

# An Appreciation of the Works and Thoughts of Stella Idiong

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt at documenting an overview of the academic and artistic life of Stella Idiong who was a Professor of Fine and Industrial Arts in the University of Uyo, Nigeria. The paper uses the critical analysis and pictorial documentation approaches and benefits from library research and the writer's many years of working as a professional colleague of the artist of interest. Findings at the end of the documentation have revealed that Stella Idiong was a graphics designer, art educator, female artist activist, enameller, lecturer, administrator and a poet. The present paper is a general overview of her achievements and it is the writer's hope that more volumes will be articulated by this writer and others to present in detail, documentations and appraisals or appreciation of specific facets of Stella's work for posterity.

**Keywords:** Appreciation, Works, Thoughts, Stella, Idiong

## 1. Introduction

If one should give a thorough thought about what could constitute the complete works and thoughts of Stella Idiong, it becomes immediately obvious that the products cannot be conveniently housed in a single volume. This attempt is the writer's choice of artistic chunks bitten from some of the many facets of her academic life in appreciation of the contributions of the great teacher and designer whose mental and visual masterpieces cannot easily be ignored. Filani (2004:154) acknowledges that 'prominent female printmakers include ... Stella Idiong, a doctorate degree holder in Art Education'. It may be reasonable to outline briefly that Professor Stella Idiong was born on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1950 at Ikot Ekpene in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria into the Royal family of Chief Samuel Udo Ukot of Ikot Udoe village. She later belonged in marriage to the family of His Royal Majesty Obong Sampson Udo Idiong of Ata Obio Akpa in Oruk Anam Local Government Area also in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. She held B.A. cum Laude Fine Arts from Southern University, Louisiana, U.S.A., 1975; M.A. in Art and Art Education, from Michigan State University, U.S.A., 1977 and; Ed.D in Art and Education from Columbia University, New York, U.S.A., 1988. (Idiong, 2003:60; 2004:104).

Without pretending to document her Curriculum Vitae which is not the interest of this paper, it is worth noting that Stella Idiong has variously been described as a Printmaker, Graphics Artists, Enameller, Art Educator and, this paper dares to add, Poet though she did not present any formal publication on Poetry. This paper however benefits from Library research and the writer's eighteen years of contact with the artist of interest.

## 2.1 Stella's Philosophies

Stella Idiong held some convictions on issues in Art, Art Education and Art philosophy vis-à-vis other human endeavours. To her 'Any nation which is not irrigated by art sinks into barbarism' (Idiong, 2003:60). This statement tends to reflect that art is necessary for the development of a nation in many ways. She believed that any nation that does not harness her art, project and commercialize it, especially through tourism, may tend to deteriorate. Idiong (2002:48) records that 'Art is a stabilizing factor for technological development'. This idea is shared and emphasized by Onobrakpeya (1999:9) who writes that 'In the history of human creativity, what was mere imaginations, fantasy or dream by the artists has eventually resulted in great technological inventions, which have moved man forward'. Stella believed that "You could say things with line that (one) has no words for" (Idiong 2004:104). This goes to strengthen the fact that most great inventions that are enjoyed globally today were first illustrated, projected, and manipulated as drawings before prototypes were built with appropriate materials.

Apart from the documented beliefs of Stella Idiong, several teachers who have worked closely with her have commented that she never accepted that any student should fail examinations. The writer has had an experience of being in an oral examination room where Professor Idiong who was actually one of the major examiners spent more time defending and answering for the candidates. That attitude tends to validate her spoken belief that no learner is 'unteachable'. Often times she was willing if it was permitted to teach at any point in time. Whether her stand was acceptable or not had never been subjected to formal academic debate but she kept reaching into her 'grab bag of teaching toys' and applied appropriate teaching aids on all learners at all levels whether they were classified as fast or dull learners and that she did till the end. There is no doubt that she was an advocate of appropriate educational technology.

### 3.1 Panorama of her Art

Every encounter this writer had with Stella Idiong's art whether it was a drawing, print or enamel work brought up a feeling of sensitivity. The austerity and economy in her application of materials and effort evoke a contagious feeling of simplicity that is baffling. Take for example 'Accented line drawing and self portrait' done in colour ball point in 2004. see figure 1.



**Fig. 1** 'Accented line drawing and self portrait', colour ball point, 33cm x 43cm, 2004.

The piece which was rendered with vertical lines does not possess the pictorial resemblance that is associated with what average minds would accept in human portraiture yet there is a deeper resemblance which seems to be beyond the physical. In another drawing 'Resting Baby Hawker' done in contour pen and ink wash, the artist captured the image of a worn out, dissatisfied and confused girl child. This is in line with the much publicized war against child labour and child abuse in the general sense. The drawing which was done in very few lines captures the theme without much elaboration as the suggested wear of the child is not physical shown within the drawing space (Idiong, 2004:65). See figure 2.



**Fig. 2** Resting Baby Hawker, contour pen and ink wash (Not dated).

Stella Idiong's forte seems to be in the area of printmaking. Most of her works seen in publication are in this genre and each piece reflects the poetic nature of the artist both in motifs and in titles. 'So close but so distant' (fig. 3) which was achieved through deep etching and pastel portrays a not so happy couple who may have been legal or illegal. The juxtaposition of the two human forms reflects the paradox in the title of the piece. This particular print is of special interest to this writer though he never got to interview the artist about its meaning. One wonders if the artist was talking about her relationship with her spouse or that of some other couple. This will remain a mystery unless she had explained the work somewhere in a publication.



**Fig. 3** ‘So close but so distant’, Deep etching and Pastel, 40cm x 60cm, 2003.

‘Endangered Species’ is another of her prints which was done through wood cut technique. The main motifs in the work are mushrooms. See fig. 4. Stella Idiong as an extremely sensitive artist was always concerned about the ill treatment of our natural environment by careless humans. Incessant destruction of forest reserves go with untold implication and the artist through her works preached against such activities (Idiong, 2003:12).



**Fig. 4** Endangered Species, Woodcut, 30cm x 60cm, 2003

Generally, the art products of Stella Idiong present carefully blended and articulated elements and principles of design. Her choice of colours on her prints and enamel wares are mild but firm. The economy in her use of design elements is an attribute which will attract the preservation of her pieces for posterity.

#### **4.1 Stella and Gender Feud in Nigerian Art**

Stella Idiong believed that female artists can practice the art profession to any level just like their male counterparts and was always quick to warn that ‘Male chauvinism should be totally eradicated’ to provide an equal opportunity for the females. However, she seems to have bought the idea of Ikwuemesi (2004:164) that ‘Nigeria’s “female” artists are seriously marginalized, not by any person or institution, but by themselves’. In her words of encouragement to female artists, Idiong (2004:170) advises that:

*Talents must be developed and women must  
summon up courage to practice art and  
develop characteristics favourable for gender  
partnership rather than competition ... Wealthy  
women should support their female counterparts  
by mounting exhibitions and selling their works ...  
The societal problem of marrying early and losing  
a career or waiting too late and losing a husband  
must be addressed.*

She has also advised that ‘Galleries and art collectors should accept female artists’ works on their merit’. To her, the future of female artists in Nigeria is quite bright as she affirms that ‘The role of women artists in Nigeria has undergone a metamorphosis and women now participate in art with men’ (Idiong, 2004:170).

#### **5.1 Her Thoughts About the Development and Future of the Design Profession**

Stella Idiong was conscious of the fact that a lot changes have been recorded in the way designs are now created especially in the two-dimensional arts. Idiong (2005:130) points out that:

*The design profession is no longer what it used  
to be in the age of manual, even mechanical production ... Technology is  
already changing  
the way products are sold and they may also  
be altering the way we experience reality.*

She has also looked specifically into the implications of the advent of computer in the design profession and opines that ‘The biggest challenge to our graphics artists is not merely learning the computer language, but reforming the language and their design principles to suit the Nigerian Situation’ (Idiong, 2005:131).

### 6.1 Her Views about Education through Art

As an academic and Professor who was formally trained and earned certificates in Art and Art Education, Stella Idiong while teaching in higher institutions had a passion for the establishment of a strong foundation of aesthetic education in the Nigerian child. She held that art education is ‘the education through art which enhances children’s ability to fully experience art and beauty, while deepening their historical and cultural understanding, appreciating and nurturing creativity and imagination necessary for innovative thinking and problem solving’ (Idiong, 2000:73). She also believed that every child especially in Nigeria needs a great dose of aesthetic education which she defined as ‘the sum total of cognitive and technical skill development which results in the effective or emotional aspect of our lives’ (Idiong, 2000:73).

In the higher institutions, she advocated that the beginners should be well guided and allowed a certain degree of freedom to be creative and inventive. Graduates of Fine and Industrial Arts usually have a choice to further their studies in either purely studio master’s degree studies or the alternative degree in Art Education and she insisted and encouraged the candidates to learn to be adequate Art teachers. Logically, she believed in the propagation of the Art discipline because a dearth in Art teachers would be synonymous with a drop in the interest of prospective Art students at the primary and post primary levels of education.

This writer’s last formal contact with Stella Idiong was where she argued to put into perspective, the peculiarity of the M.A. Art Education degree as distinct from other M.A. degrees in Education faculties in Nigerian Universities.

### 7.1 Conclusion

Having briefly appreciated aspects of the art and thoughts of Stella Idiong, one discovers that while she pursued her passion and career, she was able to leave indelible prints in terms of documented and undocumented works. Those who were under her artistic tutelage have a duty to sustain those teachings of hers that they find useful. While this paper is by no means a comprehensive appreciation of the artist’s contributions, it is the writer’s belief that together with other publications on her, a more complete outlook of her life and times will have been achieved. In recommendation, this paper presents to appropriate authorities the recommendation Stella Idiong made at the beginning of this millennium that ‘there is need to implement at all levels of Nigerian Education arts discipline-based education for these are pre-requisites for technological advancement and for the articulation of body and soul’ (Idiong, 2000:78).

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