

ISSUES AFFECTING PROFESSIONALISM IN THE PRACTICE OF ART HISTORIOGRAPHY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigerian art history is as old as Nigerian art itself. Art served historical chronicler of the communities where it was produced. The methods of transmission of the history was orally via stories told and retold by experienced elders of the communities. History is the practice of recounting, recollection and transmission of facts as accurately as possible. Theories in mythologies and legends surrounding to be studied or recounted. The issue of transmission was interrupted by the many years of slave trade which engulf Nigeria alongside other African countries. The art historian of such affected communities residing in palaces resolve the issue of transmission in history and encouraged practice. On the arrival of Europeans to Nigeria, the owners of the artworks were not contacted by the European invaders called explorers, navigators, missionaries, imperialist, colonialist or consulted for their opinions. The aftermath of such gave rise to the writing of reports, books and historical accounts by visitors from Europe, people who knew nothing about the art they encountered. The wider implication of such was that, anthropologists, ethnographers, archaeologists, sociologists were left to write the history of Nigerian art. Thus the somewhat one sided or often incorrect or even biased perspectives obtained in many documents. Such issues in more recent times are found to be mostly inaccurate hence the need for articles such as this which discover and challenge the in-depth and in-balance of such art historical documents. Such are discussed in this papers with solutions suggested.

Key Words: Issues, Historiography, Transmission, Documents, Professionalism

Introduction

Art has served as historical chronicler of nearly all Nigerian communities socially, politically, religiously, and culturally. To understand art as a keeper of chronicle, there can be nothing more exciting and worthwhile than the study of history. Davidson in Samuel (2015) reports that history is the picture we can make of all our ancestors, what happened to them, and of how they lived? History seeks to explain why the peoples of the past behaved in the ways they did, and not in alternate ways: why they failed in some things, yet succeeded. Why they had wars and misery, but also peace and happiness. It is necessary to understand these things in the past if one is to have a proper understanding of the present. There is bad and good history. Bad history appears when historians allow their prejudices and personal feelings to get the better of them. Many imperialists' historians of Africa, during the colonial period, wrote bad history. The Europeans' prejudices and personal feelings made them assert that Africans had no history and art objects to the extent of calling them crafts. This could be the reason why the American missionary, R.H. Stone, in Thompson as cited by Samuel (2009) states:

"One bright morning in the middle of the nineteenth century, when he ascended a lofty granite boulder [Olumo-rock] and looked down upon the city of Abeokuta: What I saw disabused my mind of many errors in regard to ...Africa. The city extends along the bank of the Ogun (river) for nearly six miles and has a population approximately 200,000 (People)... instead of being lazy, naked savages, living on the spontaneous productions of the earth, they were dressed and were industrious... (providing) everything that their physical comfort required. The men are builders, blacksmiths, iron-smelters, carpenters, calabash- carvers, weavers, basket- makers, hat-makers, mat- makers, traders, barbers, tanners, tailors, farmers and workers in leather and morocco ... they make razors, swords, knives, hoes, bill- hooks, axes, arrow heads, stirrups...women...most diligently follow the pursuits which custom has allotted to them. They spin, weave, trade, cook and dye cotton fabrics. They also make soap, dyes, palm oil, nut- oil, all the native earthenware, and many other things used in the country".

The above summation is possibly a concise summary or a portrait of art in the town of Abeokuta which over-rides the Western notion of primitivism or the so called vanishing Africa. It is also an overview of the

artistic framework of art found in most African societies including Nigeria, which gives evidence of the will and creative impetus of the artists who were the custodians of the art. These custodians were the historiographers who reside in the palace of the Kings or stayed with the chief priest. They kept custody of the oral history of art and other elements of their culture; making sure that they are passed to the next generation of custodian's / art historians. Nok (2011) stressed that in most African communities, art and artists were owned by the king who keeps the guilds of art practice alive.

Historiography from the foregoing is defined in this paper as the study of the methodology of historians in developing history as an academic discipline, and by extension all persons involved in work on art. This covers how art historians can study art, the techniques of art production, and theoretical approaches used for the transmutations of such art.

Art Historiography:

Art history spans the entire **history** of mankind, from prehistoric times to the twenty-first century. Art history is the documentation of art and its practices as it is produced so that in future it can be called a historical document or object d'art. Art History in the context of this paper is the study of end products or objects of art in their historical development and styles which includes the art of painting, sculpture, ceramics, graphics, glass design, textile design and architecture as well as the art of furniture, and other decorative arts.

Art Historiography is the principles, theory, and history of historical writings of art related experience and occurrences. It is the study of the methods of historians in recording history as an academic discipline, and by extension involves person's art historically trained to function as art historians in methods and theory in the field of art.

The historiography of art covers how art history should be and is studied as a discipline using particular sources, techniques, and theoretical approaches. Such writings of art history are based on the critical examination of sources and art objects, the artists, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of critical methods that revolve around the practice and creation of art. When a trained person in art history writes of any art related subject using laid down principles, it is considered an art historical discuss. In this paper therefore, when art history is mentioned, it is viewed through such professional lenses of academically trained persons.

Art Professionals:

Proven experience in authoring materials in art related discuss is an essential in art history.

The **art historian** in the place of training seeks to learn how to interpret and understand works of **art** of many types, ranging from the monumental to small scale, and by learning about the artists, their life's story, why using the materials used to express themselves, what the artists enjoy, what obsess them and the influence of the community they practice. By the end of the training, the art historian is supposed to have learnt the profession. That is why at the point of graduation, the graduates bag their Bachelor of Arts degree in **Art History, Master of Art History or Ph.D. in Art History**. Equipped for practice as a **professional** career in museums, galleries, auction houses or Art Historical Publishing.

As a result of the professional training undergone in schools, many **art historians** have bagged either a Master's Degree in **Art History** or **Public History**. Others complete degrees in related fields, such as Museum Studies, Historical Preservation, or Archival Management. The training received by the art historians in most cases looked adequate in terms of degree attainment. The authenticity of the degree is tested at the field of practice, the difference is always sported and rated adequately.

Professionals in art history are supposed to be those who take art history as a career, those who take art history a lifelong engagement replete with an enjoyment of the field of study. Art history professionals are authorities in art, or at best seasoned in various or specific fields of art. In most cases, they are people who have practiced over time and have attained the title of professional in their area of specialization. In fact, a professional in anything does not practice once to arrive at being called such. It must involve a painstaking and diligent training, search and practice to be called a professional art historian. Having stated these facts about what is required to be a professional art historian. An x-ray of what is obtainable in Nigeria is required to know whether there is any progress or not, in terms of professional historical practice in the arts.

Issues of Art History Professionalism in Nigeria:

Being Professional in simple terms has to do with the development of latent skills acquired after or during a training in an attempt to replicate or transform one's field of endeavour. It is consequently, the arming of one's good judgment about a field of study after a period of training; the development of a polite behavior expected from a person who is trained to perform a required task resulting from training. Deducing from this definition, it therefore means that people must submit themselves to be trained over a specified period

of time as is required by their field of endeavour or specialization in order to attain a status called a "professional".

For instance, in the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, individuals such as Heathcote Hunter David had completed the specified training to be labeled as a professional Art historian by earning a PhD in Art History by the year 1979. It was not the general qualification of a PhD in Fine Arts, but a specialized degree in his chosen field of endeavor. Inclusively, the first batch of undergraduate training for professional Art Historians was completed in 1983 with three students Bulus Mang Yohanna, Suleiman Ibrahim Alhaji and Haye Ogboto. Such giant stride by the Department in Zaria is considered instrumental in launching a formidable and suitable foundation for continuous and rigorous academic training in Art History in Nigeria.

Others started joining the band wagon of professional training in Art History, of which presently the population is considerably large. The number of undergraduates trained, combined with the number of Master's Degree fellows trained and the Doctor of Philosophy fellows is consistently on the rise. By the foregoing, one would at this point applaud the giant strides undertaken by established academic institutions around the nation, but alas! there are a lot of setbacks. These setbacks as enumerated below contribute significantly to the slow growth and rate of professionalism in art history practice. Setbacks on the professionalism of art history and its practices include the following:

1. **Early Writers:** The early art historical book/ documents were written by Ethnographers, Anthropologists, Archaeologists even Museum experts. The books were used by art historians in training to the extent that the dimension of scholarship were copied by the students in training and upon graduation the style of writing became acceptable. The implication of such dimension of scholarship is that the trained art historians start to report art history in an ethnographical, archaeological or anthropological formalistic style and not in the manner that is requisite to the art historical practice and paradigms. Sometimes, from the themes of the research or writings, one cannot differentiate the writings are examining art or exultations of spirits, exotericism, and occultism. At most times, the art history encountered is like an exultation of African tradition religion. Art history examines the background story behind that art work, they examine the influence whether of religion, politics, social or economic. Others could be aesthetic socio-cultural, socio-political or socio economical. The study of form which involves the outward nature of the art include the colour including their philosophical implications, these and many others are supposed to be the "Centre of Interest" of the art historian and not on the spiritual powers imbedded on the art. Such misplacement of priorities in the side of the present art historians has continued to make art historical writings to look like religious writings, anthropological or ethnographic.
2. **Accidental Art Historians:** There cannot be a profession where accidents are consistently replicated that the profession will move forward. An accidental engineer leads to accidental car. Accidental architects lead to collapsed building and the likes. Because many graduates had no job and in the bid to make ends meet, found themselves in the academic arena does not make them academics automatically. One needs to be interested in the profession, make conscious efforts to be trained to become one. Art historians are trained professionals but of recent there are those who call themselves art historians that even event dates they do not know. Some of them cannot decode art forms in their encoded formalism, because they are not trained. So many of the so-called art historians of today are attracted by the viability of art produced thus, in the bid to make it deviate from their former areas of specialization and engage in art history they were never trained on. Thus, the outcome of these kind of art historians is that they give shallow narrations and interpretations of a number of art historical products and events without any consideration of the long time effects their writings may have on the larger and future society. In this case a professional grows from one degree of training and becomes an expert with time of practice, practice as is always said makes perfect. Nigerian art schools have had a backlash because of artists who run from one area of specialization to the other, such circle in individuals have been in the increase; it depletes professionalism.
3. **Jack of All Trade Syndrome:** Art training in general education trains one to be multi-faceted. One is trained either in a single or dual specialization, in painting, graphics, sculpture, art education, ceramics, art history and or textile design. After one's training, it is expected that the artist has a specialization, but Nigerian artist want to be everything. No engagement of art historians to organize exhibitions or curate same, simply because we can do it. Can the job be done well by everyone? Such question is not the matter, we can also do it, and thus the quality of work is jettison. And so, when the issue of global standard is applied, the simple answer is that "this is Niger!" Everything can go. Art Historians today are painters, ceramists, graphic designers and the likes,

they want to do everything thereby failing in all. The issue of professionalism is a consistently under serviced in the specific field of endeavor.

1. **Scientification of Art History:** The methods of Art history are strictly qualitative in nature combined with the use of historical and descriptive approaches. Art History is in most cases subjective to the extent that the art historian uses observation as an instrument to collect his data apart from the use of oral interview. In the discussions of data collected, the expert uses the words of the interviewee, make deduction from explanations made and infers during analysis of data. Of recent, there are many shifts from this known historiography to the adoption of quantitative method in the field of art historical study. This style of analysis uses repose from people with a rigid disposition of agreed, disagreed, strongly agreed, strongly disagree and non-decided. Such approach does not give the respondents an open ended liberty to give additional imputes from other perspective. Art Historical qualitative method allows the gathering of much information that can be used in another study in one study. Therefore, humanistic studies tilt towards qualitative research method art historians are advice to use it.

2. **The Devil you know:**

Many clichés exist in society that fits the description of an anomaly. Some schools are known for delaying student's graduation whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Such scenarios are encountered by certain students are as the stories go around that one cannot graduate as stipulated on the admission letter. Somebody who reads sculpture for example and wish to continue but have the knowledge of a probable delay might go for art history since the study for art history is better and the probability of completing his/her studies on time is much more visible. Time actually is not on the side of anyone, studies has shown that students would always like to go back to where they were shown love or accepted than to go to a strange or where they were not accepted. This is one of the reasons why some students come to read art history, so that they can finish in due time and graduate. Whether the training takes effect or not is not their interest, graduation early is their quest.

Therefore, a person knows he/she will graduate in art history fast, and he goes for it. The concern on these kind of art historian is the shallow knowledge they will have in the profession. Thus a school can graduate many "trained" art historians with only few professional art historians.

Conclusion

Art history should be art history and no any other. Art historians should practice the profession they are trained for. The historiography of the art must be adhered to so that the professional guidelines will lead to huge successes.

Recommendations

1. Art historians are requested to use art historical methods to treat art historical.
2. Artist should not go into art history as a last resort because if such is done they cannot be proficient.
3. Art historians should not be jack of all trade.

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