

The Nigerian Art Scene: Patrons And Patronage

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Abstract

Contemporary Nigerian art suffers an auspicious propagation whereby a legion of factors and forces are in full play to overwhelm sound art practice. Art professionalism seems to have been trampled down as artists and art collectors struggle to make financial fortunes out of art. Consequently, this has led to a pervert commercialisation of art which threaten the sustenance of virile art practice in the country. The artist produces anything just to survive, while the collector on the other hand, collects from the artist whatever he believes can be sold.

In the light of these facts, this paper discusses some of the factors that constitute the soul of the problems of art patronage in Nigeria. It also examines the role of Nigerian art galleries and collectors, motives of patronage, artist's price index and the role of Nigerian government in patronising art.

From the research, however, it is discovered that the level of patronage in Nigeria is generally low. The support from the government for a sustainable art development is inadequate and infrequent. And in spite of the fact that individuals and private institutions patronise the artist much more than the government, particularly through art collection and sponsorship of art events, their efforts are regrettably characterised by excessive commercialisation of art. But there are indications that art patronage in the country has prospects.

Introduction

There is pleasure ... in working for people who are capable of sensing the fine points of an art, who can

offer a sweet reception of the beauties of a work, and, by gratifying approval, repay you for your labour. Yes, the most delightful reward you can receive for the things you do is to see them understood, to see them feted by an applause that honours you ... but the adulation does not keep you alive; praise by itself does not make a man well off; and the best way to praise is to praise with open hand (Moliere, 1968: 217).

Throughout the ages, patronage has always been a catalyst to the art practice. Art tends to flourish more whenever and wherever its patronage is high. In the early Occidental renaissance, for instance, art blossomed with an increase in the level of patronage. Artists were handsomely rewarded for their labour that by the end of the fifteenth century, many artists were earning the sort of money out of their talents that others could hardly earn out of quite a large capital investment Open University (1972). The increase in the level of patronage at this period however did not just encourage production of plenty works; it also enhanced professionalism in art.

But the case is different in contemporary Nigerian art scene. Many people in Nigeria do not understand that patronage of art transcends mere buying and selling of works and that it goes far to include both the encouragement of the artist and the appreciation of art in an attempt to ensure excellence and continuity (Obodo, 1992). The problems of art patronage tend to pull hard at the prospects of art patronage so much so that the equilibrium in the production and consumption of art is threatened. The creation and the enjoyment of art are not independent of each other; art is not complete with the artist alone; the audience has its own role to play. The artist does not create art just for his personal consumption but for the public's too. He strives to satisfy, according to Chuta (1997), the aesthetic urge of his client, which, if achieved, results in giving him his own satisfaction. This notwithstanding, an artist is satisfied by the sheer act of creation.

Actually the Nigerian art scene has always been an unpredictable scroll that unfolds many problems and prospects. Some of those problems are inextricably linked to the thorny questions of art patronage: Is there really an authentic and adequate patronage in the country? How do avarice and ignorance affect art patronage? To what extent has the present economic situation in the country influenced the buying and sponsorship of art? How helpful to the patronage of art are the roles played by various art institutions and artists who, by the virtue of their profession, constitute the main actors in

the art arena? This paper seeks to answer these questions by examining the activities of some Nigerian public and private galleries, museums and art institutions. It also discusses the attitude of some Nigerian artists towards art professionalisation.

Nigerian Galleries and Collectors in the Making of the Artist

Within the last two decades, a number of private galleries, museums and individual collectors cropped up, particularly in Lagos and Abuja. The emergence of these new art institutions and collectors rather worsened the situation of art professionalism in Nigeria. Their activities have tended to paralyse art practice owing to the zeal with which they seek to reap folds and folds of fortune out of art without caring much about quality and value. Many of the institutions function like market places where collectors and artists meet to haggle over art works as people would haggle over goats or other commodities (Chuta, 1997). This development has an apparent negative effect on the growth of art in the country.

In any case, the sustenance of art is dependent upon the survival of the artist. In a bid to survive, the artist yields to the whims and dictates of his patrons even at the expense of sacrificing art professionalism. No wonder the kind of art he creates is often determined, to a large extent, by whatever condition his society has placed him in. The need for a sustained energy for creativity has made the typical Nigerian art dealer to exploit the struggling artist with baits of hopes guaranteed upon financial upliftment. He dictates to the artist the theme, the material, the technique, and every other thing that make the creation of art work possible. Consequently, the artist is reduced to a mere craftsman who is used to actualise a work someone has conceptualised. The contention here is not that the client should not make some input into a commission he is giving out to an artist, he can make some contributions but he should rather be guided by the artist who should be allowed as a professional to take the final decision on matters concerning the production of the work.

The trend in art business now has reached a disturbing point. Some artists devote most of their time and energy chasing collectors and gallery proprietors, trying to persuade them to buy their works. Sometimes they sell some of the works but only on the collectors' terms. Most of the collectors would always insist on such piece the art merchants refer to as "collector's work". Jerry Buhari called it "art wey de move market" (Buhari, 2001). According to him, the art merchants never failed to show or describe to the

artists that come their way the kind of art that sells. They always urge the artist to produce such types of works if they desire to be successful.

Unfortunately, the number of works an artist sells has generally become a determining factor of professional success. Success is therefore measured in terms of monetary acquisition, and not necessarily by the level of aptitude the individual exhibits. An artist who sells plenty of his works in an art show, for instance, is regarded as a star even when most of the works are what Collingwood refers to as “pseudo art” (Olapade, 1985:43).

The making of an artist by these money-bag collectors, museums and galleries breeds quackery in art. It encourages all kinds of persons to parade themselves on the corridors of art as artists. Sometimes authentic artists find it almost impossible to exhibit in some of the public and private art centres either because of the outrageous fees and commissions charged in such places, or because their works are not the kind that “move market”. This situation does not allow the artist to season through experience and develop to a high level in his career. His ambition will no longer be to strive towards producing art forms that can stand the test of time but to discover some prominent art merchants whom he will rely on as his image maker. And as long as he keeps producing those kinds of works that “move market”, he will surely never lack buyers. His name and works shall cover the pages of newspapers and screens of TV sets.

But the problem with this is that what is produced is perhaps no art. Or if it is, it certainly is not his work per se, since the artist himself was used like a robot or artisan to actualise an idea. In many cases, just to earn his money, he allows into the work ideas and elements he could not explain or understand.

Motives for Patronage

Genuine art patronage is motivated by sincere love for art. It flows out from people who appreciate art and understand that it means more than mere commodities. Such people encourage the artist so as to ensure excellence and continuity in art. Their patronage is often geared towards propagation of art. They take extra steps to establish art organizations or institutions and occasionally organise workshops and lectures on art and art related issues in addition to acquiring works of art for art’s sake. This way they chart a fertile course for the growth of art – a course not based on gross financial motive. In other words, they try to nurture art as life because they believe art is an indispensable part of life.

But there is also patronage that is characterised by crude commercialism. This type is more or less a buying and selling kind of business whereby mercenary artists, collectors and promoters exercise their perverse ingenuity. Partakers in this sort of patronage hope for salubrious profit and give little or no consideration for the development of sound art professionalism. Many of Nigerian private museums and galleries, collectors and media people belong to this mercenary group. They have made the art of art collection degenerate to a point where even the man in the street views art work as nothing but “money”. No wonder at every art show people are more curious to see the exhibition price list than the work on display.

Of course there are people who are bent on personal aggrandizement. When such people patronise art they do so in their effort to display their affluence and power because they believe art is an insignia of wealth. People in this category of patrons are often art-illiterates. They can neither appreciate works of art nor differentiate an artist from an artisan. All they want is to let their homes and offices be adorned with art works that would never again be refurbished. And whenever they feel the works have gone out of vogue, they destroy them for new ones. No doubt they patronise art, but this kind of patronage is not completely different from the type arising from commercialization. It isolates art from its various meanings and functions, and presents it as a mere commodity which value stands as the money exchanged for it. This attitude portends the danger of causing a disjointed or crooked history as such people keep on destroying or wasting some old works for new ones.

Artist’s Price Index

It is a general notion that the prices of art works are high in Nigeria. At exhibitions, many visitors will often complain at the price lists, even before seeing the corresponding art pieces, that works are tagged with outrageous prices. Such complainants seem to be more anxious to find out how much each work is fixed at so as to make certain their belief that art is nothing but money and that artists are magnates. But is it really true? The question is: what factors determine the artist’s price index, and how do we ascertain that a work is overpriced? Osa Egonwa (2001) has suggested four factors – “the status of an artist, place of transaction, the prevailing economy, and the nature of the work on sale”. This means that the work of a celebrated artist is likely to cost more money than the work of a young artist. As an artist grows (gets more known), the value of his works correspondingly appreciates. In other words, increasing prices becomes justified as one’s market grows, and

besides, a heightened demand for a fixed supply bestows on the sought-after works increased value (Grant, 1991). Thus, it is ideal that an artist should incrementally raise the price of his works from time to time depending on the market he has.

Of course, works on exhibition in a small city centre, for example Otukpo, a local government headquarter or even Makurdi, a state capital, are likely to be cheaper than works in prominent galleries in Lagos. An artist who is sustained by a market of smaller town collectors would require setting prices of his works at the level of those buyers. In the same way, those artists whose ambitions are represented in larger urban centres depend on those city prices in determining their value (Grant, 1991).

The nature of the piece for sale also plays an important role in determining the price of the work in question. That is, is the work in wood, bronze or paper-mache? Or is it a water colour work, a ceramic ware or a textile material? But irrespective of whatever form an art work may assume, its price is not dependent upon the equation of the cost of its material and labour. Art along with its price is unique. This is because it possesses intrinsic and extrinsic values which ordinary goods do not have.

It is common in Nigeria today that several artists fix unreasonable price tags on their works. Such artists are either mercenaries who are insensitive to the plight of some genuine patrons (who are perhaps constrained by the prevailing economic regression) or nascent artists who do not know how to incrementally raise their prices. They fail to attend exhibitions to see other works of comparable size, imagery and quality in order to ascertain how to establish their market value. All their efforts are usually just to make money from art irrespective of whether the codes of conduct in art profession are observed or not. Unfortunately, these mercenary artists always have untenable reasons for hanging outrageous prices on their works. When confronted at an exhibition over high price list, for instance, one young artist explained that he decided to place tags for huge sums of money on his works because he knew that collectors would never fail to haggle with him over the works, even if he had fixed only a hundred Naira to each of them. Another reason he advanced was that high price on works helps the image and status of the artists as most renowned collectors prefer dealing with well established artists. No wonder some young artists hawk their works from one gallery to another with outrageous price tags – an attitude that demeans them the more.

It could be contended that more often than not some galleries and museums cause people to look askance at price tags on works displayed in

those art houses. Filled with greed, they add some money – sometimes more than sixty percent of the price approved by the artist – to the work. This is in a bid to make more money for themselves at the expense of the artist. This happens especially in situations where they know that the artist involved is still an “emerging” one who, even if he knows his rights, will not have the ability to take actions against them. Of course the artists sometimes do not know they should insist on signing explicit consignment contracts with their galleries. Even when they know, they are afraid they may lose securing a place in the art dealers’ galleries to place their works for sale. Sometimes, disagreement arises between the gallery owners and these nascent artists when they insist there should be specified written agreement (Grant, 1991). This is attributed to the power imbalance between the young or lesser-known artists and the dealers which causes the artists to accept otherwise unacceptable arrangements.

Classifications of Patrons and Patronage

Patrons of the art fall into three categories, and not two as Crowther (1978) observed. They include the sponsors, the buyers and the promoters. Each of these groups patronises the artist in a different way. The sponsors assist the artist by sponsoring him; say in organising art exhibitions, symposia, workshops, biennales, residencies, competitions and other related programmes. In sponsoring the artist, they do not usually have remunerative motives as their preoccupation. Their efforts are inspired by the genuine interest which they have in art. And with the conviction that art should rise above the level of mediocrity, they strive to achieve a sustainable and virile development of art practice that will be illuminated by excellence.

The buyers, on the other hand, buy works of art and, or give out commissions to the artists. Their interest is to acquire as much works as they can afford. They build up a collection of works in their quest to satisfy their aesthetic desire. Among this category of patrons are typical art merchants who accumulate piles of works with the sole motive of making a fortune out of them at the most available opportunity. For them any art venture that does not target financial profit as its end is worthless.

There are also other categories of buyers who buy art works because they love the works and can appreciate them, and not because they have much money to throw about or because they hope to make fortunes subsequently from the acquired works. Their admiration for successful works of art is naturally genuinely motivated. In spite of the financial support they give to artists for their labour in creating artistic works, these collectors also

encourage them by giving them the moral support that gets them fired for more creative and productive explorations in art. In fact, it is this class of patrons that promote professionalism in art practice. No wonder Nsikak Essien, a painter, acknowledged that he considered them favourably too whenever they approached him for some work. According to him, "I sold one of my works to Wole Soyinka not because he came with a large sum of money but because he knows the real value of the work and will always appreciate it" (Obodo, 1992: 38). There are some other patrons like Professor Soyinka in Nigeria today, though they may be quite few. Alhaji Abdulaziz Ude, Engineer Yemisi Shyllom and Mrs. Dafinone are other examples of collectors who, besides buying art works from different classes of artists, also encourage the development of art through sponsorship.

Finally, there are art promoters whose activities help to build the image of the artist. Their main objective is usually to project the artist as somebody of high renown whose works are without equal. Many patrons in this category are found in the media houses where they write or broadcast unfounded essays and reviews, sometimes for a fee. One artist recounted his encounter with a TV star that approached him at an exhibition in Lagos and demanded for one of his works in exchange for a fifteen minute review of his exhibition. According to the artist, the journalist promised that following the media package, collectors would rush and buy off all the works on display before the end of the exhibition if only he (the artist) would comply.

Governments, Museums and Galleries in Art Patronage

Patronage of art comes from two basic sources: private and public. In contemporary Nigeria, the bulk of whatever patronage the artist enjoys emanates from the private sector. Although once in a while, a generation of administration, particularly at the local and state government levels, initiates large-scale projects that support the development of art as they embark on city beautification scheme. They usually commission the artists to create monuments at some strategic roundabouts within the cities. These commissioned works electrifyingly set the cities in a splendiferous atmosphere as long as the administrations lasted. Important cities like Enugu, Kaduna, Awka, Makurdi and Asaba are examples. But it is quite regrettable that most successive administrations neglect the works to degenerate. For instance, a survey of the public sculptures mounted at some strategic locations within Enugu metropolis are observed to have been severely deteriorated, save a few that were renovated recently by the Sullivan administration. Most of those works, which were mostly acquired by the

Group Captain Emeka Omerua (now retired Commodore) administration in the 1980s, were abandoned by the subsequent governments so much so that they became popular stands for posters and banners of deceased people, politicians, religious groups and social events. It was so until 2008 when Governor Sullivan Chime took over the administration of Enugu.

Like Omerua, the governor had embarked on intensive rehabilitation and beautification projects within the Enugu metropolis. The project, in addition to refurbishing some of the deteriorating old monuments, has put in place new ones at some strategic locations, which hitherto were not adorned with art works. As it is now, virtually every important junction and roundabout in Enugu urban displays one glittering monument. This effort is however a positive move towards the development of art in the state.

But it should also be noted that art patronage transcends the commissioning of artists for public monuments. It includes sponsoring art programmes and events, and encouraging artists' participation in relevant art programmes. The typical Nigerian government fails to patronize the artist as much as it should (Ikwuemesi, 1997). In 2001 for instance, two Nigerian artists approached their state government (Enugu State Government) for assistance in crating, shipping and travelling to Japan for the prestigious Osaka Triennale Contemporary Art Competition. Their entries were among the only 8 selected from Africa/Oceania, and among the 150 selected from no fewer than 11,497 works from 99 countries and areas for the competition and exhibition (Osaka Triennale, 2001). The works were to go for the final round of selection. Unfortunately for the artists, they were thrown out of every government office they went to. Moreover, in February 2010, the Planning Committee for the Enugu Centenary celebration sent out flyers for exhibition and youth art competition as part of events to commemorate the centenary year. Close to the deadline for the submission of entries for the show, the Committee sent out messages that the State Government had aborted the art exhibition and competition plan. The government was unwilling to pay the honorarium recommended by the committee due to "lack of fund". These attitudes tend to imply that the government is only interested in giving the city a facelift through what art can offer, and not necessarily in the development of the profession.

But this is a mark of sheer insincerity by the government which has always preached that the promotion and development of art and culture is the right effort geared towards a sustainable social development. This is not so with other ministries. In the Sports Ministry for example, talented athletes are rather financed by the government in both local and international

competitions. They are recognised and given awards on return if they win trophies. Even at the local level, the athletes are generously rewarded, not only by the sports enthusiasts, but by the government also, if they show satisfactory performance. On the other hand, when an artist wins a prize at an international art competition, the case becomes different; it becomes his personal affair.

The situation is not quite different in some other states. All levels of governments seem to believe that funds spent in collecting art works or sponsoring art events and programmes are unnecessary expenditure. They scarcely acquire works for the ill equipped government owned galleries and museums. Even some of the few works donated to the government by some good spirited individuals are either looted or poorly preserved. In fact it is no surprise that the government institutions entrusted with the responsibilities of ensuring a sustainable development of art and culture in Nigeria are incapacitated by mismanagement, corrupt practices and lack of vision. The little fund that the governments eventually dedicate to art commissions is usually eaten up substantially by instituted corruption, and only a paltry sum ultimately gets to the artist. In many occasions the artist ends up receiving less than fifty percent of the total contract sum. This eventually results in poorly executed works; hence, defeating the motive behind the commission.

On the other hand, the National Museum is entrusted with the responsibility of collecting certain amount of money as tariff from artists, and issuing them with clearance certificates for their exhibits intended to be shipped out of the country. Even as this may constitute bottleneck for artists who are taking works outside for one event or the other, it is however right that those artists should pay their tax, and that the Nigerian antiquities are preserved from smugglers through the process.

But one wonders to what extent the government has made effort in developing this art sector from where it reaps. National Museums are one organ through which the government can help develop the arts. But they have become like eateries and social clubs which objectives are strongly built upon financial gains. They cannot give out their exhibition space to artists for art events at affordable rates. Most of them prefer to hire out the space to individuals who can pay the high fees for their marriage receptions and social meetings. For instance in 2009, the Pan African Circle of Artists (PACA) was refused holding their annual art exhibition and conference at the Enugu National Museum because it could not raise the sum of one hundred and forty thousand naira (#140,000. 00) fee demanded from it by the Museum. A fee like this is outrageous, particularly for the emerging artists who are struggling

to register their imprints on the profession. Even if it resorts to running some commercial activities as means to supplementing the grants from government, it is more civic-minded to consider carrying out its basic responsibility to the society first.

The story about the activities of private museums and galleries is not different. Although these art houses are fundamentally commercial ventures which objectives revolve around financial profits, their desperate pursuit of monetary gains tends to deaden every effort they seem to be making towards the development of art practice through patronage. This is particularly so with the pressure of inconsiderate market deals, which they often exert on the poor and emerging artists. In 2000, for instance, one burgeoning artist exhibited at the Alliance Francaise, Lagos, where Nimbus Gallery approached him for some works. After a written agreement was made between them to buy some of the works and have some displayed for sale in the gallery, the proprietor carted away the selected pieces. He invited the artist to come to the gallery immediately after the exhibition for his money. According to the artist, he received less than the cost of two of the works in the end after several visits to the gallery even when it seemed obvious that most of the works had been sold. The artist further complained that he could not contemplate taking legal action against the gallery because he could not afford the cost and still practice his art. Some other emerging artists have complained that the same gallery owed them substantial amounts. There are also many other galleries that run the artists down in this way.

However, a few of the private and non-governmental galleries and museums occasionally take some good steps towards promotion and sponsorship of art events. It was in one of such good gestures in 2001 that Mydrim, Pendulum and Nimbus galleries made their exhibition space available for a controversial art show which brought ten young artists from the Nsukka Art School into sharp focus before the Lagos art audience. The exhibition, *New Energies*, was curated by El Antsui. Fortunately, the show became a springboard for the young artists, as well as an eye-opener for the public who was thrilled more than ever before in recent times by the uniqueness of the works. Similarly, Pendulum Gallery has sponsored series of art programmes including art exhibitions and conferences within and outside the gallery. It has sponsored different publications arising from the activities of the Pan-African Circle of Artists. Supports like these encourage the artist, particularly those emerging artists, to find means of practicing and showcasing their works. Regrettably, only few art houses commit their resources, time and space to patronising art genuinely.

Foreign missions in the country have done much better than the government and most of the indigenous art institutions in the propagation of art in Nigeria. The British Council, Alliance Francaise, Goethe Institut and USIS have variously patronized Nigerian artists, and made more contributions to the upliftment of the arts (Ikwuemesi, 1997). For example, Goethe Institut and Alliance Francaise regularly sponsor and exhibit Nigerian artists at their centres while Nigerian galleries and museums (both government and private) charge exorbitant fees for their space. They also hold art workshops at intervals in different parts of the country. The question therefore arises: why is the government reluctant to commit much time and resources to develop the art sector, even when it is aware that other African countries like Senegal, Zimbabwe, South Africa, etc are investing in and reaping from art through biennales and residency programmes? Hopefully, the African Regional Summit and Exhibition on Visual Arts (ARESUVVA) which the National Gallery started in 2009 will be a step forward if it takes root. It will likely be a big art event that will be celebrated annually or biannually in the country.

Conclusion

Art practice in Nigeria has become an all-comers business where mercenaries are in full play. Genuine art patronage, characterised by sincere appreciation of art and encouragement of the artist, seems to have been thrown out of the window for pecuniary motives. Even the artist himself has jettisoned art professionalism in a bid to survive. He no longer cares whether or not his works are pieces of history.

In the last decade, however, the level of support for art by both private and government institutions appreciated favourably to some extent. This is attributable to a growing awareness for the crucial needs of the artist and his products in the country. Private collectors, public and non-governmental art institutions are gradually sponsoring art events and giving out commissions to artists. This is evident in the way individuals and governments commission the artists for monuments, billboards, posters, architectural sculptures and paintings. But these are not yet flowing at the expected rate, looking at the history of the Nigerian art as well as the place of art in social life. Patronage, as the artist enjoys it today from his audience, comes in trickle which neither encourages the artist nor promotes art adequately enough.

Essentially, several factors and forces combine to work against any meaningful art propagation in Nigeria. To salvage the Nigerian art and art

professionalism, government should play its role by putting in place proper infrastructures and policies necessary for the development of art. It should also encourage the artist to create and project art beyond his frontiers through sponsorships of art event. Museums, galleries and individual collectors, on the other hand, should design and accommodate programmes capable of reshaping the already warped art practice. Exhibition centres charging high fees for their spaces should consider the plight of many artists, especially those emerging and lesser-known ones who are not yet established. They should be encouraged to develop without being choked by financial strains. Finally, the artist himself should shun perverse commercialisation of art. He should remember that he is a professional who should keep to codes of conduct which befit art practice.

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