

FEMALE ARTISTS AND THE QUEST FOR RECOGNITION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian woman in contemporary Nigerian art practice faces challenges that inhibit maximal achievement in innate talents and creative skills against the backdrop of gender insensitivity that has been an issue over the years. This article, therefore, seeks to add to the existing literature on the female artist's quest for recognition in Nigeria and Africa. The article highlights some of the negative phenomena that still militating against the female artists and, most importantly, the various efforts women have made to gain recognition in a society where art business seems male-dominated.

Keywords: Contemporary, Gender, insensitivity, militating female

INTRODUCTION

A great deal has been written about women in contemporary Nigerian art practice, especially in the face of gender insensitivity that affects them and their prospects. This article seeks to add to the quantum of extant literature by highlighting some of the negative phenomena that still militate against the female artists and, most importantly, the various efforts women have made and continue to make in a bid to be recognised in a patriarchal society where the art business generally seems to favour men over women. While acknowledging the many successes recorded by women in modern art practice in Nigeria, this articles cautions against glossing over the problems of gender. In fact, various studies such as Bulus (1994), Adesanya (1997), Nzegwu (2000), Omoighe (2004), Ononeme (2004), Idiong (2004), Filani (2004), Jacob (2004), and Aniakor (2004) have been undertaken on this subject. Their common view seems to rest on a critical examination of female marginalisation in addition to stock-taking of their presence in the visual art from a historical perspective.

The modern Nigeria art practice over the years has generally witnessed a celebration of the male artists over their female counterparts. In consequence, there has been a form of class distinction between these two gender identities

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in the art practice. It appears that the male artists gain more recognition and relevance in the society than their female counterparts. The non-recognition or lack of attention paid to the female artists has resulted in more values often times being placed on the creativity of the men than on those of women. As a result, some of them lose courage and confidence. Moreover, the favouritism accorded to the male artists has made their female counterparts appear as though they lacked rigour, dedication and sophistication in such artistic endeavours when the contrary was true. A number of social factors have contributed to this trend in Nigerian modern art practice. In particular, the following stand out: The belief systems, marriages, patronage and marginalisation. This paper delineates these issues thusly.

BELIEF SYSTEMS

A re-examination of visual art practice in Nigeria from traditional period to the modern era shows that male artists have been dominating their female counterparts. According to Akatakpo and Ubani (2004:183), "women have participated in both traditional and contemporary development of art in Nigeria but this involvement has not been published as it has been for their male counterparts". In addition, Adesanya (1997) contends that from the sculptural traditions of Nigeria, namely Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, Tsoede and Benin, there is little or no evidence to suggest that the female folk were the artists. However, the assumption that male artists are generally more active in modern art practice partly stems from the shadows of some of our cultural belief systems and inhibitions.

These belief systems have had a negative impact on women in traditional art due to some restrictions placed on them when it comes to practising certain forms of art. Ottenberg (1983) affirms that traditional women do not take part in woodwork, as women throughout Africa were not allowed to carve wood. As a result, some traditions in the eastern and western parts of Nigeria attached superiority of or the exclusive right for men to practise sculpture (wood-carving and metal smith-ing). In these societies, the women were as a result only allowed to practise minor and utilitarian crafts such as cloth weaving and dyeing, basket weaving, pottery, body and wall decorations. This practice of restricting traditional women to particular aspects of art has been attributable to the pronouncements of the gods, which are believed to be custodians of creative practices. In fact, in a traditional society, women are known as the weaker sex (Ikpakronyi, 2004:9) under patriarchal norms and values.

This belief that women are the weaker sex in such patriarchal traditional societies has prompted many women to shy away from specialising in jobs traditionally reserved for men. Subsequently, in modern Nigerian art practice, women rarely practice sculpture (clay and cement modelling, wood-carving and metal crafting) that are essentially the preserve of men in a typical traditional setting. The basic assumption is that women cannot withstand the nature of the materials and rigorous techniques involved. Bulus (1994:25)

contends that women may not be allowed to do certain types of jobs because of these patriarchy-engendered beliefs. He further asserts that there might be occasions when they may be unfit to perform certain works. Nonetheless, they end up being denied opportunities to exhibit their creative potentials for societal recognition in situations where women in modern art are not encouraged or allowed to participate in sculpture or other forms of art because of some traditional beliefs.

MARRIAGE

Marriage in many an African context, according to Nzegwu (1994:84), is practised in such a way that married female artists are evaluated by what Ottenberg calls “domestic-feminine standard”, since they lack time and dedication to pursue a career in art. In recognition of marital demands on Nigerian female artists, Idiong (2004:170) proffers that only a few women stay on in art practice after marriage because many of them fail to cope with both the pressure or enormous demands from their marriages and the rigours of their craft.

In his analysis of the setback marriage creates for modern women artists, Ottenberg, according to Nzegwu, used Ada Udechukwu as an example of one of the contemporary female artists who abandoned her graduate programme because of marital demands (Nzegwu, 1994: 84). Implicitly, marriage does not seem to favour some women in contemporary art. First, it has curtailed their ability to commit themselves to their profession and aspire to the zenith of their career. Secondly, marriage has discouraged many women who would otherwise have created an impact on modern art practice. In fact, those women artists who have made it tend to make ‘painful’ sacrifices in their marriage for them to continue working and prosper in the industry.

PATRONAGE

Patronage plays a vital role in art. In Nigeria, patronage has yet to favour the female artists as much as it does their male counterparts in creativity primarily because it has not given women tangible rewards for their modern art. As a result, the little harvest for their labour has created an erroneous impression of weakness and lack of sophistication in their artistic production.

Patronage has also not encouraged female artists in popularising their artistic ingenuity. In fact, it has not provided them with the material wealth with which to face the challenges of the modern times. The most unsatisfactory damage caused by patronage to female artists is that some of them have lost their integrity, aims and objectives of their creativity because they have failed to make what the Nigerian society calls the “right connection”. Indeed, this development has not created an enabling environment for the majority of them to excel in their career as artists. In particular, Odo (1993:17) indicts the patron for using his economic independence for “pomposity” and “vulgarity”.

However, one also finds a situation where a patron acquires works from a female artist but payment becomes a problem. When the female artist visits the patron, she is either sexually abused before she is eventually paid for her toils or she will be confronted by an attendant or secretary who rudely states that the patron left no message for her.

On the other hand, art patrons (males) usually want to be petted or romanced by the female artists before they buy their works. Sometimes, such patrons acquire art works done by male artists and ask female artists to re-copy them. Reasons adduced for this unfavourable attitude include the art works produced by male artists being more unique than those of their female counterparts in terms of the underlying concept. Secondly, they claim that female art works lack the market quality required—in other words, they are not up to the required marketability standard. These unhealthy practices do not only deflate innovation and creativity amongst female artists but also demotivate them. Furthermore, they also betray the trust they have in art patrons.

MARGINALISATION

In her article, Nkiru Nzegwu (2000:63) argues that “masculinity” and “sexist” curators often marginalise female artists in their “male privileging” and “female effacing” ideology. Also, a critical look at the evaluation and appreciation of art by connoisseurs shows that male artists usually get more consideration than their female counterparts. Perhaps, the reason for this attitude is what Aniakor (2004:157) calls “gender meekness associated with [the] female image in Africa”. This negative trend has inevitably impaired the appreciation of the contributions of women to modern art.

Though Nigerian Cultural Policy of 1985, according to Omoighe (2004:178) has good intentions, it largely exists on paper as it has yet to be actualised. Omoighe does not mention some of these well-intentioned policy issues. Nevertheless, the lack of proper implementation of this cultural policy has encouraged or accentuated discrimination against women in the visual arts and other professions. Women artists—in particular—have not been given equal opportunity as the men in Nigeria as is the case in civilised nations. In essence, they are less favoured and recognised in art practice. The belief that the male artists through their art works project our national and corporate image more than the female artists is still engrained in our character. In other words, the society is largely male gender specific in their approach to art. In consequence, the female artists remain largely an appendage to their male counterparts.

In essence, women artists continue contending with seemingly intractable challenges of their profession in modern times. In schools, especially tertiary institutions, you will find more male art lecturers with only a handful of their female counterparts. In this regard, the personal experience of the writer, as a

female lecturer in a university, has been quite revealing because it has been a tradition for male art lecturers always to outnumber their female counterparts. Could this 'be by design? How do we remedy the situation? This marginalisation again places the female artists' creative integrity and endeavour in jeopardy and makes them appear like hustlers, or confrontational, when they agitate to be heard in an environment dominated by men.

Similarly, the number of male visual art students is always more than that of the female in almost all institutions of higher learning in Nigeria that offer visual arts. Omoighe (ibid: 179) attributes this imbalance not to lack of ability but to lack of encouragement of the female gender due to the modern value system that remains patriarchal in nature. As a result, far more male than female artists graduate each year from these institutions. One can contend that this reality on the ground contributes to the presence of far few female artists in modern art practice in Nigeria relative to their male counterparts.

Female art students also face marginalisation during the allocation of areas of specialisation. They are usually allocated areas socially believed to be less strenuous, less stressful and less energy-sapping. These areas that are usually reserved for women include textiles, ceramics and occasionally graphics. Because of this gender-bias, there are inevitably more males in sculpture and, subsequently, far fewer female graduate sculptors. Ononeme's (2004:198) observations support this view. As a result, female sculptors are very few on the Nigerian art scene. Ononeme also mentions few notable female sculptors in Nigeria today to include Ndidi Dike, Princess Olowu, Veronica Otigbo, Emily Nelson, and Kehinde Oke.

These inhibiting social factors that seem to have placed the male artists on a pedestal and have hindered the female artists' efforts to gain the much needed recognition notwithstanding, there are dynamic and vital attempts by female artists to register a vibrant presence in modern Nigeria art practice to counter and check this trend. Such commendable efforts include holding regular art exhibitions, exploiting various media (including those considered preserves of males) and stylistic possibilities, and publishing as well as formation of female art groups.

REGULAR ART EXHIBITION

Consequently, women in modern art no longer have to contend with inferiority complex or withdrawn whenever there is an opportunity for them to showcase their creative potentials. This change is attributable to the general rise of consciousness among women to challenge the status quo and strongholds of male dominance in art exhibition over the years. Indeed, many female artists have in recent years been participating in both Solo and group exhibitions alongside their male counterparts. In fact, Idiong (op.cit:170) asserts that women artists in Nigeria have undergone a metamorphosis and now

participate in art with men. The art works women in modern art usually exhibit also tell great stories about their creative ingenuity. Hence, women artists have used exhibitions not only to showcase their pride in the nation's artistic culture but also to gain recognition in an age where art works produced by men are more appreciated than those of their female counterparts. However, art exhibitions by women artists have illustrated, in part, the variety of attitudes, approaches and trends, which have warranted their recognition.

In effect, one can rightly contend that their sustained art exhibitions in modern art has allowed women artist to embolden their foothold and achieve a lot in their resolve to gain the recognition they deserve thusly:

1. Continued staging of art exhibitions has enabled women in art to constitute a visual inspiration, which has motivated many of them to aspire for scaling greater artistic heights and have, consequently, attracted both national and international recognition.
2. Such presence on the artistic scene has made them pull the required resources to propagate the message of self-reliance, self-sufficiency and empowerment essential for recognition.
3. These platforms have provided an avenue for women to demonstrate their resolve towards moving Nigerian modern art forward in addition to correcting the gender imbalance, misrepresentation, which in part has hindered their recognition in modern art business. Simply put, the women artists are demonstrating that they are a mainstay on the modern Nigerian art scene.

APPROACH TO MEDIA AND STYLISTIC POSSIBILITIES

In modern Nigerian art practices, certain art materials are still regarded as male preserves. These art materials include wood, metal, cement, glass, mat and resin, etc. As the materials seem difficult to manipulate, they require persons with good technical skills and physical strength. Thus male artists appear more predisposed to manipulate them than their female counterparts. However, female artists have broken the jinx and reduced this widespread belief to a myth. This is because many female artists have professionally demonstrated great skills or ingenuity in the use of these materials in various stylistic ways. In recognition of these exploits by modern female artists, Filani (2004: 151) affirms that the dynamism and vitality female artists have demonstrated equal that of their male counterparts in terms of stylistic possibilities, media variety, thematic depth and technical virtuosity. Moreover, in appreciating the efforts made by modern artists so far, the Nigerian society with bewilderment has also beheld them for their progress in the visual arts. They have also used this act of courageousness in the stylistic use of different media to initiate more vibrant female presence in modern Nigerian art practice.

Furthermore, many Nigerian female artists are worthy of note in this discussion, but the writer will mention just a few here for illustrative purposes. These exemplary Nigerian female artists include Sokari Douglas Camp, Princess Olowu, Ndidi Dike, Veronica Otigbo, Chinyere Onyemaobi, Emily Nelson and Flora Ilonzo. Notably, Emily Nelson was the best over-all HND graduating students of her time at the Yaba College of Technology despite majoring in Sculpture, ironically which is supposed to be a male preserve in a traditional society dominated by patriarchy. Recently, she was also one of the best over-all graduating students at the University of Benin where she studied sculpture at the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) level. She has actually distinguished herself and helped to question some of the long-held beliefs about female artists and their dealing with certain art media. Thus, more female artists should take the bull by its horn and venture into those hitherto no-go areas of art that are more or less seemingly the preserve of the male artist. Who says women cannot cope? Emily and others exemplify courage, determination and the will to succeed in hitherto seemingly male domains.

In as much as these female artists have excelled in the use of different media, their approach to style is in no doubt worthy of mention. Each of them has exhibited distinct styles in visual arts which have projected feminist ideologies. These ideologies include gender equality and recognition in visual art concerns.

PUBLICATIONS OF BOOKS AND JOURNALS

Female artists in academia or academics with literary inclination have published extensively on modern Nigeria art. A lot of these publications are in peer-reviewed and reputable journals and books, which have highlighted the efforts of women in art. As such, there is an overwhelming need for the Nigerian society to appreciate their numerous contributions. This positive mark has been noticed as these brilliant articles in journals and the books they have written or contributed to underscore the untiring efforts of women in art. As a result, they are now exceptionally recognised even much more than their male counterparts. Nonetheless, there is a need for the society to keep recognising women in art for their studio practice and literary works. After all, the recognition of female artists and women in general in the process of developing the country and the current efforts of positioning them for action are positive features that should be encouraged, embraced and pursued (Buhari, 2004: 173).

It is not the intention of the writer to make a roll call of female artists who have used their literary works in projecting modern Nigerian art, especially the image of their colleagues, but there is a need to mention just a few because of their outstanding qualities. They include Patricia Oyelola who holds a doctorate in African Art History (Ibadan); Stella Idiong, a PhD holder in Art Education; Kaego Okeke who holds an MFA; Ronke Adesanya who has a doctorate in African Art History; Peju Layiwola who also holds a PhD in African

Art History; Nkiru Nzegwu, a professor of Philosophy, Interpretation and Culture; and Bridget Nwanze of University of Port Harcourt, who is a painter and a PhD holder in African Art. Some of these women are not active in studio practice; however, their literary works on modern Nigerian art have placed female artists above board to be recognised in an area of modernism. These include Patricia Oyelola and Nkiru Nzegwu.

FORMATION OF FEMALE ART GROUPS

Women in modern Nigerian art have challenged themselves in fostering gender issues, especially equal rights and opportunities for men and women by forming female art groups. Feminist opinions are expressed through these art groups, which most importantly have led to the breaking down of barriers that seem to have made the male artists more recognised than their female counterparts in the modern art business. In fact, a critical look at some of the activities of female art groups in Nigeria shows that the presence of female artists is being consolidated. Some of these female art groups include Kinesis in Zaria formed in 1998 under the leadership of Adele Garkida and Nigerian Association of Female Artists (NAFA), which emerged on 28th February 2002 in Abuja under the leadership of Dr. Mrs. Bridget Nwanze.

More significantly, governmental and non-governmental organisations have increasingly recognised and identified with these female arts groups through exhibitions and other scholarly meetings. Ikpakronyi (op. cit.: 7) reports that Kinesis organises conferences/exhibitions through which they explore the meaning of a chosen theme using the art and science link. Similarly, NAFA has held several exhibitions of art works of members with the assistance of the National Gallery of Art. In 2002, for example, the National Gallery of Art in collaboration with the association packaged “Creative Femininity”. A closer observation of the catalogued works mounted in the exhibition reveals the growth and achievements of Nigeria female artists in their attempt to gain recognition. The works also show a build-up of a comprehensive compendium of Nigerian Female Visual Artists (Ikpakronyi, op. cit.: 9). Another exhibition that was held in Port Harcourt in 2004 by NAFA was entitled “Progressive Feminism” subjected the group to the much-desired exposure and recognition Nigerian women in art crave and deserve locally and internationally.

Today, one will rightly say that Nigerian women in art have used their art groups to become more active in Nigerian modern art practice. The activities of these art groups have in no small measure exposed their creative potentials to the public. As a result, their various exploits in the visual arts have entered the public domain and have become public knowledge, hence helping them to gain even more recognition. In other words, their activities do not only attract public attention but also portrays their resourcefulness in design, determination to march to a greater future, individual perception of the cultural environment, and an endeavour to enhance the dignity of female visual artists like their male counterparts. The achievements of female art groups,

especially in art exhibition underscores the allegation against Nigerian female artists that as season come and go so do women in art profession (Idiong, op. cit.: 167). Generally, Nigerian female artists serve as role models both at the individual and group levels. One only hopes that all these efforts are sustainable to ensure the gains women artists have registered in Nigeria will be augmented rather than eroded.

CONCLUSION

The attempts by female artists to gain recognition in modern art practice in Nigeria epitomise tremendous success because some of the social factors that challenge the identity and career prospects of the Nigerian women artists are being abolished. Secondly, the problem of male dominance in the profession is gradually being checked as the gap is no longer as wide as it used to be. Thirdly, there is positive impact of the various strategies women have adopted in promoting their art as analysed in this work to check this ugly trend. However, to make even further progress, Nigerian women artists should always project some of what the writer has tagged “Ideals of humanity and the art profession”. These include an adoption of new creative manner, always experimenting with different media, and remaining focused in their creative endeavours without slacking. Perhaps, an effective and systematic handling of these challenges, as they come, would easily pave the way to quicker and more balanced representation and recognition of Nigerian women artists in modern Nigerian art.

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