

**NIGERIA VISUAL ARTS
WORLD TOUR**

(NIVATOUR 1)

NIVATOUR 1

A RUN THROUGH HISTORY: Nigerian Art since the 1900s

CAIRO - (July 25 - August 03, 2010)



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

(Federal Ministry of Tourism, Culture and National Orientation)

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NIVATOUR Team

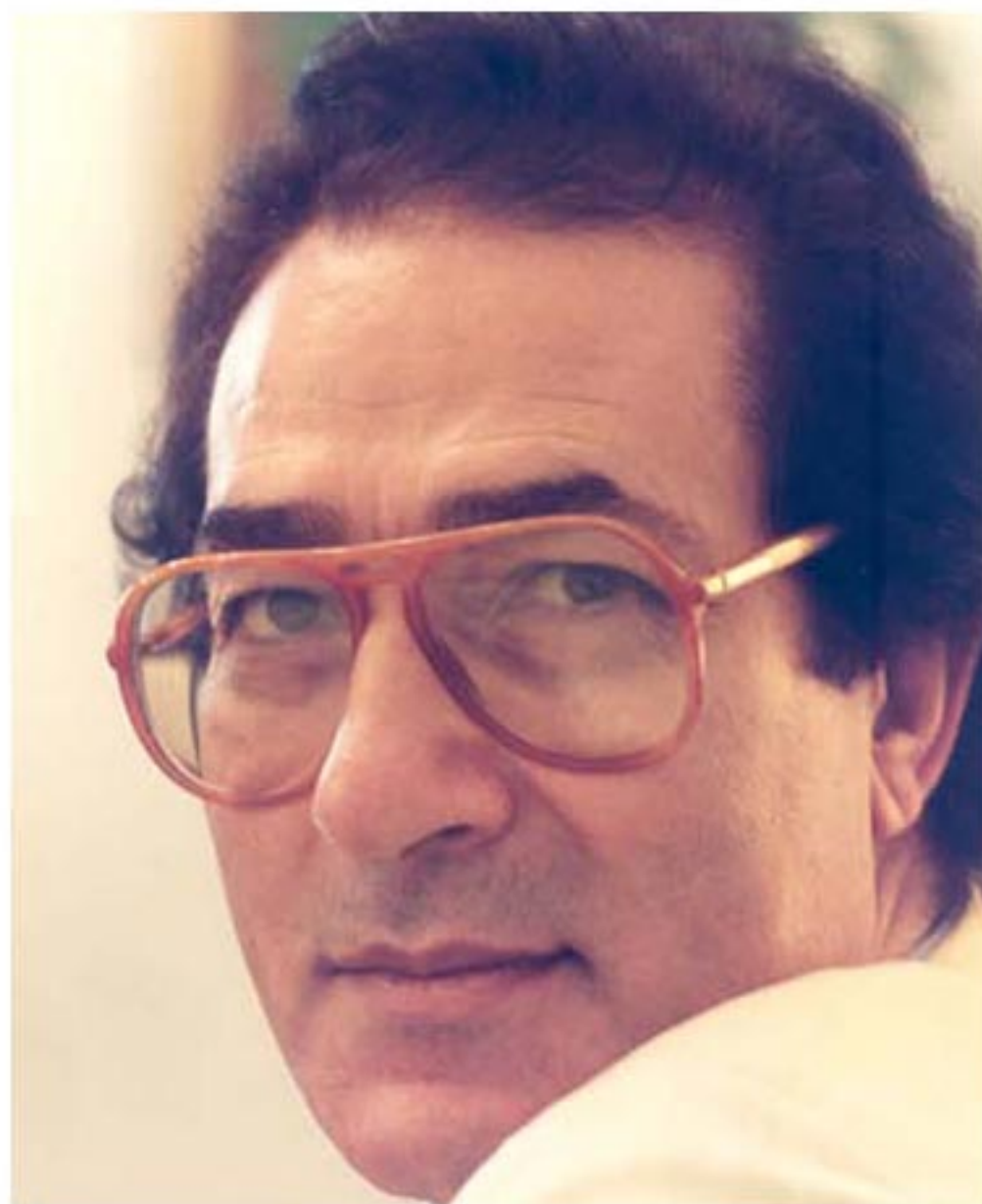
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THE EXHIBITION

1. **Part One (NIGERIA)**
 - a. Ripples of a Heritage
 - b. Trajectory
 - c. The Present as Mirror
2. **Part Two (EGYPT)**

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Farouk Hosny
Minister of Culture
Egypt

Egypt – Nigeria: Dialogue of Culture

We are very optimistic about the future development of the fruitful cultural and artistic dialogue, which is taking place in Egypt, between two African giants. In addition to historical and geographical features and potentials, Egypt and Nigeria also take pride in time-honoured heritage and civilisation. Confident of their potentials they are leaping to achieve their contemporary ambitions and deepen the reality that Africa no longer lags behind global major changes.

Farouk Hosni
Minister of Culture
Egypt



ALHAJI ABUBAKAR SADIQ MOHAMMED
Hon Minister of Tourism, Culture & National Orientation.
Federal Republic of Nigeria

Nigerian Art: Opening a Window to the World

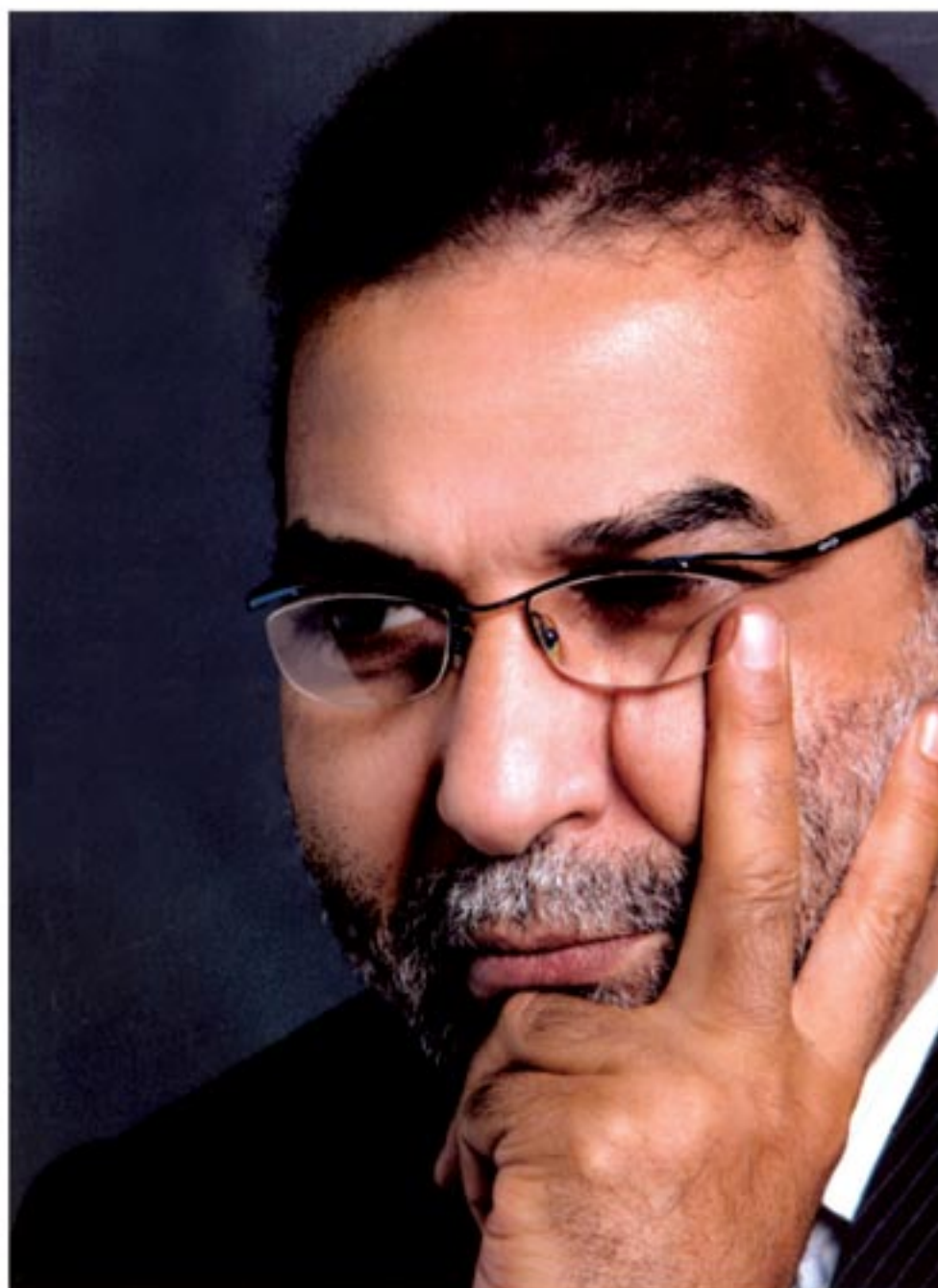
Welcome you all today to this epoch-marking visual art exhibition, which incidentally is coming on the heels of Nigeria's 50 years of independence and 2 days after the Egyptian National Day. It is set to mark the commemoration of the journey so far in the transition and radical growth from contemporary to modern in the visual art sub-sector of both great nations. Without any doubt, this artistic discourse and curatorial collaboration will bring to the front burners the strategic importance of visual arts as a major catalyst for achieving rapid economic development.

This historical exhibition has as its theme "Nigeria-Egypt: African Dialogue in Progress". Egypt, a strategic location and historical landmark in the Arts and Sciences, is indeed privileged to host the maiden edition of this memorable event, and it is no mere coincidence that NIVATOUR begins here, because according to history, Egypt is the cradle of modern civilization. The allure of Egyptian civilization, its quintessential land, the myth in their arts and culture and the warm hospitality of her people that flows effortlessly, will surely captivate any tourist and this Egyptian virtue is the much needed atmosphere for this epochal outing.

The Nigerian sub-theme of this exhibition, aptly titled, "A Run through History: Nigerian Art Since The 1900's" is a collection of creative experiences and experiments through eight decades. It will highlight, amongst other things, important events of our everyday national life, mixed with myths and folklore, conveying social, religious, and political issues as undercurrents for societal integration and development.

Thank you.

Alhaji Abubakar Sadiq Mohammed
Honourable Minister
Federal Ministry of Tourism, Culture & National Orientation.
Federal Republic of Nigeria



Mohsen Shaalan
Head of Fine arts Sector
Egyptian Ministry of Culture

Nigeria: Great Welcome to a Great Culture

It was a pleasure meeting up with the friendly Nigerian delegation several times to arrange for the production of this exhibition, and a joy to share best practice with its members. Those encounters were crowned by this first cultural collaboration between our two countries, a

Collaboration that showcases an important part of the Nigerian National Gallery of art, alongside a carefully chosen selection of contemporary artists from both countries. This unique show will provide the best segment of the Egyptian audience to share and appreciate works from a twin African Nation, a nation with a great authentic culture.

We would like here to confirm that culture is the most authentic -probably the only real language for a proper dialogue between humans, a language that transcends all ideologies and nationalities. Egypt and Nigeria share deeply founded roots in the history of the human race, the race that Africa hosted since the earliest Man.

The ancient Nigerian sculpture (sixth century a.c.) is a standing witness to wealth and beauty of one of the World's oldest civilizations. Our two countries contribute to the world's contemporary culture today through their Noble Prizewinners in literature, the two colossal figures: Wole Soyinka and Naguib Mahfouz.

Today we welcome the authentic, that African authentic; we extend a great welcome to a great nation: Nigeria.

Mohsen Shaalan
Head of Fine arts Sector
Egyptian Ministry of Culture



FOREWORD

The saying that art is an expression of the totality of man's existence and experience is indeed a truism. A people's art is the mirror of events present and past and a testimony and record for generations to come. The visual artist is the lens through which other people see his community; he is a custodian of his community's history and values. It is through his paintings, sculptures, photographs e.t.c that we learn how his society lives/lived. One function of the arts, which is also a core part of our mandate at the National Gallery of Art, is that of education through visualization.

The Nigeria visual Arts World Tour (NIVATOUR) is one of the vehicles which National Gallery of Art is using to propagate the rich culture which generations past have handed to us to the rest of the world. It is our platform for showcasing the rich artistic talents that abound in Nigeria. We intend to tour the world with the best of modern Nigerian visual arts so that the world will see that it is not only our ancient art forms that are great but that our contemporary art has evolved to the level where Nigerian visual artists can hold their own and compete favourably with the best anywhere in the world. The present exhibition, aptly tagged, "Nigeria - Egypt: African dialogue in Progress", is the first in the series of exhibitions planned for the Nigerian Visual Arts World Tour. The exhibition is divided into two main parts:

1. The Nigerian National Collection which contains works that are representative of various generations of Nigerian art. There are works from such legendary Nigerian artists as Ben Enwonwu, Erhabor Emokpae, Abayomi Barber, Francis Osague, Ladi Kwali and Chris Echeta to mention but just a few. "The Zaria Revolutionaries", such as Yussuf Grillo and Bruce Onobrakpeya who changed the visual arts landscape of Nigeria in the 1960's and formed the bedrock of what is known as modern Nigerian visual arts, are also represented in the exhibition.
2. Works of 10 contemporary Nigerian and 10 Egyptian artists who are dynamic and working in varied media and form are also on display.

The works of art here exhibited are spread across all genres, ranging from painting to sculptures, textiles, ceramics and drawings executed in a variety of stylized forms and diverse techniques. The exhibits are treasures of inestimable value and form part of our aesthetic legacies.

The next NIVATOUR exhibition will take the same format (i.e. Works from the National collection and works from another set up 10 Nigerian artists and 10 artists from our next host country). We intend to use the platform of NIVATOUR to showcase our rich National collection and expose our contemporary artists while creating a synergy between them and artists from other parts of the world.

Welcome to NIVATOUR !!

Abdullahi S. Muku
Ag. Director General
National Gallery of Art (Nigeria)
July 2010

Nigeria and Egypt: Such Importance for a Cultural Dialogue

There is a substantial importance today of establishing channels and cultural dialogues between Egypt and Nigeria, as both countries are living examples of what is described today in international political economy (IPE) as "Nation Country". Both nations share, out of historical and colonial circumstances, almost similar economic and social challenges. Both countries share a strategic geographical spreads and water access on the richest continent -in terms of natural resources-on the plant. Both nations have their long history of struggle for independence from colonial Western empires, a struggle that left undeniable depletion of resources throughout the years, and a long lasting impact on modern heritage and culture today.

One of the most interesting similarities between Nigeria and Egypt is the dissipation of cumulative civilizations and cultures in archeological detritus; a source that inspires art and artists today in both countries, especially in visual disciplines like painting and sculpture, mediums that retain and transmit the wealth of references of such detritus.

In a world of globalization and diminishing local cultures and cultural specificities, and threats to authentic identities, and ultra kinetic commercial system served by speedy markets of consumption, we are continuously risking an impending loss of the last elements of true identities. The consumption markets and corporate domination are eventually operating in alternative neo-colonial mechanisms that target the human factor: art, culture and human production. We hence witness the presence of the authentic alongside the hybrid and the worthless; all exist in a diversity of democratic and accessible media. The globalized critical discourse and contemporary theories accept both the fake and the authentic as equal. It becomes a strenuous process to extract what is true, valuable and meaningful. We thus believe in the indispensable capacity of dialogue and exchange between rich cultures, like Egypt and Nigeria, in the exploration and discovery of the art production that is founded on and derived from the true and the local authentic.

We are very proud to introduce to the Egyptian public an exhibition of Nigerian and Egyptian artists who document with their practice their contemporary global interest, while retaining and respecting their local identities.

Mohamed Talaat
Director of Place of Arts
Cairo, Egypt.

My relationship with NIVATOUR is a long and very interesting one. It started in 2008 with my serving on the committee headed by Mr. Abdullahi Muku, then Director of Curatorial Services (now Ag. Director General, National Gallery of Art). When Mr. Muku was reassigned to other projects and Mrs. Elizabeth Oparaugo (a.k.a Lolo) was appointed NIVATOUR Project Champion, she invited me to serve on the project's Central Working Committee. When in February 2010, Mr Abdullahi Muku, Ag. Director General NGA appointed me NIVATOUR Project "Champion" (as we call coordinators at the National Gallery of Art), he charged me to see that the project achieved the ideals for which it was conceived, and told me he knew I could pull it off, I promised him and myself that I would stop at nothing to make sure I do not let him and the National Gallery of Art down. I knew it was going to be daunting task but I have never been one to baulk at challenges, and there were many of them but to the Glory of God, NIVATOUR has kicked off in Egypt (which we have tagged NIVATOUR 1). We at the National Gallery of Art do not aim to stop here; we hope to take modern Nigerian visual art around the world.

My gratitude goes firstly to Almighty God who bulldozed every mountain of difficulty that appeared in the way of our achieving success and granted us so many favours and open doors. I am humbled by Mr. Abdullahi Muku's belief in me and grateful for his giving me the opportunity to work on this great project. I thank H.E. Sherif Naguib, Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt to Nigeria, for his enthusiasm which was very infectious; Mr. Aboubakr Samy, a diplomat at Embassy of Egypt, in Abuja, was also helpful in the course of preparations for the Project. Dr. Mohsen Shalaan, Head of Fine Art Sector, Ms Dahlia Moustapha, General Director of Exhibitions, and Mr. Mohammed Talaat Ali, Director of Palace of Arts (all in Cairo), were also very enthusiastic about the project and patient with us when we had a few hitches. Mr. Sam Madu Okonkwo, Charge d' Affaires, Embassy of Nigeria in Cairo was absolutely wonderful and came through for us each time we had communication problems with our Egyptian Partners in the NIVATOUR project. NIVATOUR brought out an innate talent in me, photography. My amateurish shot on pages 56, 82 & 83 of this catalogue could compete favourably with the rest taken by stylish Steve Afen'oko Bala (or don't they?)

James Irabor, NIVATOUR Deputy Project Champion, proved himself to be a brother and worthy compatriot. He and the NIVATOUR project team; Mark Obasi, Beryl Pecku, Queeneth Mma Agbagha, Saleh Bature, Kizito Ekeng, Uche Mbele, Peace Richards, John Alagi, Farida Labaran, Mohammed Oga, Matthias Gana and Loveth Onyeri were 101% committed to the Project. To them I say, keep the flag flying! Afen'oko Steve Bala, Emeka Oliver Augustine (Graphics Unit, National Gallery of Art HQS); Funsho Ajanaku, Aminu Oboiren and Emeka Odiari of National Gallery of Art, Lagos) were always on hand whenever I needed their assistance. The curators, Krydz Ikwuemesi and Mohammed Talaat Ali were fantastic to work with. Krydz and Mohammed, the National Gallery of Art is very grateful for your tireless and selfless work on the NIVATOUR project. To the 20 artists, Chris Afuba; Uche Agonsi; Pamela Egware; Folu Folorunsho; Kunle Filani; Jacob Jari; Anselem Nya; Ojo Olaniyi; Oswald Uruakpa; Levi Yakubu; Gihan Soliman; Reda Abdel-Salam Sadka; Amin El-Semary; Mahmoud Hammed Mohamed; Mostafa Abd-El Mouty; Mohamed Abou Elnaga; Khaled Seror; Saeed Badr; Farooq Wahba and Ibrahim Dessouki; we say, THANK YOU for being worthy ambassadors of our great countries, Nigeria and Egypt.

This is just the beginning.

Thank you all.

Ngozi Adamu-Ibrahim
NIVATOUR Project Champion
July, 2010

A Run through History

Factors and Issues in the Evolution of Nigerian Art

C. Krydz Ikwuemesi

Background

Before the advent of the colonizers, what is today known as Nigeria was a cacophony of peoples and cultures engaged in the art of living according to their peculiar circumstances and destinies. It was Lord Lugard, the first colonial Governor-General of the area, that facilitated the amalgamation of the so-called Southern and Northern Protectorates to create one entity called Nigeria in 1914. Today, Nigeria is made up of 774 local government areas, 36 states and the federal capital territory, Abuja. The existing state structure in Nigeria only amplifies the cultural diversity of its people. The local government areas and states may represent mechanisms that facilitate governance and administration, but they are far from being objective basis on which culture in Nigeria can be appreciated. They are only microcosms of the macro complexity which Nigeria represents. Culture-wise, Nigeria is an intimidating bazaar.

In pre-colonial Nigeria, there were many kinds of artistic expressions ranging from painting and carving to textile design. Although some Western scholars would classify them as traditional (in one of the word's pejorative senses), I insist, in the words of John Picton (2008), that where such arts exist (as in the cases of the uli ¹ painting tradition of the Igbo of eastern Nigeria or the Yoruba Adire ² tradition), they are contemporary arts that, "while drawing upon a continuity with the past as the basis of (their) existence, (are) about the here and now, addressing local concerns within a sense of local modernity." The truth, as stated by Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe many years ago, is that traditional-contemporary/modern dichotomy created by early scholars of modern African art is self-contradictory for the fact so-called traditional art is still produced widely in Africa. Modern Nigerian art has, for instance, borrowed immensely from a wide range of traditional idioms; it was not born in a vacuum, nor is it a distinctive child of colonization.

In the Twilight of Modernism

Although the impression is often given that contemporary art in Nigeria is a child of colonization, the modern³ idiom in Nigeria actually dates back to the initial contact between Nigeria and the outside world. Aina Onabolu is, thus, not the very beginning of that encounter, but the concretization of the fruits of the harmonies and conflicts that resulted from the meeting of Nigerian art/culture with European visions and philosophy. I would love to skip the refrain about the Onabolu-Enwowu-Zaria evolution of Nigerian art,

but that well known story needs to be recounted here given that this exhibition is primarily for a non-Nigerian audience.

Onabolu's activities are thus recognized as the beginning of the nationalistic movement in the art/culture sphere, as the pioneer artist sought to demonstrate in his works that abstraction in Nigerian/African art was not evidence of representational deficiency on the part of the Nigerian/African artist but a way of life, a philosophy of art, which aided the artist to seek the essence and inner meaning of subjects and phenomena, rather than concern himself/herself with the surface, the banal, the commonplace. It must be pointed out that Onabolu's art was not necessarily counter-nationalist. By painting in the realist style, he sought to demonstrate that realism or even naturalism was not the monopoly of Western artists. He certainly was not the first to create realist images in Africa. Some artists of the ancient Benin Kingdom (now in present-day Edo State of Nigeria) had attempted realistic busts, but Onabolu was, perhaps, among the first in the history of modern art in Nigeria to grapple with realism on the two-dimensional format, turning art, which was once a principal religious instrument, into a professional engagement. Aided by the inspiration provided by a "renascent Africa" (à la Azikiwe) and the aspirations for new frontiers, Onabolu constructively and positively broke away from so-called traditional visions/notions of art in order to chart the modernist course in Nigeria. I must hasten to add, though, that modernism here is used in its multi-versalist connotation rather than from the usual mono-casual perspective of Europe in relation to the others. In other words, Onabolu's works, including his landscapes and portraits of notable Nigerians, may not have been on the same ideological and technical key with those of the European modernists of his time. But they marked the beginning of a new zeitgeist in the Nigerian art field, one influenced by an extraneous vision of the universe and its enabling mysteries, yet connected to the, what had been, what ought to be and what will be, given the gathering snowball of globalization initiated through the dialogue of cultures that usually occurs in the process of acculturation.

Onabolu's paintings, therefore, opened a new vista for the visual arts in Nigeria, both for aspiring artists and the public, and paved the way for the introduction of art teaching and learning in the colonial school system in the 1920's. But, Onabolu and his efforts were not an end in themselves; they were a means to an end; the first in a series of landmarks around which a possible story of art in Nigeria could be woven. Among such landmarks can be mentioned the role of Kenneth Murray, the expatriate art teacher and Superintendent of Education in the colonial school system, which yielded another landmark in the person and activities of some of his liveliest students, including Ben Enwonwu and C.C. Ibeto.

At this time, Onabolu was still teaching art in Lagos and some of his students were beginning to make some impact in the art and social scenes in the country. But unlike Onabolu who showed through his paintings that what the white man could do, the African could do equally, Murray did not encourage his pupils to emulate European art in order to prove their technical proficiency. He rather believed that the emergent art of the evolving country known as Nigeria could only become more relevant to its people

if it was imbued with the capacity to resonate with the realities of the environment. Thus, he tasked his students to confront the realities through an engagement of their cultural heritage and issues in the social development of the new nation. This explains the stylistic and philosophic departure of the works of the artists of this era in contradistinction to those of Onabolu and his students. For where Onabolu and Lasekan concerned themselves with realism, Enwonwu, Ibeto and other peers sought the conjunction of realism and symbolism. Yet both groups were connected in their quest for a new art idiom which could embody the conflict and promises brought about by colonization and modernity.

Around this time, other factors also gave impetus to the growth of modern art in Nigeria. Art had become one of the subjects in schools, *The Nigerian Teacher* (which later transformed into *Nigeria Magazine*) was already being published by the Federal Department of Culture, a number of galleries had sprung up in Lagos.⁴ The highpoint of these developments is perhaps to be located in the establishment of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST), Zaria, which offered art training at diploma level for Nigerian artists. It is here that the next generation of Nigerian artists, with their revolutionary and visionary tendencies, was brought together by fate in 1958 to become some of the pioneer art students. They included Uche Okeke, Simon Okeke, William Olaosebikan, Ogbonnaya Nwagbara, Emmanuel Odita, Felix Ekeada, Yusuf Grillo, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, I.M. Omagie (a woman), among others. Through their activities in the art department at Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST) and aided by a number of important factors, most of which seem to be neglected by writers on the Nigerian art,⁵ the "Zaria rebels", as they are often called, became the bastion of real modernism in Nigeria and following their graduation from college on the eve of Nigeria's independence, continued to influence art production, ideology, pedagogy, and dissemination, as most of them got the opportunity to teach at different levels and various institutions across the country.

But the problem of "Zarianism"⁶ in the narration of the (hi)story of Nigerian art is now that of mono-causality, as most historians and students tend to see Zaria as the beginning and end of the victory dance of Nigerian art. Yet many factors and realities in the history of Nigeria as a nation have accelerated the train of her modern art beyond Zaria and thus call for a critical re-appraisal of the fruits of "Zarianism", not necessarily to enable an arrival at its translocation to Nsukka or Lagos, but to look beyond Nsukka and Lagos, perhaps, in search of a more progressive, if dynamic, historiography. Such a narrative should also take into consideration the activities of Ulli Beier and his first and second wives, Susanne Wenger and Georgina Beier, in the Oshogbo Workshops.⁷ Although the great poet Christopher Okigbo once called the Oshogbo artists a bunch of "unschooled primitives" (Benson, 1986), there is no doubt that some of the Zaria artists, notably Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, through their friendship with Beier, also drank from the fountain of Oshogbo creativity nourished mainly by Beieresque aesthetic taste.⁸ It is, perhaps, the attainment of a more composite historiography through more atomized studies of issues in Nigerian art that is at the heart of the present exhibition, as it purports to enable the viewer catch a glimpse of factors,

the combination of trends, personalities and issues that have shaped the notion of art in Nigeria since Onobolu made the first realist paintings in Lagos in the opening years of the last century.

Beyond Zaria

The civil war in Nigeria (1967-1970-) changed the face of many aspects of the Nigerian nation, including her fledgling modern art tradition. Not only did it affect the disposition and vision of artists and cultural actors in the country; it also became a creative resource for some of the artists, especially those from the east of Nigeria where the war had had a more devastating effect. For instance, established artists like Uche Okeke, Chuka Amaefuna, and Chike Aniakor as well as rising stars like Obiora Udechukwu found their way to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (in the Igbo region in the east of Nigeria) between 1970 and 1972. Interestingly all had connections with Zaria, not necessarily directly with the Zaria rebellion, but with the post-Onobolu tendency first championed by Murray and his students, and later boosted by the Zaria rebels. Of the four, only Udechukwu was a student, having fled Zaria in the thick of the pogroms in northern Nigeria in 1966.⁹ Yet it is Udechukwu who was later to become the most prominent in the uli experiment¹⁰ which Uche Okeke helped to initiate at the University of Nigeria when he became the first indigenous Head of Department of Fine and Applied Arts in 1972.

The uli experiment at Nsukka, especially with the involvement of Uche Okeke, has been interpreted as a continuation of "Zarianism" and its enabling "natural synthesis" philosophy in another place (namely Nsukka). If Ola Ololade explains "Zarianism" as a positive reconstruction of the status quo in the search for new frontiers, writers on Nigerian art usually project "natural synthesis" as a call to nationalist creative activism, the centralizing vision on which the Zaria departure was anchored. But I see "Natural synthesis" - if I read Okeke correctly - as an endorsement of what has been described as "glocalisation", that tendency to aspire to universalism or globalism, but not without some grip on the local content and realities of one's identity and environment (Ikwuemesi, 2003; Nzewi, 2008).

For the artists who found themselves at Nsukka, therefore at the end of the civil hostilities, natural synthesis was a three-layered encounter. With the defeat of the secessionist Biafra, Okeke, Aniakor, Amaefuna, Udechukwu and many other artists from the east were naturally, personally renegotiating their relationship psychologically with the victorious nation, Nigeria. They were primarily Igbo, then Nigerian, and of course, members of a rapidly changing world. This, perhaps, explains the spirited re-discovery of the uli ancient painting tradition of the Igbo by the Nsukka artists and their tenacity at turning it into a tool, a springboard on which they could step on to the world stage. But for Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Yusuf Grillo, and some of the other influential members of the defunct Zaria Art Society, natural synthesis was pursued in their own different ways. While Demas Nwoko is known to have embraced the Nok sculpture

tradition in his own quest for a new vista, Onobrakpeya has explored his native Urhobo forms and lore. Grillo, on his part, grappled with the deconstruction of the mask as a datum for coming to terms with the human form or person. But unlike Okeke and the other artists, their Nigerianness had not been threatened by the war and they had no urgent need for a psychological, if political, renegotiation of identity and personality. For them, their experiment was more like a direct continuation of the activities in Zaria and in pre-war Nigeria. However, only Grillo took to teaching professionally, in addition to Uche Okeke, and was able to influence students and colleagues at Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, where he rose to the position of Rector and ultimately retired from in 1987. Onobrakpeya also taught, but at the secondary level, in Benin and Lagos, before resorting to private practice from which all his acclaim derives. But as a committed studio artist, he also spread the natural synthesis gospel through his numerous apprentices and many Lagos-based artists who have associated with him. Nwoko did not teach art for the period he taught at the University of Ibadan. He taught stage design. But it was also an opportunity for him to explore/exploit his Zaria heritage further in addition to what he was doing with it in painting and architecture.

Generally, the so-called Zarianism not only got more intense, but diversified beyond Zaria. The Zaria artists only had a common vision, but not a common style. In addition to that, perhaps, the more centralizing commonality is their ability to revarnish the face of art in Nigeria technically and stylistically. And since their visions and styles were richly diversified, Nigerian art became further enriched through their work and activities. Zaria, thus, is one river that begot many tributaries, but some of the tributaries naturally ran stronger than others, as could be said of the uli experiment/movement which attained what some writers have described as a climax in the Ottenberg-curated Smithsonian exhibit of 1997.¹¹

But the history of Nigerian art is not the story of Zaria. The history of Nigerian art does not end with what the "Zarianists" did in the art terrain in the two decades following the civil war in Nigeria. Yet, this is the picture that has been painted with the lacklustre historicisation of art that has taken root in Nigeria, coupled with the axial, selective, exclusionist tendencies of (Nigerian) Diasporan writing about the development of Nigerian art.¹² Art is a cyclical phenomenon. It is in a state of flux. Paradigms or tendencies flourish for a while only to give birth/way to others. That is not to say that the works of pioneer Nigerian artists are out of date and should no longer be studied (although this seems to be the unspoken mantra of much Diasporan writing on Nigerian art). Art is never out of date, indeed can it? It only takes its place in the history of a civilization, with time, and continues to shape the course of the tradition to which it belongs - what Jonathan Sacks (2000) has aptly described as a "conversation between generations". It is such a conversation that NIVATOUR (the present project) seeks to broker in this edition and future editions in the hope that it will become the concern of Nigeria's growing number of art historians when they seek a narrative that can help "put the tail back to the trunk of our tale", to borrow from Chinua Achebe. And this is a huge imperative, considering also that it is the story (à la Achebe) that survives the struggle. Nigerian art is rich; the story of Nigerian art as told by historians is poor; it is yet to match the richness and vibrancy of

the enabling activities, as has been argued by Freeborn Odiboh.

Confronting the Harvests of Synthesis in Neo-coloniality

It is generally believed that much of modern art is concerned with art for art's own sake. Yet what blossomed in Nigeria as a modernist tendency, especially in the first and second decade following the Nigerian civil war, cannot be tucked conventionally into such a formalist mould. Within the framework of the major styles and techniques which were born in the post-Zaria era, especially from 1970 onwards, the thematic vision of Nigerian artists logically broadened as the flow of information worldwide expanded gradually. Artists were exposed to greater contact with others living in different parts of the country, Africa, and the world in general. Nigerian artists became more critically conscious of their role in nation building as 'pedagogues of a new society', to borrow from Hans Belting. This tendency could be seen in many of the works produced in this period, even up to end of the last century.

One does not deny the existence of the formalist mode in Nigerian art, but the fact is that there has been a greater propensity towards an instrumentalist vision. This tendency can be appreciated and understood in the light of Nigeria's history and political realities which have made, and continue to make, enormous demands on the people in their mundane existence as citizens of Nigeria and members of an ever fleeting world with all its contradictions and challenges. Thus, going through the collection of works in this exhibition, for instance, one is confronted with a medley of thematic concerns, ranging from the simple to the very complex. But even among the simple, it is not easy to find works that take pride only in their own artistry, devoid of a connection to the social reality in Nigeria. This is also because of the historical experience and the unspoken need to make art more relevant to society. Much of the body of work produced by artists thus harbours narrative and didactic essences.

For instance, Jossy Ajiboye's Fulani Shepherd Boy with Flute (oil on canvas) or Emokpae's Queen Amina and King Osagie of Benin (oil on canvas) may look like complex portraits at a cursory glance, but they are really windows into a culture and a history, frozen fragments of memory around which diverse stories could be told. While the Shepherd Boy is an emblematic narrative about growing up and boyhood-to-manhood transition in northern Nigeria, Emokpae's 'portraits' celebrate some of the heroic moments in the history of some of the regions that were banded together and renamed Nigeria in 1914. Even such simple conventional portraits as those of African literary giants Chinua Achebe painted by Olu Spencer and that of Picasso sketched by Theresa Akinwale (one of Nigeria's early female artists) are not just portraits of the figures or personalities painted; they are graphic metaphors for heroism and greatness and thus harbour some elements of instrumentalism.

Besides these works, one also notices an overt tendency towards a variety of social concerns which are a hallmark of Nigerian art. Such broad concerns as peace, war, hunger, poverty, oppression, urban ugliness, and general deprivation which are the bane of neo-colonial Africa (including Nigeria) have formed part of the corpus of the artist's creative resource in Nigeria. It is against this background that works like Ebong Ukut's *Peace* (oil on canvas), Haig David-West's *No More Aggression* (gouache on board) and Aniakor's *Hommage at the Full Moon* (oil on canvas) can be appreciated. While Ukut and David-West's cock and dove evoke the high sense of ritual and spirituality that shroud the social sphere and daily existence in Nigeria, Aniakor's painting embody a notion of innocence, the picture of a generation overtaken by the whims and caprices of a selfish leadership. But taken from another angle, Aniakor's signature figures with up-raised arms as seen in this painting and others of the same period may also be a carry-over from the experience of war, a synecdoche of the anguish of defeat and surrender, not only in the war, but also in the post-war situation where the people were to be generally defeated by bad governance, dictatorship, corruption, economic hardship and poverty. If one argues that such a thematic thrust must have been informed by the harsh and conflicting social conditions in the aftermath of the civil war in Nigeria, they must also be seen as a reaction to neo-coloniality which scholars, according to Rasheed Araeen (2010), "mistakenly call postcoloniality". It is also in this context that the flourish of resistance and activism in modern Nigerian art can be appraised and understood.

Although resistance and activism as thematic elements in the history of Nigerian art dates back to the civil war with the propaganda art/exhibitions of Uche Okeke, Udechukwu and others during the civil war and a collection of resistance poetry edited by Ulli Beier and Paul Onovo (published in 1996 with poems written around 1966-1969- by by "Biafran" writers and academics, including some from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka), in celebration of the horrors and anguish of war,¹³ any serious study of resistance and activism in Nigerian art must look at the activities and works of artists in the three decades after the war. For instance, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed an anticlimax in the growth and development of Nigeria as a result of the astronomical impoverishment of the masses and a systemic decimation of the middle class. Corruption had heightened in Nigeria like other parts of the continent; democracy - fashioned rather obliquely as the decentralization of violence and corruption - had failed to provide the expected frost against the flame of mass impoverishment; if anything, democracy (in Nigeria and Africa) continued/continues to enable the have to continue to have and the have-not to continue not to have; police brutality became a social norm, while leaders and politicians could not insulate the population from common want, including potable water, navigable roads and electricity. Not unnaturally, these issues and problems became fertile grounds from which artists could draw inspiration for their works, ranging from paintings through cartoons and sculpture.

At the University of Nigeria where Uche Okeke held court as Head of Fine and Applied Arts and Dean of Faculty till his sensational retirement in 1985, art virtually became a means of social commentary,

not necessarily due to Okeke's efforts, but as a result of the exertion of his younger colleagues, notably Obiora Udechukwu, and Chike Aniakor. Udechukwu, for example, in 1981, devoted an entire solo exhibition (No Water) to the problem of water scarcity (which still persists in some parts of Nigeria); in addition to many graphic swipes he took in his lyrical linear drawings against dictatorship, poverty and oppression in post-war Nigeria. Little wonder his efforts found rich and enduring followership in the person and works of younger artists, such as Tayo Adenaike, Olu Oguibe, Chika Okeke, C.krydz Ikwuemesi, and perhaps Ozioma Onuzulike. As Simon Ottenberg (1997) has put it, there is no doubt that Nsukka artists in the 1980s and 1990s considered they could change politicians and the ugly status quo through the instrumentality of political art.¹⁴ Whether they succeeded or not is an issue for a different discourse. But it must be pointed out that resistance is not a monopoly of Nsukka artists or indeed any other group. In Lagos, an artist like Dele Jegede, painter and art historian, took to cartoons as alternative political thought. His cartoon series published in some Nigerian newspapers in the 1980s and part of the 1990s are important factors in the development of political art in Nigeria, as they continue to attract the attention of artists, scholars, and art historians. But if a discursive tripod must be established as regards resistance element in Nigerian art, we must also take into consideration the very critical and thought-provoking works of such Zaria artists as Gani Odutokun and Jerry Buhari.

While two of Odutokun's works included in this exhibition - The Oppressor (Charcoal) and Police Brutality (gouache) - are a harsh mirror of Nigeria of the time, Jerry Buhari has produced works in reaction to poverty, oil spillage (one of the original causes of the agitations in Nigerian's Delta region), and parliamentary rascality. In the twilight of Nigeria's current democratic dispensation, Buhari painted his Noise in the Assembly to lampoon the usual partisan bitterness and rancour and, at times, free-for-all fight that often consume legislative business in these parts.

Indeed, if anyone seeks a fertile example of the relationship between art and politics, Nigeria of the 1980s and 1990s is a classic case. But I must hasten to aver that politics is not the single thread that held art and artists together. Religion and other socio-cultural issues also solicited the attention of artists, as can be seen in some of the works produced ante-2000. Perhaps the centralising commonality that ran through the art terrain in the three decades following the war is a total return to history, one of the principal tendencies of the postmodern spirit, which saw many Nigerian artists going back through the forest path of history in search of new idioms and refreshing data with which they could confront contemporary challenges. Of course in this regard, Nigeria was not alone in the African continent. The failure of so-called postcolonial/postindependence institutions and leaders in Africa catalyzed a renewed search outside the political arena for a new birth, a rather belated variant to the gospel of rebirth and self-reliance which visionary leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Nnamdi Azikwe and Julius Nyerere had espoused and sought at the onset; the same rebirth to which the Zaria artists and Enwonwu (before them)

had vigorously gestured at as art-culture nationalists. It had been washed ashore in the alluvial tides of history, aided by the deprivations and attendant disillusionment of neo-colonialisation.

In Ghana, for instance, artists unanimously named this return to history *sankofa* (go back and pick) after the mythical bird that frequently retraced its tracks in search of crumbs it might have left behind. In parts of francophone Africa the philosophy of *vohou-vohou* and *daroo-daroo* became variants of, if original, alternatives to, Okeke's "natural synthesis." Perhaps, "natural synthesis" is an apt description for Nigerian art. For not only does it encapsulate the various fusions - stylistic, thematic, cross-cultural, internationalist - that circumscribe the history and content of Nigerian art; it also provides a *raison d'être* for the term "Nigerian art" itself.

Of course, it must be pointed out that much of the advances recorded in the art field in Nigeria in the 80s and 90s was a direct response to, or result of, the global socio-cultural turn and the yearning by local artists for new challenges at the frontier. Artists sought for new relationships, as significant development was recorded with regard to such consecrative and disseminating agencies as galleries and museums (especially the private ones), art-culture journalism, a critical tradition, and a somewhat responsive audience. It was also at this point in history that the monolithism of the society of Nigerian

Artists (SNA) received positive deconstruction with the rise of other professional groups and artists associations beginning with the birth of the Aka Circle of Exhibiting Artists in 1986.¹⁵ But perhaps one factor, which radically redrew the contours of the art landscape in Nigeria - as elsewhere - is the advent of the virtual world through the Internet, which tended to collapse the boundaries of the physical world in line with the principles of globalization. In other words, cross-cultural borrowings, inspirations and influences gave rise to new energies, new visions and new work. As the 20th century - the highly "tormented American century" - drew to a close, "natural synthesis" had taken yet another turn.

It is impossible to inscribe the ten Nigerian artists juxtaposed against those in the "National Collection" in this exhibition as an impeccable reflection of the current trends in the Nigerian art field. No doubt, like a mirror, they reflect portions of the prevailing possibilities, but do not assume an exhaustive impression of the contemporary scene in Nigeria. Since this project has been contrived as a traveling exhibition with this as the first edition, the ten contemporary artists have been randomly selected to provide a harbour at which the narrative embodied in the exhibition can be berthed. They do not address any single thematic issue, but have been put together to provide the viewer an anticipatory capsule for coming editions. Perhaps the logical strategy in subsequent editions of NIVATOUR, as it travels to other countries and venues, will be to organize (a) thematic exhibition(s) alongside the National Collection, not only for clearer perspectives on issues in modern Nigerian art, but also to clear the grounds on which the cause of a locally brewed historiography could be advanced.

Yet this interesting medley of thirty works (by the ten artists) problematises the concept of "contemporary" and poses historiographic questions that are not within the purview of this exhibition. For instance, what is the average span of contemporary? What aggregate parameters can one use to measure a contemporary set of works or artists? If we use an aggregation of roughly thirty years for the present purpose, the works in this segment of the exhibition may make more sense, even without a totalizing theme, as they share in the same post-war, neo-colonial realities of a nascent Nigeria, beginning from Chris Afuba's *After the War* (wood and metal), through Kunle Filani's *Oju Ona* (oil on canvas) and down to Folu Folorunso's *Spirit of Ecstasy* (mono print). And indeed all are a pastiche of their enabling environment and context in light of Nigeria's recent turbulent history with the attendant harsh social conditions. To paraphrase Elkins (2001:132), art is always about "loss" and the pitiless "passage of time". So much can be said of the contemporary Nigerian art and artists in this segment of the exhibition. Contemporary art may concern itself primarily with the act of art, but it also often harbours a humanist counter-face, especially depending on the time, experience and history that have shaped the artists' consciousness. The collection thus straddles the stylistic, technical and thematic infusions on which the wheel of art has turned in these parts in the last three decades. At the same time,

they are reflective of the trajectory of modern Nigerian art as a whole; they are also pointers to the expectations and new possibilities in the emergent history.

Conclusion

When authors and critics like Arthur Danto (1997) and Hans Belting (1987) argue that the history of art has ended, I personally presume that they speak of western art. For the young and pledging African nations which were contrived in the mill of the colonial experiment, a true history of art is yet to begin. This is mainly the danger that looks African art and civilization in the eye when artists and critiques from here pander to globalist nihilism with regards to their identity. For instance, it was fashionable in the 1990s and opening years of this century for some notable African artists to denounce the African label and hanker after a universalist identity that continues to locate Africa on the periphery in spite of such cases of heroic gate-crashing. It is the variant of this tendency that is also responsible for the scorn with which some Diaporan Nigerian critics view art and scholarship that go on inside the country.

Yet we cannot deny the richness and diversity of what is known as modern art in Nigeria in its evolution of roughly 100 years. Such diversity coupled with the reality of the ethnic plurality in Nigeria prompted some scholars in the 1990s to interrogate the validity of the term "Nigerian art" as a bland and contradictory idea.¹⁶ Not only that; the question, "how Nigerian is art produced from knowledge acquired

through Western education and with tools that are purely Euro-American", has been raised also. The complex cultural and political history of Nigeria may readily problematise the term "Nigerian art", but we can talk about Nigerian art in the same way we can talk about British or American art. Modern Nigerian art is a fusion of the African spirit/experience and Africa's yearning for new challenges in a highly fleeting world. Nigerian art made of Western tools and materials, to me, is as African as an African person dressed in Western style clothes, in consonance with "natural synthesis".

All told, the imperative that emerges is not that of the validity or otherwise of "Nigerian art" as a discursive construct, but the need for scholars and critics to interrogate the trends and tendencies that comprise that construct in response to the need for an objective and enduring history of art. As the virtual world envelopes the physical one, Nigerian art and artists - indeed African artists - must encounter the emergent hybrid with a clear perspective of memory and desire.

Notes

1. Originally, the term, uli was the Igbo name for the indigo dye obtained from several species of plants identified with the following botanical names: Rothmania Whitfieldi, Rothmania hispirole, Rothmania cuspica, and Rothmania urcelli. These species also have Igbo names as Uli Oba, Uli Nkilisi, Uli Edeji and Uli Okolobo. Uli is not just the plant, dye or pigment. It also stands for the drawing made on the body or wall with the dye or pigment; it is also the name of the entire feminine art tradition in which the indigo dye or earth pigments were used in Igbo land.
2. Adire is a textile/dying tradition popular among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. It continues to stand the test of time as it appeals generally to a wide range of consumers in contemporary Nigeria.
3. "Modern" is used here in a rather contextualized sense to refer to art that emerged out of the colonial encounter between Britain and Nigeria. It is not in the strict ideological sense of the word associated with its usage in European art history. To this extent, "contemporary art" denotes art at the defining edge of the more general modern paradigm in Nigeria.
4. See Ikwemesi 1996; Onuzulike, 2006.
5. Chike Aniakor insists that so-called "Zaria Rebels" have not acknowledged other factors that aided their development, especially the obvious encouragement and assistance given to Demas Nwoko and Uche Okeke by Ulli Beier.
6. See Ola Ololdi, 1995.
7. Ulli Beier's Oshogbo workshops must have inspired the Zaria artists in their activities in and outside Zaria. The fact that Beier praised and prized them over Onabolu and Enwonwu in his personal aesthetic judgement of the art of the period must have been a catalyst to the development of some of the "Zarianists".
8. See, for instance, Beier, 196061-.
9. The war had disrupted Udechukwu's studies at Zaria. After resuming his art training at Nsukka in 1970 at the end of the war, he graduated in printing in 1972.

10. Some writers have described Udechukwu as the "St Paul of Uche Okeke's St. Peter" as far as the Ulli movement is concerned.

11. Many scholars and artists have appropriated or studied the uli art phenomenon from various perspectives. Leading the list is Uche Okeke, but much of the more practical and fructifying field work may be credited to Okeke's colleague Chike Aniakor and former pupil Obiora Udechukwu. Since the 1970s, uli has been espoused and adapted by generations of artists trained at the University of Nigeria. Apart from these efforts, some EuroAmerican researchers have also contributed immensely to the study of uli. I have also engaged the uli paradigm from multiple standpoints - field work, workshops, lectures, exhibitions, and craft production among village women - not only to extend and bring added meaning to existing literature and earlier work, but also to bring new essence and purpose to uli as a disappearing tangible and rich heritage (see among others, for instance, Willis, 1987 and 1989; Udechukwu, 1972 and 1990; Aniakor 1995; Ottenberg, 1997; Adams in Ottenberg, 2002, Ikwuemesi, 2005 and 2010).

12. For instance, see the debate on African art initiated by Nka Journal in the last quarter of 2009. Some of the contributors asserted that art and scholarships in Nigeria were on the downgrade. www.nkajournal.com.

13. A limited edition (about 20 copies) of this book was released by the editors in 1996 in commemoration of Songs for Idoto a memorial exhibition for Christopher Okigbo organised by C. Krydz Ikwuemesi and Onuora Okeke at the National Museum, Enugu and Didi Museum, Lagos (1996 and 1997 respectively).

14. See Ottenberg, 1997.

15. The birth of the Aka Circle of Exhibiting Artist had a ripple effect in terms of giving rise to many other associations outside the SNA and in creating unprecedented vista in the history of Nigerian art. It is, perhaps, to Aka that is owed the formation of such groups as the visual orchestra and the Pan-African Circle of Artists, among many others.

16. A good example is perhaps Ikwuemesi, 1995.

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