

CRITERIA FOR ART ASSESSMENT IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: A TRANSFORMATIONAL GUIDE

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Abstract

Standards for assessment in the educational system in Nigeria are often stale. Most of these standards have not been reviewed. How are these standards created? What are the bases for its value judgment? How long can it serve a period? These are some of the questions addressed in this study. The thrust of the study is in the provision that criteria for assessment should be transformational and dynamic to the needs of the time. It must not be based on foreign role models. It should be designed based on situations; what or who we are and according to the needs of the time, not because it is a standard elsewhere. Copying may not always solve problems because foundations, modus operandi and cultures differ. In this study, we use visual arts as a paradigm. There should be innovative otherwise fresh ideas where necessary to solve fresh problems or to address novel ideals.

Nigeria seems to be pursuing the West in various ways in order to meet their standards. Perhaps, the idea is that Western Modus Operandi is an ultimate method that kept her development above others. Western criteria for assessment has therefore been borrowed by some “third-world” or “developing” countries found outside the Western worlds of Europe and America. Nigeria has been patronizing either the European or the American systems of education. In this study visual art has been used as an example to

measure how Nigeria’s criteria for assessment has fared over the years.

In Achebe’s (1958) “Arrow of God”, Edogo the wood carver, the son of Ezeulu the chief priest of Ala of Umuaro, would stand and watch the mask he had carved and assesses whether he got the nose or eyes or mouth as he expected it from a distance, while people are appreciating the handiwork of the artist. Those watching may not know where he thought he made a mistake. What would be his target or criteria for assessment?

Here the author showed the carvers judgment of his carving:

Although Edogo could have taken one of the back seats in the Okwolo, he chose to stand with the crowd so as to see the mask from different positions.... There was something about the nose which did not please him-a certain fineness which belonged not to an Agaba but to maiden spirit. But the owners of the mask had not complained. In fact they had praised it very highly.

Edogo knew, however, that he must see the mask in action to know whether it was good or bad. He stood with the crowd.

As Newman (1974) rightly stated, the African concept of art is a “we” concept and not “I” concept like the West; that means, at first, the communal concept is put into consideration. As he puts it:

The African conception of art is a communal conception as compared with European individualistic expression. To the African, community existed prior to the individual and the individual is just a small part of a long tradition. This sense of unity extends to nature and to the earth (earth belongs to ancestors).

Aesthetics is a major consideration in Igbo art depending on one’s values which relates to his awareness of the art form which also presupposes beauty. As Duane and the Prebles (1994) put it: Aesthetics is, “when we seek basic guidelines for creating, interpreting, or evaluating works of art, or when we wonder why one work is more beautiful, memorable, or provocative than another, we engage in aesthetic thinking”.

Criteria for assessment in Igbo art also refers to aesthetic consideration. The Prebles (1994) wrote that, “scholars in many civilizations study the way in which works of art affect their people” As these authors go further to quote Roy Lichtenstein (Prebles 1994:22), organized perception is what art is all about”. Prebles looks at seven Key terms (or set of terms) used in identifying major principles of design:

Unity and variety
Balance
Emphasis and subordination
Directional forces
Contrast
Repetition and rhythm
Scale and proportion

One may ask, as Edogo the carver in Achebes (1958), “Arrow of god”, assessed his mask performing in the crowd, could he have considered any of the above principles. We assume there were criteria for judging his work but the problem between developed worlds and third-world countries is that developed worlds feel superior and try to intimidate others. Okeke (1958), the Nigerian veteran artist, has also pointed out this observation. He asked of cultural democracy in a globalizing world. As he stated, “we must fight to free ourselves from mirroring foreign cultures,”and looked at a “continual cultural interchanges”, so that the term international art will not be looked at with suspicion.

Herodotus (484-425BC) (Bonnard 1962), “believed that the Greek way of life

was superior to others". Nevertheless, "he acknowledged the fact that other people feel the same about their life-style, that is, they prefer their own way of life and probably consider it to be the best and moreover tend to judge other groups life-styles negatively in terms of their own value system". Delaquis (1976) reminds us that: "African intellectual artists who merely ape the west must know by now that the west is getting more and more frustrated and their art is merely reflective of the death pangs of a withering culture". And also that African art was both "abstract and semi-abstract because the old societies were... stabilized compared to modern societies. The arts were of such high order that they could exist as art for art's sake or art for peoples sake depending on how you view them". Polakoff (1978) also wrote that, while acknowledging that the struggle for the survival of the modern African artist is both difficult and poignant, outside influences hamper his search for authenticity and originality..."

What then is "African Proportion" in art? The theory of African proportion states that the head is taller than all other parts of the body. This is why the head is almost proportional to the body of most carvings from Africa. This may not be the meaning of proportion in Western assessment. But this has given value to African art and culture. The height of a man is measured as the head.

Modern Nigerian artists, scholars and writers have different views regarding art appreciation. Some Nigerian teachers

and lecturers condemn what they call "abstract art". Some refer to it as Western madness. Uzoagba would see it as meaningless. Some say that most artists that are not gifted hide under the umbrella of the term "abstract" to deceive spectators because the West has called it art. This is why to most teachers of art education "installation art" of the modern trend is no art at all". They see it as a Western terminology and as part of Western imperialism to undermine Africa. Thus realism is seen by most instructors of art as the beginning and end of art.

The philosophy of art end aesthetics has a traditional base and also a modern trend and can be measured according to a people's philosophy society. In the educational Sector in Nigeria, if there is no agreement or balance between tradition and modernity, it may retard the understanding of art for the talented modern child; it is also important to note who is giving the instruction. One cannot give what one does not have. Up to the university most assessment is done based on the teacher's standards and most of the time not according to the general rule in the National policy on education but according to one's own whims and caprices. For example, the rule may be to consider proportion, foreshortening, originality, space, light and shade in a drawing which is practically, the Western rule but can we use the same measurement to judge an Uli drawing? This will practically not work. Also in a painting, we understand that we create distance using light colours. The distant Objects

fade away in the background while the nearer ones are stronger and also the perspective is created with diminishing lines that meet at the background to show distance. In an Uli painting, this might not be followed. And judging a pupil based on some of these principles might not work.

Nevertheless, Western-oriented principles have always been drawn in the Art curriculum in Nigerian educational system. Apart from the apprenticeship system, African traditional art form as criteria for assessment has never been entrenched in any school system in Nigeria. There has never been any such practice in terms of curriculum development in the area of art. This is also affecting many other considerations in judging a student's performance in visual art and also hampering the Childs development of his cultural forms. We are proud of the Oriental countries that developed their traditional forms in a globalised scale such that most of their products depict these forms. Perhaps, some of the reasons given above may be why up till the present moment, the jamb questions in art history have not changed in the last three decades and half. Does this mean that there has not been modern artists worthy of analytical study, other than those trained by expatriates. Expatriates have written so much about the beginning of modern art in Nigeria and the pioneer artists of contemporary African art but not the new artists of the millennium. Perhaps they left it for Nigerian art scholars. Ofoedu (2012) has tried to document a biographical event of some of these recent artists but it has not

been entrenched into the school system. The "Nucleus" published by the National Gallery of Art in 1981 (when it was under the Department of Culture) in Lagos and the ARESUVA offers a wide range of studies on these artists. Even in the Universities, students, up to postgraduate level do not know about a majority of these artists, even their lecturers. This goes to tell how poorly considered, visual art researchers and historians have been in the area of entrenching recent art activities into the school art curriculum. These art activities can be reflected in the creative and cultural studies as part of the curriculum or syllabus. Although there have been documentations of some of these artists, and their activities through graduate projects but it has not been included in their studies at tertiary institution or served as examination questions. The memory of these children will probe for attention on these artists for further research if they are entrenched into the school curriculum.

Nigerian arts have not fared so well in the International scene lately. Also Alien methodologies have helped to upgrade the interest of researchers. They have fared so 'sell, but could have fared better if their methodologies were the ones designed by them based on their cultural experience. Scholars of modern arts in Nigeria have not been able to create further theories apart from existing ones, methods or criteria for assessment except those based on Western principles and Philosophies. They could create modern philosophies just as Uche Okeke and his colleagues tried to do in the term coined

also by West, "Natural synthesis". Here, we do not mean schools of thought but criteria for judgment in educational system outside Western criteria. Nigeria or the so called "third world" has always waited for the scoring of the West. The West determines her position and may never leave that position until she begins to create her own position, her own standard of assessment which may be based on her cultural orientation and modern experience.

Okeke (1982) pointed out this fact:

Because the new artist was patronized by European missionaries and administrators, he was willing to suppress his past in order to be judged civilized in accordance with western usage. These aliens even dictated in matters of artistic taste. The new artist could not without loss of prestige develop an original way of approach to his many problems.

The West often identifies our artists before we recognize them. It may be difficult for one to get a PhD or professional certificate here but abroad one could earn such academic qualifications in a record time and will be accepted when he comes home. So that anything that has not met the Western rules in education has not arrived. Nigeria has not begun to develop or initiate Nigeria designed criteria for assessment in visual art based on our cultural experience in a drawing or sculptural piece:

1. Function
2. Communal
3. African proportion

4. Material, wood panel or plane surface
5. Theme
6. Size/space
7. Originality

In the West 'aesthetics' means "art for art's sake", but in Africa, aesthetics meets with function or it is no art which to an African is part of life's essence. For example, the beauty of a woman is in the character. If the character does not conform to the norms of her society, even her figure no matter how pleasing is considered ugly or bad. In the same way the character of the form in a mask gives value to the meaning behind the mask or drawing.

African cultural values have been suppressed by Western imperialism to the extent that she is afraid of identifying with certain African values which he think inferior to others. It becomes worse and unbearable when in the educational sector where we measure as elite class deny their cultural base. She could not observe the universal reality of cultural relativity. No culture is superior to the other. It is mere psychological intimidation thus she has not been able to develop her technology.

In the past there had been established rules on what art should be and how art should be measured and how it should be done. But these principles were designed by men according to their philosophy, psychology, epistemology, society and time. We can think differently. In the process of thinking differently we might observe mistakes or some issues

that have been neglected or new inroad towards a better beauty, appreciation and well-being.

Looking at the history of standards of measuring art and aesthetics, the school of Athens in 4th C.B.C. is an example.

Academic teaching under Ingre's leadership was very dogmatic; he insisted that drawing was the basis of art and he stressed sharply defined contours and smooth finish.

There was a time people were afraid to say the truth, about their findings, observation or research concerning the world. There was a time people made speculations and made mistakes concerning their research or assumptions. There was a time someone said that the moon was a Blackstone.

Trends, stylistic tendencies were followed and discovered with time. The baroque period introduced the sublime, which portrayed both the beautiful and the ugly. The royal academy in France was "copied by other countries. Leading academies gave periodic discourses on theory and principle". All assessment was based on thesis. To win the "prix de Rome" your work must conform to the rules of the academy. Leaders of the academy changed the standards to suit their standards, But 'The late 17th and 18th centuries are often called the Age of enlightenment. Major scientific discoveries were made. "Issues were criticized and new ideas emanated. Concern shifted to personal style, and individuality which was more acceptable in America than Europe. Thus, to express

that freedom Some European artists have to go to America where they may not be accosted by the law.

The life and works of Vincent Van Gogh is obvious without commitment to any document till the present. The influence continued to accuse intellectuals and the society on how it contributed to the physical passing away of that artist because he contravened the rules of his society only to be sung later.

Recommendation

The artist sees with his own eyes and sensibilities and should be allowed to express it. Teachers and Instructors should realize the necessity to make the students develop original methods of expression no matter the dimension of expression rather than depending on certain rules of art. Art must not be naturalism, realism, abstraction this or that. Method of appraisal also may not depend on old rules but new ideas or forms that may give a new light in the visual art. For example, when traditional art is subjected to analysis it can be seen that they possess the same beauty of form and theme just as contemporary ones. Originality should be encouraged instead of suppressed.

Ways in Which Criteria for Assessment Can Be a Transformational Guide

Aesthetic Education: through aesthetic education, the student can develop aesthetic taste based on his cultural experience.

Curriculum development: developing courses based on traditional art by entrenching traditional criteria for assessment into the school curriculum.

Making an industry out of traditional crafts: developing traditional crafts up to the tertiary level. Countries like China, Japan, and Malaysia are good example of countries that have developed traditional crafts and have made a big industry out of it, worldwide.

Town and gown: often research results end up in the school library as if it is meant for a group of people. Every research objective should anchor on the need for new findings, to update established results and generally to service humanity.

Conclusion

Generally, what this study submits is that criteria for assessment should be transformational. We get stuck when we do not give room for new ideas. We can study and appreciate the ideas of these new artists so that we can relate with them especially in an educational perspective. We must not wait for the West to commend them before we commend them. The society must also appreciate, patronize and encourage Nigerian artists so that they can establish in confidence their new role .It will also help them stop looking West in most areas where cultural heritage has a prospective content.

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