

Which Craft? Re-Interrogating Art and Craft

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Abstract

The issue of the artist's identity and functions has become worrisome in the contemporary discourse. Who is an artist, in the face of this eclectic milieu? And what makes him one? What distinguishing paradigm draws a line between art and craft? Or are they the same instruments bearing separate names? Hanging artistry on an avid intellectual clientele is being threatened by a burgeoning influx of "outsiders" crying more than the bereaved. What then becomes a perfect beacon for demarcating the boundary between both genres or what overcomes the distinctions? Or is there any overlap occasioned by the duo's verisimilitude? This study exposes the blurring margin between "low" and "high" art through analytical survey of the controversies and overlaps in artistry. It also presents possible tendencies for historical re-thinking.

Keywords: Art, Craft, Representation Aesthetic Harmony and Visual Metaphor

Introduction

Finding a definition that encompasses all art stands for is as difficult as finding a universally acceptable origin of man. Several contributions say what art is with little or no emphasis on what it is not. Art is seen as a creation or expression of what is beautiful especially in visual form. It is also the "fine skill or aptitude in such expression". The Oxford Advanced learner's Dictionary goes further to define art as "something in which imagination and personal taste are more important than exact measurement and calculation".

"Art is a man recreating and regenerating his environment in all its form. Nature provides him with a lead. Thus art is a creation of man whose origin emanated from man's great insightful attribute. Art is a spiritual product that accords man a deep sense of fulfillment. In this regard, its essence is beyond mere ephemeral outings and celebrations in museums exhibitions. Art remains a great phenomenon for the celebration of life". (Ugiomoh 2002:63)

From the forgoing, man with his essence constitutes the objective of art. It is the alteration of nature. Therefore it is that manipulation of nature for the satisfaction of man. Rephrasing Eugene Kleinbeaur, Professor chike Aniakor opines "that a work of art is a man-made object with aesthetic significance; an aesthetic object which has resulted from

a high level of craftsmanship. A work of art is therefore autonomous and self-sufficient when it is brought into being through the creative process to become an aesthetic product” (2006: 32). Following the same line of argument Robert Cohen posits: the word “art” brings to mind a host of intangibles, creativity, imagination, elegance, power, aesthetic harmony and fines of form; in addition we expect a work of art to capture something of the human spirit and touch upon sensed but intellectually elusive meanings in life”. (Cohen 1981:83).

This presupposes that art exists or operates within a defined ambience with certain variables as yardsticks of ascertaining its acceptability. “Art is a human conception made manifest by the skillful use of a medium. It signifies a doing, a making, a fashioning or putting together, and it usually implies that the thing is accomplished by human skill” (Uzoagba 2002). Whether this human conception is restricted to the doing (man’s) is challenged in the proceeding proposition.

“...the wind is the artist in chief. It determines the general appearance of the gallery (that is the desert) and rearranges the shapes as it pleases. It is forever making changes. If you return to this gallery a year from now, you may notice that some of the drums have been moved as much as 30 metres in your absence! That is what Namibia’s winds can do” (Awake March 2001:27)

This inanimation of artist’s persona tempts one to wonder if “the man made” cliché could find its basis here on the human observation. Or could nature’s manipulation of nature be art? As if the question raised above is not enough, the author further states:

“another eccentric artists with curious ways though not as rough, is the perique’s alder. Its graphic design on the sand looks like a sense of crooked sticks. The snake leaves these prints behind as it propels itself in a peculiar sideways fashion. (Awake March, 2001:27). As to whether man holds absolute monopoly of artistry is outside the scope of this paper but this posits clues and/or worries for in-depth enquiry.

“Art is a typical emergence of self thoughts, communicatively accomplished via manipulation of matter. It is an outward manifestation of inward urges. That is a product of a correspondence between the spirit and the physical being; in summation of art’s multiple function accruing from new and ever-changing ways to appease the five senses. (Onyishi 2001:13).

It could be deduced from the above observations that using visibility as the only criterion of appreciating art is losing validity. “Aestheticism as a sole criterion for the validity of a work of art is evaporating. The artist will not work anymore for his glory in museums or galleries but for solidifying the meaning of his creation on a large scale without falling into the pitfalls of social realism or anecdotal account of events. He will take active part through his work in forming a new world image” Selz (1996:510). From this view, art could be seen as a solemn military whose ultimate reward is not only the satisfaction of inner self but also the joy of giving service to man, space and time. In which case it would be a disservice to the blind if artistry is hinged only on visibility. Art could also be seen as “the product or process of deliberately arranging items (often with symbolic significance).

On the other hand, “to describe something as craft is to describe it as lying somewhere between an art (which relies on talent) and a science (which relies on knowledge). Folk art follows craft traditions, in contrast to fine art or “high art”. Craft refers to the manual skill or the doing. “Craft work is skilled work: any kind of craft must involve the

application of a technique”. Craft refers to skilled work that exhumes creativity and talent. It requires the application of techniques and “intelligence”. In the production of crafts, the objects are usually to a large extent designed for utility. In this sense, one could say that a craft is something that performs a service for people because it provides them with what they can use. Often such objects as: clothing, box, purse, bag, shoe, pot, bowl, mug et cetera are considered craft. So, utility or function becomes a pivot around which craft revolves. In this sense, aesthetics is not the crux of craft production but function.

Craftsmen are pejoratively referred to as those who learn through apprenticeship and trade and have no formal/western education. Thus the usual derogatory remark “he is a craftsman not an artist”.

The objective of this paper is thus to re-introduce a debate on the artist’s persona and the concept of low and high art. It is aimed equally at looking at the differential and similar qualities of art and craft. The method of enquiry is comparative and analytical.

Art and Crafts: The Status Quo and Tendencies of Query

Just like installation discourse which has increasingly been a subject of conflicting opinions Peterson (2015:84), Art and Craft generate similar controversies. The preceding is an attempt to examine the propositions and contestations.

The knowledge of Craft is often handed over by ancestors through “transmitting their craft from father to son for many generations”. Fuller (2016:162). Traditionally, crafts were concerned with using handmade process to achieve an end result, usually something practical, like chair, cup, mirror et cetera. It is not that these objects could not also be aesthetic but the main aim becomes function. Contemporary crafts are less about practicality and function and generally something a craftsman chooses to produce because he enjoys the process itself. In this sense, it is a leisure activity rather than a means to an end. This is not of course, to conclude that crafts cannot also be practical and functional it is rather rare to see crafts solely for aesthetic purpose.

On the other hand, art is generally about aesthetics rather than function. The terminology used entirely relies on some deeper layer of meaning being infused in the piece. Whether the artist deliberately makes a statement is left for the audience. But a new wave of contemporary artists are using or adapting traditional craft techniques in artistic productions. The argument is that the crafts have become arts because of the intentions of the creator to whom crafting is simply a medium just like paints are applied to canvas.

In art the meaning of the finished piece can be deduced consciously or subconsciously. The factor of defining each genre is anchored on whether a piece is planned or whether it grew organically, in the creative process. Even when a piece is re-created for multiple sales, does the artistic integrity of the piece remain intact?

A design might be successful or aesthetically wanting. The skill level of the creator raises the degree of craftsmanship inherent in a piece. An artist uses craft techniques and approaches as media and this is true of any craftsman as well. If one creates one’s own designs, could one be termed an artist whose medium or process happens to be a particular craft?

“The Craftsman knows beforehand the end to be achieved, or the effect to be produced upon his audience. The artist, on the other hand, stands in the same relationship to the

outcome as his audience. The artist explores the unknown limits and possibilities of his art, the artist is also finding art, clarifying, understanding” Dutton (1990: 3). The inference from the foregoing is that the artist does not just have a mastery of his media but is also knowledgeable in the philosophies his works express. But historically, craft is associated with the production of useful objects. The crafter’s flower vase should as a matter of principle be able to hold a flower but the artist’s works targets aesthetics. Moreover, many great works of art also are objects of enormous practical value, for instance works of architecture, functional sculptures, ceramic and textiles. Have we come to a point where there is art in craft and craft in art? **Scott Patria** provides an interesting perspective: “Craft objects occupy a varied space in the arts realm, somewhere between “fine art” and design, with the term “sculpture” likely applying to as many objects in the craft realm as it does the realm of fine art. The objects we call art or craft are members of a continual spectrum under the creativity banner” (2010:1).

Patria’s proposition smacks off a refutable conclusion that queries the integrity or status of art and craft. Since validation and interpretation of art is usually a matter of controversy, an audience could perceive craft objects as art objects when these are juxtaposed and appreciated within/in a gallery or museum context.

Ceramic pottery, glass, fibre, miniature metal works and jewelry are traditionally called crafts as a result of their utilitarian purposes and qualities. New graphic forms like urban design would fall into this category as well if “use” becomes the criterion of categorizing craft. The distinction between aesthetic and function of all objects could find its basis on the historical and cultural contexts in which these objects are created. Reacting to this historical restructuring of ideology, Wangboje (2005:1) opines:

The dichotomy which exists between arts and crafts is of Western origin because in pre-colonial Africa such a dichotomy did not exist. For example, those works that were created in the pre-colonial era and which were mainly inspired by traditional religion and attendant ceremonial and ritual practices were classified as “arts” whereas, the ones that were made as functional objects were classified as “crafts”. Consequently, the former is regarded in the Western world as non-practical and of high aesthetic value while the latter are relegated to the background as “minor” arts since they do not possess the same awe and hidden meanings that are the hallmark of great art. In traditional African societies, all the arts were created as functional objects and the “craftsmen” who created works in bronze, wood or terra-cotta and who would normally be classified as sculptors were no more important than the craftsmen who wore baskets, carved calabashes or made pots – they were all artists in their own right. Their arts flourish because of the vital roles they played in both the secular and religious life of the people.

Differential Claims, Common Grounds and Overlaps

I. Education/School: A pertinent question comes to mind at the mention of school or education. It is the convention that an artist, in this part, receives formal/Western education. Who provided the benchmark of knowledge inculcation that shuts the door once Western model enters? Is school restricted to formal education? Should school be

bookish or pragmatic? Michael Eniji rephrasing Neperud (1965:21) writes about the so-called African traditional Craftsman thus:

“The indigenous artist was in a class of specialists, a professional, whose particular speciality fulfilled the artistic need of his society. The artist’s role and expected behavior was then a relatively unchanging one, derived from a tradition dedicated to a refinement of artistic forms in meeting stable needs.”

Further questions inherent herein is how did the traditional “craftsman” attain such level of specialization while there exists a censor on the system that produced him? What school did the makers of Nok, Ife, Benin and Igbo Ukwu art objects attend? If they were mere artisans, how could one of their “**crafts**” proudly appear as the logo of Society of Nigerian Artists? Or are we the chief priest who does not eat dog meat but uses his teeth in sharing same among kids? Peter Selz critiquing “Palais Ideal”, an installation by a French Postman Ferdinand Cheral asserts that “unschooled artists made their own outdoor installations, sometimes with astonishing authenticity” (1996:499). But worrisome still, should the gap be bridged to place a basket maker, who spends eternity on a routine verbatim regurgitation of inherited specimen, on the same pedestal with a serendipitous scholar whose urge leads him continuously to realizing new realities?

II. Formula, Duplication/Pre-Determined End: In formal terms, art is defined as a form of work that allows the doer to encounter several alterations without a fore-knowledge of the outcome. Crafts, however, opposes the concept of art as it is argued that it has a hackneyed or stereotype mode of representation. Thus, a basket maker could make baskets all the days of his life. From the start he is sure to arrive at basket with little or no alteration or deviation. Some aspects of artistic production like printing, portraiture, casting, embroidery et cetera face similar creative process. Often times the artist could be commissioned to mass-produce for instance souvenirs for a client. Through processes such as casting and printing, he falls into the pitfall of duplication. Poster making entails some repeatable routine of sketching and tumb-nails which tilts artistic production to manufacturing. In the same vein, some painters’ photographic grasp of portraiture goes with predetermined end.

III. Content/Function: Art is as a result of a personal innate talent. Thus it is more likely to be part of one’s nature. Craft, perhaps, is known to be one’s nurturing process. It may be inferred so because crafts are developed under one’s experience. Art entails the involvement of emotions. A high dose of emotion is involved in art. Art has always been formed, even dating back to history, with a great deal of emotion that needs to be expressed. In craft, on the contrary, no emotion is required but instead skill and experience are the apt elements, a school of thought believes. In the words of Chike Aniakor while relating a carver’s attachment to his medium, “the calabash carver becomes the calabash while the calabash becomes the carver”. This singular preposition disproves the detaching of emotion entirely from craft production. But if art has a monopoly of expressing emotions, what mystery does a church banner which a graphic artist is commissioned to produce, belie? And what embodies the originality in a print with its stencil or plate which could be re-produced in innumerable numbers? Or does the

artist become a craftsman at some point while afterwards putting on his apron-coat of avid intellectualism?

Also, some contemporary artistic production weaves aesthetics with utility. Some functional carvings abound in chairs, tables, wall clocks, dressing mirrors, bars and other load-bearing and non-load bearing fittings in houses. Further examples exist in ceramics where “function” is the crux of artistic production. Ceramic pieces such as mugs, tea pots, jugs, wall planter etc form the basis of most ceramic productions. So utility is not the sole property of craft or are these examples above less art because aesthetics is combined with utility? And what divorces aesthetics from “craft” objects?

Current Trends and Blurring Margin

Frank Ugiomoh in his introduction of OTUEWENA artists writes about the current trends thus:

“ a new way by the postmodern man to rehabilitate art from that state of near-alienation from the world, which the original idea of the museum offered. It stands as an attempt to rehabilitate art, to give birth to it anew from the death modernity subjects it to” (2001).

From Frank’s opinion, orthodoxy divorces art from being, as Ola Oloidi would say, “an integral part of the society”. That is distancing art from man which it stands primarily to serve. This could be as a result of artists’ direction of their works towards materialism. But as Krydz Ikwuemesi would say, we should look “beyond the economic implication of this enterprise”.

The contemporary renovations could be in compliance with the rethinking of art. This may be why Ugiomoh (2002) maintains that it could be the effort to “demystify art’s conceptual sanctity”.

Traditional cum conventional art tends to limit its appreciation to the visual and tactile senses. The advent of new trends like installation and conceptual art re-positions art to appease the five senses.

In frowning at hackneyed conventionalism in the art scene before postmodernism, Fredrick Kiesler, in Selz (1996:511) regrets that “what we artists were doing was simply trading tradition with little forays into the unknown to flatter our fickle egos”.

We think what Kiesler means by “little forays into the unknown” is little or no attention to exploration and innovation thereby making static the should-be-dynamic discipline, art. The investigation into the “unknown”, we feel is that quest or way of finding, addressing and proffering possible prescriptions to art’s or man’s challenges. That is to find new metaphors of making statements. One could deduce from this that to explore explicitly implies unraveling the mysteries surrounding creativity. This is what Kiesler means by “it is evident that the constantly expanding universe of our environment forces us more and more to give attention to time-space continuity” (Selz 1996-511).

This continuity of human essence could also be made feasible by craft since with its utilitarian provisions, it brings creative objects close to even the uninformed audience thereby bridging the long gap in visual literacy.

Conclusion

Both artistic production and crafts making entail the use of skill. They involve the doing which requires an interaction of the mind and the hands. Man becomes the anthropocentric focus of both genres. Both have functions since there could be aesthetic

function. Craft appears to be limited to the visual realm whereas the postmodern artist charts a course for himself in his exploration of intangible means of artistic expression. But, if there exists some common grounds and overlaps in a critical discourse of both genres, could we yield to Oloidi's (1997) proposition that "in the unlimited field of creativity anybody could be a treasure"?

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