

VERSATILITY IN MODERN NIGERIAN ART: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

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Abstract

Using historical and narrative approach, this study examines the art practice of a special breed of prodigious artists endowed with superlative artistic and creative abilities; the artists who professionalise in two or more areas of the visual arts at the same time and practise them with equal dexterity. The study has also suggested a generic term for this long existing tradition of art practice.

Introduction

Traces of modernity in Nigerian art expression were first noticed in the art of the indigenous Benin artists of the sixteenth century, when they began to incorporate in their art forms Euro-Christian concepts and symbols that were brought in by the Portuguese.¹ However, modern Nigerian art, as we know it today, realistically began in the early twentieth century with the singular efforts of an Ijebu-Ode-born artist, Aina Onabolu (1882 - 1963).² He was a self trained artist who had produced outstanding academic drawings and paintings before he went for formal art training in academies in London and Paris.³ He established the basis on which modern art expression in Nigeria was developed. Most significant among his landmark achievements was his influencing the deployment of a British art teacher, Kenneth Crosswaite Murray, to Nigeria by the Education Department of the British Colonial Office.

Murray came to Nigeria in 1927 to assist in teaching art in Nigerian schools and colleges. As soon as he resumed his teaching, he cultivated in his students the spirit of indigenising their art; making their art to reflect their African culture. Thus, he liberated the minds of some new Nigerian art students already suffused with the photorealistic tendencies of Onabolu. He catalysed and revolutionalised the art activity already begun by Onabolu. Onabolu was intent on continuing the Western art style of pure naturalism, factual or realistic representation of life. He later substantiated and gave local flavour to Onabolu's landmark achievements. Through his dogged "culturistic ideology and heuristic approach"⁴ to art teaching, he refocused the direction of art teaching and practice.

In fact, it was Murray who gave Nigerian art its image and identity through sensitising his students, in the 1930s particularly, to the rich cultural and artistic heritage of their people or the culturally and artistically fertile environment they lived in, and urging them to integrate them with the new techniques and media they were being introduced to. Through his efforts, the new Nigerian artists began to employ the newly introduced Western ideas, materials and techniques in a synergy with indigenous ideologies to express Nigerian concepts and ideals. In other words, they blended the newly introduced ideas, materials and techniques and Nigerian indigenous ideologies to achieve a uniquely modern artistic expression which can be identified as wholly Nigerian in form and content.⁵

This marked the beginning of a new era in Nigerian art scene, when Nigerian art began to show bold traces of symbiosis between Western aesthetics and sensibilities and Nigerian concepts. This was the period of cultural dialogue between the traditional artistic ideologies and the Western aesthetic principles. During this period, Nigerian artists embraced Western aesthetic elements but still held on to the older forms of Nigerian aesthetic principles, thoughtfully employing those cultural elements in a positive, forward-looking manner rather than in a way that was nostalgic. Ben Enwonwu, one of Murray's students, was one of the best exponents of this ideal. He was able to validate Murray's ideas throughout his practice as an artist. Enwonwu though did not see reasons initially for Murray's promptings to culturistic approach, later did not only embrace but also borrowed enormously from his (Enwonwu's) Onitsha Igbo cultural background and experiences. Thus, he was deeply influenced and inspired by Igbo aesthetics and philosophy particularly that of his cultural background, an influence which he repeatedly turned to the spirited imagery of African dancers and masquerades as exemplified in Figure 1.



Fig. 1: Ben Enwonwu, *The Dancers*, Mixed Media, 1975
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Between the foundational work of Enwonwu and the 'revolutionary spirit' of the Zaria Art Society, spearheaded by yet another modern Nigerian artist, Uche Okeke, who enunciated the philosophy of Natural Synthesis, modern Nigerian art has exponentially grown and diversified. The Zaria Art Society eventually adopted Murray's advocacy for inward search for, adoption and projection of, the Nigerian cultural and artistic ideals and carried them to a greater height in the 1950s. This was through the philosophy of natural synthesis which emphasised the integration and synthesis of the best of the indigenous and Western ideas and concepts. That is to say that what Murray started in the early 1930s with a few students was bolstered by the Zaria Art Society in the late 1950s. The activities of the Zaria Art Society pushed Murray's revolutionary and radical approach to art to the next level in Nigeria and indeed Africa in the middle of the twentieth century. These artists have shown, through their adaptation of traditional folktales and mythologies that re-engaging the traditional imageries for contemporary vision would not have any adverse or destructive effect on the Nigerian traditional visual culture. The artists who practise within the purview of this new art are referred to as modern Nigerian artists.

This category of artists enjoys a high level of freedom that gives them the leverage to unbridled experimentation with the new, non-conventional and non-indigenous materials and techniques. Their curiosity to explore, or what Dele Jegede refers to as a "fervid upsurge of creative enterprise"⁶, has engendered the creation of distinctive artistic styles that depict a fascinating union of the old and new art forms.⁷ With masterful inventiveness and dexterity, they have deftly employed non-indigenous materials and sensibility in a synergic manner

with traditional modes and symbolisms to achieve a new creative idiom. This innovative experimentation results in a wide range of individual styles which manifest in producing resplendent works of exceptional power and originality, and in interpretations of themes that reflect the new Nigerian art culture.⁸ In the course of these profuse experimentations, some artists have discovered the artistic potentials of other media and, as a result, traverse their areas of specialisation to explore other areas of art, evolving into what, in this paper, has been aptly referred to as creative and artistic versatility.

Artists are usually guided by the nature and character of the art material which in turn governs the design of an art work. This could be seen in Erhabor Emokpae's *The Seeker* (Fig. 5). The pose was not only strongly affected by the narrow dimension of the wood block he used but also restricted the figure's outward movement into space.⁹ Therefore, to be truly versatile in art, an artist needs to be abreast of the various art disciplines and the media and materials most appropriate in each area or discipline to be able to respond appropriately to his artistic instincts at all times. As a result, he needs not know any bounds with regards to areas of specialisation. This way, an artist may not be tethered to only one mode of artistic expression but be exposed to different disciplines of art as well as different media of art expression which invariably peeps up the style and technique of the artist and makes them unique. Demas Nwoko, for instance, has proven his artistic and creative versatility by traversing interdisciplinary borders of art, technology and architecture as well as writing well-articulated essays on architecture, religion, art, technology and aesthetics.¹⁰ With this wide scope of media, he could interpret his concepts in any appropriate medium suitable for any concept.

A veteran versatile artist and staunch member of the Zaria Art School, Nwoko has been described as the most versatile, exciting and creative artist among his contemporaries. He is a painter whose work is pervaded by an intensive expressiveness and who has in recent years also experimented with sculpture and even architecture.¹¹ Demas Nwoko is an adroit Nigerian artist, sculptor, painter and designer who has shown marked versatility in the many ways he has manipulated diverse artistic tools and media in his works.¹² He drew inspiration from indigenous architecture in his experiment with building forms. Impressively, working in all these media, his creations are unique in their inventiveness and visual imagery.¹³

In a bid to ascribe a suitable term to this age-old art tradition, various terms such as All-round artist, Multi-talent artist, Multiple-talented artist, Multidisciplinary artist, Multifaceted artist and Multimedia artist, among others, have been used to refer to artists in this category. All these describe to a certain degree the art concept but have not really defined the concept. What this paper has, therefore, tried to do has been to suggest a more acceptable, definitive and appropriate term for the artists in the category.

The Concept of Versatility in the Visual Arts

The concept of creative and artistic versatility is an age old tradition that has been in practice through the ages. Starting from the pre-historic periods, the hunter-artist was artistically versatile; he was a painter, textile artist, carver as well as a potter. Similarly, the artists in the traditional cultures of the world were also all these in one. For instance, in the traditional African society, an ironsmith was also a flutist, a wood carver as well as a weaver

and painter. During these periods, however, there was no clear delineation among these art practices as we have them today; they were all often practised by an individual artist. To them any activities involving skillful creation of beauty or utilitarian objects is art, whether in the medium of painting, carving, weaving, dyeing or pottery. A traditional carver who carved masks enhanced the beauty or the potency of the masks by imparting colours on them. In the traditional African context, different colours convey different meanings to different people in different situations. In modern art practice, the visual arts are compartmentalised into different areas of specialisation and are, therefore, media-defined. It is indeed interesting to note that, in spite of the compartmentalisation, a number of modern artists still continue to work in diverse media and variety of forms characterised by a profusion of individualised artistic styles, processes and themes. As a result of the use of multivariate media and materials, the artists cannot be defined by media affiliation or discipline.

In Euro-American art world, there were, and still are, very many creatively, artistically and professionally versatile artists. For example, Leonardo da Vinci was a painter, sculptor, architect, engineer, and scientist. Michelangelo was another notable European versatile artist. He was a painter, sculptor, architect, and poet. Giorgio Vasari, the pioneer historian of art, Pietro da Cortona, Baldassare Tommaso Peruzzi, Guilo Romano and Taddeo Gaddi have all distinguished themselves as those who practised as painters and architects with equal propensity. In the area of sculpture and printmaking, the artists who have shown impressive artistry as sculptors and printmakers include, among others, Elizabeth Catlett, Jasper Johns, and Sandro Chia. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy was a world renowned versatile artist who practised painting, sculpture, designing and photography simultaneously.

In Africa, examples of the artists in this category also abound. Examples given in this paper are drawn from different parts of Africa for a wide geographic representation. Tekle Aferwerk was an Ethiopian painter and sculptor; Kofi Antubam, a Ghanaian painter and sculptor; Theresa Musoke, a Ugandan female painter and graphic artist; Sam Songo, a Zimbabwean painter and sculptor; Rosemary Karuga, a Kenyan female sculptor and collagist; and Issa Sambo, a Senegalese painter and sculptor; and a host of others from Nigeria. Since creative and artistic versatility began in Nigeria in the early twentieth century with Aina Onabolu, the pioneer and patriarch of modern Nigerian art, an impressive number of Nigerian artists have followed his example. He was a painter, designer and an art historian. Among the early apostles of creative and artistic versatility in modern Nigerian art were Akinola Lasekan who was a painter, cartoonist and graphic artist and who also, to some extent, engaged in textile production and Benedict Chukwuka Enwonwu, a renowned painter and sculptor.

Very many other modern Nigerian artists have followed their examples; but a few to a more professionalising level. These include, among very many others, Uche Okeke, painter, sculptor, poet, art historian and designer; Abayomi Barber, a painter and sculptor; Demas Nwoko, a painter, sculptor, architect, art critic and actor; Erhabor Emokpae, a painter and sculptor; Victor Efosa Uwaifo, sculptor, architect, painter and graphic artist; Clara Etsu Ugbodaga-Ngu, a female sculptor and painter and the first trained Nigerian female artist and art educationist; Afi Constance Ekong, a female painter, textile designer and graphic artist; and Ndidi Dike, a female painter and sculptor. Today the list is inexhaustible as so many artists curiously vacillate from one art disciplinary pole to the other in search of creative

consummation. Versatility, as used in this paper, therefore, defines the art practise in which a particular artist works and experiments across, and professionalises in, different art disciplines at a time. This implies that the emphasis here is on professionalism and not just on those who create in diverse art media for the mere fact that they have general knowledge of the visual arts.

The Versatile Artists

The artists who belong to this category are those who no longer find it satisfying enough to work in only one art medium like Sculpture, Ceramics, Textiles and Painting. Consequently, they strive to free themselves from the fetters of conventional art practise that enslaves one to the dictates of art traditions or canons, which, it is believed, challenges and benumbs creativity. Many of the artists have metamorphosed into great experimentalists who show unusual technical skills, strong imagination and independence of mind as well as resourcefulness and highly ingenious approach to achieve creative synthesis. These are those artists with prodigious talent and unbridled imagination whose areas of specialisation cannot easily be pinpointed because of their also being equally dexterous and technically proficient in other areas of art they have ventured into. A good example is an artist who trained as a painter but also shows unprecedented talent in other areas of the visual arts like sculpture or textiles.

Therefore, based on the premise of this study, the visual artists who have been categorised as the versatile artists are those unique or creative geniuses with utmost transcendental abilities or "explosive creative talent" to work in two or more different areas of art with equal skills and proficiencies to a professional level. They are the metaphorical art wizards with uncommon or superhuman talents, the "rare artists from the outer space"¹⁴ who possess special attributes: "personal creativity, uniqueness, strong feeling, adventure, individuality, and imagination, as exemplified in artistic freedom and expressiveness."¹⁵ They are the superhuman professional artists who exhibit extraordinary talent for creativity and artistry in different art media. These are the artists whose creative ingenuity and artistic intuitiveness are superlatively above the ordinary. They are not only knowledgeable about the visual arts in general but have developed high level of proficiency, and professionalised, in two or more areas of the visual arts at the same time such that their areas of specialisation are difficult to locate.

Nevertheless, it is pertinent to further state that there are so many other artists who may be misconstrued to be versatile, but the context of this paper does not include them. These are those who explore other art disciplines not as a means to satisfying their creative instincts or to a professional level but for economic satisfaction. Economic needs notwithstanding are also unmistakable firing pins by which versatility could be motivated but this paper has considered them not to be truly versatile in the strictest sense of its use here. They only dabbled into such artistic enterprise "just as a means to earn some money" but not in the quest of satisfying creative urge.¹⁶ For instance, Andy Warhol, an American artist, who started his career in art as an illustrator of shoes had the conviction that once he had established a financial base for himself through commercial art, his transition from an illustrator of shoes to a painter of Pop icons was going to be remarkably quick.¹⁷ In this sense, Warhol

was not practising commercial art to assuage creative urge but for economic reasons. It may be probably for this same reason that Erhabor Emokpae, a renowned Nigerian painter and sculptor, worked as a graphic designer for LINTAS, a well-known advertising firm in Lagos in the 1960s. He was using what he was earning to augment what he was making from the sale of his art works which he was usually very reluctant to sell.¹⁸ Nevertheless, both artists later developed into world class versatile artists. Presently, many modern Nigerian artists are found in this category of diversifying their art practise mainly for financial gains and not specifically to consummate creative inquisitiveness. Also conspicuous in this category of artists are the roadside artists who could create in varied art media but unprofessionally. Therefore, in the sense versatility is used here, the artists in this category could not be said to be creatively and artistically versatile; they are general practitioners.

In contrast, there are still other artists who may be loosely considered versatile in their particular areas of specialisation. These are those who are versatile in creating works in different media within the ambit of the same art discipline. A sculptor who creates works in Plexiglas, galvanized steel, brushed aluminum, metal, cement, fibre glass, or wood could be loosely referred to as being versatile within the sphere of sculpture. Nevertheless, strictly interpreted, such an artist is not considered a versatile artist in the strictest sense because the artist only strides along a polar axis of an art discipline. A sculptor is a sculptor, whether in Plexiglas, bronze, cement, or wood, among others. The one that is considered to be creatively, artistically and professionally versatile in this context is the one who, at least, operates at professional level in sculpture and one or more areas or disciplines at the same time, skillfully exploring their materials, media and techniques in equal capacity and proficiency. The versatile artists move from one art discipline to another to explore and express their perception of the social, religious, political and cultural environment. Ndidi Dike after graduation as a painter in 1981 discovered the potency of wood as a creative medium and temporarily abandoned painting. She resumed her painting in 2004 with a series of paintings she tagged Uli Suites and Paintings. What probably informs the artistic and creative ideology of this category of artists is the fact that some concepts are better expressed in solid, three-dimensional forms, whereas others are best in two-dimensional forms. Some concepts are best expressed on flat surfaces such as paintings, drawings and designs, whereas others are better expressed as stables, mobiles, reliefs or sculptures-in-the-round.

In this regard, some operate even beyond the confines of the visual arts to areas like Poetry, Performance and Engineering, which afford them the opportunity to use different traditional and non-traditional materials and media of expression to search for a new and more appropriate creative idiom. Buttressing further on the multidimensionality of media appropriation and art technique, Diplomzulike, for instance, explains that whenever he places a concept on a table to see the three-dimensional aspect of it, he discovers that sculptures only, or performance only, or writing only cannot say what he wants to say. For that reason, for every work or every concept or every rumbling, he tries to look at other ways to put depth and some kind of clarity to it. At times something comes up; at times it just remains as raw as it is.¹⁹ The above statement gives credence to the position of this study, that different categories of artists who have embraced this trajectory of artistic versatility include artists who traverse two or more art disciplines in search of creative fulfillment. These include

artists such as painters who also produce sculpture, printmakers who paint, graphic designers who produce sculptures, architects who paint or sculpt, or sculptors who are also painters and graphic artists, textile artists who also sculpt or paint, and so forth, to the professional level.²⁰

Conventionally, textile artists only produced works with functionality in mind, particularly to serve as clothing in different forms. Functionality is no longer the only determining or motivational factor for textile production in the present time. Textile production has, therefore, transgressed from the realm of Applied Arts to the domain of Fine Arts where aesthetics is the primary concern. Textiles today produce non-wearable materials in which non-textile materials and techniques are also employed for their execution. Similarly, it has been the tradition of sculptors to produce works only in different materials and media within the ambit of sculpture. Today, many artists no longer find specialising in and orbiting around one art discipline fulfilling enough. To them, no one art technique or medium of art expression is adequate enough to consummate their creative impulses. Corroborating this widely held view, Ndidi Dike succinctly states that the tactility of a medium has always been her attraction as an artist; that since she graduated as a painter, she decided to explore the nuances and expression of the wood panel language as the next logical step to take to visually express her instinctual feelings at that moment.²¹

Furthermore, combination of objects and transgressing the confines of areas of specialisation as manoeuvres to satisfy creative inquisitiveness were not the only ploy by the versatile artists. In addition to exploring the use of tangible conventional and non-conventional materials, they also explored the integration of words into works of art to interrogate their visual and verbal intercourse. This practise was introduced into art in the early cubist paintings. Today, Nigerian artists have embraced it. For instance, in Agbo Folarin's screen printed textiles (Fig. 2), he integrated Yoruba symbolic inscriptions *gbogbo alamu lo dobale*, which literally means, all reptiles lie on their bellies so it is difficult to notice the one that suffers from stomach ache. Similarly, Emmanuel Inua in the inscription in his painting, *Our Children, Our Future* (Fig. 3), admonishes Nigerian politicians to please think of the future of the country by enunciating policies that will protect the future of the Nigerian nation.



Fig. 2: Agbo Folarin, Printed Textile, Screen printing,
© USO: Nigerian Journal of Art, 1995.

Adewale in No. 1 (Fig. 4) demands to know “what benefit is running if you’re on the wrong road?” He counsels the Nigerian polity that there is no benefit in cutting corners to attain any goal; that tantamount to being on the wrong road. The words are used to further strengthen the meaning the works of art intend to convey. When in the early cubist paintings they first appeared in art, they were used as mere surface embellishments, not as an intrinsic part of the work. But in the present application, they are used as subject matter or as visual imageries to convey messages. In this respect, Oliver Andrews observes:

Today, letters and words are used in painting and sculpture as forms interesting in themselves, and also in a poetic way, where the actual meaning of the word is its reason for being there. In some ... work ... there is a double ambiguity in that, rather than the word being on the sculpture, the word is the sculpture.²²

Versatility in the visual arts is mainly motivated in the artists by the urge to satisfy the creative instinct; the craving for the instinctual side of human nature. Naturally, artists are imbued with different shades of latent creativity, each struggling for supremacy in the unconscious. Eventually, one or more of them will overwhelm the others and surface on the periphery to take preeminence over the others. That therefore becomes the one the artist practises as his specialisation.



Fig. 3: Emmanuel Inua, *Our Children, Our Future*, Mixed Media, 125 x 95 cm, 2008
© Time art Gallery, Lagos.

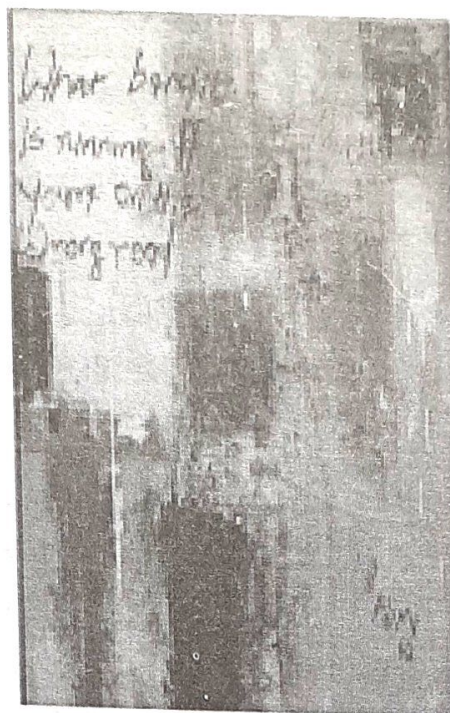


Fig. 4: Alimi Adewale, *No. 1*, 86 x 86 cm, 2010
© Time art Gallery, Lagos.



Fig. 5: Eshobor Eseluqwa, *The Sankofa*, Wood
© Ikemolal Museum, 1979

Conclusion

It is incontrovertible that every visual artist has a fair knowledge of every aspect of the visual arts and, therefore, has the flair for working in two or more areas of the visual arts, at least to a level of general practise. This implies that an artist who specialised in textiles, for example, naturally, can also produce works in sculpture, painting, graphics, and ceramics, among others. Based on this common knowledge, many laypersons and uninformed artists argue that classifying some visual artists as being versatile was a misnomer, arguing that every artist is versatile. This study has not disputed the ability of every artist in the general practise. However, what the researcher suggests here is that, versatility, as is used in this context, categorises artists based on the degree of competences, proficiencies or professionalism in their areas of practise. Chris Afuba's statement that "all artists are the same, but the perspicacity of their vision and the power of their works depends on the degree of their attachment to various elements and principles of design" gives credence to the writer's position.²³ It suggests that, even though every artist has the capability to work in diverse media, the degree of their proficiency and professionalism distinguish them. In that regard, it is not improper that some artists who have distinguished themselves by showing uncommon prowess in different areas of art at the same time are isolated and given a generic name. Stated otherwise, the researcher earnestly believes that inasmuch it is usual for people involved in specialised professions, such as the visual arts, to develop terminologies they use in their profession, the idea of categorising these artists as versatile is in order.

In every profession, there are degrees of competences, proficiencies or professionalism, hence there are such terms as amateurs or charlatans and specialists or professionals used to describe people at different strata of proficiency echelon. Take for instance the medical profession. There are many doctors practising as general practitioners and some who

are referred to as Specialist Doctors to whom special medical or surgical cases are referred. The Specialist Doctors constitute the doctors who have developed a high level of proficiency in particular areas of medical or surgical practice through training and practise which they practise to a professional degree. This does not, however, mean that the general practitioners cannot do, to a certain degree, what the specialists do in those areas, but that, they are not as skilled or proficient as the specialists in the areas. Hence, in a more serious consideration of medical practice, the general practitioners may be aptly referred to as the “jack of all trades and master of none”. The versatile artists are not only masters of the two or more areas of the visual arts they engage in but practise them with extreme dexterity and to a professional level. Therefore, what the researcher is saying here is that isolating some visual artists and categorising them as versatile artists is as appropriate as referring to some football players as professionals or some doctors as specialist doctors. However, training and practise alone do not make an artist to be versatile but prodigy as well.

The analogy drawn between the specialist doctors and the versatile artists here is based on the degrees of proficiencies, competences or professionalism. It does not infer that the versatile artists should, like the specialist doctors, keep to their specialty. Rather, what is suggested is that level of proficiency should be used as the criterion in deciding whether an artist should be considered to be versatile or not. That is, an artist should only be considered to be versatile if he exhibits high level of proficiency, competence and professionalism in the two or more areas of the visual arts he engages in. The artist must also be practising them with equal dexterity much that the artist’s area of specialisation is blurred and difficult to locate. An amateur or roadside artist working in diverse media but not to this degree of professionalism should be encouraged and honoured but should not be regarded as a versatile artist; he does not qualify.

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