

# RE-AWAKENING EDUCATION THROUGH ART IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

*A common concern since the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century African art has been a question of what constitutes art. The 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century African art, which can also be termed “modern African art” or “contemporary African art”, came about as a result of the birth of art schools in the early 1930’s. This brought development of urban design and public art which later resulted to the embrace of globalisation. It exposed artists to the use of technology for designs, drawings and paintings. The development of contemporary African art was as a result of the influence of the western as well as traditional arts. The paper discusses how traditional African art has influenced the 21<sup>st</sup> century art in diverse ways through the use of different materials to create art. This resulted to the use of waste or abandoned materials like aluminium items (bottle caps, cans, wires) etcetera, and pieces of clothes, computer, beads, fibre glass, craft works, just to mentioned a few. The use of these materials led to the introduction of new variations in art.*

**Keywords:** 21<sup>st</sup> century art, re-awakening, economic development.

## Introduction

21<sup>st</sup> century as defined by (*Definitions.net, 2019*), can be said to be the era we are in now, a time of freedom and technological advancement and it is a growing and flourishing field, which makes it an incredibly dynamic field get involved in. Art of the 21<sup>st</sup> century emerges from a vast variety of materials and means. As always, new technologies provide new opportunities and challenges and many artists regularly and freely mix media and forms, making the choices that best serve their concepts and purposes. These include the latest electronic

technologies, such as digital imaging and the internet; familiar genres with a long history that continue to be practiced with great vigour, such as painting, materials and processes once associated primarily with handicrafts, re-envisioned to express new concepts.

These new concepts cannot shy away from the fact that the traditional African art was and still is its source. African culture and civilisation is distinguished from those of other continents by traditional abstract philosophies (belief in the existence of a supreme being in control of the universe, made manifest in nature and ancestors). Consequently, pre-colonial African societies were governed by such philosophical belief systems through which cultural space was ideologically adapted for meaningful living (Ogumor 1993, Kreamer et al 2007).

### **Globalisation and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century African Art.**

A key feature of the art scene in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (and of many sectors of 21<sup>st</sup>-century life) is the impact of globalization – the accelerating interconnectivity of human activity and information across time and space. Aided by the internet and mass media, awareness of the vitality of contemporary art in localities around the globe has grown more rapidly (Robertson, 2014). Anyone with access to the internet can follow developments anywhere around the world that is why many modern African artists, according to Freeborn (2005), are more concern with keeping pace with global artistic trends of the 21st century and for them, alienating their art from any element of cultural identification is the core of their practice.

Thus, unlike the 20<sup>th</sup> century which portrayed individualism, the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the beauty of globalization has nations contributing and sharing their resources for the benefit of all. 21<sup>st</sup> century as posits by Annku and Adu – Agyem (2012), is a post-colonial/ contemporary period where synthetic and natural materials are used, designs are done on computers, and many other means. When describing the impact colonialism had on African contemporary art, it is described as art created in the time period of post-colonialism, into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The place of Traditional African Art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

There cannot be 21<sup>st</sup> century art without the knowledge of traditional art. This so because, for example, the formation of abstraction in art by some European painters/artists like Pablo Picasso and Henry Matisse, was as a result of contact with African art by incorporating elements of this art into their works. That is why Pivin (2002) observed that many contemporary African arts borrow heavily from traditional predecessors. Ironically, this emphasis on abstraction is seen by Westerners as an imitation of European and American

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Cubist and totemic artists, such as Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani and Henri Matisse, who, in the early twentieth century, were heavily influenced by traditional African art.

African art and sculpture has for a long time been thought of as simply comprising of mask and ancestral figures, categorised as the generic art type of Africa. Conversely, any mention of African art (sculpture) in the west is likely to trigger thoughts of ancient mask, masquerade and ancestral figures associated with primitive tribal religion and philosophies. Thus, for large proportions of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, westerners view African art as being predictable and unchanging (Akpang, 2013)

The study and response to African Art, by artists at the beginning of the twentieth century facilitated to an explosion of interest in abstraction, organization, and reorganization of forms, and the exploration of emotional and psychological areas which were still unseen in Western Art and by these means, the status of visual art was changed (Ezio, 2005)

Contemporary African art is also described as art that has made a “departure from traditional styles and values”, which can be directly connected to the influence of colonialism (Evans, 2015). Because of the influence of colonialism, Shiner (1997) argues that contemporary art forms created through appropriation or creative synthesis are considered to be special forms of expressive symbolism, indicating cultural identity, making social commentary with decorative motifs and creates a bridge between cultures. Such art expresses the symbolism of Africa’s changing cultural space occasioned by contact with foreign cultures, indicating growth and the maintenance of traditional material culture and values using advance technologies which modern societies offer and at same time, blur the boundaries between cultures. The aforementioned theories and assumptions emphasises the importance of appropriation and adaptation in contemporary art which could be seen as a new defining feature of modern art especially in Africa.

It is important to acknowledge that African men and women chose to master the new technologies presented to them and used them within their own local frameworks to contribute to a budding modernity on the continent. While some contemporary African artists have sacrificed traces of cultural identity in their art in favour of western driven art styles inspired by global creative advancement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as observed by (Odibo, 2009), he also adds that others tend to exert Africanism in their art practice to reflect the rich creative qualities of traditional visual forms and explore the various possibilities of restaging traditional identity in modernism. Unlike the art of the Western societies, traditional African art was a functional and necessary part of

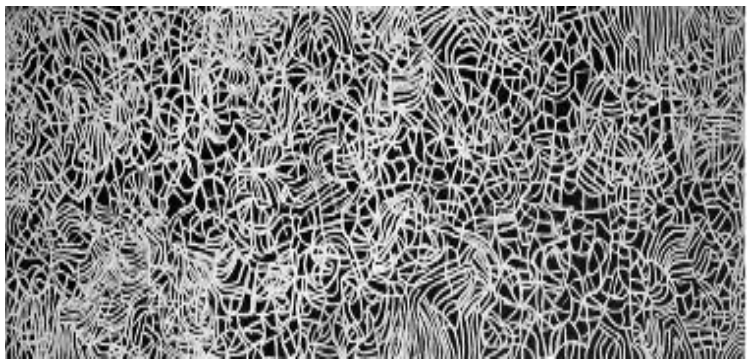
everyday life and it would be impossible to understand African culture without an understanding of their art. The traditional Africa had figures or masks which were the vehicles through which these spirits made themselves seen and their presence known. Wooden masks, which might represent either human or animal, are one of the most commonly found forms of art in western Africa. In their original contexts, ceremonial masks are used for celebrations, initiations, crop harvesting, and war preparation. The masks are worn by a chosen or initiated dancer. During the mask ceremony the dancer often goes into a deep trance, and during this state of mind he "communicates" with his ancestors. The masks can be worn in three different ways: vertically covering the face; as helmets encasing the entire head; and as crests resting upon the head, which was commonly covered by material as part of a disguise. African masks often represent a spirit, and it was strongly believed that the spirit of the ancestors or the deity possesses the wearer. Most African masks are made with wood, and can be decorated with a number of substances including: ivory, animal hair, plant fibres (such as raffia), pigments, stones, and semi-precious gems. Statues, usually of wood or ivory, are often inlaid with cowrie shells, metal studs, and nails. Sculpture also served to symbolize authority and played important roles in maintaining social control (Peter, 2005). With increased materials and an evolution in technology, cultures and even thinking, African art has also transformed into something more sophisticated, combining the import of the traditional with the stylisation of the modern.



**Fig. 1:**WangechiMutu (2004) *Complete Prolapsus of the Uterus*, glitter, ink, collage on found medical illustration paper, 46 x 31cm (www.khanacademy.org)

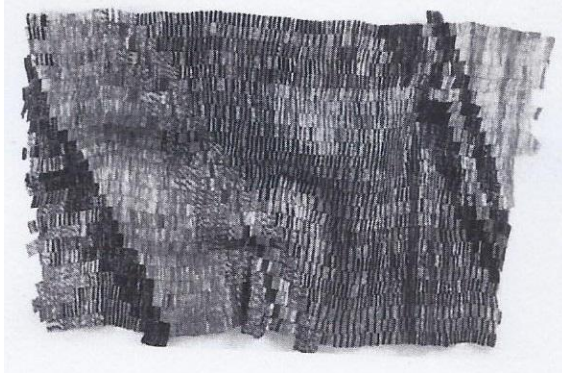
At the same time Africa is experiencing globalisation, the increased movement of artists across borders and oceans has added to the intermixing of influences and artistic vocabularies. For example, WangechiMutu, originally from Kenya, pursued further education in South Wales and then in the United States. Her collaged images of women are informed by African tribal arts, 20<sup>th</sup> century European and American collage artists, and the latest illustrations from fashion, pornography, and medical sources.

Most of the first “modern” Aboriginal painters who started to work with the European materials and techniques and to sell their artworks, were in their 70s or 80s when they had begun their work. One of the best known artists of this group is Emily “Kame” Kngwarreye.



**Fig. 2:** Emily Kngwarreye (1995) *Big Yam Dreaming*, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 291.1 x 801.8 cm, (www.tandfonline.com)

Through the use of introduced Western materials and techniques, the art of the traditional artist began the transition from the religious and private to the public and commercial domain. Some newly invented art forms may become traditional in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if they are not continued by the next generation. Even a relatively new art form should be considered traditional if it is communally recognised as a continuation of an older practice, and is accompanied by a complex structure of use and belief. (Vogel, 1991).



**Fig. 3:** El-Anatsui (2007) *Zebra Crossing 2*, Aluminium bottle caps and copper wire. 226 by 325cm. ([www.sothebys.com](http://www.sothebys.com))

Throughout his career, El Anatsui has consistently proven to be one of the world's most influential contemporary artists. El Anatsui's use of bottle tops began in 1998 when, while taking an exploratory walk, the artist stumbled upon a bag of discarded 'Peak' branded milk-tin can lids. Anatsui left the bottle tops in his studio for several months before the idea came to him 'that by stitching them together, he could get them to articulate some statement. When the process of stitching got underway, he discovered that the result resembled a real fabric cloth.' (Vogel, 2012). The success of El Anatsui's bottle cap works can be attributed to the artist's ability to effortlessly manipulate the rigid metallic material in a way that creates a finished work that is robust yet malleable and luxurious.

The works represented in this paper are the result of development of 21st century contemporary art in Africa. According to Stokstad, (2009), once African artists began to make representational painting on paper or canvas, their art began to be called "contemporary", the name which has come to be known in the writing of most African and Western critics. There is nothing wrong with this term, but its meaning "of the present era", applies to equally all kinds of art made in Africa including contemporary traditional art, contemporary urban art, and new functional art. Olajobi (2018) avers that:

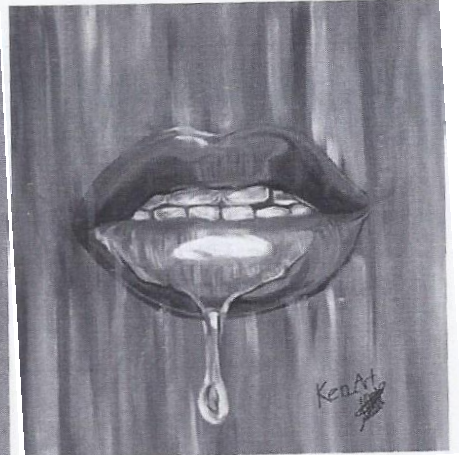
The digital technology of this age has changed a lot of things. From the way we do things to how we communicate or relate with people and our environment, the technological advancements of this age have also boost our speed of working, offer other mediums of doing things among other benefits. It is unarguably true that art is as old as man itself, the recent developments have

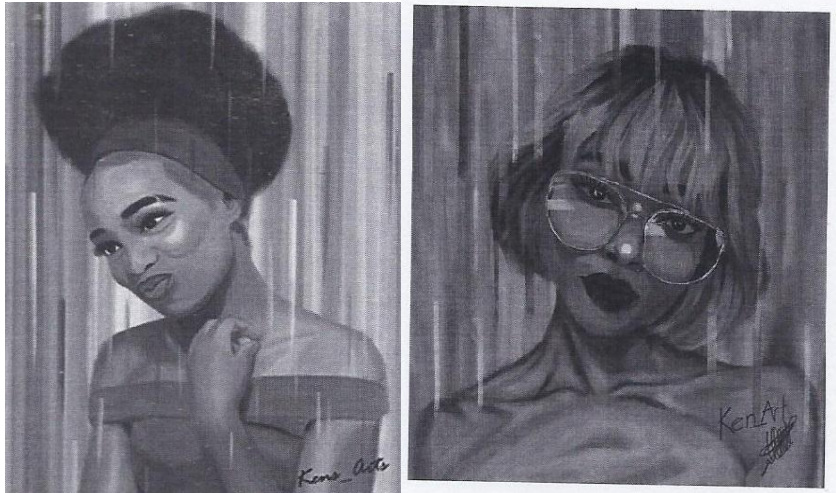
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also affected the medium of expression or enjoying this channel of communication and aesthetics or beauty.

Nigeria for example, is blessed with artistic heritage and her visual arts practices are also rich in all forms. However, the concepts, themes, the methods, styles, materials/ media of execution of the visual arts practices keep changing because of the emergent socio/cultural, religious, technological and modern influences (Ngumah, 2014). From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new forms of art emerged as a result of new ideas induced by computer assisted programs. There are many computer packages such as Adobe, Corel draw, Macromedia, among others which have enhanced creative performance. However, most visual arts practices are grouped along the schools from which the artists graduated. An example of a 21<sup>st</sup> century African artist as asserts by Olajobi (2018) is AbodunrinKehindeIbukun (kennydi, as he is called by his friends), a digital fine artist whose digital paintings explores the basic African cultural lives and make his drawings and paintings with the help of the graphical tablet. And unlike the traditional palette, the digital technology allow the mixture of some hues which might have not been possible years before now. With a foundational inspiration from nature and photographs, kennydi visually express his views using the digital technology available. By adopting lines as a signature style in all is works which covers diverse themes ranging from portraiture to daily activities found across Africa. Examples of his works are shown below (Fig. 5, representing four untitled works):





**Fig. 5.** Ibukun, Abodunrin Kehinde (2018). Untitled works. Digital oil painting ([www.omenkaonline.com](http://www.omenkaonline.com)).



**Fig. 6:** Zara Kattiems (n.d). **Bring back our girls.** Impasto, Abuja, Nigeria. ([www.contemporary-african-art.com](http://www.contemporary-african-art.com))

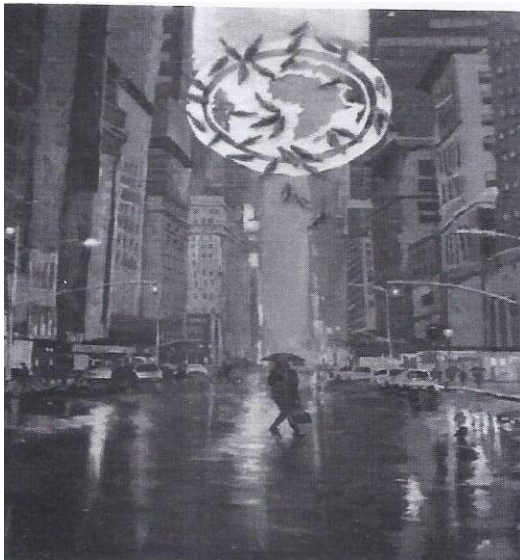
The painting in Fig. 6 falls into the abstract category, it depicts social impact through thick impasto and rigorous brush strokes, the black represents the girls who have been taken, the red depicts bloodshed, the green represents the Sambisa forest. Most art works of the current century depicts the recent happenings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Contemporary African Art also comprises of craft works, which though the same as the early African art, has been modified due to the technological age we are in. According to Buszek (2011), the subject of ‘craft’ in the contemporary art world grew at the start of the 21st century, as artists with conceptually oriented studio practices increasingly turned to media and processes associated with handicrafts or decorative arts, such as knitting, stitching, weaving, pottery, glass-blowing, and woodworking. In this so-called ‘information age’ the sensuous, tactile ‘information’ of craft media spoke of a direct connection to an endangered humanity, or at least to a humanity being rapidly reconfigured in a technologically saturated world. Other 21<sup>st</sup> century crafts were drawn to the familiarity of utilitarian media such as cloth, ceramics, glass, or wood, which are often invisible due to their being present in our everyday lives. Works were made using these seemingly ordinary craft materials and techniques that draws viewer’s attention to the remarkable show of potentials. Incidentally, the 21st century is directly preceded by the strong personal idealism of the 20th century which, to Greer (1982), entrusted into the hands of the artists the ability to pursue individual styles and personal aspirations. It also awakened the avant-garde spirit of the artists to attack the rigid traditions and conventions that imposed age-old restrictions on the psyche of man.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, vibrant and sophisticated artworks of young African Artists were produced based on approach, artistic style and medium. The artists captured the energy of youth, mirrored life and commented on the human condition in modern Africa. They make their art because “Art is where we express our creativity”, they say. “Art teaches us freedom and beauty”. It helps us to look and understand what we see and to act on what we have learned. Art is a physical expression of our imagination, emotions and ideas. Art is the symbol of what is possible, when we imagine things and make them a reality” (Kamau, 2019). Examples of young African artists’ works done of recent are shown below in Plates 1 and 2 which are works of students of art still studying at ABU Zaria, Nigeria.



**Plate 1:** Tsukwan Joshua Gazama (2019) *Agony*, Sculpture- Beads and Fibre Glass 58x65cm (Snapped by Mwanse, R. K.)



**Plate 2:** Jaye Andrew Ezekiel (2019). *The Ignorant world*, Painting- Mixed Media 110x90cm (Snapped by Mwanse, R.K)

According to the artist, Plate 2, we see a beautiful landscape with sophisticated structures and streets full of glamour, but that is just how we see things normally on a surface level, that's why at background or above is a map of the world surrounded by locusts (which are known as devourers). The placement of this image in the landscape suggests the invisible or inauspicious

happenings in the other realm of existence which links to ours. The artist also relates the symbolism of the work to global warning.

## **Conclusion**

Many 21st-century artists are deeply affected by their deep involvement in global visual culture, which is now made vividly present through online networks which they maintain to create art expressions through social media. In the early twenty-first century, contemporary African art is no longer confined to the works of black artists; it now includes those produced by artists of European, Arab, and Asian descent. That it has come of age is evident in the creative ways it often combines ancient African elements with new and frequently Western materials, forms, and techniques to reflect the peculiarity of the continent's history and the complexity of its encounters with other cultures (Pollack, 2001)

Europeans introduced education relating to arts and crafts as early as the late 19th century, when mission schools included new techniques such as carpentry and Western-style embroidery in their curricula. In the first half of the 20th century, some individuals pursued art studies overseas (often in the colonial “mother country”) at art schools and universities. At the same time, some foreigners resident in Africa began art workshops in painting and/or sculpture for interested individuals, some of whom had little or no formal schooling (Curnow, n.d). The 20<sup>th</sup> century art had been an exploration and politically-charged subject matter, and artists who undergo academic training often produce works that are vastly different in spirit and appearance from other modern traditional African artists. Because these academically trained artists are familiar with the art business in major Western cities, they begin their careers knowing that cultivation of relationships with reviewers, dealers, galleries, and curators can have a major impact on their progress, and are aware of grants, fellowships, residencies, and competitions that will increase their prominence.

Public art was a well-established genre by the late 20th century, attracting both traditional and experimental practitioners. Public art in the 21st century has expanded even more as a field of activity in which creative investigation can take place. Many important topics/ideas have come up in the new century and inspiring new thinking. In addition to continuing familiar forms such as site-specific monuments, murals, graffiti, and collaborations between artists, engineers, and architects, public art encompasses new purposes, forms, and locations, including pop-up art shops, street parades, and

online projects. Public artists in the 21st century might use established approaches such as installation and performance, but introduce new variations.

### **Recommendation**

1. Art should be encouraged by the government to develop creativity, innovation and skill development.
2. Effective use of skills should be encouraged to improve self-concept for self-sufficiency.
3. Mass mobilisation of artifacts and other art works within the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be shown to the general public through exhibitions in different state capitals, tertiary institutions, libraries, museums, etcetera, so as to create awareness about such works and their significance to technological and economic development.

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