

REDRESSING A DYSFUNCTIONAL ART HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN NIGERIA

Egonwa, Osa Dennis¹; Uche, Esimike¹

¹Department of Fine Arts, University of Delta, Agbor

egonwa1@yahoo.com / esimike.uche@unidel.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the methodological foundations of African art historical scholarship in Nigeria, arguing that the field has been shaped by frameworks imported wholesale from anthropology, sociology, and Euro-American art history, resulting in what has been described as "art history without history." Tracing the discipline's institutional development from Kenneth Murray's ethnographic studies of the 1930s–60s through the establishment of postgraduate programmes at Ahmadu Bello University, University of Nigeria Nsukka, University of Ibadan, Delta State University Abraka, and LadokeAkintola University of Technology, the paper demonstrates how foreign analytic schemes—formalism, contextualism, and connoisseurship—have proven inadequate for interpreting African art's conceptual and perceptual codes, cyclic temporal philosophy, and spirit-oriented ontology. Drawing on the author's personal scholarly experience and the intellectual legacy of Professor Cornelius OyelekeAdepegba, the paper proposes an indigenous African art history methodology grounded in oral sources (proverbs, praise poetry, incantations), artist-workshop knowledge, synchronic evidence from allied creative disciplines, and object-centered eyewitness engagement, while cautioning against uncritical reliance on interviews and photographic evidence. It further addresses the politicization of contemporary African art as culturally "corrupted" by foreign influence, countering this view by framing artistic dynamism as an inevitable expression of living culture. The paper concludes by calling for a revitalized professional forum—building on the stalled Art Historian Association of Nigeria—to consolidate indigenous methods, foster scholarly collaboration, and reposition African art historiography within African philosophical, oral, and performative epistemologies rather than borrowed Western paradigms.

Keywords: *African art historiography; indigenous research methodology; art history methods; Nigerian art scholarship; African aesthetics*

Introduction

Scholastic attention to what is presently Nigerian arts and craft began since the 1930s with the efforts of Kenneth C. Murray (1902-1972) and in the 40s with some secondary school art teachers such as C .C. Ibeto (1915-1995), A. J. UdoEna, (1913-1996), J. O. Ugoji (1917-1981) (Egonwa 2007). By the early 1960s Murray had engaged a number of American Peace Corps Volunteers to embark on more systematic academic study of different material cultures in various parts of Nigeria. These however, were in terms of methods largely ethnographic and anthropologic at the onset (Foss 2003; Adebayo, 2024).

The African studies programme under which African art was studied has been pioneered by interest groups of diverse scholarly background and motives. Concept and models developed in other disciplines especially anthropology and sociology did not facilitate the speedy advancement of African art history (Gerbrands, 1990): the sheepish adoption of the methods of other disciplines was a disservice to knowledge production in African art history. Obviously these limitations in methodological approaches led to a situation described by Olodi (2004) as "art history without history" (Adebayo, 2024).

Though the pond of African art research had been stirred earlier by foreigners since 1966 through the Federal Department of Antiquities, Ahmadu Bello University was first to mount a postgraduate art history programme in 1970. Bamise-Oluwa, Collette Omoregie whose dissertation topic is The Significance and Meanings of Selected Art forms in some Ishan Shrines (1972) is the first product (Onyeiwu, 2025). This was followed by the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1975, with an undergraduate art history programme and a studio masters, - the MFA, but providing support for foreign student researchers Igbo and Ibibio art history. The early 1980s ushered in the Institute of

African Studies University of Ibadan into research in African art history. Patricia Oyelolas, *Yoruba decorative Batik: the rise and development of a new art form (1981) is the first recorded MA dissertation while Pogoson I.O'*The Esie Stone Images and Their Relationship to other Arts of South Western Nigeria (1990)", is the first doctoral thesis. Delta State University, Abraka one of the most active of these art history training institutions started hers in 1996. Agholor Josephs. The study of Selected Early Modern Nigerian Artists of the 5th Decades in Private and Public Collections in Nigeria (2002). EmeniOnyemas Visual Languages and Ideologies of Representation in Modern Nigeria, Arts (2005) is amongst the first set of five doctoral graduates in 2005 (Anamaleze, 2025). LadokeAkintola University of Technology Ogbomoso began her programme at about 1996/97 shufficIdowu's study of graphic artists in Lagos and Oyo State (2005) is the first master's dissertation (Adebayo, 2024).

Conceptual Framework

Visual artistic literacy, preclude the hypothesis that sensory habits and communication codes, are affected by cultures traits (Dyson, 1986). That being so understanding images in given cultures, should not be taken for granted: such literacy will be acquired via training. How much our foreign African arts scholars have acquired this literacy is not certain. What I am sure of, is that extant so-called "mainstream" procedures for art historical studies are mostly suited to the Euro- America and Asian art historians to synthesize workable foreign and indigenous, principles and techniques in the way studio artists are adapting classical idioms in their current practice?

Any attempt towards an African idea of art history must begin with knowledge of philology of art history is, therefore, a search for Africa wisdom engraved in art and experience (Onyeiwu, 2025). To the African art is not an ultimate demonstration of imitative prowess, art belongs to the world of the spirit with its own higher order of reality. I.e. imitation ranks low in its modes of presentation, boundless expressive and emotive impact on encounter.

No attempt is made to hide the human authorship of art works. (Enwonwu, 1977; Onyeiwu, 2025) Art makes visible the otherwise invisible. (Klee, 1909; Anamaleze, 2025) A spirit partner must have (spirit) non-human features. To see it as non-articulate on the ground of its remoteness from real human is an error in the African idea of art. Elsewhere I said,

" . . . art belongs to the world of creativity; (the autonomy of art works;) of the spirit blacksmith or of the world of Ala or Obatala from where men and women are given the blessing of dexterity of manipulation and sensitive vision. Visual images belong to the creative world with its own laws not our physical world from where they minister to the needs of man to influence his conditions as desired" (Egonwa 2005:35).

That is why the Igbo would metaphorically describe an exceptional artificer! artist as spirit one and also a fruit not suitable because its beyond human consumption as spirit species. Thus we hear of UzuMmuo (spirit blacksmith/wonderful blacksmith) DintaMmuo (spirit hunter); AnunuMmuo (spirit garden egg). This philosophy according to Mudimbe (1988) is to be found from primordial African discourse in its various forms. I recall Adepegba's (1982), "the essence of the image in Yoruba Religious Sculptures".

This paper shall examine some operative constructs, but specifically share my experiences in the application of indigenous concepts and research paradigms in my practice of art history. These ideas are wwkinf un our effort to sustain the pioneering works of patriarchs such as Professor Cornelius OyelekeAdepegba un whose honour and memory we are holding this academic meet(Asogwa, and Odoh, 2023).

It sets out to share some thoughts on methodological proclures that can be called African in identity aEI origin under the following sub-topics:

1. Art History Methods and African Art History
2. Towards an Indigenous African Art History Methods
3. Sources for African Art History
4. Current African Art
5. Conclusion

Art History Methods and African Art History

By the western heritage via college training an African art historian is expected to be exposed to Euro-America art history methods. Today, many standard texts are available which parade these methods. Examples are *Art Across Time* Adams (1999); Helen Gardener's *Art Through the Ages* 7th Ed (1976). The *Story of Art* Gombrich E.M (1995); *Art: An Introduction*, Dale Claver (1966) etc. One could isolate many popular art historical analytic and interpretive schemes spread across three main divisions set out below for reasons of scholastic and practical encounter with works of art:

- i. Formalism
- ii. Contextualism
- iii. Connoisseurship

The formalist responds to formal elements in works of art and their aesthetic effects. His interpretation is anchored thus on the stylistic features of the work more than its content. The Contextualist adores formal and non-formal content of the art work over structure or form. Much as depth of analysis is predicted on contextualization imposed on data, form and content are riveted in any valid historical interpretation (Asogwa, and Odoh, 2023). Thus Autobiography, Biography, Deconstruction, Feminism, Marxism, semiology, Iconography and Psychoanalysis as methods engage art historical contextual analyses which, nevertheless, have form as their rallying point. Ordinarily connoisseurship is a contextual frame, but only distinguished by its attendant economic consideration. The isolation of connoisseurship here is guided by its functionalist status.

Categories adopted for the study of art history in the West are mostly suited to two dimensional painting and illusionistic anthropomorphic sculpture. This is why African art history was not considered as a possibility until the 19th century (Adams 1989). Secondly historical time and movement has been considered only on a linear frame without regard to the cyclic time frame discernible in Africa's art stylistic evolution. Based on these facts many art historians with western training background overly worry about the shallow time frame affordable by available works of art for historical interpretation.

That fact *neliK** worry anyone in Africa as those who created the art work operate a cyclic time philosophy. Common sense detects that to use a linear assessment for the value and social relevance of such works is putting a square peg on a round hole. For instance, ritual carved objects are in use in many African groups as long as they make the things they are created for happen. Once they become impotent they are thrown away and another made to replace them. The sense of time is eternal (conceptual) as those objects are still regarded as the original ones. By that reasoning, it is insignificant and in fact, an abomination to keep the impotent one. Why does one need to preserve such an objects? Here lies the futility of bemoaning the shallow time-depth, of lost ancient art and its chronology (Ogbeche, 2023).

Toward an Indigenous African Art History Method

For long the West have neglected a convention that would be called African in their study of African art (Aiodun, 1984). When they do they resort to solely non-vision based theories such as semiotics, and ritual incantation poetry. Their weakness more than their strength is that art operates on visual syntax, with own codes different from verbal syntax.

African art combines both conceptual and perceptual codes in its formal and contextual make up. That is why "what we think we have seen about particular African visual configurations could be misleading without appropriate conceptual experience in terms of theories which inform them".

For instance, the apparent "smiling visage" of Zaire Mintadi soapstone (plate 2-1) is antithetical (perceptually) to the attitude supposedly portrayed. These figures are actually conceived as mourners who stand in for its "donors" who commission them (Egonwa 2005). Appraising such an object based on "mainstream" representational expectancy patterns may not be productive. Thus the western dictum that "form follows function", does not apply here, even when "function is a condition for Africa art being art" (Enwonwu 1974). The West is yet to recover from the tendency to feel that natural proportions are representational imagery is the only scheme of the diverse ways

in which ideas of form can be handled. They know nothing about proportion of significance, or proportion of reject which derives from the philosophy, that "fire drives put fire".

A wise man says that what you do not like you do not watch. Sometimes you need to watch what you do not like to become desensitized to it, so is to forget it. Since not watching is to make one to forget, being too familiar via watching can make create contempt and invariably make one to forget. This is the use of ugly masks proportion of reject (Ogbeche, 2023).

For example, a respected Urhobo art specialist Perkins Foss (2003) write about Ayererivbi and Osharerivbi-spint partners thus; "of all the images of Urhobo art, those of the spirit spouse are the least articulated". His opinion is based on its outward appearance which has no similitude of anthropomorphic semblance between it and the signified.

Sources and Tools for African Art History

Knowledge or Practice from Artist Workshops

Information previously thought to be exclusive to conventional literature are now available in artistic practices not yet published in known conventional ways. It could be reposed on living legends, manuals, and import manifest, bill of quantities and programme of social events. The notebooks, sketch pads, and studio memoirs of studio artists are useful art history sources for the new art historian. Hence it's now advisable to resort to Review of Related Literature, Knowledge and Practice.

Instrument for the Study of African Art.

Interviews may be used but; interviews should be screened for or against situational use of figures of speech in what is considered plain narrative. Languages users in Franco-phone Guinea Coast have what they call "responses la parole" in which lies or falsehood could be deliberately told to hide classified information. Most Africans would not divulge or disclose actual facts, when they want to feel important or when they are not sure of the intention of the interviews. So question traps should be set to elicit information. Indirect question are more effective than direct ones.

It is advisable to record such interviews, so one can replay them several times. Oral sources Orature are valid for art historical interpretations but they must be crosschecked against visual evidence.

Visual conventions or image types may uphold or refute verbal information about an image typology. Wisecracks, proverbs, ritual incantations, song texts and praise poetry are very useful. The Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Izon, Mada and Chamba have a repertoire of such oral sources that will help us understand some of their visual exploits (Ogbeche, 2023).

Synchronic Evidence

Visual arts of not too distant time periods could be pitched against subthemes in the allied areas of theatre art, music, poetry and creative writing for the interpretation of aspects of modern African art. Images of the colonialist, foreign soldier weapons and religious insignia or models have been shared by these disciplines. This method has been useful in the water spirit studies in South Central and Mid-Western Nigeria (Drewal 2007).

Object-Centered Study of Art forms

The encounter with works of art entails a dialogue between it and the preceptor. Relating a message of such an encounter to a third person is unlike verbal language. The depth of meaning is very much predicted on personal eye witness. Eye witness accounts are respected primary historical data. Art historians now must learn to rely on facts decoded and recorded from actual works of art. The Sotheby Institute, London not long ago began training of curators and art critics based on the logic. Photographs are good but they contain distortion due to environment and mechanical conditions of cameras, adjacent or background forms digital image treatment devices of our age requires that we take facts from photographs with caution as digital image use and abuse cannot be ignored (Ogene 2006).

However, photographs, and illustrations made directly from art objects are useful when reporting visual or art historian researches.

Art Historical Paradigms

Art historians unlike anthropologies, until recently were not often mindful of conceptual models in the study of African art history. When it began to be adopted, it was by "anthropologists interested in art, who dominated the field till 1960, "according to Drewal (1990). For African art history theoretical models are essential to avoid one "seeing the art forms through, the nose" (Alejolojukomoiran fi I wo). This upholds the truth that intellectual constructs underlie the creation and perception of sensual forms. Yoruba scholars have made significant mark in the unearthing of these multifaceted varied and enlightening constructs, in popularizing Yoruba aesthetics in the Americas today.

Professor Cornelius Oyeleke Adepegba's scholarship was seasoned by a studied use of these non-literature materials, specifically OduIfa in the interpretation of African art forms. Through this effort in concert with some "foreign friends of Africa such as professor Roy Siebe (1923- 2001), Douglas Fraser, Simon Ottenberg (b. 1932), Robert Farris Thompson, Herbert Cole, John Henry Drewal (b. 1941), William Peek, Perkins Foss and Arnold Rubin amongst others, Africa's art could now be studied for what it is.

These constructs and theoretical frames are increasing in number. Most importantly, it may interest us to know that the diverse strategies which characterize contemporary arts are qualities in classical African arts, appropriated refined and re-circulated to us. Such constructs as site specificity, accumulation, hybridization, discursivity, impermanence eclecticism and multi-disciplinarity are rooted in Africa's formal intellectualism.

Current African Art History

The study of this class of art has been politicized by the West with cries of "corruption with foreign contact" Odata (2005), but they are not feeling uncomfortable as humans with the spate of cross-racial marriages since the U.S particularly opened its doors to foreigner-Asian, Jew, Australians etc. If marriage as an element of culture could absorb good traits from the other why art be an exception?

Dress habits in Europe and America have been influenced by classical African types. Why is it not seen as corruption? The conclusion of this matter is that since art is an element of culture, and culture is dynamic art must manifest this dynamism. The environment of art's creation, whether physical or ideological must have imprint on its form and content.

The few worries on writing about current art are lack of ethical rectitude on the part of the many arm-chair researchers who do not follow the rules of trade. Art story is a game of valid evidence buoyed on robust data theory. Art historians need to base interpretation on authentic data. The second is lack of adequate support for art historians by those who need their services most; the art collectors, and gallery owners. The art Mafia of Lagos should engage art historians to help with their collection and art administration policies. Charity begins at home not from abroad. Art history is a profession; exhibiting artists, art collectors, museums, galleries, theater artistes, film producers and research Institutes need their services.

Conclusion

The field of African art history had been long dominated by those whose interest was not passionately art, but curiosity in the use art as an anti-factual tool to interpret the alien culture of the African. The culture of art history they created gave the false impression of a boundless field of play by all without a modus operandi and definition of purpose, especially in Nigeria. The paucity of forum for exchange of ideas by leaders in the field and upgrade for the led worsened the situation. The Art Historian Association of Nigeria (AHAN) was a good proposal that was not allowed to work. I have always believed that such a forum would have afforded ways to find consensus solutions to vital questions in our field such as research frontiers, methods, collaborations etc.

The slow development of an indigenous techniques-centered procedure of studying African art history was considered uncivilized by our western trained art historians. Now that globalization encourages thinking globally and acting locally: now that ideas known and applied for our ancestors have been repackaged in an appropriate language of transmission and recirculated to the world, should we not pick up the gauntlet? African art historiography must be studied with the hindsight of African philosophy from oral and performance sources, the insight of creative sensitivity to cultural realities and the foresight of projective/predictive reconstruction: The stranger sees through the nose according to a Yoruba adage: a man is always the chief priest in his shrine. (Igbo adage) We have what it takes to develop workable methods for studying Africa's visual arts, past or present.

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