produced many artists and projected them to the outside world through exhibitions particularly in Europe and America in the early 1960^s. Mount also records that artists from the centre attracted eminent 20th century art collectors. McEwen ensured that the young artist were guided to discover for themselves, their areas of interest. However, majority of them specialized in painting, while others became sculptors. Nonetheless, the artists influence themselves having stayed together in the process of their creative development. Prominent among the graduates of the workshop centre were Sylvester Mubaya, Joyce Manyndare and Lucas Ndandoriku. The most outstanding of the artists who incidentally was the progenitor of the centre was of Thomas Mukarobgwa.

Their subject matter includes images of animals that inhabit their environment. McEwen thus ignited the creative impulse of the African artists, which gave birth to the popular *Airport Art* in the early 1960^s. The term *Airport Art* was coined by him when the stylistic tendency became very popular and the desire of European art Collectors in Africa. Egonwa (2005:148) observed that the airport art became transitional between the African traditional style and the modern art.

Other workshop centres that pioneered the African scene include the Polly Street Centre in Zimbabwe. This experiment produced outstanding African artists in the early 1960^s; they include Ezrom Legae, Lucky Sibiyi and Lucas. They carved wood, stone and also cast bronzes. Also in Zimbabwe, the Serima Roman Catholic Mission has in 1948 established an art workshop. The Serima Centre was directed by Reverend Father John Groeber (1903-1972). The centre was located in the remote countryside town of Mashonaland. Its main focuses were wood sculptures, altar decorations and mural paintings. Their themes were mainly biblical stories and African cultural lifestyles. The clergy director of the centre had no intention of grooming the young minds into formal school setting but rather used the centre in fostering his evangelistic mission. However, strong neo-traditional African artists still emerged from the centre.

Workshop Centres in Nigeria

The situation in Nigeria was definitely not different from similar experiments which trailed other African countries. The pioneers of the artistic experiment in the country were mostly the Catholic Church missionaries. Mount (1973:30) had expressed that the leadership of the Catholic Church at the Vatican had encouraged “Bishops to establish centres of local culture in their areas” which the clergy could explore as a platform to interact with the people and study their culture. The Catholic Church therefore encouraged the use of her version of the mission-inspired art to promote cordial relationship between the Church and the host communities.

In 1947, the Catholic Church in Oye-Ekiti led by Reverend Father P.M. Kelly of the African Mission Society established an art workshop centre. Two other Reverend Fathers; Sean O’Mahoney and Kevin Carroll were the supervisors at the workshop. Their initial intakes were young talented minds of the Yoruba ethnic extraction. They were introduced to wood carving and embroidery. In the centre, art material were provided for the trainees by the missionaries, who also took care of their personal and spiritual needs. Although, they were not prevented from producing artworks for their private clients, they were however re-oriented to produce liturgical art objects for the Catholic Church.

Two other workshop centres were established by Reverend Fathers Carroll and O’Mahoney at Ijebu Igbo and Ondo. The new experiments were merely the extension of the Oye-Ekiti Centre. They produced Liturgical objects according to the dictates of the founders. Although the earlier experiment at Oye-Ekiti appeared to be more broad-based their themes and concepts remained the same. Such themes include, *Mary and the Child Jesus*, *Crucifixion*, *the Last Supper* and the various *Biblical Saints*. They also carved church doors and relief decorations for the church. However, even though the concepts were alien to the artists, the forms still remained Yoruba – African in execution. For instance, the ancestral Yoruba images were made to become Catholic Church Saints while the popular African concept of *Mother and Child* was regarded as *Mary and the Child Jesus*.

The experiment produced young creative artists such as Areogun whose son Bamidele later trained Lamidi Fakeye (1925-2009). Fakeye was adjudged one of the best Nigerian wood sculptors of his generation. In the early 1960^s, Fakeye established his art centre in Ibadan where he explored greater

patronage. He trained younger generation of Yoruba sculptors whose themes revolved around their culture and tradition. Lamidi later studies stone carving and cement sculpture in a French University. He served as artist-in-residence in some European and American Universities before he finally settled down at Obafemi Awolowo University; where he taught wood sculpture. However he continued to train young traditional carvers in his art centre in Ile-Ife till 2009. Artists who passed through Fakeye's workshop centre are spread the Yoruba States in Nigeria. His stylistic trademarks of compact – configuration, intricacy and the expressive power of his design marks are discernible in the works of his former students.

Apart from the Oye-Ekiti experiment, there were other experiments in the country that were very successful. One of such centres was the Abuja Pottery Experiment founded in 1950 by a British potter – Micheal Cardew. He was in Nigeria at the invitation of then Government of the Northern Region to establish a pottery centre at Abuja, where young traditional potters of the Northern origin could be trained in modern pottery. Abuja has abundance of natural and human resources required for such centre. It is largely a Gwari tribe and their women are naturally good in traditional pottery. Cardew therefore recruited young creative ladies mainly from the Gwari tribe for the initial take off of the pottery workshop. Okunna (2002:55) explained that Cardew was astonished with the advanced level of the Gwari traditional potter.

The pottery experiment in Nigeria was the first of its kind in Africa where trado-modern approaches were explored to produce a unique forms and concepts. He revolutionized pottery in the country through the introduction of modern equipment; use of potter's wheels and firing Kilns. He taught the women how to mass produce their works. He also introduced modern designs and utility concepts such as, plates, sancers, cups, mugs and trays, which were also commercialized. In addition, he explored glazing, the use clay washing machines, setting pans, central drying rooms and washing pits which were unknown to traditional pottery in Africa.

The Abuja pottery centre has trained several potters in Nigeria, many of whom have gained international recognition. Prominent among the potters was Ladi Kwali, who was acclaimed as the finest female potter Africa ever produced. Many other prominent potters of national repute were trained at the Abuja Experiment. They include; Dr. Saidu N'Allah, Dr Abbashiya Ahuwan

and Tank Ashada, all of whom later trained formally at the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. Danlami Alin from Minna in Niger State also trained at the pottery centre. He currently operates similar workshop at Tunga near Minna, the state capital.

There was also the Mbari Workshop at Oshogbo. It was set up in 1962 by three expatriates; Ulli Beier, Giogina Beier and Suzan Wenger. They introduced a radical approach in visual art production which Adepegba (1995) regards as naïve and fossilized. Their revolutionary ideas, forms and concepts generated serious interest and curiosity particularly in the western part of the country. This workshop still thrives till date but not with the original momentum. Interestingly, prominent post independence artists emerged from this workshop. They are Jimoh Buriamoh, Asiru Olatunde, Rufus Ogundele and Twin Seven among others. The artists drew inspiration from the Yoruba culture and tradition; their works were woven around the Yoruba mythology and folklore.

The Ori-Olokun Workshop was founded in Ife in 1968 by Michael Crowther while Solomon Wangboje nurtured it to maturity. It lasted till the early 1970^s when it was disbanded following the establishment of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ife. Suffice it to say that the Ori – Olokun Workshop was indeed an extension of the nearby Oshogbo experiment. Their mode of operation and the nature of their fossilized artworks were akin to those of the Oshogbo artist. The experiment nonetheless produced successful artists; Adeniyi Adeyemi and Wale Olajide were among them.

The Mbari Art Centre, Eke Nguru, Mbaise in Imo State was founded in 1955 by Sylvester Chukueggu. It was originally a wood sculpture workshop and arguably the most prominent workshop of its type across the Niger. Egonwa (1995:101) has it that the centre flourished thematically on Igbo traditional mythology and folklore. Nevertheless, it also produced different forms of traditional art. The centre later introduced cement sculptures and commemorative monuments in its programme. Some prominent Igbo neo-traditional artists participated as facilitators in the workshop. They include Josiah Nwoagu (1925-2008) and Long John Mbazuigwe I, (1921-1964). The commemorative monuments in the South Eastern Nigeria became popular as a result of the creative activities of the centre.

The art centre also produced souvenir art which attracted tourists within and outside the country. Another unique aspect of the centre's creativity, was the pioneering of the miniature thorn sculpture which hitherto was unknown in the Eastern part of the country. The artworks appeared in realism with widely spread traditional themes, such as; *going to the Market, Lamentation, Ofo, Celebration and Unity*. In the artworks, distinctive anatomic rendering was emphasized. According to Chukueggu, although patronage was necessary to guarantee improved creativity and continuity, his main drive was his innovative approach which invigorated unimagined goodwill.

Young school leavers who had flair for creativity were trained at the centre. Many of the artists who passed through the centre later established their own workshops at Mbaise, Owerri, Enugu and Onitsha. Prominent among the pioneers were Albert Anya and Mazi Onyeju. Others who joined the centre after the Nigerian civil war in 1970 include Chris Afuba, Evans Osuchukwu, Long John Mbazuigwe II (1949-1978) and Geoffrey Nwaogu (now based in Sanfrancisco, in the United States of America). The group grew in fame through exhibitions even up to the late 1980^s.

Issues

The pioneer experimental workshops were focused with mission or set objectives. They worked very hard to realize their goals; the satisfaction of their clients and the training of talented young men which ensured continuity. Although few of them did not seem to have compelled their trainees to imbibe similar stylistic trends as their masters but suffice it to say that the traits were very evident. Since the centres provided art materials and direction to the trainees, it was certain that they will follow their masters styles whether it was emphasized or not. That is why each of the centres and their products has unique style. Their themes, concepts and forms had depth which clearly gives away the culture or tradition where such centres were located. They thoroughly studied their environments and eventually produced artworks that projected such cultures. This is best exemplified in the works of the Oshogbo, Mbari Art, Ori-Olokun and the Oye – Ekiti workshops. The intricacies of design and the compact nature of the individual figures is the trademark of the Mbari Mbaise artists. This style is still practiced by younger generations of the Mbaise artists.

Similar tendency was replayed in the Oshogbo Centre. Their artworks were inspired by their Yoruba ethno - mythology and folklore. The scenario at the

Oye – Ekiti workshop was even deeper even though it was established by the European missionaries. The workshops adopted forms and motifs of the indigenous arts and crafts into their new art forms. For instance, Lamidi Fekeye, the acclaimed product of the Oye – Ekiti Experiment was a prominent Yoruba neo-traditional carver whose artworks clearly mirror the philosophy, concept and forms of his training background. Filani (2001:134) reveals that the Oye – Ekiti style of the Yoruba art had been in practice for centuries.

The formation of the Ori-Olokun experiment by Michael Crowther in Ife, which was nurtured by Solomon Wangboje, may have been the tonic required for the eventual establishment of the art department of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; which has repositioned the development of the contemporary Yoruba art. The profound detail and the complex configuration of the artworks, which characterized the various workshops in the country and indeed Africa in the 1940^s, up to the early 1960^s, no doubt launched the continental rat race for Souvenir art by the European collectors.

The foundation for the growth and eventual development of Nigerian art tradition was laid by these workshop centres. The artists were focused and determined to succeed even though most of them were self taught. They explored their talents and skills in diverse media of expression. Many of the former students of the various workshops later fostered younger generation of artists through the establishment of their own workshops. However, since the late 1979, there has been downward trend in the activities of workshop centres. There is the obvious lack of continuity in the system. Older centres have since folded up while a new form has emerged in the mould of art studios.

Problems Emanating from Lack of Continuity

Our study shows that the formation of workshop centres across the country in the late 1940 encouraged appreciable enrolment of trainees into the various centres. Some of them eventually emerged among the pioneers of contemporary art development in the country. Some also established their own workshops where many of the present day college trained artists had their foundation training. Many of those artists are currently acclaimed among the best of their generation in the country at that period. For instance, we observed that Lamidi Fakeye established his own workshop centre at Ibadan and later relocated to Ile Ife upon his appointment as an instructor on

wood sculpture students at the Obafemi Awolowo University. Many of the sculpture students of the Department of Fine Arts of the University sharpened their skills in his art centre. Also, Christopher Ibeto, (1912-1995) Ben Enwonwu (1921-1994), Uche Okeke (b/933), Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972), Julius Akenedolu (1915-1984) and Demas Nwoko (b/934), established art workshops centres where younger talents were trained.

Many of the young artists later obtained college entry qualifications and eventually trained in formal art schools. Notable among former workshop apprentices are Chris Afuba now an art teacher in a higher institution; others include Dr. Hycenth Ngumah, Dr. Abbashiya Ahuwan and Dr. Saidu N'Allah. The absence of training workshop centres has created a wide gulf between the college trained artists and their untrained colleagues, who have nowhere to develop their skills. The consequent effect is the spread of these artisans across the cities in the country. Their talents are left raw and undeveloped. This has adversely affected growth and development of modern art in Nigeria.

Most of the few art departments in our institutions of higher learning experience very low student's intake. Many have gone ahead to establish pseudo workshop centres inform of certificate programmes. They act as feeders to their main art programmes; but the situation is yet to improve. Art training requires patience, skill and sacrifice an the part of both teachers and students. Adequate time and materials ought to be made available for the trainees to discover themselves. The fire brigade approach in our nine-month certificate course is not the solution. More so, the course content of the programme is very scratchy.

The resultant effect of the problem is the inability of the various art departments in our institutions to fully develop as expected. This has therefore inhibited the establishment of more art departments as expected since these who qualified to teach art are few. Even the well established art departments find it difficult to fill the vacancies created by the exit of the older art teachers. Also, many secondary schools in the country do not offer art. This is caused by the non-availability of enough art teachers.

Many of the college trained artists are not interested in either teaching or establishing workshop centres where young creative minds could be given proper direction and training at foundation level. Majority of them are only

interested in operating commercial art studios where they sell their artworks. They practice “photographic or wait and take art” just for commercial reason. Worried by this ugly development Bruce Onobrakpeya founded the Harmattan Workshop for college trained artists at Agbara Otor in Delta State. Unfortunately, this has not addressed the serious problems occasioned by the absence of foundation workshop centres. The two weeks Harmattan Workshop is not designed for beginners or the untrained young creative school leavers. It is classically designed assist the college trained and accomplished artists in better service delivery and professional interaction. It certainly cannot fill the gap created by the absence of the foundation workshop centres whose approach appeared very fundamental to art development.

The emergence of all manners of art collectors whose major supply points are the commercial studios is absurd and worrisome. Most of the proprietors of the art shops are not abreast of the cultural values and content of the artworks. They purchase them from different cultures and thereafter influence their mass production and eventual dominance against indigenous artworks. This is very common with souvenir or the popular art.

Conclusion

The Nigerian college trained artists, particularly those that operate art studios should be encouraged to address the problems by establishing workshop-based studios that could train talented young men and women. Also, the workshops should be focused in specialized aspects of the studio areas. Critical aspects such as drawing should be made compulsory. We observed that Michael Cardew and the Oshogbo workshops focused on pottery painting/bead making respectively. Little wonder they eventually excelled in these areas.

These two workshop centres are the only two survivors of the pioneer experiment in Nigeria. The centres have continued to expand in practice and patronage. They were originally designed to be independent and self-sustaining. They were not built around individuals, therefore the exit of their founding fathers did not adversely affect the progress of the centres. Colleges trained artists, art collectors and tourists still patronize them. These two surviving pioneer workshops should be financially supported by both the National Gallery of Art and the National Council for Arts and Culture to meet their current challenges.

The course content of art study in our higher institutions should be reviewed, broadened and possible harmonized to meet the twenty first century challenges in the visual arts. Also, the importance of workshops should be emphasized particularly for those who intend to practice full-time on graduation. The fire brigade certificate programmes in art in our higher institutions should also be reviewed and made workshop oriented. The drive should not necessarily be “to keep our jobs” but to produce talented and skillful artists for continuity.

Finally, the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) should rise to these challenges. Art should be professionalized like Medicine, Engineering and Architecture. They have code of conduct for their members. Such should be introduced by the Society of Nigerian Artists if professionalized. The two national custodians of art and culture; and the National Gallery of Arts (NGA) and the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) should put in place appropriate regulatory mechanisms to regulate the manner in which artworks move in and out of the country. Art collectors should be properly licensed and their activities supervised.

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