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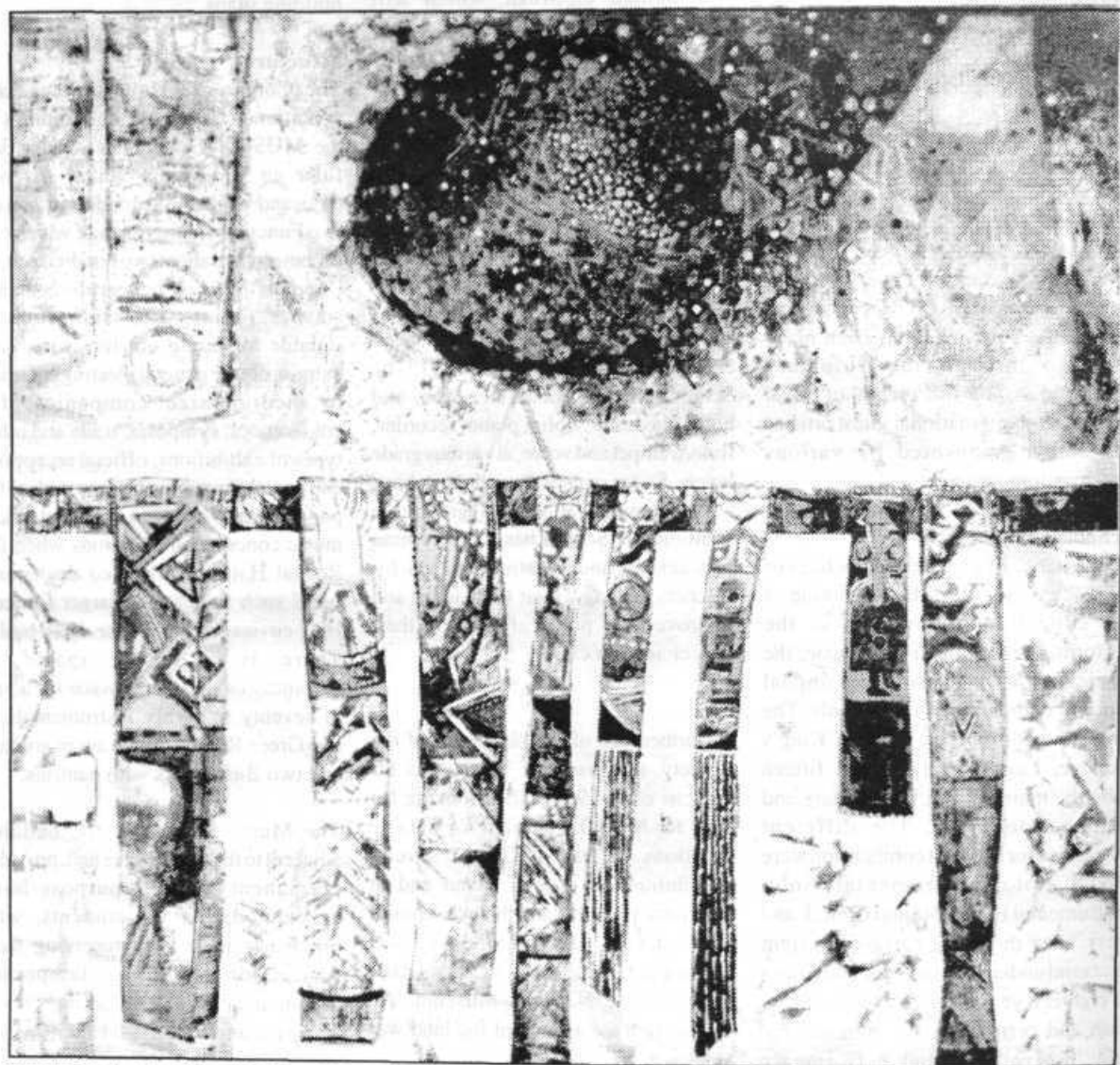
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# THEY JUDGE THE ART, THEY JUDGE THE WORLD

KUNLE FILANI.



Skunder Boghossian, *Climatic Effects*, 1984-85, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 50".

*The question which keeps reoccurring is who decides the worth of an artwork? And with what criteria is its value determined?*

**I**n tackling this subject, it is important to note that art is a creative exercise that largely depends on emotional

conceptualization of ideas translated into equally imaginative forms and appreciated by individuals having subjective views of life. With the above, it is then clear that any study relating to art must of necessity be viewed with open-mindedness rather than the straight-jacketness of the

sciences.

Evaluation of works of art, according to the aesthetician Edmund Feldman, ranks 'in relation to other works in its category - deciding the degree of its artistic and aesthetic merit.' (*Variety of Visual*



Gift Orakpo, *The Goddess of Water*

**Experience: Art As Image and Idea.)** It is a review of those criteria responsible for making critical judgement on art. It is in a way the criteria for art criticism and appreciation. We must however distinguish between the meanings of 'evaluation' and 'appreciation' for objective discussion of the criteria. Here, evaluation of artworks means a systematic approach towards the study of art that could facilitate better understanding and knowledge about the art. It is an attempt at setting certain standards for the sake of better artistic judgement. On the other hand, appreciation is the end of that experience one has when viewing an artwork. It is possible for the viewer to use the criteria of evaluation to assist in the process of appreciation, however, one must note with distinction that evaluation is a process of studying art works while appreciation is the total end feelings that the artworks must have generated in the individual. Appreciation as a word is more subjective because it is a

collective of aesthetic behaviour as experienced by the individual.

The overlap lies in the fact that in the process of evaluating art works, one is directly bringing out the elements and principles of aesthetics which of course form the basis for appreciation.

To determine the value of an art work, we must first understand the characteristics peculiar to the artistic epoch, since the artist is a product of a society exposed

to distinct materials, styles, socio-economic, cultural and intellectual situations of his period and the art he produces is his visual metaphor. It is this that validates the argument of H. Rosenberg who in his book *Art on Edge* reasons that the first requirement of art criticism is that it shall be relevant to the art under consideration.

For all arts to have universal appeal, the critic, the scholar, connoisseurs and activists themselves must forge an objective or at least near-objective criteria or sets of standards for artistic criticism.

In a situation where canons of appreciation are not established, ready grounds are prepared for jaundiced and uninformed appraisal of artworks

as established by the derogatory views of some Eurocentric scholars of the early 20th century who exposed how subjective criticism could be delimiting when they used pejorative terms such as 'primitive' and 'lesser art' for African sculptures on the basis that they were not used to seeing such artworks. For such beholding critics, we would say that beauty resided not in their eyes, but in their minds.

Today, intellectualism has triumphed over prejudices, and art, like technology, is now approached with encompassing systems of evaluation - the evidence being the visual presentations with lesser emphasis on extraneous reasons.

For our own purpose, two main issues that could assist us in evaluating art works shall be looked into. As earlier said, there is no strict rule about how anyone's feelings could be forced to admire or appreciate. What we are doing is to only identify certain issues for consideration and allow the individual to use them alongside their subjective experience in validating artworks. The first issue is termed here as *Aesthetic Considerations* which is based purely on criteria for analysing what is seen on the basis of its *form* and *content*. The second issue is termed *Situational Considerations* which is based on extra-aesthetic matters that are external to the artwork proper but influential in the



Ibrahim El Salahi, *Faces*



Wole Lagunju, *Orisas in Transition*

overall appreciation of the said works of art.

#### Aesthetic Considerations

The most important and possibly most objective yardstick for artistic evaluation is the aesthetic considerations. Art being a visual occupation must of necessity be seen within the structure of beauty, beauty being that sensuous feeling of emotional balance occasioned by the various sensations we derive from pleasurable sights. The concept of aesthetics is a complex issue because of its abstract nature; however, a lot of scholars have discussed extensively on the elements and principles of aesthetics. Generally, aestheticians have identified two determinants to the exterior/structure of the art, while content relates to the meaning/theme. Bernard Myers (*Understanding the Arts*) describes the two as 'physical appeal' and 'emotional appeal'. The physical appeal is beauty of form, while the emotional appeal is the underlying effect caused by the subject-matter of the artwork.

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#### Art Form

For artistic evaluation, the art work must be adjudged to have fulfilled certain formal structures by examining how effective the elements and principles of design have been applied. The element of design include: colour, texture, size, e.t.c. while the principles of design include proportion, harmony and rhythm among others. It is on the basis of effective utilization of the

elements and principles that an artwork could be categorized as aesthetically viable. This position of aesthetic feelings based on form is referred to as 'art for art's sake' and popularized by aestheticians known as formalists.

As an illustration of the formalist theory, a painting done for example by Piet Mondrian titled *Composition* should be seen only in terms of the merits of its formal structures without attempting to find out what meanings are attached to it. The validity of aesthetics should be found only in the outward manifestation of form and not in the content. This position is very important for the evaluation of art because the meanings of art are often shrouded in visual symbols and codes which only the artists and those who share their world-view understand.

For a universal and objective acknowledgement of art works, the formalists' approach to appreciation and criticism becomes apposite. The form of art and the aesthetic feelings generated through it should extend beyond the



through it should extend beyond the boundaries of ethnicity. The viewers must allow themselves to enjoy the visual beauty of art even when it does not have direct interpretative meanings

relating to their socio-cultural experience. This is why, for example, it is possible for a non-Nigerian to appreciate the intricate calligraphic pattern of the Uli paintings of Eastern Nigeria and on the other hand, for Africans to enjoy the non-figurative abstract-expressionism of twentieth century American art.

#### Art Content

For a robust understanding and appreciation of the arts, there must be a corresponding relationship between the form and the content of the artwork. Essentially, it is through the form that the contents could be derived. The content in this context refers to the intrinsic meanings attached to an artwork. This will involve the recording of symbols and the interpreting of the composition into meaningful experience.

The contentists otherwise called the expressivists are apostles of that concept of aesthetic based mainly on appreciation of the ascribed meanings of art. They strongly believe that the form is not sufficient to justify the basis for aesthetics. For them, the value of an artwork could be placed in the motives behind the forms i.e. the functional interpretation of the art forms. This writer for instance has held before that the content has a more imaginative and encompassing nature, hence, messages are concentrated in the subjective interpretations. Then we further claimed that various meanings might be ascribed to a symbol, form, colour and other elements of design depending on the

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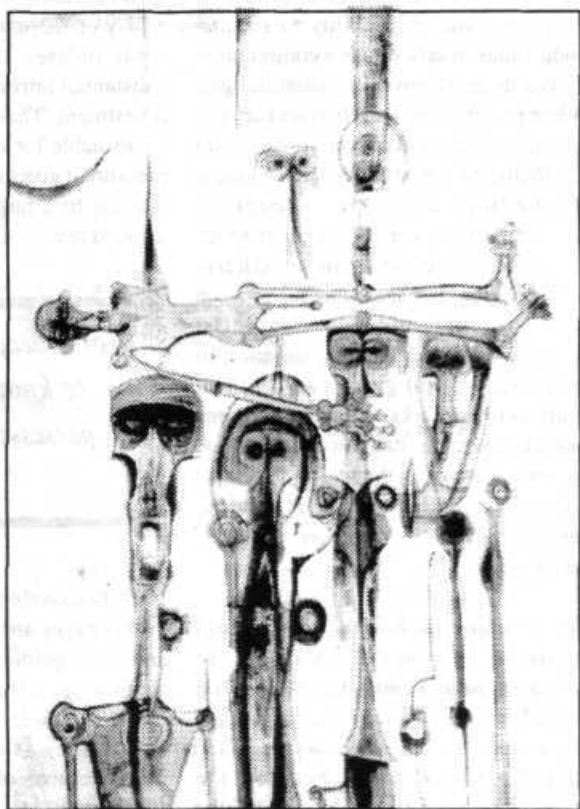
socio-cultural experience of the viewers. The viewers as a matter of fact, associate more meanings onto the artwork than even the artists intend.

The contentists' position on aesthetics becomes pertinent for art lovers since art is part of our universal experience. It is important to functionalize art not only as object of decoration, but also as a means of passing comments on culture, history, society and the environment of a people. Art becomes humane when we can relate it to our direct experience in life. The forms of the art goes long way in assisting the viewer to interpret meaningfully. The realism of Michelangelo's paintings at the Sistine Chapel ceiling in Rome gives the viewer a more profound understanding of the Bible, while the semi-realistic bronze works of Benin, Nigeria denotes the expressions of power in the royal palace of the Oba of Benin, no doubt.

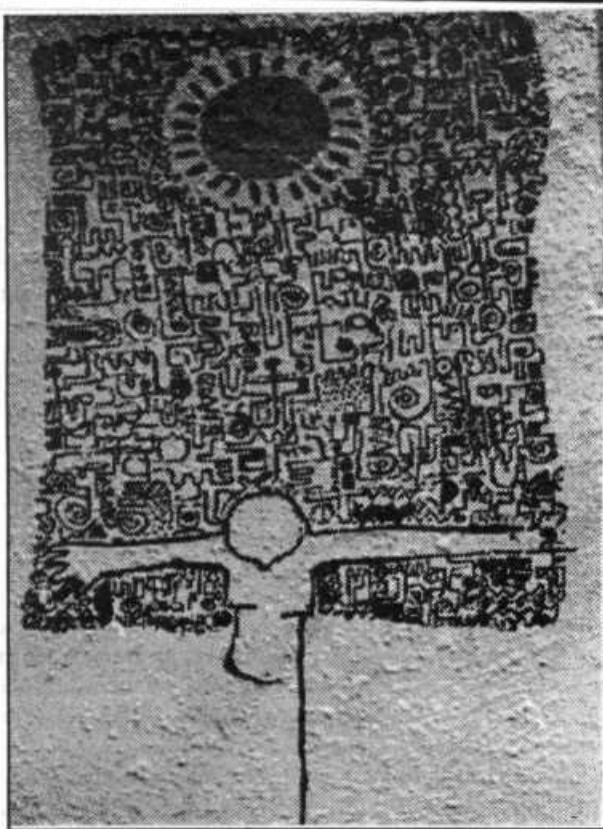
As an extension of direct depiction of content in art, the

American illustrationists of mid-twentieth century beat the Trompe'lieil artists to the expression of naked reality by using photo-realistic style in creating visual counterfeits in art. Prominent among such artists are Richard Estes, a painter and De Andrea, sculptor. Their artworks speak for themselves since they are direct simulations of natural things. The photo-realism of these illusionist artists finds aesthetic expression in what Feldman has termed 'trill of recognition,' i.e. the shocking life-likeness if the artworks more than the sensuousness of the form. When the artwork reminds the viewer of an experience or generates the feelings of familiarity with the subject-matter, we can say that he undergoes the so-called 'imaginative experience' through art.

#### Form and Content as Shared Experience.



Ibrahim El Salahi, *Funeral and Crescent*, 1963.



Victor Ekpuk, *Blue Messiah*, 1993

Feldman notes that 'aesthetic pleasure is the satisfaction experienced in employing to the full our innate capacities for perception.' The ability to see and understand an artwork as a complement makes us maximise our visual delight. When pictorial organisation and artistic technique are creatively controlled, and the theme of the artwork is not lost, a resounding aesthetic awareness envelopes the viewer. The position which is most objective in aesthetic considerations is that of a merger between the formalist and the contentist perceptions of beauty. The isolation of the two could still give us an unbiased analysis of artworks, but we must agree that when we simultaneously appreciate the sensuousness of the art form and also understand the historical and didactic functions, we derive fuller aesthetic feelings.

For example, although many could appreciate Jackson Pollock's series of abstract *Compositions* based only on formal analysis, the majority will derive more visual delight in viewing Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* because the strength of aesthetics lies in both the formal structure and the meaningful subject-matter. It was Feldman again

yardsticks for artistic evaluation which today cannot be jettisoned because of their revelation of art. For collectors of artworks, there is the wish to know that what pleases them also possesses substantial intrinsic value to justify the investment. That is, a work of art must be valuable for reasons other than the pleasure it gives us aesthetically. These reasons to a large extent assist in the upward review of interest in the works.

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The situational considerations discussed in this paper are durability, originality and the sociological, i.e. within the framework of time, age and origin.

*Durability* as a situational consideration is seen in terms of materials and also the fragility of the artwork. Although artworks are priceless possessions that should be handled with utmost care and

who captured the essence of form-content relationship when he observed that 'we study art not only to learn the facts about its existence, but also to learn the bearing which art has upon our existence.'

#### **Situational Considerations**

There are other less important

attention, some materials can still count to be more durable than others. The value attached to the possession of an artwork could be informed by the materials and technique used. An art connoisseur, despite his deep knowledge of the worth of an Ife terracotta will most likely place higher value on an Ife bronze head done within the same period and of the same stylistic treatment. The durability there will be on non-preference of the fragility of fired clay against the metal of bronze and not on how long terracotta and bronze work can last in terms of age.

In the same vein, an oil painting by Pablo Picasso will attract more value than a drawing by him; the reason being the relative durable nature of oil paints on canvas against pen on paper.

*Originality* refers to the authenticity of an artwork as a product of the artist that it is attributed to and not a forgery by a counterfeit artist. It also means the actual artwork as different from reductions through whatever means.

An original art piece will attract more value than a reproduction since we all have romantic sociological attachment with the real and actual products than

fakes. When copies of famous paintings such as Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* were discovered to be forgeries by other artists, the value earlier placed on them dropped drastically. One

begins to wonder why high premium was earlier placed on them when they were thought to be genuine and these same works suddenly turned ordinary just because the viewers now knew that they were fakes. This is not evaluation by reason but rather by situational conditions with deep influence from the sociological phenomena.

The same thing applies to the pricing and evaluation of prints. Once the artwork is considered to have been duplicated by whatever reproductive method, the unit price becomes cheaper and the value attached to it becomes reduced. The reason for this can only be explained from the psychological point of view that man is an ego seeking individual who thirsts after uniqueness to a selfish extent.

By *Sociological*, we mean certain conditions of life that affect human behaviour by virtue of their placement within time and space.

The *age* and *origin* of an artwork could go a long way in the determination of its value. This is why old and ancient art collections all over the world attract more value (at least in price) than contemporary ones. For example, ancient Benin bronzes and the traditional Yoruba carvings done ages ago are better priced and valued than replicas done by contemporary artists even when they compare favourably in technique and skill. The paintings of Giotto who is considered the father of the Renaissance despite all the proportional and compositional shortcomings are better valued than some unacknowledged artists of the period of high renaissance who certainly by progressive tradition, must have mastered anatomy and only fell short of becoming famous because artists like Michelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo Da Vinci displayed outstanding creative outburst. The reason for the preference of Giotto over the unclaimed sixteenth century artists could only be found in historical considerations not in aesthetic

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consideration. The time the artwork was done and its origin in terms of development of style are major situational and sociological considerations. The artwork of a successful and renowned artist will attract better attention and acceptance by many as of good standard (although if subject to aesthetic considerations might not be acceptable) just because it is signed by the famous artist. This is to say that the fame of the artist could be used in placing high value on his works outside the actual issue of aesthetic considerations. Many collectors today cannot give adequate account of the pleasure they derive in some of their possessions other than to boast about the famous names signed on their paintings.

In as much as these extra-aesthetic and situational considerations do not form the core of objective criteria for artistic evaluation, the sociological and eventual psychological make-belief that they manifest in determining value among connoisseurs, critics and art historians make it imperative for us to accept their influencing criteria for artistic criticism.

#### Endnote

Our main goal is to intellectualise the processes of critical judgement in art and therefore yield the maximum knowledge about the contents of the artworks. Since art criticism also assists

in the determination of quality, prestige and financial value of art, it then becomes valid that its practice should benefit readers and artists to realise better their sensations.

Objective evaluation of artworks will break the walls of biases that the viewers are using

to imprison their appreciative capabilities. When we allow ourselves the freedom to enjoy artworks without narrowing down our immediate socio-cultural experience, we derive much more pleasure in the universality of life.

Thus, the purpose of objective evaluation is to assist the viewers and the collectors in widening the range of their artistic experience and participation so that they can enjoy a wider variety of artworks and make reasonable selection when necessary.

It also creates a body of materials which ultimately constitutes standards that many artists might use in measuring their works. The 'set of standards' could be instrumental to the development of individuals' style and aesthetic preoccupation.

The two major areas of objective evaluation we have looked into are aesthetic consideration and situational considerations. While the first accounts for the structure and essence of art to our life, the other makes up for certain sociological reasons which cannot be divorced from art appreciation. The general intention is to approximate the tools, types and conditions of criticism into logical criteria of evaluation that when observed, could serve as objective methods of art appreciation. **GR**