

Reviving the African art and Culture Through Exploration of Indigenous Concepts in Painting

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Abstract

There is this impression made by the white (colonial masters) that the art and culture of the African man is fetish and primitive. This has culminated into driving the focus of the African artist towards the white man's art, idea, concept, theme and vision in a bid not to earn primitivity and be accepted allover the world thereby throwing the artist into colonial expressionistic bondage and as well relegating the African art and culture; making it unexhibitible and unacceptable outside our domain. This paper therefore, is focusing on adopting indigenous themes, ideas, vision, structure and mission in paintings to revive and promote the rich African art and culture particularly Nigeria that has sometime been relegated and lost in our pockets due to crave for colonial acceptance.

Keywords: Culture, African art, painting

Introduction

African art has gone a long way in terms of style, theme, aesthetic and structure like the art of other continent. Creative analysis in art is an everyday event as new styles, forms; media, procedure and idea are emerging alongside contemporary artists. African art is known beyond Africa due to its dynamism and uniqueness. Art is life, and the way of life of a people is embedded in the culture. The African art and culture must be reawakened, promoted, exhibited and revived through the exploration and rendition of indigenous forms, themes, styles, ideas and aesthetic on the painters' canvas or support.

The exploration of indigenous concepts in painting has since been an engaging issue in the mind of many contemporary artist. Although available art works (paintings) made by contemporary artists in Nigeria reveal such experimental trend for the sustenance of the rich artistic and cultural heritage of African especially Nigeria. Art is a living tradition in Africa. Contemporary African art derives its inspiration from traditional models but employs new techniques and materials (Shorter 1998).

Art and Culture Defined

Art and culture are crucial and inevitable terms. Although they have their different meaning but closely related and accompany each other. Art as a term is an activity of diverse definitions. Simply defined, art is an expression of the adversities and feelings of the people in relation to their environment. According to Banjoko (2000), art is the visual and non-visual arts representation of human though. The visual arts are the symbols of expressed language, the tools with which culture is analyzed.

Thus, it is the expressed non-verbal symbols of the cultural environment. The meaning of art is applicable to African art. That is, African art refers to art works produced by Africans reflecting African(indigenous) life, theme, style, form and ideas.

Culture, like art, it also wide in scope and content, culture is more elastic because it embraces every aspect of human life. Generally, culture is seen as a sum total of people's way of life, socially, religiously, politically, economically and morally.

Nkom (1992) posits, the identity of people, it provides the group that particular stamp that distinguishes them from other people, it expresses their uniqueness and existence. Taking a look at our society leads us realize that culture, for the African, is an indispensable tool. Cultural exposition and identification is manifested in the daily life of the people in the society. This is evident through the numerous art activities available in every Africa society. A society devoid of indigenous art practices cannot maintain its culture due to the presence of modernity where some things are disregarded and tagged "old fashion" or "primitive".

Painting and Exploration Defined

Painting as a two dimensional art form is highly expressive. It consists of the organization of ideas in terms of lines and colour upon any surface (Ngumah 2006). He further defines painting as the application or spreading of colours on any given surface to create an effect with the aid of brushes and painting or palette knife. The art of painting developed from the primitive cave decorations of prehistoric times to the highly sophisticated and varied processes used today.

Exploration on the other hand simply means experimentation. Experimentation of something or ideas, styles, themes and so on. Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines exploration as an examination of something in order to find out about it. It also means analyses-to analyze something.

Why Reviving the African Art and Culture

Currently, lack of complete documented rich and cherished art and cultural heritage – values, norms, attitude, aesthetics and tradition handed to us from our fore-fathers is what our society is faced with. We all know that cultural properties are good elements that nourish the growth of the society especially the Nigerian society. But it is unfortunate to know that the so called colonialism is Africa had adversely infected our people socially, economically, politically, religious, and culturally. No doubt, this same colonial infection was extended to the art of Africa - the concepts, ideas, styles forms of African art.

However, the white man's culture has interwoven and interrupted and relegated our art and culture. Prior to this time, the Africans had and were satisfied with their creative urges and abilities in terms of theme, idea, style, form and concepts. Therefore, the revival of the African art and culture can be possible and achievable through constant and further exploration of indigenous concepts, idea, style, form, theme and so on in paintings.

Exploration of Indigenous Concepts in Art Started in Nigeria

What exploration of indigenous concepts calls to mind is the experimentation on African (indigenous) ideas, styles, theme, life (culture), structure in painting to portray certain messages from within based on African background generally and Nigeria in particular. Before the advent of colonialism with its related tools, the Africans generally and Nigerians in particular had her novel

way of executing paintings. This form of painting were done on the walls – murals, posts and on the body “Uri”. Such paintings are characterized by African themes and styles.(Ngumah 2006).

During the colonial era, a new form of painting emerged in terms of styles, support and media. This new way of painting expression formalized in Nigeria in the early 1920s with the effort of Aina Onabolu who made art form an important aspect of the school curriculum. This new art experience was mainly focused on landscape and portraiture. This is why most of the foremost Nigerian artists – Aina Onabolu (pioneer)Akinola Lasekan, Ben Enwonwu, Ugorji among others were realistic or representational painters (Ngumah 2004).

The post-colonial era witnessed and produced notable painters with radicalization of African concepts, full of experimental zeal. Paintings reflect the socio-cultural matrix of the people rather than singing in praise the canon of the white man. This explosive urge gave rise for the “Nsukka school” whose focus is on “Uri” with Uche Okeke as the exponent. Bruce Onobrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo and a host of others were not out of the race for cultural experimentation and radicalization in painting (Ngumah 2004). The Awakening (Anyanwu) although sculpture by Ben Enwonwu has an indigenous background, the market scene by Akinola Lasekan, Agemo festival by Kolade Oshinowo and Ahwaire and Enemu by Bruce Onobrakpeya among others typified exploration and radicalization on African indigenous themes, ideas, styles and life.

Benefits In Exploring Indigenous Concepts In Painting

Exploring indigenous concepts in painting has no limitation on the artist horizon and vision, rather it opens the painters’ insight on the cultural practices of his people or the environment he finds himself in. Exploring on indigenous concepts like – Ezeship (Coronation), Aladima, Ikenga, marriage ceremony, fishing ponds, cultural dances, wrestling festivals, farming season, politics, religion, burnt shrine and others, definitely push us very close to our way of life and happening around our society. It will interest us (the artist) to know that paintings with indigenous concepts are prone to patronage, more especially – if idea is clear and unique.

In like manner, Ochigbo (2011) posits that the creation of cultural artistic designs and works in staggering proportion by our creative geni, both in the academia and cultural institutions have been able to open vistas to Nigeria’s culture and traditional indigenous values. There is no doubt saying that African art had been in global market, museums, galleries and other art and cultural institutions – clothed with indigenous style, form, beauty, idea and life thereby raising interest, awareness, attention and hope for the African art and culture. Ayaka (2004) posits that cultural survival can only be possible if sufficient interest is shown in the study of sources of our cultural heritage, which is implanted in arts and culture.

Conclusion

In concluding this paper, we should have observed from the beginning of this paper that African art and culture are widely known but was relegated and discarded during colonial embracement. The vision, quest and cultural urge of our founding fathers, there came a rebellious mission which led to the systematic liberation from the so called colonial expressionistic bondage.

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