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Wither Patronage for her Visual Art This

Kunle Filani

is Lagos," reads the bold sign that heralds newcomers into this boisterous city inhabited by about ten million people. Situated along the coastal region, and a former capital city of Nigeria, Lagos is remarkable — if not notorious — for its peculiar admixture of elegance and ghetto, tranquility and upheaval. Divided into two major parts by the lagoon, Lagos comprises the serene areas rightly called "Island" and the rowdy "Mainland" areas. This rapidly expanding city is the nerve center of Nigeria's economy and the most politically active segment of the country. Lagos is a melting pot of some sorts for cultural integration and a haven for artistic rejuvenation.

More by accident than design, activities and structures in Lagos seem patterned in curious formations. A bird's view of busy spots in Lagos shows a colorful sea of human and vehicular traffic. Fleeting strokes of cars and buses line up the snake-like roads and bridges that lead to the busy Island and Mainland parts. All of these are sandwiched between rusty and reddish roof tops. The peculiarity of these formations has remained a major source of inspiration to many creative minds who have



come in contact with Lagos. Visual artists pounce on the divergent themes offered by the "fast" life in Lagos. Patronage of the arts now appears consolidated, considering the huge investment in creative works in the past one decade. Although Lagos is situated in the south-western part of Nigeria where the Yoruba are numerically dominant, the influx of other ethnic groups and foreigners into the city makes its story of patronage that of Nigeria as a whole.

Visual arts cover a broad range of artistic practices in the areas of Fine and Applied Arts. However, this essay is preoccupied with the fine art of painting and sculpture rather than the applied arts of graphics and textiles. Applied arts tend to be perceived as "lesser arts" because of their association with industrial and utilitarian purposes. The possibility of reproduction and quantification of graphic, textile, and craft works equally contributes to this attitude. As a result, patronage for the applied arts and craft is often of a general and functional nature. Unlike applied arts, fine arts such as painting, printmaking and sculpture are regarded as having greater artistic value. They are areas of art where creativity is better displayed. More often than not, fine art products serve the aesthetic role of "art for art's sake," and are, therefore, highly valued in terms of originality and uniqueness. Patronage in this aspect is more selective and dependent upon the financial capability to acquire art for personal or collective taste. The unique status of Lagos on the West African coast implies that there are more opportunities and outlets for artistic participation and patronage.

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Patronage: Concept and Scope

Patronage is generally thought to be a process of support for the arts through purchase, promotion and sponsorship. It motivates artists and spurs creativity and healthy competition. Patronage could come from individuals, private and public organizations, and is manifested in aesthetic, cultural and economic investments. Major outlets for art patronage in Nigeria include national agencies such as museums and galleries, Council for Arts and Culture, national exhibitions, and public competitions and commissions. There are also private outlets such as churches, art shops and studios, local galleries, foreign embassies, indigenous and expatriate collectors, corporate bodies and private exhibitions. These are avenues for the acquisition and display of art works. It is important to mention that publicity for the arts and artists through print and electronic



Opposite page: The opening of an art exhibition at the French Cultural Centre, Lagos, 2000. ©Uche Iroha
Top: Art critic, Olu Oguibe (right) with artist, Kelechi Amadi-Obi in Lagos, 2000. ©Uche Iroha

media is a major boost for patronage. The rise in the number of press reviews and art journals where artists and their works are discussed is most encouraging since they give information and serve as a means of art education and appreciation for the audience. The interplay of these variables affects the dynamism of visual arts and patronage in Lagos.

Patronage in contemporary Nigeria is of course more complex. The purpose of art has changed considerably. Art is no longer meant to glorify deities and kings. It now satisfies the aesthetic desires of individuals, rather than priests and kings. More than ever before, twentieth century Africa came under the influence of Western culture, especially in the areas of religion and education. A reorientation towards life and society became an imperative. And for the first time in the long history of Africa, the notion of the collective gave way to that of the individual. The communal life where the individual is inextricably woven into the fabric of the society became weakened, and the extended family system yielded to the nuclear type. The implications nevertheless became more exciting and enriching for both art and artists in Nigeria. New methods and materials created new styles and possibilities; patronage became internationalized to the advantage of the artists. There is no better place on the coast of West Africa than Lagos where artistic activities could be more rewarding.

Patronage in visual arts in Lagos of today is simply business, while the ultimate intent of exchange is financial reward. In spite of government intent and recognition of the

arts as published in the cultural policy, poor implementation of goals has become a major impediment. Government intent and support for the arts can be seen in the numerous organizations and offices in Lagos: the National Theater, the National Gallery of Art (NGA), the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) and the Center for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC). There is also the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) that administers the National Museum, which houses the widely-traveled and world-acclaimed exhibition entitled *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria: Legacy of Two Thousand Years*. This exhibition was first organized in Nigeria on the occasion of the Second World Festival of Black and African Arts and Civilization (FESTAC 77) which took place in Lagos in 1977. In spite of these institutions, the consensus is that government can do better in supporting the arts in Lagos.

Galleries, Dealers and Artists

In the early nineties, Lagos witnessed an upsurge in the establishment of private galleries. This was in reaction to the rising demands for art works, a reaction that came in the wake of the incursion of corporate finance houses and elite companies into art patronage in the late eighties. There also was the boost provided by a general interest in the acquisition of contemporary Nigerian art by expatriates and Nigerians alike. Unlike the notion of gallery in Europe and America where patronage often stems out of genuine interest in actual promotion and sustenance of creativity in the visual arts, the trend in Nigeria seems focused on the possibility and opportunity to transact business. Therefore, the gallery owners who are Nigerians and foreigners engage in competitive

marketing strategies which in itself is another form of creativity. Sometimes, such strategies are to the detriment of art and artists. Most galleries are located in the Island part of Lagos, which, as earlier mentioned, is the haven for the rich and where most of the corporate businesses take place. Dotting Ikoyi and Victoria Island, which are two major settlements in Lagos Island, are many private galleries bearing creative and sometimes overzealous names: Signature Art Gallery, Mydrim Gallery, Palette, Nimbus Gallery of Contemporary Arts, Hieroglyphs, Didi Museum, Life Strokes, Galleria Romana, Something Special, Wangboje Art Gallery, Iola Art Gallery, Nike Gallery and Hour Glass Gallery. Many of the galleries have art dealers as proprietors. A few galleries are located on Lagos Mainland. They often sponsor exhibitions outside their location since patronage is low within Lagos Mainland. The downturn in the economy virtually wiped off the middle class, creating two classes of the haves (who find patronage quite convenient) and the have-nots (for whom the arts are a distraction). Worth mentioning among the galleries in the Mainland are Aaragon Gallery, Geobi Gallery, Ajibulu-Moniya Gallery, Treasure House, Vermilion Gallery and Baffles Gallery. They are moderate in ambition and barely exist.

An artist-writer once described art dealers in Nigeria as parasites who are only interested in making money, not minding the progress of the artists. This might not be far from the truth when one considers the fact that most of the gallery owners (who are dealers) are art illiterates who hardly understand the concept and scope of aesthetics. Many of them merely pretend to know good quality art by marketing mainly the artists who have 'arrived' and are well-patronized. They hardly read about art appreciation and do not bother to document their collections in catalogs and brochures. Such "expensive" venture to them is a waste of resources which only the artists should invest in. These dealers insult artists by pricing their works like tomatoes. They buy at ridiculously cheap prices only to sell expensively to unsuspecting collectors who are often cajoled with articulate salesmanship spiced with half-truths. This set of art dealers are dreaded by artists who are nevertheless under severe economic pressure to succumb. Like the Yoruba proverb which warns that "The farmer's love for the chick is not deep; it is merely to nurse it big so as to relish its flesh," the respect that most dealers have for art and artists is only to make money from them. Nevertheless, there are a few galleries that have the touch of class, with dealers who are genuine in their transactions. These dealers sponsor creative projects that could be beneficial to artists. Proceeds of sales are promptly paid to artists while some even advance artists money to make works. It can only be suggested that most gallery owners should live by the ethics of their business and take artists as equal partners in this creative business. Despite these grey areas, however, there is a lot of money in successful

gallery business and the dealers are of tremendous importance to the survival of the artists. For the artists that are creative, hardworking and resourceful, the dealers assist in marketing their works and in promoting their image. The most remarkable contributions of the galleries to contemporary art include setting high standards in display techniques, fixing appropriate prices for various categories of artists and art works, identifying and encouraging more art collectors, motivating artists and making them more respectable as professionals.

The artists should equally learn to behave like organized professionals. Many have become charlatans due to economic hardship, causing them to lose self respect. They cringe unashamedly in the presence of the dealers and collectors in order to get cheap money. Some even lie against their colleagues so as to curry favor from clients. The worst thing that some desperate up-coming artists have done is to plagiarize others' styles and concepts in an attempt to make a living. Many fresh art graduates and quacks prematurely rush into staging exhibitions which ultimately get them frustrated and disillusioned. Unlike the older generation of artists who took time to mature in style and technique before



A gathering of artists, Lagos 2000. ©Uche Iroha

seeking fame, younger artists are impatient and lack research efforts. Many of these unscrupulous artists have also played pranks with the dealers and collectors, thereby weakening the mutual trust needed in business. Only a negligible number of artists are interested in art administration, and this gives room for incompetent non-artists to run galleries and plan exhibitions. The professional body, Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), that should rally and organize artists is in itself problematic, thereby leaving artists reckless without moderation. Only the older generation of artists who are resident in Lagos—Bruce Onobrakpeya who owns Ovuomaroro Gallery in Lagos and also in his home town,

Yusuf Grillo, Kolade Oshinowo, David Dale and some younger ones—still follow the decorous path set by pioneering contemporary artists like Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan and Ben Enwonwu. Granted that some artists could be eccentric, it is high time the younger ones realized that art patronage is an organized business which requires organized presentation and representation. The artists must encourage the dealers and gallery owners to ensure more success in art business. Nigerian artists should know that there are alternatives for the dealers who could go to other African countries to get art works that will fill their galleries.

Foreign Embassies

Many foreign countries have cultural attachés who run their cultural centers that are located in Lagos. These foreign embassies, through their cultural organs, have contributed immensely to the promotion of Nigerian art and art business. They sponsor exhibitions, projects and exchange programs

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in creative endeavors. They mobilize their citizens and friends who are expatriates in Nigeria to patronize Nigerian artists. Oftentimes, they are genuine in their relationship with the artists and give candid advice that may open international opportunities for the artists. Examples of embassies that support art in Lagos are French Embassy (French Cultural Center) German Embassy (Goethe Institute), Italian Embassy (former Institute Italiano di Cultural) Russian Embassy (Russian Cultural Center), American Embassy (American Guest Quarters) and British Embassy (British Council). There are international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, Friedrich Ebert Foundation and Smithsonian Institution, among others, which show concern for indigenous art by occasionally sponsoring programs that involve artists.

More than others, the French and German cultural centers facilitate dynamic promotion of Nigerian art through regular exhibitions, workshops, lectures and purchases of art works. The Germans are actually known to have sponsored many Nigerian artists to exhibit in Europe, especially in Germany.

Some Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), run by Nigerians have recently committed more to the promotion of art by bringing into Nigeria foreign scholars, art historians and critics in order to stimulate and sensitize Nigerian audience to international currents in art. A recent example is the effort of Bisi Silva and Simi Ogunsanya of Institute of Visual Arts and Culture (IVAC) who brought into Lagos scholars from Europe to lecture on diverse areas of art.

The question often raised about embassy patronage is on the issue of foreign ownership of indigenous art works that are purchased by expatriates. Most of the works are taken away to their countries thereby denying Nigeria of the best art pieces produced in the contemporary period. Another problem with embassy patronage is the undue influence the various outlets have on the artists. Many of the cultural centers try to condition Nigerian artists to work to their own foreign taste and satisfaction. The need to satisfy international audience now outweighs that of satisfying individuality.

Corporate Organizations

Lagos alone has the highest concentration of banks in the country. It is the nation's center of commerce and industry, which includes insurance and other financial institutions. There are also highbrow corporate organizations such as the oil companies, foreign governmental agencies, indigenous governmental agencies, and private industries in Lagos. These rich industries and organizations form another viable bedrock on which art patronage rests in Lagos. In the past decade or so, there was an upsurge of art patronage by corporate bodies that found it prestigious and decorative to adorn offices and lobbies with paintings and sculptures. Art is seen as a means of improving corporate image and, more importantly, as a form of investment, since good art appreciates in value with time. Many artists have benefitted from commissions, exhibition sponsorships and direct purchases made by these corporate organizations. Most supportive of these organizations is the banking industry that increased in number in the late eighties. Competition was stiff, not only in the area of services rendered but also in physical infrastructure and advertising. Art was then used as beautification for halls and offices, thereby creating a posh atmosphere for relaxed banking transactions. Votes kept as assets were used to commission and purchase art works for decorative purposes. Notable among the second generation banks at the forefront of art patronage are Citibank, Guaranty Trust Bank, Chartered Bank, Continental Merchant Bank, Societe Generale Bank, Eko Bank, International Merchant Bank, Intercontinental Merchant Bank, Africa International Bank, Equatorial Trust Bank and many others. There are

other banks that sprang up and got distressed within five years. They were part of those who patronized art and enriched the artists and gallery owners and dealers — the middlemen.

Intra-banking competition surged during this period, causing older and more established banks to patronize art also. Notable among first generation banks that have supported art and artists are United Bank for Africa, First Bank of Nigeria and, to a lesser extent, Union Bank and Wema Bank. The Chief Executives of these banks often determined the level of involvement of the banks in the patronage of the arts. It is noteworthy that most artists did not come in direct contact with these bank officials because of the middlemen who collected artworks from the artists at chapters and sold at exorbitant prices to the banks. Eventually, artists found a way of bringing banking executives into the exhibition forum as dignitaries. It is important to also mention the oil companies that patronize art: Chevron (Lekki Restaurant and Gallery initiated by Toyin Akinosho and Liz Feit), Elf and Mobil; they are at the forefront of art sponsorship, and also make huge purchases.

The increased patronage of the arts by the corporate bodies motivated artists to experiment with new ideas, techniques and styles. The high rate of exhibitions mounted and sponsored by some corporate organizations, galleries and individual artists attested to the prolificacy with which the artists worked. Many of the artists that were working in public and private organizations even resigned from their jobs to concentrate on art which was fetching them more money. Some corporate bodies became estranged with the gallery owners and started dealing directly with the artists, thereby encouraging and reassuring the artists of making more money and having self-respect. The only snag in the mutual relationship was the occasional copyright abuse of artists' works by some corporate organizations, resulting in court settlements. The corporate organizations usually advance the cause of the artists beyond purchases by publishing their art works in corporate advertisement in form of greeting cards, annual reports, calendars, brochures, and corporate statement catalogs. Royalties are paid to the artists on these published works.

Individual Collectors and Others

Many rich Nigerian and expatriate art collectors are also known to have motivated artists by way of purchases and sponsorship. Some notable Nigerians even allow artists to stage exhibitions popularly referred to as "Salon" in their courtyards. They use the occasion to invite their rich friends and initiate them into art collection. Many of the chief executives and directors of corporate businesses are usually invited weekly to serve as chairmen and dignitaries at the opening of this seemingly endless spate of exhibitions. They are expected to make purchases for themselves and their business organizations. There is evidence of an undulating growth in the number of indigenous collectors. This is largely

dependent on the fluctuating economic situation of these individuals. The military era in the seventies up to the nineties actually destroyed the middle class and gave rise to a new set of privileged Nigerians who got contracts from a profligate government. Many of them started collecting art works as a symbol of affluence, thereby promoting art.

Some artists equally engage in acts that promote the arts. Apart from the "academic artists" who by virtue of their education participate and sometimes organize conferences and workshops to advance the course of art and appreciation, there are those who also have their studios located in the open streets of Lagos. Paintings and sculptural works are used to adorn the walls of these studios, and activities such as sculpting, buying and selling of works go on openly on the street to the admiration of curious passers-by. Open studios have facilitated a number of private and public commissions for the street artists whose problem, however, is the question of competence in maintaining good standards.

Conclusion

Lagos city is the melting pot for art and artistic activities; it is also a place where many artists love to visit, if not reside. It is the major outlet for artists to market their works. The dynamics of creativity and economic realities often determine the level of art patronage in Nigeria. The artists have equally woken up to the fact that the world is a global village where creative minds must explore and exploit other countries to the advantage of art. Therefore, there is a growing tendency to align with the international art market outlets by individual artists, galleries and art dealers. This will further promote Nigerian art and enrich the artists both in experience and reward.

Government cultural agencies must also do more to promote art in Nigeria. The lofty ideas enumerated in the Cultural Policy for Nigeria ought to be fully implemented. Improved economy in Nigeria and better welfare of the citizenry will also allow for better art appreciation and support from individuals and organizations. All related disciplines such as Architecture, Town Planning and Environmental Design should include artistic embellishment in their proposals as a matter of necessity. Only competent artists should be allowed to carry out specific commissions rather than the present situation where some mediocre artists are employed to carry out art projects based on favoritism. The potential of artistic development in Nigeria is limitless, and Lagos, being the symbol of creative growth in Nigeria, should retain and properly maintain the National Gallery of Art. The authorities concerned must update the collections to reflect the recent dynamism of the various schools of artistic thoughts in Nigeria. It is only when these are effected that art business and patronage will further witness progressive growth in the new millennium. GR