

Entrepreneurship in Visual Arts: Furniture and Arts Enterprise of Okey Chinwuba

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Abstract

In Africa, Visual arts entrepreneurship predates the colonial period. Among the Awka-Igbo, for example various aspects of entrepreneurship exist, especially in the traditional metal industry and the trend is still on till this day. This work focuses on Okey Chinwuba's wood and metal designs. Chinwuba's works do not only celebrate the ancient Igbo metal art and folklore but have proved that art practice in Nigeria is economically and socially rewarding. It is also a means of gainful employment and positive step towards self-reliance and building a virile national economy. It is hoped that this work will simulate and encourage more research into entrepreneurship and visual art practice in Nigeria or a possible shift in paradigm.

Keywords: Visual Arts, entrepreneurship, Okey Chinwuba, Arts, Furniture

Introduction

Contemporary artists have found out that sensitivity to artistic impulse is not confined to only fine arts; it also permeates all three - dimensional structures. The same abstract quality of expressive beauty that form the foundation for a piece of sculpture, for example, may also underlie some functional forms, such as furniture. Although, the need for the production of utilitarian objects often restricts the creative latitude of the artist, one can still observe that the production of utilitarian objects, like furniture, lamp shade, doors among many others, have been part and parcel of visual arts in Africa even before the advent of colonization, hence, Ifeta (2002) states that "sculptural pieces were used as furniture and as well served other domestic functions in Africa".

Art is a work of technological manipulation and both arts and technology are inseparable and foster desirable tastes that could improve the required national level in craftsmanship especially in our industrial production. In the light of this statement, Ovirik, et al, (1975) postulates that;

Contemporary designers are very aware of the functional needs of the objects they plan; consequently, they design their forms to express and aid their function. However, these designers are also conscious of the need for these objects to be aesthetically pleasing.

Visual art practice in Africa is progressing steadily however, one danger lie in the path of the growth of Africa's artistic expression, and that is the politics of "centre and the periphery". This implies that the western world dictates the policy of internationalism in the arts. These occidentals do not acknowledge the cultural traffic between Europe and Africa which are deeply implicated in each other's cultural history, rather, they fall back on the "self and others" polarities of traditional ethnography, as a result of this, the audience is encased within an outmoded fantasy of otherness which regrettably can never prepare one for the present hybridity of contemporary African art. Such hybridity also

occurs in Chinwuba's works. Most of his works show a synthesis of western design, designs from traditional Igbo metal craft, and ideas from other aspects of contemporary Nigeria life style.

Chinwuba also employs both Igbo traditional “Uli” art style and Igbo folklore in his works. These two attributes are more evident in his decorative items than his functional objects. In his quest for expression, he is often involved in experimentation with both imported and local materials, such as acrylic paints, bamboo sticks, and "Uli" pigment. Chinwuba is indeed an outstanding Nigerian contemporary artist and Entrepreneur with a lot of promises. He is working tirelessly to establish continuity in Nigeria art tradition and entrepreneurship.

Christopher Okey Chinwuba: Early Beginning and Artists Development

Christopher Okey Chinwuba was born in April 21, 1959 in Amawbia, Anambra State, Nigeria. He is the first child in the row of seven children. His father Michael Chinwuba was a businessman and his mother was a business woman. His maternal grandfather, Ogbuefi Nworah-Okoye who hails from Awka was metal-smith. Chinwuba, no doubt inherited the art of craftsmanship from his grandfather, Nworah-Okoye, who was a versatile craftsman.



Plate 1: Christopher Okey Chinwuba

Okey Chinwuba had his primary school education at St. Christopher's Primary School, and St. Andrew's Primary School, both in Onitsha, between 1967 to 1972, where he began to exhibit his artistic talent. He always assisted his teachers in drawing and painting visual aids on the walls of the school. He also attended Merchants of light Secondary school, Oba and National Secondary School, Enugu. After he finished his secondary school career in 1978, he worked at the Nigerian Police Headquarters Internal Audit Department, Enugu, for about one year.

Later in the same year (in 1979) he gained Admission into the University of Nigeria Nsukka where he specialized in Graphic art. During his art training at Nsukka, his excellence in his field of study drew him close to some of his lecturers and colleagues namely; Obiora Udechukwu, El Anatsui, Chuka Amaefuna, Ola Oloidi, Chike Aniakor Olu Ogbuibe, and Ndidi Dike, all of whom have made remarkable impacts in the Nigerian contemporary art scene. Also while in school, he researched on the linear art of the Igbo people, popularly known as "Uli", which reflected in his drawings, book illustrations and paintings depicting aspects of Igbo culture, and "Uli" designs. Chinwuba holds a doctorate degree in Art – History, also from University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

He presently lectures drawing, art history, and computer graphics at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe, Anambra State.

Studio Management

The most important factor in any productive enterprise is the human element, the people involved. Without people, there can be no performance upon which any anticipation can be based. Again, a critical problem that faces any entrepreneur today is how to get the people to achieve desired results and give his works a sense of fulfillment.

Among the Awka metal workers there is a formal recruitment of apprentices, preferably close relatives, in order to ensure continuity and keep some secrets of the profession. Okey Chinwuba's organizational method of his workshop is similar to that of the traditional Awka metal workers guild. He is the master artist and the Entrepreneur employing about 12 workers made up of apprentice workers and casual workers, while he handles the sales of his products personally and this is usually done in his workshop.

Apprenticeship

Chinwuba recruits his workers and apprentices in two ways. The first is, the formal recruitment which happens when Chinwuba asked the parents of the "would be apprentice" for permission to recruit their son or when the father of the boy approaches Chinwuba and appeal to him to recruit his son.

Okey Chinwuba may give to the boy's parents a little gift such as drinks. If he approaches them first, on the other hand, parents of the "would be apprentice" will give to Chinwuba if they approached him first. Again, in both contract agreements, Money is not usually involved. The second type of recruitment is when he employs people as casual workers and pays the worker an agreed sum for services rendered, Some casual workers under him eventually turned into full-fledged furniture makers.

On graduation an apprentice becomes a fully-fledged furniture designer and he may give them a certificate as an evidence of completion of his training depending on the duration and design of his training. Some apprentices stay up to four years while some stay for two years. The graduates are encouraged to set up their own workshops by

Chinwuba instead of working for other companies. His relationship with his former apprentices are so cordial that they run back to him once in a while, when they have difficulty with their work or to show gratitude for what they have gained from him. Chinwuba on his part ensures that they practice their art in accordance with the standard he already set for them. The minimum age for apprenticeship recruitment is sixteen and preferably male secondary school leavers.

His Oeuvres

Okey Chinwuba's works are mostly utilitarian designs in wood and metal and few decorative items. The utilitarian designs are mainly furniture, in wood and metal, which include tables, chairs, beds, desks, lampshades among many others.

Designs in Wood

Most of Chinwuba's furniture designs are based on Igbo-“Uli” design. An example of his work based on “Uli” design is an upholstered "divan", which is reminiscent of an “Uli” motif called “Okwa Uli” (Uli receptacle) (fig 1). It comprises of a long low, rectangular shaped seat, with cushions placed on the seat for the sake of comfort and also to compliment the design.

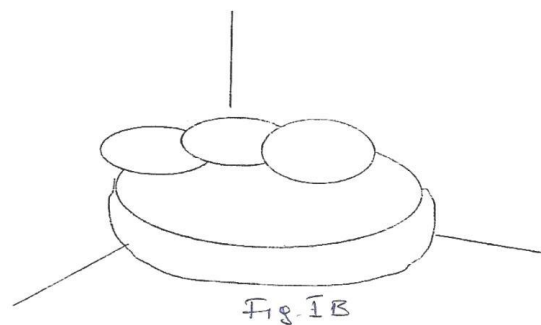


Fig 1:A Design base on Okwa Uli (Uli receptacle)



Plate 2, Title: A Divan, Size: 150cm long × 30cm High,

Again, Chinwuba's use of "Uli" motif was shown in his "modular center table" (plate 2). The design of this table is based on an "Uli" motif, "Onu Nwannunu" (Birds beak); This is an abstract representation of the beak of a bird, symbolizing a motherless bird or person. (Fig 2). The modular table also relates to the avant-garde style. It comprises of a fixed round top with detachable sides which equally serve as side stools. This fusion of Igbo "Uli" design and western "Avante garde" design is not surprising because the life sytle of many African people have been influenced and changed by their contacts with western cultures. This new attitude is not only noticeable in the works of Okey Chinwuba but also in the works of most contemporary Nigeria artists.

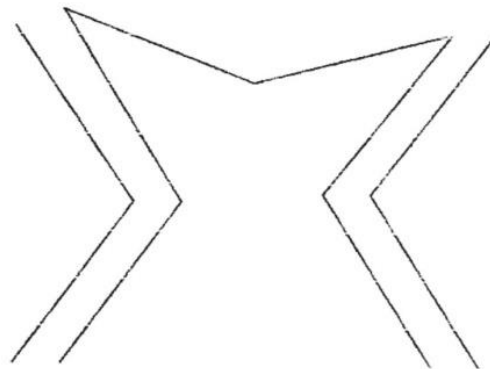


Fig 2: "Uli" motif; *Onu Nwannunu* (Birds beak). Sketches by Okey Chinwuba



Plate 3: A modular Table by Okey Chinwuba

His Dining table (plate 3) is a western styled dining table attached with wrought iron designs adapted from the traditional Awka metal gates. These ornamented designs

were fitted between the legs and top of the table. Similarly, his lattice is an adaptation of an “Uli” motif called “Okpulu” afo eke” (python's Belly mark) signifying “Sacredness. This work is a framework, made of thin strips of wood, fastened together, to serve as a screen, fence, door or a support for climbing plants to grow over.



Plate 4: A Dining table designed by Okey Chinwuba



Other furniture by Okey Chinwuba include, a nest of tables, dresser, lectern, among many others, while his decorative pieces, include “Ofu oja” (flutist), “Akalala, aka” (destiny), “Ego igwe” (money) among others. “Oja” is an Igbo musical instrument, characterized by the high-pitched sound they produce. “Oja” is also used to acknowledge the presence of important dignitaries and to sing their praises. Chinwuba's "Ofu Oja" (plate 3) is a rectangular shaped relief work depicting a long flute. Only the fingers of the flutist were depicted in the middle part of the work while the lower part is designed in a rococo manner using various “Uli” motifs. The work reminds one of the Igbo maxim, “one who blows the flute also wipes his nose” the saying implies that one is

Plate 5: Ofu Oia (Flutists)

supposed to get a remuneration for any project he embarks on. His other decorative pieces, entitled, “Ego Igwe” and “Akalaka” are also based on Igbo traditional belief that whatever one becomes in life is determined by his destiny”.

His Metal Works

Chinwuba's metal works are mostly lampshades, lamp posts, and furniture. His metal works were mostly adaptations of Awka metal smiting tradition. Chinwuba, who is worried that this metal tradition is dying works to project the traditional Awka metal designs and also to ensure a continuity of the metal tradition. His lamp shades are reminiscent of the traditional Ogene Nkpi-ino (Quadruple Gong), which is produced by the Awka traditional black smiths. The artist’s choice of Ogene as a motif for his work is not surprising since Ogene (metal gong) is a means of communication and the work symbolizes an “Ogene: and light, announcing and commemorating the return of Democratic governance from military government. This work was entitled “May 27”, since the present democratic dispensation took effect on May 27, 1999. The lamp shade has a disc-like base, surmounted by a cylindrical form like the body of an "Ogene" (gong), with a vertical pipe attached to the neck of the cylindrical form with a screen placed over the lamp. The screen is hand painted by the artist with acrylic paint, using various “Uli” motifs, an electric bulb is also contained within the screen (plate 5)



Plate 6: Lamp Shade design with a Quadruple Gong Base by Okey Chinwuba

In the production of his metal chairs and tables, he often combines metal, wood and textile fabrics, while relying on style of production of the Awka local smiths to arrive at an art nouveau styled furniture. Similar style of production was employed in his lamp holders and lamp posts.



Plate 7: A Metal Chair design by Okey Chinwuba

Working Technique

Generally, Okey Chinwuba starts his work by making various sketches of what he intends to produce on paper, he goes on to transfer the ideas into templates (where necessary) using ply wood or card board sheets. These shapes are later transferred to three dimensional works using either wood or metal or a combination of both.

Wood

The wood work section of his workshop contains a lot of tools and materials required for his work. There is a large tools chest and a “carpenter’s work bench”. He starts work by raising pieces of timber, onto the carpenter’s work bench, then later takes off the rough surfaces using a jack plane, after which he selects a rip saw from the several hand saws hanging on the walls of his workshop. The rip saw is used to cut out different members of the work. Bow-saw can also be used to cut out curves, especially when a thick piece of timber is involved. His bench-vice which is almost permanently fastened to the carpenters bench holds down the timber while the cutting and shaping is going on. When all the members of the chair are ready, he joins them up using either a “mortise and tenon joint” or a Dove tail (see fig. 3 and 4).

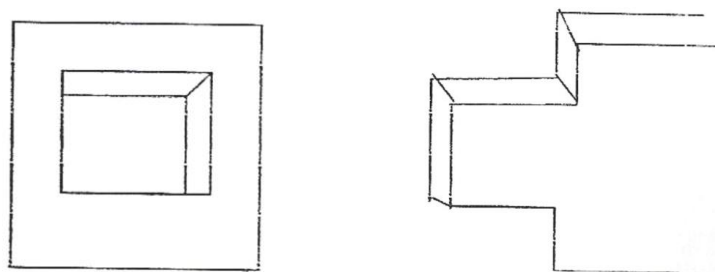


Fig 3: A mortise and tenon joint. Sketches by Okey Chinwuba

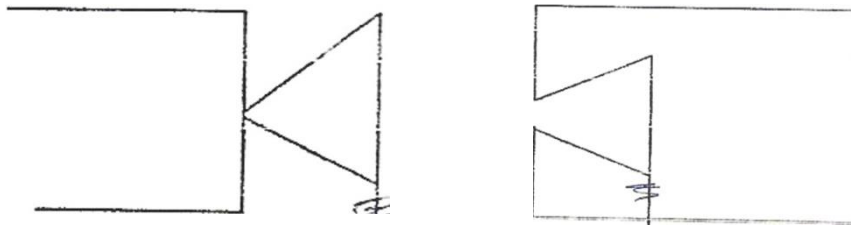


Fig 4: A dove tail Joint

Okey Chinwuba prefers these two joining techniques to avoid the use of nails in joining members of his furniture. These methods he argues, makes his wood works more decent and aesthetically appealing. After joining the component parts together, he smoothens his work, by using different grades of abrasives, after which the work is polished with wood polish (wax) until the pieces shine or by spraying work with synthetic polish, comprising of sanding sealer and vanish.

Metal Works

The processes involved in production of Chinwuba's metal works are similar to the ones involved in his wood work. After the initial designs on paper and preparation of the templates (where necessary) the various parts are cut out separately to be joined later. The cutting involves first marking out the designs on a sheet metal or pipe. A pair of shears is used to skip away excess metal first, then gradually the cut gets closer to the cut line in several passes, then removing the last bit of metal with a file, if necessary, Hack saw is employed in cutting pipes or rods.

The next technique, which Chinwuba employs after cutting is “bending”. He ensures that the line along which metal is to be bent is held firmly in place, then the sheet metal is clamped between two carefully aligned blocks of wood or bending brakes. The brakes simultaneously clamp the metal, which is then folded evenly along the desired line, using light hammers. Sometimes edges of sheet metal are "hemmed" to strengthen them, make them smooth, to provide rigidity to the piece of metal as a whole.

While shaping with forms, Chinwuba stretches his metal into various shapes and anneal after which hammering can be resumed; sometimes he constructs molds which are used for producing shallow bowls. He makes the mold by cutting a circular hole with Key hole saw in one piece of wood and gluing it down on a second solid piece. He also uses stakes for shaping metal forms. Chinwuba makes cylinders, and scrolls by curling metal sheets around a length of pipe held in a vice, flat pieces are crimped with long-nose pliers after which he files the edges, where necessary, before the separate parts are joined together.

Chinwuba sometimes joins two separate metals along the seams, either by themselves or in combination with solder. Apart from soldering, he also does arch-welding with electrodes or reverting. After joining and sanding with abrasives, matt paint is applied on the metal, using brush, sometimes; the metal is sprayed with car paint after smoothing out the work with metal body filler.

Marketing his Products

Okey Chinwuba displays his products in his workshop along Igwebuike road, Umudioka, Awka, and most times his consultancy services are constantly in popular demand. Such services include wall panels, wooden balustrades and staircase, Commissions sometimes take him out of Awka, even to faraway places like Lagos and Abuja. His patrons include the church especially St. Matthew Catholic Churches, Amawbia, others are Banks, Hotels, Government parastatals and Private homes.

The current price ranges for some of Chinwuba's products are as follows:

Product	Price
1. A Divan	from N250,000 and above
2. A Dining set	from N145,000 and above
3. A lamp shade	from N60,000 and above
4. Wall plaques	from N45,000 and above

Conclusion

Art contributes to the growth of human culture. In fact, art is the foundation stone or the beginning of its growth and for a nation to achieve economic growth entrepreneurship must be encouraged among visual artists. This will also encourage self-reliance which is the "golden sword" of hope of the so called underdeveloped countries. Unfortunately most of these Countries merely echo the song but fail to match their song with practical application. Little wonder, why they preach transfer of technology from the West to Africa instead of developing their own indigenous technology and art knowledge.

In all, Chinwuba's works show a sensual pleasure of the materials in plays; wood, metal and textile, which is an index to the artist's innovative and versatile ability and of the African survival ability and self-reliance.

The paper recommends that entrepreneurship and management courses be included in the art curriculum of both secondary schools and tertiary institutions. This is because art was the Conner stone of Africa's economy in the past and a lot can still be tapped from art past toward economic growth and edification of humanity.

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Oral Interview

Interviews with Okey Chinuwba 20/2/05 and 14/4/2014