

Contemporary Nigerian Sculpture: Where are the Flowers?

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Abstract

There is general assumption that flowers are Western not African. Mazrui et al (2004) opines that ‘there is a “floral gap” in African culture’. By this he refers to an insignificant representation of flowers in African Culture. This study investigates the possibilities of including flowers in contemporary sculpture as a way of bridging the floral gap. This study will not be sufficient to fill the floral gap but is aimed at promoting a flower culture in Nigeria. It brings to fore the issues of extinction, adaptation and its Consequences. It emphasises the dire need for artists in Nigeria to respond to the environment and issues that pertain to her. Five flowers have been selected; hibiscus, lily, zinnia, sunflower and rose; they are explored to create sculptures in relief and round forms to satisfy the canons of representational and abstract art. The approach of this study is studio-experiment. The purpose of this research is to promote a flower culture in Nigeria, making flowers a relevant subject matter in expressing thoughts and ideas in art.

1.1 Background

Nature forms a major source of inspiration for artists and designers. In one way or another, nature has always been the preferential theme in creative art. Nature as described by the Word Web Dictionary (2013) is the natural physical world including plants and animals, landscapes, vegetation, water bodies, clouds to mention a few. Schwimmer, (2000) describes nature as a raw material; by this he refers to nature as inspiration (idea) for art and also the source of the different media an artist uses. Apart from representing nature, artists also make use of a variety of media like wood, skin, stone and wax in the execution of their art. These materials are all products of nature. A good number of African sculptures are made from clay, bronze, stone or wood.

Artists, both contemporary and traditional confirm the notion that there exists a relationship between them and their natural environment. Moffat (2007) opines that “the cave art of all social groups consists of five principal motifs: human figures, animals, tools and weapons, rudimentary local maps and symbols or ideograms”. To further buttress this Adams (2007) says “the upper Palaeolithic man produced a wide range of small sculptures made of Ivory, bone, clay and stone these depict humans, animals and a combination of the two” this can be seen in the examples listed below:

- i. Venus of Willendorf (2500- 2000bc) a limestone statue of a woman.
- ii. Two bison, France (15000-10000 BCE); a relief sculpture made from clay.
- iii. The cave paintings and engravings of Lascaux (c.1500-10,000 BCE),
- iv. Ritual Dance; engraving from the Cave of Addaura (10, 000 BC)

In addition, Kleiner and Mamiya (2005) say “there are two questions that bother on the artist before beginning work: what shall be my subject? How shall I represent it?” In their opinion, the most universal answer to the first question was an animal – Bison, Mammoth, Ibex and Horse were the most common images of the Palaeolithic period. The cave man happens to be the first to express these natural forms as subject in his art.

How an artist comes about his subject matter is best known to him/her, there are no restrictions to the choice of subject matter in contemporary art. Artists are at will to choose for themselves what their subject matter should be. Adams (2007) says subject matter is what is manifestly represented in a work of art- including figures, objects, narrative, shapes, colour and other visual elements. Sale and Betti (2004) state that “the figure (or human body as it is known in art parlance), has held centre stage for artists throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. The figure has been called the still-life of contemporary art” this connotes a preference for some subjects over others.

1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to promote a flower culture in Nigeria, making flowers a relevant subject matter in expressing thoughts and ideas. This will be achieved through the following objectives which are to:

- i. select a group of flowers for exploration in sculpture
- ii. compose sculpted flowers into identifiable objects
- iii. explore parts of the flowers; its petals, sepals, pistils and stamens to create abstract compositions.

Artists in recent times have made themselves relevant by responding to issues that bother on the environment. Three African artists have shown concern on the problem of waste management which is an environmental issue. These artists; Kainebe (b.1964), Anatsui (b.1944) and Ekpe (2012) have harnessed waste cans and bottle tops and turned them into remarkable, artistic statements. Global warming and its consequent extinction in plants and flowers, is one of such environmental problems contemporary Nigerian artist should

look into. The entire world is focused on global warming, Nigerians should not be left out. This study hopes to be a pointer to other artists to adopt flowers in producing sculptures. It will inspire contemporary Nigerian artists to look into environmental issues and proffer solutions to them in their art. This research considers agencies who aim at preserving nature through art, some of which are artist groups like Artists for Nature Foundation (ANF) and The Wild Life Art Society as a motivation.

1.3 Scope of the study



Selected flowers

Five flowers found within Zaria have been selected for this study they are; Sunflower, Rose, Zinnia, Lily and Hibiscus. They were selected randomly on the basis of colour, size, shapes and petal arrangement. Some other attributes have informed their selection. Hibiscus for example is selected for its relevance in the study of Biology at the Secondary level of education in the whole of West Africa. Of recent Sunflower has attained an economic value, it is now a cash crop and individuals are encouraged to cultivate them for export. Zinnia and lily may not have such values but while lilies are rare on the Campus community the Zinnias are largely populated and growing wildly without any regard from the public. The last flower, Rose, is selected for its popularity all over the world.

1.4 Conceptual framework

This study is centred on the Egyptian belief in life after death. This is so because flowers are short lived and under threats of extinction. The Egyptian mythology says “death is not the end of life but a transition to a similar existence or another place” (Adams, 2006). Egyptian artists made figurative sculptures that served as surrogates for the soul of the dead (*ka*). Death for flowers may mean its metamorphosis into fruits or death in the real sense. If flowers would live on, they needed similar, three-dimensional forms as “surrogates” to transcend them from death to the new life else the soul (*ka*) would transcend without a body to live on. Though this belief was applicable to humans only; this research treats the flowers as humans (having the ability to die). This research will give them an opportunity to live in the new life in the sculptures that have been produced. As these sculptures live it is hoped that they will inspire another generation of flower sculptures which means the purpose of art as an agent for cultural change would have been accomplished in this belief.

2.1 The position of flowers in Visual Art

Environment consists of other elements aside animals and humans it includes land, water and air. Cain (2001) reports that about 71% of the earth is covered by water while the remaining 29% is the sum total of Landmass, which is predominantly covered by vegetation. In the findings of Gordon *et al*, (2001) vegetation is grouped into flowering plants (angiosperms with about 260,000 species) and the non-flowering plants (gymnosperms). Angiosperms have a reproductive structure called flower. Some flowers have historical significance like the Tudor of the royal house of England. In Nigeria, the Coat of Arms is dotted with some flowers; the *coctus spectabilis* that grows wildly across Nigeria, emphasizing the beauty of the nation alongside her agricultural potentials. This is supported by the green grasses. This history however has not motivated Nigerian artists to consider the subject of flower. Flowers have mostly been rendered as embellishments in Baroque, Greek and Egyptian architecture and sculpture but where are they in Nigerian art traditional and contemporary?

According to Henri Matisse (1869-1954) “There are always flowers for those who want to see them.” Flowers are inclusive in the endless list of raw materials that nature provides. About flowers, Kunz (2011) says a close-up view of flowers or plants are a never ending source of beautiful design. Gordon *et al* (2001), further

describes flowers as brightly coloured, sweet smelling and oddly shaped. From this assertion flowers therefore, bear the following obvious characteristics which could prompt artistic inquiry.

1. Bright colours: the Rose flower for example is known to have variety of colours; there are red, pink white and yellow roses.
2. Fragrance: pleasurable to both humans and animals.
3. Interesting shapes: some are conical like tulips, others are tubular, star-shaped or funnel-shaped.
4. Vary in size: the smallest flower is the water meal, It can weigh about 1/190,000 of an ounce, equivalent to two grains of table salt and the largest is , the titan arum, or "corpse flower" which is about five feet tall
5. Natural patterns: as observed in the petal arrangement and the lines formed on these petals; some patterns are radial, symmetrical, spiral, etc.
6. Structural divisions: flowers have four major parts namely, petals, stamen, pistil and sepal. However these attributes have not been enough to inspire visual art in Nigeria to any significant extent. If at all flowers are included they would appear on textiles, murals, book cover (Purple Hibiscus by ...) and a few paintings.

The “floral Gap”

The idea of flowers in art is not new but is inexhaustible; Available literature shows an abundant representation of flowers in European, Oriental and Islamic art but Africa has been portrayed by certain scholars as ‘deflowered’ (a culture void of flowers). The above assertion is in consonance with Mazrui (2004) who opines that ‘there is a “floral gap” (insignificant representation of flowers) in African culture’. Contrary to this, Africa is a home to many flower species. The Kenyan embassy in Japan (2014) reports that, “Kenya has become the European Union’s biggest source of flower imports” making it one of the world’s greatest producer of flowers.

Goody in Mazrui (2004) has strongly argued that

although; Africa is rich in plants, African culture is not fascinated by flowers... the peoples of Africa did not grow domestic flowers, nor yet did they make use of wild ones to any significant extent in worship, in gift giving or in the decoration of the body... But what is perhaps more surprising is that flowers; neither domesticated nor wild, play so little part in the domain of design or the creative arts

Perhaps for the reason of colour more artistic researches have been carried out in the area of painting as compared to sculpture as it concerns flowers on the globe. One cannot talk of painterly expressions with flowers without mentioning Hans Memlinc, a fifteenth century Dutch artist, credited with having painted the oldest surviving floral image around 1485 Jim (2001), Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Georgia O’Keffe(1887-1986). Contemporary sculptors outside Africa have taken the subject of flowers into consideration. They are Eduardo Catalino(1917-2010), Antone Bruinsma(b.1958), Choi Jeong Hwa(b.1961)and a host of others. It may be a bit difficult to point Nigerian artists who have explored the flower form with similar passion as artists from Europe or even Asia. In Nigeria, flowers are mostly treated as a subject for “commercial art”. By this I refer to artists who would just paint or sculpt flowers once in a while on commission. Jerry Buhari (painter) *Floral notes* (1989) and Olu Amoda (sculptor) are two Nigerian artists I could mention for relating with flowers. The thrust of this study therefore lies in the less representation of flowers in African art and in contemporary Sculpture in Nigeria. There is a need for Africans and Nigerians in particular to explore flowers as a subject matter in sculpture so as to promote a flower culture here in Nigeria.

2.2 Consequence of the floral gap in Nigerian Art

Artists and humanity in general are victims of the effects of global warming. When nature is destroyed it means that the artist is on the losing side since nature is a “raw material” in the hand of the artist. It is sad to know that more than one-in-four of all flowering plants are under threat of extinction (Jowitt, 2010). Extinction, adaptation and evolution occur and distort nature. Vrey (2011) elucidates that “humans do not have the ability to work in perfect harmony with nature”. Such human activities like construction of roads, bridges, houses and so on, are likely to destroy habitats of both plants and animals, inhibit the pollination of a specific flowering plant and eventually lead to their extinction.

The “floral gap” consequently, symbolizes extinction; in accordance to the law of use and disuse (use it or lose it) as propounded by Charles Darwin (1809-1882). If flowers are not included in our art, it indicates a future extinction where there will be no artistic evidence of their existence perhaps with the exception of Kenya and a few other cultures in Africa who relate with them in terms of agriculture, food and medicine.

One way of putting flowers into positive use is by approaching them as inspiration for art as seen in the works of afore mentioned artists. The existence of flowers and its aesthetic qualities may be enough to inspire floral forms appearing in the sculptures of contemporary Nigerian artists.

3.1 Experimental Study

To achieve the objectives mentioned above, the researcher

3.2 Procedure/ methodology

The study is a studio based exploration. It began with an experimental study in different media to ascertain the most preferred material. Considering that artists are concerned with form and their habitats, sheet metal and aluminium turned out to be the acceptable medium as they could withstand any weather condition and will be suitable for both indoor and outdoor purposes. The artist decided to discontinue the use of paper, fabric and plastic.

Flowers have been best described as organic forms but in the task of transforming sketches into concrete three dimensions a little of geometry had to be considered. Identifying petals by a shape was necessary so that they could be replicated for grouping into flowers. It therefore became mandatory for the researcher to produce templates for the different flower species. The petals, receptacles, stalks, stamen and pistil were constructed as separate entities and later coupled together to form individual flower units. In most cases, the single flowers are grouped together to form a composition. The research procedure was highly dynamic and faced a lot of changes to accommodate the thoughts and ideas of a particular sculpture. The following steps happen to be general, especially at the initial stage of the research.

- 1 Drawing and cutting of templates on paper.
- 2 Tracing the templates on the material i.e. aluminium, sheet metal
- 3 Cutting of sheet metals and aluminium sheet with the aid of a jig saw and scissors.
- 4 Forming them into the desired shape by beating with a mallet or hammer
- 5 Cutting of iron rods, straightening and bending to suit the composition.
- 6 Welding of the sheets and iron rods or joining the aluminium sheets with rivets pegs or adhesive and welding them into a composition.
- 7 Finishing; this entails dressing, filing, smoothening and application of patina.

Below are some of the works produced to answer objective i, ii and iii as stated earlier.

4. Catalogue of works



Leni (2013) Umbrella, 68.5 cm, Sheet metal, 2012



Leni (2013) Broom, 81 cm, Sheet metal, 2012.



Plate 5: Spiral Rose, 71cm, Mild steel, 2012



Plate8: Pollination, 76x50 cm, Sheet metal, 2012.



Plate11: Concerted, 55x45 cm Inches, Sheet metal, 2012.



Plate16: Multifaceted, 50x53cm, Sheet metal, iron rods and bearings, 1012



Leni (2013) Fall I, 58.4X76.2 cm, Sheet metal and iron rods, 2012.



Leni (2013) Fall II, 66cm, Sheet metal, 2012

5.2 Conclusion

In response to global warming and the consequent result of extinction, artists are called upon to set the path straight. Kleiner (2013) asserts that artists and architects can affect History by reinforcing or challenging cultural values and practices through the objects they create. On the basis of this assertion, this research exploits art as a medium to promote a flower culture in Nigeria. The floral gap is still in existence and is open to be filled by contemporary Nigerian artists.

The environment is embedded with a variety of flowers from which the researcher was able to select five for the study. The flowers vary in colour, shape, size *et cetera*.

Having explored flowers in representational and abstract form, the researcher was able to compose the flowers into four identifiable objects; bouquet, umbrella, broom and crucifix. It is based on this finding that the researcher affirms that flowers possess numerous possibilities for creating art. This is just one of the ways flowers could be composed. The researcher is resolute about the words of Kunz (2011). He says a close-up view of flowers or plants are a never ending source of beautiful design. Artists like Antone Bruinsma, Onward Sango, Masayoki koorida and Salwa Zeidan have found expressions in them. They have inspired works of great masters like Matisse and Van Gogh. They have functioned as important components of the Baroque period. The subject of flower is not time bound, it cuts through Baroque and Rococo to the 16th, 18th, 19th, 20th and 21st century, yet the inspiration is unending. There are also possibilities of exploring them in other different media and techniques.

Abstraction was achieved by distorting size or shapes of flowers. In other cases, composition was achieved by exploring only a part of the flower for example some compositions were made from petals only. The works could be suitable for architectural embellishment on window frames, gates, burglary proofs, ceilings and bare walls. Fall (I) is one of such examples.

Recommendations

African writers, poets, musicians and visual artists should be encouraged to carry out more research on the available flowers on the continent, to improve on our flower culture and add to the volume of literature. Issues like gender, feminism and religion are some of the areas that artists/ researchers could focus on in carrying out further studies on flowers. Individuals and government agencies should take up the responsibility to plant and nurture flowers everywhere for the numerous benefits we derive from them.

Flower sculptures should not be used to replace live ones. A symbiotic relationship should be maintained between them and the environment. The flower sculptures have been found suitable for both indoor and outdoor purposes. Therefore, it is recommended for public places like schools, hospitals and offices as they could be used to embellish bare wall, floors and other surfaces. It is important that while designing structures, Nigerian architects should consider introducing sculptures to their structures.

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