

## RELEVANCE OF ART HISTORY TO ART LEARNING IN NIGERIA

Ladi Onyi Andrea Agada  
Department of Fine Art  
Faculty of Environmental Design  
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria  
[agadaladi@gmail.com](mailto:agadaladi@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

The essence of art history is to have an extensive documentation of the art of the past and present which will serve as a keystone for the future of art. From early times, art historians have been communicators of visual arts. They provide recognition for artists, develop reviews of visual arts expressions, promote and project art events in given periods, and provide comprehensive information devoted to the study of art. In general, vital information on the development of visual arts and artists are obtained from the study of art history. This means that, art history functions as an essential element of man's creative abilities; it also serves as a foundation for the appreciation and criticism of works of art and provides resource materials for other disciplines. The systematic, progressive and practical nature of the discipline makes it relevant to the growth of contemporary art in Nigeria. However, attention needs to shift from simple or conventional art reports and presentations to accounts of critical issues in contemporary Nigerian art. As a discipline, art history influences art practice, provokes aesthetic appreciation, creates artistic awareness and needs to be fully valued. It is important to critically evaluate some of the problems associated with the field of art history in Nigeria and proffer critical solutions to these problems so that the relevance of art history as a discipline in Nigerian schools at various levels of learning will be evident.

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**Key Words:** Art History, Relevance, Learning, Creative abilities, Nigeria

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### Introduction

Art history is a vital tool for the knowledge, growth and development of contemporary art. It provides the history of art in a systematic and functional approach. The concept of art history is dynamic in nature. Just as art has evolved over the years, art history has also evolved. The history of art is the story of creation made by humans in a visual form for aesthetic or communicative purposes or expressing ideas and emotions in general. Over time visual arts has been classified in diverse ways, from the earliest art distinctions to the modern distinction between fine arts and applied arts, or to the numerous contemporary definitions, which define art as an expression of human creativity. Art history has developed from establishing the historical information of essential components of art works created by artists and the role of prominent artists through time in the development of art to assessing current critical issues that relate to the history of art. Art history in contemporary times in Nigeria refers to research, from the 1960s signaling the divide from the assumptions of modernism brought about by artists of neo-modernism. In simple terms, Okpara (2004) affirms that, from the beginning, art history has been the only discipline that adequately explains what happened and what is happening in the arts.

Art history emphasizes the importance of past and present artists. Through art history, significant details have emerged of outstanding visual artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Paul Cezanne, Margaret Trowell, Sam Ntiro, Afewerik Tekle, Skunder Boghossian, Elimo Njau, Kofi Antubam, El Anatsui, Aina Onabolu, Ben Enwonwu, Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onabrakpeya, Uche Okeke, Solomon Wangboje, Gani Odutokun, Afi Ekong, among others. However, art history is not only a biographical venture. It is a discipline that also projects, promotes and appreciates works of artists and art events in any given period of history. It also serves as a resource material which records happenings in art that are subjected to alteration, decay or extinction and showcases current art works of artists and accounts of latest events in such a way that more knowledge is acquired. Okpara (2004) acknowledges that, the subject of art history encompasses biographies of prominent artists and events, which remind us of key theoretical and practical issues in our everyday lives.

### Art History as a Discipline

Art history is the study of the history and development of painting, sculpture, textiles, ceramics, graphics and other visual arts. It is concerned with identifying, classifying, describing, evaluating and interpreting objects of art. The study also covers the creation of awareness of functions and values of art. Information on the professional growth of artists is also obtained from the history of art as an academic discipline. This means that, art history functions as an

essential element of man's creative abilities, serves as a foundation for the promotion and appreciation of artists and their works of art and provides resource materials for other historical disciplines such as social history, political history, anthropology, archaeology, ethnography, among others.

Odiboh (2004) describes art history as the history of fine and applied arts and architecture. The term embraces a variety of intellectual studies, from the cataloguing of museum collections, where the primary objective is to establish a body of factual information about such objects, to the philosophical musing on the relationship of art and society or the nature of beauty.

Okpara (2004) opines that,

Art History is more than a historical account of what has happened or the description of a social event, or an adventure into archaeology or anthropology. It is the culmination of many years of worthwhile fact-gathering efforts. Very often, it incorporates imaginative thinking, creative deduction, and time management and planning. It involves the development of a document that is aimed at directing scholars and other stakeholders in the creative field. For most artists today, Art History is a *sine qua non*. It is the most critical component of our information arsenal (p. 186).

The ideology of art history is that the history of art of the past is as important as the events of art today. Igbaro (2006) observes that, through historical records, we are kept abreast of art developments in the civilized world from Egypt to Greece, Roman Art through Modern Art to Contemporary Art practice.

Art history, as an academic discipline, was developed in Germany in the 19th Century (Odiboh, 2004). It is safe to say that, art history as we understand it in the 21st century started in the 19th century but has roots that date to the ancient period. Like the study of historical developments in other related branches of learning, the discipline benefits from the precision and simplicity of the written word, but art historians also rely on art criticism, schools of thought and ideologies, precedents and models, gender approaches, stylistic analysis, psychoanalysis, semiotics, iconography, symbolism and institutional research. Saliu (1992) asserts that, methodical approach to history is essential to the study of art. Art history therefore, is also relevant to any general history. This is so because art is a contemporary and authentic expression of the concerns of an age and a community, while changes in art reflect changes in such concerns.

The field of art history is traditionally divided into specializations based on eras and regions. For example, Ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt are all characteristically regarded as particular focal points of Ancient Art. Non-Western art is a relative tenderfoot to the art historical custom. Recent reviews of art works have recast art historical studies generated in non-Western cultures in more visual and aesthetic terms. In comparison to those studying Ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt or the Italian Renaissance, researchers focusing on Africa, the Ancient Americas and Asia are an evolving minority. Igbaro (2006) reveals that, while there are no contradictions as to the trend in developments of art from Egypt to Greece, Roman to Modern Art movements, Nigeria and the whole of Africa suffered a great set back because there were no historical records as a response to the questions concerning African art. Odiboh (2004) mentions that, sequel to the development of African studies as a discipline in Europe and the United States, sub-units of African art studies were established in institutions. Beier in Odiboh (2004) asserts that, for the scholars in African art, the 1960s was the dawn of an era, as many foundations in the United States made funds available for the purpose of scholarship, including conferences, seminars and publications on African Art. Invariably African art that was once found within the discipline of anthropology became part of Fine and Applied Arts discipline.

#### **Role of Art Historians in the Development of Contemporary Art**

Kleiner (2011) states that, art historians study the visual and tangible objects and structures humans make and build. Scholars traditionally have classified such works as architecture, sculpture, the pictorial arts (painting, drawing, print making and photography), and the craft arts, or arts of design. The craft arts comprise utilitarian objects such as ceramics, metal-work, textiles, jewelry, and similar accessories of ordinary living. Okpara (2004) acknowledges that, art is basically a simple communication device, which has gained universal acceptance and

recognition from the pre-historic times. It is therefore, the job of the art historian to ensure free flow of quality information about the entire creative activities of mankind.

In the words of Saliu (1992),

It is also the role of an art historian to investigate iconography, the characteristics and meanings of pictorial renderings or of symbols whose arrangements, and even specific location in compositions, affect the form of art or, conversely, the form affects the iconography. He/she, in addition, studies media and technologies as methods and materials that allow a concordance between the artistic conception and the aesthetic form of the work of art (p. 3).

Contemporary art history practice accepts that historical sources can be enriched with contemporary or near-contemporary visual material or descriptive prose and poetry (Esche-Ramshorn and Roudavski, 2012). Technologically oriented studies of art objects have also played an increasing role in art historical literature. More recently, media and digital technology has amplified the potentials of visual, empirical and spatial analyses in future art historical studies. The relevant forms vary from film, to digital interactive forums, including virtual environments and networked channels. The approaches enabled by such techniques are in active development and promise to include qualitative methods that can highlight narrative, expressive and logical characteristics of art and history.

Consequently, the key instruments used for gathering art historical records are basic visual aids, video recordings, and literary articles. Advanced technology after World War II, particularly in photography and print, increased the capability of reproductions of art works and the review of such art works. Such proficiency has helped to develop the discipline in reflective and philosophical ways, as they have enabled easy comparisons of objects. Associated with these technological advances, art historians have revealed a growing interest in new theoretical approaches that relate to the characteristics of modern art works.

Art historians utilize a number of methods in their study of the history of art objects. They often examine an art work within the framework of its time. What is most paramount is that, the examination is carried out in a way which complements its creator's necessities and motivations; with thoughtfulness of the requests and influences of its patrons and sponsors; with a relative analysis of themes and approaches of the creator's contemporaries and tutors; and with considerations of design and symbolism. This process, therefore examines the work of art in the milieu within which it was created.

It is also pertinent to note that, before art historians can generate a history of art, they must be certain they have the right information of what they plan to study. An art historian seeks to examine art works or objects of art using systematic or orderly ways to search for answers to specific questions. For example, art historians, while studying an art piece must know its title, how old it is, who created it and for whom, how the artist produced the work, what artistic style was adopted, its subject matter, the historical influence that shaped the artist's piece, and how the artist's creation, in turn, affects the course of creative, political, cultural and social events.

Saliu (1992) affirms that,

An art historian is interested in identifying a produced art work, the origin of the work, the period when it was produced. He asks whether it portrays what it claims to represent, whether it is unique in its general form or one of several or only a copy of something else, the functionality of the art work, the specific meaning of the art work, how it fits in the whole art works and for whom it was made. It is therefore, the job of an art historian to provide answers to these questions. And this is done following an orderly procedure (p. 3).

Saliu adds that, first, the authenticity of an art work has to be identified, place and time of production, the artist, the manner of fabrication, the style, the meaning and the socio-cultural context, relating this to the whole culture. The idiosyncrasy of the art work is examined in comparison to others, that is, the conditions, circumstances and quality of its creation both internal and external. Finally, the art work is placed in a general framework of the evolution of similar and related art forms around, in the world by inference.

It is the job of an art historian to also provide collective knowledge of art and aesthetics and particular knowledge of art criticism by affiliates of society that produce the art. Art historians

are also concerned about the history of the past which is relevant to the activities of art today. The experts involved in the history of art are capable of executing and boosting art representations and perceptions of the future through enlightening literary and visual documents.

### **Art History in Nigeria**

According to Babalola (1992), although, it is already well known the Department of Fine Arts of the Ahmadu Bello University started in 1953 in the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology Ibadan branch. It was in 1955, that it was moved to the Zaria branch of the Nigerian College. Initially, there were only three areas of specialization; Painting, Sculpture and Graphic and Commercial Design. Later, more areas were added. Babalola adds that, although knowledge in the history and appreciation of art was acknowledged, it took some time before a lecturer in that area was appointed. It became the lot of D. B. Hope, a British art graduate of Goldsmith College of Art, London University, to start teaching art history and appreciation to a cross section of students twice a week. Later, lectures were held thrice a week to encourage students and enhance greater and effective participation.

In 1957, according to Odiboh (2004), two colleges in Nigeria were offering courses leading to the award of Diploma in art. Those were the Art Departments of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University) and the Yaba Institute (now Yaba College of Technology). That time, only European art history was taught to the students, particularly at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology. There was no programme for the modern and traditional art of Africa.

Babalola (1992) notes that, at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, since 1957, art history and appreciation have been important components of the four year Fine Arts Programme. Students who came from diverse but rich artistic backgrounds were encouraged early in their studies to write on art historical topics which interest them. Odiboh (2004) declares that, in 1961, when the Department of Art of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka began to offer the degree programme in Fine Arts, there was also no provision made for African art in the curriculum. In 1970, Uche Okeke, a graduate of the Zaria Art Department and the initiator of the Zaria Art Society, which according to Oloidi, advocated "cultural revivalism" at Zaria, joined the Nsukka Art Department. He made sure that African art was introduced into the programme with the help of Chike Aniakor, a teaching staff and also a graduate of the Art Department Zaria.

Odiboh affirms that, Aniakor travelled to the United States for his postgraduate studies in Art History in 1973 and came back during the 1978/79 session. By then, Uche Okeke, who had begun to write on contemporary Nigerian art and artists, and Ola Oloidi, had already carried out their revolution in art history. For example, courses in Art Appreciation, African Art, Art and Artists, Modern Nigerian Art, Fine Arts Criticism, the Art of Europe and America, Asian Art, among others, were introduced into the Nsukka Art Department.

Odiboh further explains that,

This initial effort of the University of Nigeria later affected other Nigerian art institutions. For example, Uche Okeke advised Dr. Suleiman, the Head of Fine Arts at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, to consider introducing African art history into their programme. Oloidi also in June 1977 advised Suleiman to make art history more elastic by introducing more courses, especially in modern African art. Though Suleiman was interested in, and enthusiastic about this, he complained about lack of art history teachers. Oloidi, who promised to get him one, eventually contacted Kojo Fosu of Howard University and his former art history teacher. Kojo Fosu agreed and eventually joined the staff of Ahmadu Bello University in 1978 (p. 181).

Art History in Nigeria as a degree programme spans over four decades with its roots in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Odiboh (2004) maintains that, no Nigerian university had produced first degree graduates in Art History before 1979. But Oloidi's expansion of art history made this possible in 1979, when Emeka Crucifix Anonyou graduated with a B.A. degree in Art History; to be the first in Nigeria.

It is important to note that, while discussing how the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria began producing graduates who specialized in art history, Babalola (1992) said:

It was in fact in 1983 that the first batch of students who majored in the history of art were awarded their Bachelor of Arts degrees. Since then, a steady flow of graduates with concentration in art history have left the Department. The theses completed as part of the requirements for the award of Bachelors of Arts degree by this student's bear testimony to the foundation that has been laid in art history. David Heathcote, a British lecturer and Kojo Fosu, a Ghanaian lecturer did some commendable work in the Division of art history (p. 3).

In line with the progress made at University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Odiboh (2004) affirms that, other universities in Nigeria have since introduced degree programmes in African art history.

### **Issues in Art History and the Way Forward**

According to Igbaro (2006), the essence of art history is to have a good documentation of the arts of the past in order to link with the present and to pave way for the future. Igbaro adds that, art students should be thoroughly exposed to the theory of art as well as the history of art to ensure continuity of the art practice and skillful use of materials and expression of ideas and design.

Art history teachers through time and research are familiar with the basic semantics of art. The issue, however, is that many of these teachers are not exposed to the core principles and philosophy of art history. The value of knowledge obtained from this exposure is wanting. Art history needs to be viewed as a driving force and an integral part of art practice. However, for this to be fulfilled, many issues need to be addressed. Traditional and contemporary art need to be studied on the same level. There should be a balance in study. Art historians must be able to tell art stories of the past as well as be up to date with current issues in art.

There is also a pressing need to make modern teaching tools such as current textbooks, journals, catalogues, video recordings, slides and photographs available to art history teachers to engage students in a captivating learning manner. Art history teachers also have to be committed to using these modern tools to teach students. It is also important for research students to equip themselves with reliable research methodology in art history. They must also be familiar with appropriate literature such as relevant textbooks, journals, magazines, catalogues, internet sources and other current sources of information and technology that are relevant to research and learning. Art researchers and scholars should be committed to the generation of ideas, establishment of standards and provision of resource materials to project and promote art history as a standard discipline at different learning levels in schools, and higher institutions in Nigeria.

Anthology of art historical writings should be detailed, historical and factual. These writings should be developed beyond reports of interviews, simple visual concepts and provincial information. Odiboh (2004) laments that, consequently, efforts made so far in researching on modern art history have been quite negligible. In fact, what obtains is a collection of writings of all kinds which pose the problem of classifying the various contemporary writings on Nigerian art. Many of these writings are what Ola Oloidi sees as art historical collage and art history without history. Oloidi's opinion is that most so-called art historical articles or essays are actually literary works of some kind outside art history. He considers most of them lacking in art historical accounts.

Igbaro (2006) is also of the opinion that, the history of contemporary Nigerian art has not been vigorously pursued as many art works are being assessed only from artistic forms while the social context and meaning were left out by African writers. Documents play a vital role in art history. Title, name of author, place and time and purpose of production have to be included. Omission of dates (in older arts) still limits art history in Nigeria to infancy. Where there is no proper documentation of art works, misgivings and misinterpretations usually follow.

The modern art historian sees art history as the process and product of adaptive and integrative philosophy (Okpara, 2004). It is therefore, the job of an art historian to get familiar with the ideologies of art history by gathering accurate materials that relate to art and studying them for practical information. Furthermore, for art historians to thrive in today's society, they must have tangible information about everything that relates to art. To be able to achieve this, they must be knowledgeable and up to date with art events around them. It is also important that,

young art history students challenge themselves beyond studying the conventional history of art which relies on biographies of prominent artists to reviewing accounts of critical issues such as socio-cultural and political ideologies that relate to contemporary art in Nigeria. Young art historians also need to engage in gathering materials of unknown artists who have excelled in their fields of specialization. Art history students should also give more attention to empirical studies and evidences of places and events that relate to art so that the records can serve posterity.

### Conclusion

To make art history relevant in the 21st century, art historians should be encouraged to strive for excellence in the ever changing times of history. Dedication and professionalism should be the watch words of art historians. The significance of art history cannot be overstated; it needs to be appreciated as a relevant discipline that contends with other historical disciplines because of its contemporary approach. The importance of current research and literary materials with profound historical and philosophical content should be emphasized to art history scholars. Art history teachers must be up to date with the current curriculum, methods, activities and instructional tools for teaching. Art history is a discipline that should not be taught in moderation. Scholars and students should be knowledgeable in various branches of learning such as political history, anthropology, archaeology and ethnography that relate to the history of art in order to enjoy a complete intellectual and professional influence of the discipline. Due to the introduction of new artists, ideas and trends, current information in art should be included in curriculum of institutions offering art history. If these approaches can be achieved, art history will gain for itself an influential place in the foremost field of academics in Nigeria.

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