VISUAL ARTS & ITS (MIS) REPRESENTATION IN ALVAN IKOKU FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, OWERRI

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Abstract

This paper investigates the place of visual arts in Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri. In recent time, art works have been recklessly destroyed within the University, necessitating proper investigation. The Psychoanalytic theory was engaged to understand the behaviors of the artists and their audience. Data was sourced from primary and secondary sources that include interviews, books, journals, newspapers, magazines and internet sources. Findings show that the community is artistically uninformed. Submissions were made which include encouraging the student artists through subsidizing their practical projects by the college, encouraging art appreciation programmes in the University among others.

Key words: Visual Arts, Power, Representation & Documentation.

Introduction

Human developments are periodically grouped in 'ages' that suggest developmental milestones. The discovery of usage of stone as equipment or tool during the Paleolithic, Mesolithic and early Neolithic periods gave the name 'Stone Age'. The discovery of iron in later Neolithic period resulted to the terminology, 'Iron Age'. And these are developmental strides in human history that have proved to be very relevant in the existence of man. Aside from these recorded developmental strides that have aided man's survival, one of the very needs of human beings in life is communication. Imagining life without communication is like imagining a farmer without his implements or even something worse than that, and one can understand the degree of damage ignorance or lack of communication can cause the human race.

Communication puts one in the know about what was not initially known and this means that communication is all about passing on information. Media critic and theorist James Carey in Nordquist (2019:1) defined communication as "symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed..." positing that "we define our reality via sharing our experience with others". Communication is very vital in life that today's age is termed information age which signifies the importance of information technology that proliferates in the world today. Communication is one of the many roles of visual art which had been from the pre-historic period, even when man was not able to document his activities except through visual representations. Honour & Fleming (2000:12) believes that visual art:

as a means of communication is a kin to language, with the aim of making statements of a didactic or morally instructive nature; but at the same time it is often a means of exerting control, akin to magic, with the aim of imposing order on the physical world, of arresting time and securing immortality.

Therefore visual art has been a very important part of human existence from the beginning till this day. Evidences of early art produced by the pre- Neolithic people are found in caves in Europe, Africa and Australia and have remained heavy tourist sites till date.

Today, visual art is taught formally in schools not just because people aspire to become professional artists but because it has been proven that visual art is an important aspect of the human existence. While Ikegwuonu, Ngumah, Ngene & Anyasodo (no date: 3) opines that "art plays tremendous roles in the society. Its usefulness is seen in the areas of industry, education, religion, economy, entertainment/relaxation, politics, homes, fashion and culture, which control the development, lifestyle and activities of any given society", Adams (2011:1) observes that "we study the arts and their history because they teach us about our own creative expressions and those of our past... Art is a vital and persistent aspect of human experience". In every human society, art forms part of a complex structure of beliefs and rituals, morals and social codes, magic or science, myth or history. It stands midway between scientific knowledge and magical or mythical thought, between what is perceived and what is believed, and also between human capabilities and human aspirations (Honour & Fleming, 2000:12).

Therefore teaching people creative expressions and their past insinuate that histories, values, norms, beliefs and even myths, to mention a few are documented for generations yet unborn through the visual art. As such, visual art should be preserved rather than be destroyed.

The power of visual arts

It is common that all art works are subject to behavior of the artists that produced them. Psychological behavior of individuals often reflects in their activities. D'Alleva (2005) believes that "many art historians have engaged with psychoanalytic theory over the past century or so to study the personality of the artist, the creative process, the effect of art on the viewer, as well as issues of reception". One fact about visual art is that it creates different reactions in people. Some of these reactions sometimes may be so emotional that the recipient tends to over react in most cases. Ngumah, Egornu & Chinagorom (2017: 252) observe that "this is so because visual images affect the emotional and sensibilities of the human being. Impressions made by visual images are more effective than that from an orator, or rather from an audio medium". In furtherance, Lewis & Lewis (2009) illustrate the power of visual art through encountered incident at *Museum of Modern Art* in New York. According to them:

As we walked through its galleries, filled with brilliant works of art, we saw a crowd gathered in front of a relatively small picture, towards one side of a long wall. Moving closer, we could see people crowded in front of a world famous masterpiece—Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Many appeared overwhelmed, though smiling. Young and old had difficulty leaving the spot where they were standing. Newcomers to the crowd experienced a sudden jolt of recognition. At times, strangers turned to each other and just nodded happily. Some even had tears running down their cheeks. Listening in, we heard many accents and many languages. One comment we overheard seemed to represent everyone's thoughts "No matter how many times I see it, I never get over it."

This experience was more of satisfaction and aesthetic appeal which is only one aspect of power of visual art. However to Moore (2010:7) and Gallagher & Zagacki (2005), the visual art can challenge one to strive to change a situation which formally, he never believed in. Moore wrote that:

Throughout history people have used art to influence the beliefs and behavior of others. From the earliest times the leaders among us have known that a good picture, song, sculpture or building can get our attention and maybe change our minds. Art has been used to educate us, to mould our opinions, to confirm us in our nationhood and to persuade us of the existence of many gods.

While Gallagher & Zagacki believe that visual art was partly responsible for the success of Martin Luther King Jnr's campaign against racism. According to them:

Authors and scholars interested in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s are in general agreement that mediated visual images aided in the pace of social change sought by movement activists. For instance, David Halberstam, who covered the movement as a journalist, argues that one of the essential things Martin Luther King, Jr. (and, by association, the civil rights movement) accomplished was making visible the realities of segregation through the popular media.

Visual art therefore remains one of the means to achieve a stable society and also a channel to check excesses of the society through artistic representations. Throughout history, great empires such as Greece, Assyria, Rome, Babylon, Benin, Ife, Ashanti and in contemporary time France, Italy just to mention a few have relied on visual representation to document their past for sake of posterity.

Visual Art as Medium of Representation and Documentation

The belief that visual art is the expression of the inner most feeling of the artist corroborates that visual art is all about representation and documentation especially as it relates to the artist and his society or environment for posterity. Okpara, (2012: 897) in his writing on Igbo Art states:

The Igbo artist of all generations, from the pre-colonial period to the post-colonial period, and from her traditional to contemporary art practices, have demonstrated the abilities to express the material, as well as spiritual world of the Igbo cultural society... Overtime, these artists have demonstrated their inherent ability to perceive, through their various art practices, the unseen, speak the unspoken, revere and share in the silent salient world of their ancestors, as well as preserve it for posterity.

In the same vein, all cultures jealously represent and document their histories through artistic medium. Some of these documents in visual art forms have enabled the histories of the people to be preserved and subsequently known. The greatness and fame of old empires like Rome for example has continually remained in history because of what is written and

read about her. Most of the narratives about her history are documented through visual art forms such as *The Forum*, *The Insulae*, *The Aqueduct*, *The Colosseum*, *The Baths*, *The Triumphal Arch* and *The Column*. All though the works mentioned excluding *Triumphal Arch* and *Column* were made for the comfort of her citizens, *Triumphal Arch* and *Column* documented and celebrated the viciousness of her army generals that conquered the then world, as Rome was known in history for her doggedness or tenacity in wars, as was written in many history books.

Some of the narratives about Rome may have been derived from these visual documents and representations which were written as the artist represented it or in other words, through the eyes of the artist. In some cases, a kingdom may not be as great as it is assumed she is, however, it is the duty of the artist to portray it as such especially where monarchical art is practiced and also to ward off intending invaders. *Trajan's Column* is an example of such representations and documentations. The 30-metre (98-foot) marble column was carved with everything that happened in the (Trajan) wars by an unidentified team, working to an exemplary degree of punctiliousness and finish. They may have had the emperor's own campaign journal to refer to as they gradually spiralled their way forwards from a beginning at ground level...The history is winding and grinding its way upwards, pushing through forests, fort gates, harbour mouths. On the first main rung in view, barbarians and legionaries alike hew down the woods of Dacia as Trajan prepares to assault the enemy's chief redoubt; on the next, victorious Romans mass around their seated emperor, receiving the Dacians' (present day Romanians) surrender. (Bell, 2007: 82).





Plate: The three lowest bands of Trajan's Column (detail) Marble relief, each band 36 in. Adams, L.S. (2011). *A History of Western Art* (5th Ed.).

Plate 2(left) Trajan's Column, Trajan's Forum, Rome. Dedicated AD 113. Marble, 125 ft. high including base. Source: Adams, L.S. (2011).

It will be very interesting to observe that *Trajan's Column* that was built over one thousand nine hundred years ago is still standing, irrespective of the many governments that had succeeded Trajan. Bell (2012: 82) writes:

The column left by the militaristic Trajan.. stands to this day in the forum that Trajan had built in 113 CE, commemorating the two wars in which he conquered Dacia, present-day Romania. They proved to be the Romans' final attempt to expand the empire's territory, and this would be the first area from which the empire retreated before its collapse in the west.

Unlike what is obtained in this part of the world where successive governments or authorities do not consider the importance of history as most visual representations have suffered destruction thereby erasing a part of history, and this is rather unfortunate. But the existence of Trajan's column till this day in Bell's (2015: 82) view "has epitomized the otherwise elusive essence of Roman art" and this is very good for history, representation, documentation and the visual art.

Visual Art in Tertiary Institutions in Southeastern Nigeria

The history of visual art in tertiary institutions in Nigeria can be credited to Aina Onabolu (1882- 1963) who is generally regarded as the father of Nigerian contemporary art. Though Onabolu started teaching art in secondary schools, it was his efforts that "made the colonial administration to bring Kenneth C. Murray, an artist, to Lagos, from London in 1927 at Onabolu's request" (Oloidi, 2011:22). Through the teaching of art in secondary schools, the subject was introduced in tertiary institutions as course of study, "Yaba Technical Institute or Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, now Ahmadu Bello University, and the University of Nigeria Nsukka. These were the only art institutions offering art in the early 1960s" (Oloidi, 2011:39).

However today, art institutions have emerged tremendously throughout the country and all the states in the Southeast have art institutions. The minimum number of art institutions found in southeastern Nigeria is fifteen (15). The students of these institutions have exhibited excellence in creativity over the years and some of their visual representations are evident in important locations within the state such as government conference halls, roundabouts, hotels, just to mention a few. Most of these works are students' practical projects which are part of the requirements for the award of the certificate.

Visual Art in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri

The department of Fine and Applied Arts was established in 1974 through the efforts of Dr. Felix I. N. Ekeada (1934- 2016). Ekeada who was a product of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria was also a member of the popular group of artists known in some quarters as "Zaria rebels" that had notable artists like Uche Okeke (1933-2015), Demas Nwoko (b. 1935), Yusuf Grillo (b. 1934), and Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932) to mention a few, as its members. The programme (for the department of fine and applied arts in then Alvan Ikoku college of education) was first approved as a non-scored elective course to both academic staff and students. The first batch of students of the department came into residence in the 1974/1975 academic year as a single major subject. That is, art was studied with other subject combinations from other schools example, fine Art/English Language; Fine Art/Igbo, until it became a double major subject. The discipline was studied as a major course for the award of

N.C.E certificate until approval for Bachelor of Education programme in Fine and Applied Arts by 1983/1984 Academic year. (Handbook, 2018).

Part of the requirements for award of the certificate in fine and applied arts in all art institutions include the execution of practical projects also known as project 2 and this as well applies to Alvan Ikoku federal college of education Owerri. Every department usually provide a large space for execution of sculpture works and this is known as sculpture garden, while paintings are either produced on walls as murals or on large boards and stored in the departments alongside textile, ceramics and graphic productions. Themes or titles of these projects are usually at the discretion of the student artists and their supervisors with little or no input from the department. Usually, themes range from contemporary issues in the society to even traditional, colonial and post-colonial issues which can be produced realistically or even in abstract forms with the idea to convey reforming messages especially where the theme is discussing one of the ills of the society.

In the late 1980's, when the institution was known as Alvan Ikoku College of Education because it was owned by the state government, a pact was reached with the department and



the government through the school's management to beautify the state capital. Through the coordination of Felix Ekeada as the Head Department, the department executed monumental sculptures adorned the major roundabouts in the state namely; Assumpta by Onistha road roundabout, that had a work titled Unity, Wetheral road Modotel roundabout that had a work titled Ikenga and Fire service station roundabout that had a figurative fountain. The colossal fourth monumental work was erected at a section of Orlu road junction by Bank road near the government house second gate. Incidentally, all these works are no more as they have been pulled down by successive governments who do not know the values of the works in terms of human and capital resources invested into the works. When this is compared to Trajan's Column (Fig 1), erected since 113 AD and still stands till

today, it shows the level of our understanding and appreciation of the visual art, as is evident in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri today.

Plate 3: Pictured above is the lower half of *Ikenga*, long after it was pulled down from Wetheral road by Modotel roundabout and discarded. Source: Chizo Egornu. 2019.

Visual art and its misrepresentation in Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri

The unfortunate destruction of the art work points to the ignorance of the destroyers or their level of understanding of the visual arts. It is rather sad that by this century, our society, unlike in the west, still does not understand the purposes and functions of visual arts. We can expand our understanding of art by examining some of its purposes and functions...Among a plethora of things, art can: (1) provide a record; (2) give visible or other form to feelings; (3) reveal metaphysical or spiritual truth; (4) help people to see the world in new ways. Art can do any or all of these. They are not mutually exclusive. (Sporre, 2010:23). Looking at the functions, Sporre (2010:23) also observes that they include "(1) enjoyment; (2) political and social commentary; and (3) artifact" and was quick to add that "the three functions mentioned (are not) the only ones. Rather, they serve as indicators of how art has functioned in the past and can function in the present".

A few visual images adorn the environment of the main campus of Alvan Ikoku federal College of education Owerri and this implies that the college has been acquainted with art images for over a long time as these works are over thirty years old. Even though the images are quite few in number, but their purpose and function convey spot-on messages that designate where they are erected. Examples of such are the statues in front of the college auditorium and the college library. The statue in front of the college auditorium which is a man hitting a gong was produced in cement. The hitting of gong signifies a call for gathering in traditional setting which is the function of the auditorium. The second one in front of the college library is a statue of a man who has one of his legs on top of pile of books and a finger across his lips depicting silence. A look at the statue suggests that the library is a noiseless zone as people reading inside the library need no disturbance.

In recent times however, there appear to be a total rejection of visual images in the institution as art work produced in the environment are destroyed after plenteous time and financial involvement with no reason given for such actions. The first of such unfortunate incident took place in 2014 when a painting student who was executing his project 2 at the auditorium was ordered to stop his painting mid-way irrespective of the fact that he has invested his time and resources. The sign that the work was not needed came with covering of the work with paint unannounced. The theme of the work was *Say NO to Cultism*. The student who is a naturalistic painter did a good representation of the ills of campus cultism in a way that whosoever that comes in contact with the work will have a sober reflection just as in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* and his anti-war message.

One thing that cannot be denied is the menace of campus cultism and here was a channel to preach against it and also emphasize the zero tolerance the institution has for cultism. But rather, orders were given to put a stop to the beautiful work in progress. Enquires thereafter alleged that the main reason for stopping the mural painting was that it would promote cultism rather than discourage it. This maybe because of its super realistic style and this is rather unfortunate to assume because visual representations emit different feelings or

emotions in people and as such should not be the criteria for passing a conclusion over the mural painting and have it run over with paint.



Plate 4: College Auditorium showing the covered mural painting. Source: Chizo Egornu.

Plate 5: Say NO to Cultism in detail Source: Chizo Egornu.

The second incident unfortunately repeated five years after, precisely in 2019 and also a project two work. This time, a large sculpture piece depicting perceived bad attitude of students was destroyed. The sculpture is a figure, obviously a student, bare chested with heavy chains on his neck, wearing his cap in reverse and holding a bottle of beer in one hand with a pen in the other. His books which were in front of him were closed, depicting lack of interest. From behind, it is observed that his trouser is sagged below his waist as it is a way of dressing among the students today. (See plate 6) This aspect of sagged trouser is one of the many condemnable dress codes of contemporary Nigerian students that the artist tried to condemn. Again, the artist tried to intimate that there is enough distraction in dressing and as such, students should do away with excessive dressings like wearing of necklaces by male students. The issue of alcohol and academics are two parallel lines that can never meet and the students should avoid it.

But it appears the project was dead on arrival going by answers derived from why it was destroyed, because there was emphatic response that the art piece was not needed. So many reasons were rendered as to why it was destroyed although none could be authenticated. But the work was destroyed, maybe for no reason at all, and this action was hurtful. Some sections said it was because of the bare body, while some said that the sagged trouser was the cause. Even when it was said that the work will influence the students negatively, there was

an appeal to write out the meaning of the work and hang on it to convey the message to those who are artistically uninformed so as to save the work from being destroyed, and save the artist the pain of losing his work, time and finances, but unfortunately the appeal was turned down and the work was demolished. (see plate 7)



Plate 6: The Sculpture before it was demolished. Source: Emeka Agbo. 2019.



Plate 7: The spot that previously hosted the sculpture. Source: Emeka Agbo. 2019

If it is true that the work was demolished because of flimsy reasons as sagged trouser, bare chest and drinking of beer, then we have an artistically uninformed community, and this study cannot help but wonder if some works in other tertiary institutions such as *The Raped* (Plate 8) by Joseph Nwankwo (2019), *Indecent Dressing* (Plate 9) by Joseph Nwankwo (2019), Drug Addiction (Plate 10) by Ebudide Amaobi (2005), *Distractions* (Plate 11) by Onuoha Chinedu (2016), *Ritual* (fig 12) by Akas Anayo (2015), all produced by students of *Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka*, and *Drug Abuse* (Plate 14) by Ogbuagu, Ikechukwu (N/D), *Iru Mgbede* (Plate 15) by Okeke Ify (N/D) produced by students of *Institute of Management & Technology, Enugu* just to mention a few.



Plate 8: *The Raped* by Joseph Nwankwo (2019). Photo by: Everest Ibe. 2020.



Plate 10: *Drug Addiction* by Ebudide Amobi (2005). Source: Everest Ibe. 2020



Plate 9: *Indecent Dressing* by Joe Nwankwo (2019). Photo by: Everest Ibe. 2020.



Plate 11: *Distractions* by Onuoha Chinedu (2016). Source: Everest Ibe. 2020



Fig 12: *Drug Abuse* by Ogbuagu, Ikechukwu. (N/D). Photo by: Osita Williams. 2012.



Fig 13: *Drug Abuse* by Ogbuagu, Ikechukwu

These art pieces were created by the students to express their concern about the vices that are now rampant in the society, except for Okeke Ify's *Iru Mgbede* (Plate 15), which tried to recall an almost extinct Igbo culture. The truth is that these expressions must be made real to drive home their messages. For instance, in traditional Igbo culture, young maidens expose the upper part of their body. Therefore, a depiction away from this does not represent the culture.



Plate 14: *Distractions II* by Arinze Onwudiwe (2010)
Photo by: Everest Ibe. 2020.
Photo by: Everest Ibe. 2020.

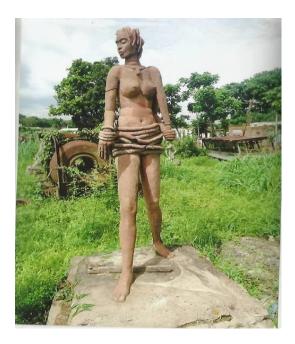


Fig 15: *Iru Mgbede* by Okeke Ify (N/D).Photo by: Osita Williams. 2012.

In Ogbuagu Ikechukwu's *Drug Abuse* (Plate 14) or Ebudide Amaobi's *Weeds* (Plate 10) which are preaching the same sermon about the dangers of hard drugs. The only difference is that the former is sending his warning to the students as one of his figures had a book in his hand, and without a care in the world as they smoke away on the weed, the skull and shabby dressing represents the danger of taking hard drugs, while the latter is warning the entire society, especially those who do drugs. Onuoha Chinedu's *Distractions I* (Plate 11) and Arinze Onwudiwe's *Distractions II* (Plate 13) are preaching against the biggest problem among undergraduates in tertiary institutions today. Students' are so devoted to the use of their handsets that even repeated warnings never to come to exam hall usually fall on deaf ears. They are so engrossed with the use of handsets that they even chat with it in lecture halls as lectures are going on which is the biggest distraction.

Joseph Nwankwo's *Indecent Dressing* (Plate 9) and *The Raped* (Plate 8) are a condemnation of what are commonly seen and heard almost on daily bases in our society today. The issue of indecent dressing has taken over the dress sense of the youths so much that the institutions of higher learning are struggling to combat this and now display warnings of dress code at the gates. Some school of thought argues that the poor dress sense is responsible for incessant rape cases as witnessed today even in churches and schools. The figure in *The Raped* is obviously devastated and abandoned by her assailant as she retreats to suffer the trauma associated with rape.

Looking at these works, does it in any way suggest that the artists are encouraging *Indecent Dressing*, *Rape*, *Pinging* or *Ritual*? The answer remains no. These visual images are the artists' contributions or social responsibilities to tackling some of these menaces that are slowly but steadily ravaging our society presently. It will be most unfortunate for an artistically uninformed person to suggest a destruction of these works simply because of lack of understanding of their messages, or agitating against the works by implying that they

promote immorality rather than condemning the vices. Again, it is worthy to note that inasmuch as these works have some obscene features, they still exist in the various institutions that house them and there has never been any insinuation to have them destroyed.

Conclusion

In this information age, whoever that chooses not to know has settled for ignorance and will remain uninformed. Every day, the artist work hard to contribute to the transformation of the society through visual narratives. However one of the many hindrances has remained poor appreciation of visual art by the society, or in other words, lack of understanding of visual art as a weapon of societal change that they have within them. With the visual art as a tool, the college can educate her community on issues that are problematic within her society like bad work ethics among staff, dress code, dangers of cultism and gender issues just to mention a few. It will be good to "note that art is the blood relation of development, and those who abnegate its alimentary existence are definitely not part of our civilized society." (Azikiwe in Oloidi 2011: 39).

Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations;

- 1. Art Students should be encouraged to execute visual images around the campus, especially on themes that are problematic within the society. This will serve as a window to educate the populace on some problems of the society.
- 2. The college should subsidize the students' practical projects as they are financially demanding, because the works belong to the college and could be sold as a source of internally generated revenue for the college.
- 3. Executing these art works around the college will beautify and also enhance the aesthetic appeal of the college, and as such should be encouraged.

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