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AN ASSESSMENT OF NATURE IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART

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Introduction

Historically, man has been identified as a painter as early as 25,000 BC. His first pictures were of animals, (Nature.com, 2013). Despite this, it is remarkable that nature as a subject is largely being overlooked. Nature in the arts reflects in an exciting diversity of works that have been produced by artists throughout the centuries. Leica (2015,) proffers that humans created art of some sorts since the beginning of their existence, and have always drawn inspiration from nature in some way, shape or form. As cavemen, drawings of animals were made on walls to make artistic statement about the conservation of the earth.

Todd (2013,) relates that art has long been associated with nature, from the cave paintings found in Christo. An artist's interpretation of nature heightens the bond of connection and creates an unspoken, ineffable resonance with the viewers. Artists try to distill the essence of their own emotional response, and the tools they use are light, colour and mood. Oftentimes when we think about nature, there is an ambiance that lingers in our memory. The aesthetics of nature is multi-dimensional and multi-sensual and part of being human is having a conscious awareness of the beauty in nature. Artists are important interpreters and translators. The depiction of an ideal and perfect nature has long filtered into the 20th and 21st centuries. One can observe dramatic shifts in attitudes toward nature. Also, at the beginning of the 20th-century, artists appeared to be questioning academic art for its lack of freedom and flirted with so many isms: secessionism, fauvism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, constructivism, Dadaism, and surrealism. Among these isms, nature showed to be the creative energy that loomed in them. Nature and the built environment present diverse themes for artistic expression, and these have been the concern of artists throughout the ages.

Nature

Nature in the broadest sense is equivalent to the natural world, physical universe, material world or material universe. Nature refers to the phenomena of the physical world and to life in general. McArdle (2019), relates that creative exploration from nature in art can take endless forms, because nature provides us with such a vast wealth of inspiring phenomena to work with. Nature is all around us and deep within us. We are inseparable from it and artworks based on nature take many forms and serve many purposes because nature is an immense topic that encompasses so many things. Nature study provides endless list of topics and subtopics that may appear in related

artwork. Flowers, plants, trees, animals, cells, bodily systems, weather, geology, matter, energy, fossils, water, fire, environment, conservation, evolution, birth, growth, aging, decay, change and culture etc. So if an artist wants to create a work of art based on the theme of nature, the artist has a whole lot of ideas to work with.

These ideas take many metaphoric, visual forms from photorealism to abstraction. Elaine (2010) asserts, man and his relation to nature was perhaps the first theme to appear in art. This evidence is in France's famous Lascaux Caves, of 15000 BC, containing nearly, 2,000 figures grouped into three main categories; animals, human figures and symbols that are considered prehistoric observations of nature. In one way or another nature for centuries has remained the preferential theme of creative art. Brady, (2013) explains that, nature has also been a source of joy and pleasure, as well as of fear and mystery when it is given the form of earth as life's foundation; nature expresses truth and honesty though somehow being endangered by technological advancement.

In addition, with the passage of time, man's relationship with nature has been marked with creative essence in art. The concept of nature entertained by the various human communities has determined this relationship while reinforcing or transforming it. Primitive man made use of the natural elements; Baroque artists as Poussin in Elaine (2010), perceived a harmonious ideal in nature that works of art were expected to render, irrespective of incidental and temporal peculiarities. Burchfield (2010) views nature as a living wonder of endless variety and magic. For Rothko, nature represented the power of ritual that art can interpret through images and symbols (Elaine, 2010).

Nature in Visual Art

Nature in visual art becomes significant when we make an active connection with it. Like a canvas in a gallery, a landscape or aspect of the natural comes to life in the eyes of the people who look at it. The act of observation in nature and not as a virtual experience brings about a very different experience that is capable of sometimes posing questions. In return, the observer confers meaning on the works of nature and artists. Contemporary artists have increasingly thematised the threat to and human intervention in nature. This understanding of nature has, however, been observed as culturally constructed and the product of political ideologies. Nature, according to Zamora and Leao (2017), offers a multi-sensory experience and we have an everyday emotional relationship with it.

Undeniably, nature even today offers artists refuge and guidance. Brinckerhoff, in Maja and Reuben (2016), stipulate that artistic representation of nature is closely linked with the social perception of the natural world. They believe that there is a two-way process, society draws its ideas about how to view and experience nature from the conventions of visual culture, while at the same time artists reflect and react to current societal attitudes to the environment. There is a long tradition of viewing art as a mirror of nature, but what should be also recognized is the reciprocal practice of aesthetically appreciating nature in terms of art. In other words, when admiring a natural landscape, we apply the same aesthetic conventions we use for appreciating a work of art. We usually go into the country and discover beautiful views, while always remembering the criteria of landscape beauty as established by critics and artists.

Nature as a subject matter in contemporary art, according to Maja et al (2016), acts as an ecological key, while correspondingly artists contribute to a progressive shift in how we relate and envision nature. Despite the modernist principle of art-for-art's-sake, there is a clear interconnection between artistic vision and society's experience of nature in terms of alienation, separation and

distance. Suzi (1998,) stresses the interdependence of separation from nature and framing as a way of perceiving.

When we look at works of art, we think about things we have seen, heard, or experienced from our natural surroundings. Art is rarely created in a vacuum. Artists constantly reference the past built on timeless themes, outdated models, forgotten histories, or traditional methods and techniques to realize new ideas. Understanding historical precedents therefore, is an important part of providing context and informing our experiences with art. Since images were first painted in caves, artists have continued to challenge the notions of what art is and how it can be made.

Conceptually paralleling Plato's ideas, Michelangelo, believed that the image the artists produce must come from the idea in the artists mind. The idea then is the reality that the artists' genius has to bring forth. Artists are not however, the creators of the ideas they conceive. Rather they find their ideas in the natural world, reflecting the absolute idea, which, for the artist, is beauty. Contemporary visual art in Nigeria and the place of nature cannot be complete without referring to the instrumental figures who, through their solo efforts, brought Nigerian modern art into the world of art history. History reveals that contemporary Nigerian art started with Aina Onabolu (1881-1963). Onabolu did not only start the art of drawing and painting but also fought single handedly to put art in the school curriculum in 1927. Onabolu is revealed to have consciously gone into art of figure drawing and painting to prove and disabuse the minds of the then Europeans. What happened later was the discovery of other talented indigenous artists who did not only continue from Onabolu but also made their distinct landmarks in the propagation of visual art. Such notable artists include Akinola Lasekan (1921-1972), Justus Akeredolu (1915-1984), Ben Enwonwu (1921-1994), Etsu Ngbodaga and others. They are believed to have started the first decade of contemporary Nigeria art practice; having a common flair for nature in their art works (Egonwa, 2001).

The year 1950 marked the beginning of the second decade of contemporary Nigerian art led by Ben Enwonwu. These groups of artists were commissioned to execute art works more in keeping with naturalistic mode of representation that was made popular in the first decade. Nevertheless, in satisfying their clients they enveloped their own ideas and concepts in various forms of stylizations, abstracts of naturalistic inspired ideas into the different forms of their art. The leading exponent was Ben Enwonwu. They expressed themselves through painting, sculpture, ceramics, graphics and textiles. They employed modern conventional styles to reflect on their own training to synthesize and execute a truly contemporary Nigerian visual form of art, derived from Nigerian cultural milieu. The works were individualistic rather than ethnic in style or form. They were laden with inherent meanings drawn from within traditional ideologies. These ideas with naturalistic tendencies by artists of the second decade are being extended and used in various ways by today's young contemporary Nigerian artists.

Egonwa, shows that artists of the third decade are best described as experimentalists, experimenting with natural visual imagery that was derived from tradition. The idea of "Natural Synthesis" initiated by the artists of previous decades is being popularized in the Zaria School of Art, improving on the development of a truly contemporary Nigerian form of art, based on its cultural and natural environment. Among the third decade's leading artists is Bruce Onobrakpeya who is known for his unique utilization of nature in the practice of contemporary printmaking. He has not only developed new art forms inspired from nature but has brought about new terminologies, which have been accepted for inclusion in the contemporary dictionary of art.

It is argued that Enwonwu's spirit of synthesis became the compass upon which the Zarianist members based their popular theory of "Natural Synthesis". These artists influenced other followers and students who have some common and unique characteristics, which reflect in their individual works which for decades dictated the trends in Nigerian contemporary art. Their ideologies according to Filani (1998) were carried to other formal schools or workshops to create a vibrant artistic revolution.

Unseen Art Scene (2009), a situation report on Nigeria from 1950–2004, gives a comprehensive analysis of nature in contemporary visual art in Nigerian including a glimpse of the prevalent stone carvings, potteries, different forms of glass work and wood carvings. The bronze works at Igbo-Ukwu in Enugu State stand tall as some of the magnificent ancient works of Nigerian art. Famous places like Benin and Awka are regarded as hubs of woodcarving. Wood carvers flourished in these areas, making figures for temples. Some of the figures include representations of the spiritual image of nature earth, sea, sky, water, fire and thunder. Pottery received a great boost with the tireless effort of Dr. Ladi Kwali, who promoted her works in European countries, which widely enhanced the art of pottery making in Nigeria. Aronson, (2012) observes that another prominent craft of Nigeria is cloth weaving, which represents varied aspects of Nigerian life style.

Some Contemporary Nigeria Artists Inspired by Nature

Nigeria has a long history of visual arts stemming from its many ethnic groups, each with its own traditions. In the years leading up to and after independence, Nigerian artists rebelled against British colonization by incorporating African naturalistic elements into their work.

Oloidi (2011), affirms the reactions of Onabolu to the notion that the African cannot produce or appreciate art like the white people, which made him an advocate of naturalism. This, coupled with the exposure of Nigerians to European painting styles, influenced the naturalism observed in early works of modern Nigerian art. He also observes how Akinola Lasekan had distinguished himself by 1940 as a self-taught nature painter. Close study of the earlier contemporary Nigerian artists show a great preference for naturalistic depiction of nature. This seems to have been the case from pre-independence till date

Kelly and Stanley (1993), observe that Eke Okaybulu (1916-1958) was a master draughtsman whose works displayed a very high level of skill at naturalism. The lines, achieved with the pen drawing, are well calculated and ordered with a lot of patience and discipline. The perspective and depiction of nature, conveying the feeling of wide open space, is remarkable.

Ulli Beier, an ethnographer and a key player in the history of the development of art in pre and post-independent Nigeria gives a little picture of art in pre-independent Nigeria. Beier (1960) reveals that Ben Enwonwu's paintings were naturalistic, smoothly executed in rich colours and love for nature. "Jungle Landscape" is filled with fresh vegetation, and trees that suggest some imagination especially in the foreground. "Cotton Trees" is more akin at showing us the mightiness of the trees by allowing us to compare the trees with humans.

Classification of Contemporary Art Schools in Nigeria

Contemporary Nigerian artists are classified along the school from which they graduated. There are cases of few artists having distinct styles or deviating from the usual school styles. Studies show that a large number of contemporary artists in practice are the 1980s to 1990s graduates of various formal art schools in Nigeria. The term "school" is also used to describe the philosophy, styles, themes and forms that are peculiarly distinguishing of these schools. The schools that have

distinguished themselves with some nature-inspired characteristics include Zaria School. The works are characterized by elongation of forms, elegant northern architecture, human figures and northern grassland landscapes. Yaba School employs realistic art forms that are done in narrative, and descriptive style mostly in accurate photographic realism. Nsukka School explores the calligraphic nature of Uli body painting art form as espoused by Uche Okeke. It intensifies the search for Igbo-identity, using the Uli linear forms to depict radical socio-political and cultural subject matters (Adenaike, 1982). Ife School is noted with cultural inspiration drawn from the Ife location. It explores the diversity of creativity in the use of local materials, symbols and images, which developed into the exploration of Yoruba traditional symbols, motifs, structure and concepts termed "Ona". Yusuf Grillo, a very influential figure at Yaba, took over headship of the department in 1961 (after further studies in Zaria) and remained there until his retirement in 1987. He taught his students to draw and paint in strict naturalistic manner (in line with the Western academy-style curriculum in place at Yaba), allowing them some measure of freedom only during the last year of their training. "Move from the known to the unknown" became the slogan that entrenched objective or nature drawings, paintings and sculptures at Yaba. Auchi Art School is noted for its expressionism and the use of vibrant colours.

The Informal Schools and their Artists

These are art locations where artists are informally trained without following the rigid rules of the formal art syllabus. The training is acquired through apprenticeship system or workshop experience. Within the informal school, some of the artists do not obey the rules of accurate proportion, and perspective. Mbari Mbayo-Oshogbo and Ori-Olokun-Ife schools explored the workshop system. Their contribution to contemporary art in Nigeria is their deviation from the known Western style realistic form. Their art forms are original, spontaneous and naively created with utter disregard for depth, space or any expected relationship of motif. Their themes are most times derived from folktales, myths and religious stories. Adepegba (1995) observes that, "they hardly follow the cannon of verisimilitude which is common with Western Art".

Demas Nwoko (born 1935) is a Nigerian artist, protean designer and architect. As an artist, he strives to incorporate nature into his architecture and stage design to enunciate the naturalistic African subject matters in most of his works. He sees design as an ingenuous activity that carries with it a focus on social responsibility for positive influences in the environment and culture of the society. A lot of his early sculptures and paintings can be described as works that project naturalistic knowledge. His terracotta's are designs that extend and express the art forms of ancient Nok. Demas, while in the ancient city of Ibadan, was short on cash to build or buy a house and studio for his work so he decided to build his studio and house from traditional methods to complement his cash shortage. He used clay and laterite found around the site chosen and built a brick house and studio. His inventiveness in using modern and natural techniques for selected and protean African art works led to his fame.

Nnenna Okore's, art is inspired by the use of found objects, and by close attention to natural textures and forms. Using basic materials such as clay, newspaper, wax and rope, her tactile and highly evocative sculptures take on dramatic and unanticipated forms. Her work celebrates the transformation of discarded materials into cultural objects and spaces and brings a critical focus to bear on the consumption and recycling cultures in parts of Nigeria. She applies various labor-intensive and naturalistic techniques, like weaving, twisting, sewing, dyeing, waxing and rolling, learned by her watching villagers performing everyday tasks. These processes accentuate colours, textures and other visceral qualities of her sculptures. Currently she is working with shapes that explore and are inspired by intimate spaces, shelters, architectural and natural environments.

Some famous Western artists and artworks inspired by nature

The British Museum has an extensive collection of artworks covering a 1500-year time period, representing over 60 countries and cultures, devoted to nature. In addition to their permanent collection, they have special exhibitions as well as classes and events for adults and children. In these hyperrealism and digital times, it is easy to forget, and even resist susceptibility to natural forces. Art can help us become more conscious of our true relationship with nature. It is undoubtedly important to feel a connection to the natural world vital to our survival.

Van Gogh: "Iris," oil on canvas, 1889, Van Gogh wasn't famous during his lifetime, but he was way ahead of his time. He made simple things like flowers have a life of their own on his canvases, with irises in particular being a striking painting of life and air. One can feel the flowers breathing in this work.

Paul Cézanne, the Large Bathers (1898-1906): the artwork is described and analysed as a fine example of Cézanne's exploration of the theme of the modern, heroic nude within a natural setting. The series of nudes are arranged into a variety of positions, like objects in a still life, under the pointed arch formed by the intersection of trees and the sky. Cézanne was attempting a departure from the Impressionist motifs of light and natural effect and instead composed this scene as a series of carefully constructed figures, as if creating sculpture with his paintbrush. He was more concerned with the way the forms occupied space than with recording his visual observations.

Claude Monet: "Water Lilies," 1919: one of the most famous nature painting series is Monet's water lilies, which is a gentle play of light, water, and shadow. These were a series of nearly 250 oil paintings that depict the Impressionist artist's flower garden in Giverny, France. They were the main focus of his work during the last 30 years of his life. What is most inspiring about them is how they show nature as fleeting, always changing and transforming. Colours and light move in ways that can never fully be captured. Monet's work, "Impression Sunrise" (1873) shows a loose handling of paint. His focus on light and atmosphere within the landscape scene is a key characteristic of Impressionism, which is widely considered the first fully modern movement. Monet's use of abstraction evokes what the artist sensed or experienced while painting the scene, which was a highly unusual approach for a painter to adopt at the time. The title of the work, Impression Sunrise, not only provided critics with the name that the movement would later receive, but also conveys the transitory, fleeting and subjective nature of the painting.

Georgia O'Keeffe: Red Hills and White Flower II: More familiar are Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings inspired by her time in New Mexico, surrounded by a harsh but beautiful desert landscape. O'Keeffe was so tired of city living that she permanently moved to New Mexico in 1949, where she could see nature-inspired scenes in her front yard every day.

Findings and Recommendations

Painters like, Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan, Adeyemi Adenuga, E. Okaybulu, D. Ebanda and Ben Enwonwu were considered as precursors of nature-inspired painters in modern Nigerian art. It is also a fact that nature in art has started for decades and has reached a standard before Nigeria's independence. It is quite clear from studies that the work of arts inspired by nature existed since pre-independent era through the 1970's onward till the contemporary times in Nigeria. Nature-inspired art has grown in number of practitioners, styles, themes and commercial viability.

The study shows the human capacity to respond visually and creatively to the social and geographical environment, which comprises of nature, the elements, tangible structures and human activities. A lot of the nature-inspired artists have not been systematically studied and documented for their contributions and influences in our contemporary art scene in Nigeria. The study shows Artists are largely aware of the legacy of nature, hence they are continuously reinventing and exploring it to produce works that are aesthetically pleasing but also address current environmental issues.

In conclusion, nature is the greatest inspiration through which beauty should be seen. It draws attention to most pressing matters in human and environmental affairs. With art as a lens, we learn to change the world. Increasingly contemporary artists have devoted and are devoting their life and art to the natural built environment because it presents diverse themes and contexts for artistic expression, and has been the concern of artists throughout the ages, especially painters. Nature in Art has much to contribute to the familiar and experiential knowledge in art and human development.

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Appendix of Some Nature Inspired Paintings



Appendix 1: Ben Osaghae, The Last Mushin Bus, 2004, oil on Canvass, 210x140cm

<https://artfield.com.ng/the-making-and-unmaking-of-group-styles-in-nigerias-art-departments-at-yaba-and-auchi/>



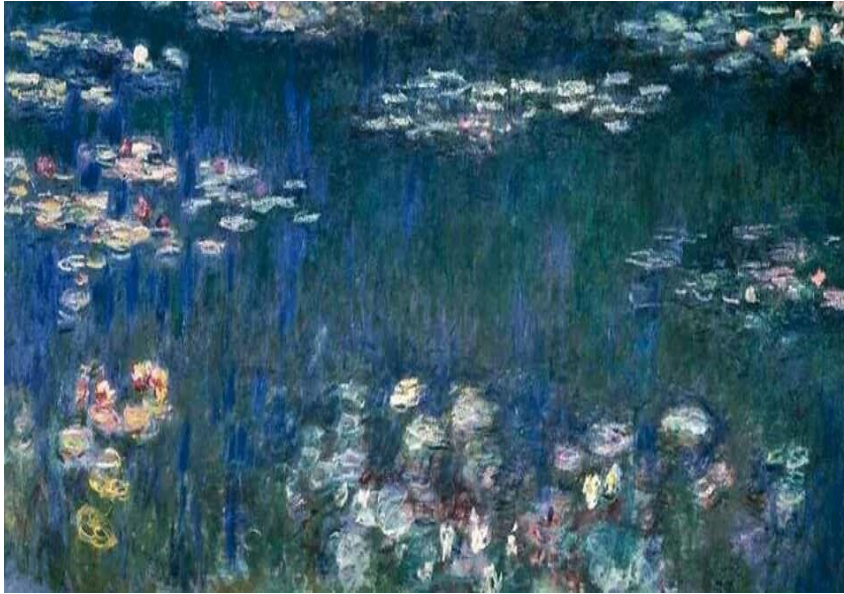
Appendix 2: Claude Monet; Sunrise, 18.9 in × 24.8 in, 18.9 in × 24.8 in, Oil on canvas, Musée Marmottan/Monet, Paris. Wikipedia. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>



Appendix 3: Jimoh Braimoh. Fishes Ocean in the Ocean, 1999, Bead and Acrylic on Board, 26.50x32.50 inches. Retrieved from <https://www.icollector.com> › Jimoh



Appendix 4: Mike Omoighe, Oge-Survival Romance, 1998, Oil on Canvas, dimensions unknown, <https://artfield.com.ng/the-making-and-unmaking-of-group-styles-in-nigerias-art-departments-at-yaba-and-auchi>



Appendix 5: Claude Monet, Water Lilies, Oil on Canvas, 1919: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. www.wikipedia.com, Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org> › wiki.



Appendix 6: Vincent van Gogh, Irises, Oil on canvas, 1889, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California. Retrieved from www.vincentvangogh.org/image/painting/Irieses.org