

THE NIGERIAN PUBLIC AND THE MUSEUM: AN ART HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Museum, which is defined simply as a place where collections of artistic objects, scientific or historical interest are set out for show, is variously misconceived or misunderstood by many individuals, organisations, and even professions. The cultural, educative, and social functions of any museum anywhere cannot be over emphasized. In Nigeria, for instance, there is at least one museum in each state, but the big question is, to what extent do the Nigerian populace particularly the elites utilize these museums? It is on this basis that this paper examines how Nigerians relate with the museum from an art historical perspective. The over thirty (30) museums established in different parts of Nigeria are not well patronized due to people's wrong perception of what museum is. This apathy of Nigerians to museum is even noticed among art historians/researchers and the government. Those in the academics are largely unaware of vital information in museums with which historical reconstruction could be made, while the government's apparent indifference has resulted into an institution (museum) that is poorly funded and supported by policy makers. It is the view of this paper that art historians in particular who are concerned with discovery, documentation, and publication of art of both the past and present should have conscious interaction with material cultural objects in museums. This is based on a strong conviction that the museum is the perfect starting point for academic historical enquiry or research into Nigeria's traditional art.

Key Words: Traditional Arts, Museums, Historical/History, Nigerian Public.

Introduction

Once upon a time, the museum was understood as an elitist, upper-class institution, which should ultimately enjoy the patronage of the privileged upper class. This understanding of the museum was rooted in an old established belief that art and scholarship were for a closed circle. In stating the relationship between the museum and visitors, Hudson (1975) recalls an occasion in 1972 thus:

...when I was told by the director of one of the most famous art museums in Vienna, that it would be no bad thing if the doors of the museum were kept permanently closed, so that prospective visitors would have to produce satisfactory evidence of their fitness to be admitted. Government policy unfortunately forbade this and the public were allowed entry unscreened.

He alludes that there was a professional conspiracy amongst museum connoisseurs (managers, directors, professionals etc.) that was "very much against the public interest." He further states that this exclusion of the public from the museum "was certainly found, to some extent, at all large museums."

The far-reaching consequence of this "public exclusion ideology" was a lopsided museum visitation pattern. Bourdieu (1977) observes that: "Museum attendance which increases, to a large extent, as the level of education rises, is almost exclusively to be found among the privileged classes." A lopsided visitation pattern poses a "threat" to the intended purpose of museum as seen in the definition of the museum by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). ICOM defines museum as: "A non-profit making, permanent institution *in the service of the society and its development, and open to the public*, which acquires. Conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for the purpose of study, education and enjoyment. Material evidence of man and his environment" (Obi, 2000).

In European and American museums today, this threat seems to have been eliminated. The museum is no longer regarded as an institution for a closed circle or privileged few. A sublime example is the Natural History Museum in London, "a large museum which does an excellent job of attracting not just traditional museum goers, but also a large number of children and new

audiences" (Travers and Glaister, 2006). Yet Kotler (2003), in stating the nature of services, affirms that "the private non-profit sector with its museums, charities, churches, colleges, foundations and hospitals is the service business, (and) unfortunately museum is way down in the ladder of consumer patronage".

Museum Patronage in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the museum has evolved in different ways. After the National Commission for Museums and Monuments was commissioned in the 1970s, the directors saw to it that museums of National Unity were instituted in all states, starting with the culturally and artistically renowned centres. According to Ikwuemesi (2006),

...In 2001, Nigeria had over 30 museums. The National Museum in Lagos contains many specimens of Nigerian art, mostly pieces of statuary and carvings, remarkable for their variety and quality. It also has archaeological and ethnographic exhibits. Other museums represent more specialized interests: the museum at Ife opened in 1955 in response to halt the looting of national art treasures, and contains world-renowned bronze and terra cotta heads; the decorative arts museum at Benin City has a collection of bronzes and that at Oron has a valuable collection of ancestor carvings. The museum at Jos, opened in 1952 originally as the National Museum, is a center of research into the prehistoric culture of Nigeria. The Esie Museum at Ilorin in Kwara State has Stone antiquities, and the National Museum at Kaduna has archaeological and ethnographic exhibits, including a "craft village." The Owo Museum, in Ondo State, displays arts, crafts, and ethnographic relics. There are also museums in Kano, Argungu and Oshogbo. Lagos also houses the Centre for Black and African Art and civilization.

In spite of this spectacular development, the formally elitist oriented ideology of museums has taken a most unfortunate twist (the museums in Nigeria, as in more developed countries many years ago, have been until recently regarded as a detached elitist outfit serving a limited highly sophisticated audience in a largely urban environment). There is undeniable retrogression in the museum's status in Nigeria and more definitely, in the way Nigerians perceive it (Izuakor, 1993). The few surveys (audience research) that were carried out in some Nigerian museums by Seindesticker (1979), Agada (1980), and Anaso (2002), revealed that very few Nigerians visit the museum. Out of the few, a good number are school pupils whose visits to museums are made compulsory. Izuakor (1998) notes that "there is no gainsaying the fact, that virtually each state in the country has at least one museum, and even among the educated elite, who are aware of the existence and value of the museum, a vast majority scarcely bother to visit the museum".

The said apathy of the public to museums in Nigeria is also found among art historians/researchers and the government. The former are "largely unaware" of certain museum service for which vital information for historical reconstruction could be obtained (Izuakor, 1998). The latter's apparent indifference has resulted into an institution (museum) that is poorly funded and supported by policy makers in the past decade (Obi, 2000).

Nigerians are not enlightened about the purpose, functions and structure of museums (Obi, 2000). The information gap that exists between the museum and the Nigerian public has resulted in many Nigerians regarding the museum as buildings where old and rejected things are stored. Obi (2000) discloses that "People often refer to any object, person, or thing, which appears to be obsolete as a museum piece." In 2006 during a social event at a University, a graduate of the Humanities proudly announced. "I've never even considered visiting a museum... people who know what's up don't spend their leisure time visiting museums." This statement by one Nigerian graduate probably represents a putative understanding of museums in Nigeria.

Izuakor (1998) opines that the lack of interest shown by many Nigerians could be attributed to a conspicuous absence of museum visitation culture in the society and a compulsive aversion to vacationing and leisure among Nigerians. Izuakor (1998), however, admits that the museum managers might not have effectively marketed the museum. According to Forkildsen (1993), conflicts over priorities and facilities would be quickly resolved if providers of leisure facilities "know what motivates people to participate in leisure." Here the emphasis is on the motivation that leads to the demand for certain leisure services. If participation in leisure would be viewed

from the motivation-to-demand perspective for a public that is unaware or uninterested in the service provided, the problem confronting the leisure facility provider (museum) would be how to find ways of connecting the benefits of the service provided with the natural needs and interest of the target consumers-the public, (Kotler, 2003). That is, however, not the focus of this paper.

The Museum and the Art Historian

The museum is a place of power. It holds the key to how people view, categories, analyse, interpret, and display their collections. It gives material and visual expression to ideas, belief, values, and norms of society. All presentations are ideological and capable of influencing public perception of history (Folorunsho, 1995). The local museum therefore empowers and validates not only the cultural history of a people but also the creative powers of the artist who made the art objects that are displayed. The fact that Nigerians are unaware of this progressive function is a setback in public enlightenment and art appreciation. Unfortunately, researchers in art history are also largely unaware of the wealth of "experience" to be obtained by being familiarised with the authentic pieces of the treasures of the ancient past (Izuakor, 1993).

According to Shank and Tilley (1987), the museum is in many ways a book around which the visitor may wonder. This is a noteworthy saying. More importantly, however, a picture is said to be worth a thousand words. If this is so, no experience can possibly surpass that of seeing, critically looking at, and where possible, touching the ancient treasures which now lie unacknowledged in museums. It was personal encounter with these ancient art pieces that inspired Europeans who did not understand much about the culture of Africans but reacted strongly to what they had seen and touched, to write much literature on African art and culture. It is, therefore, not surprising that renowned writers (on museum theory and art pieces) like Kenneth Hudson, William Fagg, Bernard Fagg, and many others are more proficient than many indigenous art historians at differentiating the original (ancient) art pieces from replicas.

Ikwuemesi (2006) rightly notes that the Nigerian terrain itself, ever agog with refreshing activities, is an example of a thriving modernist, paradigm, in spite of the absence of sustained government and corporate support. It is in this justifiable frenzy of modern artistic resourcefulness that art historians have relinquished the study of museums and the treasures of "our" ancient past to other disciplines. This is detrimental to the creative development of art history as a discipline, as there are lots of questions that are yet unanswered by findings (writings) of the European counterparts in the field of African Arts. Ikwuemesi (2006) also notes, "In spite of the resourcefulness and resilience of Nigerian artists and some of the private galleries and institutions, Nigerian art remains a victim of poor documentation and historiography."

Conclusion

Shank and Tilley (1987) reveal that archaeologists have a social responsibility to present themselves and their works to a non-archaeological public through the media, publishing media, actual physical confrontation (archaeological sites), and the museum. Archaeologists play a pivotal role in the acquisition of material objects of the past, and the reconnaissance (reconstruction) of that which no longer exists. Anthropologists are primarily concerned with the evolution of culture (both material and visual), in like manner, Art historians are concerned with discovery, documentation, and publication of art of the past and the present. Interestingly, traditional African art cannot be divorced from its material and visual culture. Most of the "ancient art pieces" which are found in museums today were uncovered and recovered through excavation of the earth. From the foregoing, it is apparent that the field of Art history is incomplete without a conscious interaction of material and literary resources in Archaeology, Anthropology, Ethnography, and Museology. The museum, therefore, is the perfect starting point for historical enquiry or research into Nigeria's traditional art.

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