

Advances in Arts and Aesthetics: Paradigm of Michael Olusegun Fajuyigbe's Pottery Sculpture

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Abstract

Through the ages, artists have explored art and aesthetics to interpret issues, beautify environment, and document history and social advancements. This paper examines the evolvement of forms, including the content, context and meanings, in the pottery sculpture created by Michael Olusegun Fajuyigbe. It also discusses the relationship between the formal characteristics of art objects and their significance as rooted in the Yoruba philosophy and aesthetics. Interviews and relevant literature are employed in data collection, while analysis of works follows the descriptive method in art historical studies. Seven works are purposively selected and analysed to gain a better insight into the aesthetics of his art forms. The study reveals that art often speaks the language of its creator, and that every artist reflects his age and cultural environment while the average observer finds it difficult to construe the intricacies entrenched within the art forms produced by the artist. However, the analysis of selected works conveys pottery sculpture as carriers of values and information; thereby drawing viewers' attention to inherent aesthetic pleasure and meanings. The paper concludes that art is a window to the artist's world; and is interpretative of the environment and experiences the artist has lived. It submits therefore that like Fajuyigbe, contemporary academic potters should strive towards achieving a balance between aesthetics and form for a sustained relevance of pottery in contemporary Nigerian art.

Keywords: Art; Pottery Sculpture; Aesthetics; Yoruba Values; Symbolism.

Introduction

Ademuleya (2007:13) asserts that "Every great artist is to a certain degree the child of his age, and yet every great artist helps to create his age". The practice of Pottery Sculpture by the artist, just like any other profession, is a process that can only be limited by the life span of the artist. In other words, Pottery Sculpture is a practice that is likely to exist as long as its practitioners and patrons exists.

Pottery Sculpture is generally known as terracotta because it is made of clay and later fired in a temperature that will ensure the clay cannot be recycled to the original material. Nelson (1984: 342) observes that terracotta is an "earthenware body, generally red in colour and containing grog". He further observes terracotta as the "common body type used for Pottery Sculpture". The earthenware clay is the most common type of clay which the traditional potters have explored greatly in producing the several pots used for receptacle purposes. Examples of the pots are the *amu*, (big and deep water pot), *agbada* (frying pot), and *oru* (the pot used for boiling herbs meant for the newborn).

In order to understand the form of an artwork, Willet (2002:133) suggests that the intricacies of the artwork should be understood first from its physical appearance before knowing or finding out the purpose and then with the knowledge of the purpose for which the artist has created the artwork. He further opines that a great deal of satisfaction could be found in looking at it without any background information and thereby see how the artist has solved his artistic problems. In his words, this could be achieved by observing first, "the overall artistic conception in terms of masses and open space". The use of open space enclosed within sculptures has, perhaps, been one of the more obvious features borrowed by twentieth-century Western sculptures from African sculptures. This feature is prominent in the artworks of Fajuyigbe.

Advancement in the Arts and aesthetics

The general orientation of the West about "arts in Africa" is that the artist is "anonymous" and that the art works lack the quality that could lend them to Western artistic appraisal. Until very recently, African art was mainly constituted of 3-dimensional art forms especially statues carved in wood or made from other natural items such as specific animal remains and the environment. The African proportion of the figures in ratio of the head to the other body parts is 1:4 as against the West's 1:8. Initially, a majority of African artworks taken to Europe were misinterpreted because of the lack of background knowledge of the cultures that produced them. They were taken away as souvenir and kept as special and rare items in well secured spaces such as the museums and art galleries.

Over the years, African art has undergone a lot of dynamic changes which could be summarized in term of form, content, context and materials. The advent of 'foreign' religions in Africa, mainly Islam and Christianity has affected the subject matter of the arts especially, the built images and carved statues which were considered as totems that must be done away with. With Western education also came the western culture and the use of

western artistic values in appraising arts of the Africans. The subject matter or purpose of the arts has moved away from predominant worship to various themes such as politics, economics and socio-cultural issues. African art forms eventually became multi-dimensional in nature and are expressed using foreign and newly discovered materials such as the Plaster of Paris, fiberglass and wrought iron. The contexts have also become diversified to include decorations and the use as land marks in 'public arts' erected on spaces for public appraisal and historical purposes.

The newly found liberty of the African artist from specific canons of artistic expressions has encouraged a tremendous development in the arts such as reflected in the works of Olusegun Fajuyigbe. He uses terracotta in expressing series of Yoruba cultural themes thereby institutionalizing certain traditional standards which are fast disappearing in the face of modern civilization.

Function of Pottery Sculpture in the Environment

The general assertion of the early western scholars of the African art was that the arts were made purely for religious purposes. They often claimed that without religion, Africans had nothing to do with art. Pottery Sculpture, as an important aspect of African art, performs several functions within the society. Adejumo (2005: 222), categorizes such as "aesthetic and non-aesthetic". The aesthetic function connotes that which is used for decorative purposes. Pottery Sculptures are done to enhance the beauty of the environment. He reiterates that art, as an embellishment of ordinary living, is acquired with competence and has a describable form. On the other hand, it also performs non aesthetic functions as it is used as a means of communication, information, education and reformation. This implies that art helps man to understand some morals and philosophies of life ranging from cultural to religious.

On this note, it can be said that Pottery Sculpture could be explored as a means through which ideas and passions are communicated. This is the reason the artist-potter is expected to produce pottery should be familiar with their socio cultural environment and, should have the insightful knowledge of iconography, symbolism, and oral traditions of this environment (Fajuyigbe, 2004:4). Unlike other aspects of the Fine and Applied Arts such as painting, graphics and textiles, fewer people are involved in Pottery Sculpture production in the contemporary age. Fajuyigbe (2003) describes such artists as genius in that they conceptualize ideas and produce works in 3-dimension with the use of clay while promoting societal values of morals, philosophy and traditions.

In the light of the uniqueness inherent in the practice of Pottery Sculpture, it becomes pertinent to document some selected creative pottery sculptures produced by Michael Olusegun Fajuyigbe, popularly referred to as '*Micho-Sege*'. He is a passionate and value adding pottery-sculptor who combines naturalism and stylization of forms to produce his works which have a high level of aesthetics and conceptual finishing.

Brief Biography of Michael Olusegun Fajuyigbe

Going by the words of Aristotle "we are what we repeatedly do, and excellence therefore is not an act but habit", Olusegun Fajuyigbe's life has proved this right. In his quest for attaining excellence, he has undertaken some crucial tasks which were requisites to his development as an artist. He was born on October 10, 1970 in the city of Ibadan, while his hometown is Ifaki-Ekiti, in Ido- Osi Local Government in Ekiti State. He began his primary education at the NW5 Baptist Primary School, Inalende, Ibadan between 1976 and 1982 and later his secondary education between 1982 and 1987 at the Oba Akinbiyi High School II, Mokola, Oremeji, Ibadan. After his secondary education, he proceeded to the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile Ife, Osun State where he got his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Fine Arts with specialization in Ceramics in the year 1993, under the tutelage of Mr. Raphael Ige Ibigbami. He was appointed a Graduate Assistant into the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University in November, 2002 where he teaches Ceramics and Art History; prior to his Masters Degree (M.A.) in Fine Arts, in 2004. He bagged a Masters in Philosophy (MPhil.) in African Art Studies in 2012; and presently rounding off his doctoral degree in, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Olusegun Fajuyigbe is categorized as a Pottery Sculptor due to the sculptural approach he gives to his pottery works which are always characterized with figural representations drawn from different thematic focuses on issues affecting the society. He has participated in several group exhibitions such as Ceramics Graduate exhibition held in 1994 at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile- Ife and "Art and the People" that was staged by the Society of Nigerian Artists, Osun State Chapter held at the Heritage Hotel, Oshogbo between 31st of July and 12 August, 2004.

Styles and Techniques of Pottery Sculpture

There have been several types of styles in art among which are naturalism, impressionism, realism, and, abstraction. However, in the traditional African art, abstraction was the major style which did not prioritize mechanical accuracy, proportional balance or resemblance. This has changed with the coming of western artists and arts to Africa causing the effacement of complete traditional artistic styles leading to a major change in African art's characteristics and functions (Crowder, 2006). In addition, western criticism of African arts labelled

them as demonic and fetish (Barber, 2006). As a result, most contemporary African artists have stopped the creation of the traditional abstract style. However, some of them have synthesized the African abstract style with the art of naturalism as manifested in the works of Yusuf Grillo, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Bruce Onabrakpeya and Agbooola Folarin among others.

Olusegun Fajuyigbe is one of these artists. He combines naturalism with abstractions to express his ideas and thoughts. During an interview, he noted that his type of art is what he categorized as “Architectural” style. He explained that he builds his pottery sculptures using the architectural approach which uses braces and pillars in other to ensure structural stability of art pieces.

Technique Adopted by the Artist

Olusegun Fajuyigbe prepares his clay and ensures that it is fermented to the level that it is plastic enough to be malleable and bendable while working. He also sketches his reference which will guide him in the production of his work. After this, he rolls a good number of clay coils which he uses to build his work. He then builds up the work using the coil method and laying the coils on each other and, when he gets to a point that the built form is not strong enough to bear some other loads of clay on it, he braces it with pinched clay. He uses some of the braces as designs and abstraction of his forms and at times he detaches the unnecessary one. Once he has derived his desired form, he embellishes his works with heavy textures, motifs and iconography which *Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary*, described as “the use of images and symbols to represent ideas, or the particular images and symbols used in this way by a religious or political group”.

Thematic Classification and Analysis of Works

Fajuyigbe’s works are executed using naturalism and stylization of forms. His work is mostly characterized by the female gender with a fragile look. His female forms are equally characterized with elaborate Yoruba traditional hairdos, adorned with beads, displaying pointed breasts and protruding buttocks. The male figures however, always wear flowing gown, *agbada* with or without caps.

Seven works of Olusegun Fajuyigbe are analysed for the purpose of this study, using purposive sampling method (Adetayo, 2011:280). This is a judgmental, selective or subjective sampling which enable a researcher to decide on the units that are investigated. The thematic analysis however uses descriptive method in discussing the works of the artist considering the Feldman’s (1967) model of art criticism which includes description, formal analysis, interpretation and judgment. This critical approach helps to investigate the works of art with a view to understanding their themes. Most of the titles are rooted in Yoruba worldview giving the works indigenous identity. In essence, the works are able to address important aspects of daily living; the social and cultural functions of art are stressed from the interpretative analysis of the form, content and context of the works.

Thematic Classifications

The selected works have been carefully discussed under certain themes. The themes have helped to classify his works into various areas of human activities. The themes are; politics: “*Agba Oje*” “*Ojelu Oselu*”, motherhood: “*Ajara Eleso*”, love: “*Ifesowapo*”, Philosophy: “*Aje*”, “*Tibi Tire*”, religion: “*Ebe* (supplication).



Plate 1a,b,c.: “*Agba Oje*” Medium: Terracotta Size; 20” by 14”
Year of production: 2015. Photograph: Yinka Okunade, 2017

Agba Oje (Godfather) is a politician who is never contended with what he has. Plate 9 is on the theme of politics. The form depicts a self-arrived politician who has no hands for working but eventually enriches himself from practicing politics.

It is a bald male figure with bulging eyes, protruded nose and thick lips. His cheeks are chubby and he does not seem to have a neck that is distinct from his body; depicting obese figure. He wears a Yoruba attire which is known as *agbada*. A big pot with motifs on it is on his stomach, it has a cover, in front of this pot is another one which is embellished with the same motifs, it is being held by the hands which are stylized to come forward and is sitting down in an undisturbed manner.

The figure is a representation of a typical Nigerian political godfather; he is always the one who decides the candidates to win elections either in his political party or domain. The issue of godfatherism in Nigerian politics is a source of corruption as people who have assumed political positions are answerable to them and not the electorate and masses. As such, the dividends of democracy that are supposed to go to the masses are being diverted to their accounts, thereby failing to deliver on campaign promises and engendering hardship on the majority. If godfatherism is abolished, there will be respite for the citizen and level of political corruption shall greatly reduce.



Plate 2a, b: *Ojelu Oselu*; Medium: Terracotta
Size: 13” by 7” inches; Year of production: 2007
Photographed by: Awojobi Olusegun

Plates 2a and 2b shows the figure of a man with a smiling face, he is putting on a cap and the Yoruba male traditional attire which is known as “*agbada*”, he has a pot which doubles as a big belly and is also shown to have a bag-like structure tied with rope. It has the inscription of the symbol of naira and INEC on it, the man is plump considering his chubby cheeks and thick short neck. The figure is seated on the map of Nigeria which is used as its base. The structure as a whole also suggests the form of a gouge.

Plate 2a and 2b illustrates the obvious characteristics of a typical politician in Nigeria, who has assumed a political post. The inscription of INEC on his bag-like stomach connotes his status of political influence such that he determines the results of elections while the big symbol of the Naira, the Nigerian currency, on his stomach symbolizes unjustly acquired public funds. His tied-up bag-like belly shows his greed and self-centeredness. The figure sits upon the map of Nigeria implying the domination of his political class on the nation. This points to the fact that in the process of his administration of corruption and greed, he sits upon the progress of the country thereby causing lack of growth and development in the country.



Plate 3a, b, and c: “*Ajara eleso*” (Fruitful vine)
Size: 18” by 12” inches Medium: Terracotta
Year of production: 2014. Photograph: Okunade Yinka 2017.

Ajara Eleso, the fruitful vine, depicts a young and newly wedded lady in her prime. She has a beautiful *suku* style of hair do on her head. The stylization of her two breast is a master creation. The breasts were able to bear the weight of the head and neck. The neck is adorned with *iyun* bead which is a status symbol showing that she is doing well economically in the society. Big breasts are common with nursing mothers. They are big and smooth meaning the woman would have enough milk to feed her children. The head of the figure is tilted looking at the three smaller figures attached to it at the base area. These are her children that depict her fruitfulness. *Ajara Eleso* shows that the woman is blessed by the gods with children. She is not sterile and therefore a blessing to the larger society. She commands a lot of respect in the society even as she helps in sustaining the human race.



Plate 4a, b,c: *Ifesowapo* (conjugal bliss), Medium; Terracotta
Size; 21” by 12” inches, Year of production; 2015
Photographed by; Awojobi Olusegun



Plate 5a, b.: *Aje* (wealth). (Front view) and 5b: (Side View)
Medium: Terracotta. Height: 15inches,
Year:2013, Photograph: Okunade Adeyinka

Ifesowapo (Conjugal Bliss) represents the true and undiluted love that exists between two young lovers especially as they are newly wedded and ready to explore the horizon of love together. In this terracotta work, Fajuyigbe was able to join the clay together in several creative ways to arrive at a masterpiece surrounded by love icons. The female form is quite interesting in that despite the swings of clay slabs around the form, she still maintains the usual female curves with a slim waist and heavy buttocks. She also wears around her waist, two layers of beads.

Aje is the goddess of commerce in Yoruba cosmology. Fajuyigbe has chosen to celebrate this Yoruba mythological icon in one of his works. *Aje* takes the form of a beautiful lady with a happy face. She has the *suku* coiffure which is well plaited by the hands of the artist. She also has rings of beads on her neck that symbolizes wealth. She holds in her hands the world, depicting various continents showing the universal importance of money as a means of commerce and wealth. She also has layers of beads on her buttocks which is a symbol of a maiden seeking suitor. When a lady with rolls of beads on her buttocks walks, the beads make some gentle sound that attracts expected suitors closer to the lady. This symbolizes the worldwide acceptability of money in every society. The globe is placed on another pot of money with the naira symbol while two smaller pots bear the signature of the American dollar and British pounds respectively. The form is finally placed on a square pedestal decorated with cowries and sea shells. The cowries are a major symbol of *Aje* among the Yoruba. It was used actually used for commercial transaction and means of measuring wealth in precolonial times.



Plate 6a,b.: *Tibitire* Medium: Terracotta Size: 16" by 7",
Year of production: 2006, Photographed by: Okunade Yinka

Plate 6a and b is philosophical and can be categorized under the theme of motherhood. It is a naturalistic representation of a woman whose facial expression suggests that she is in agony, her head tilts to the left in a

way to show that she is in pain and the head of the woman is adorned with elaborate Yoruba hairdo. Her breasts are represented to be big and clothed with underwear which is getting tattered, the mouth is open in the position that shows that she is unhappy, the stomach is big which is represented to depict the ripeness of her pregnancy. The belly is also covered with a wrapper which is already loosening and thereby exposing the navel of the woman, on the right side of the wrapper is shown a repeated motif which flows from the base of the figure upward, the figure is placed on a circular base which is also decorated with hemispherical motifs.

The pottery sculpture is one that emphasizes on the dual nature of life using the phenomenological example of child birth, a woman who is at the verge of delivery is portrayed here, the big breasts and the large falling stomach represents the idea that she has reached the point of her labour. Labour is something that goes hand in hand with pains, and as a result, she is being portrayed to be disturbed and agonized as she tilts her head with a gaping mouth expressing the vehement pain she is passing through. The piece is a paradox, representing the pain and joy that she passes through at such eventful moment of her life. She may be blaming herself on why she has to be involved in it. She cries and even unconscious of what is happening around her, her underwear is slacked as a result of the pain causing her nudity to be gradually exposed, the wrapper also coming off her body.

This is the plight of a woman in labour. She feels dejected and agonized during the process, and she feels that the period may lead to her death as many people have died as a result of labour pain. While the prospect of the baby's arrival is a source of joy, the pain and uncertainty of childbirth is a deep source of worry and even possibly sadness. This supports the saying that life is not a bed of roses, and one should not expect pleasant times all the time, there are always the bitter times too. When the bitter time comes, one should not just give up or think that it is the end of the world but one should be steadfast in hope and expectation that things will get better and circumstances will change.



Plate 7a,b,c.: *Ebe* (Supplication) Medium: Terracotta, Size: 14' by 12', Year of Production: 2007. Photographed by: Okunade Yinka

Ebe (Supplication) is a form portraying a worshipper. This is one of the most common religious wood figure carvings here depicted in fired clay. It is a woman carrying a pot supposedly containing ritual paraphernalia for the supplication of the gods. She carries a mood of petitioning, pouring out her heart or request and appeasement to the gods. Idowu (1996: 5) once observed that “the keynote of the Yoruba life is in their religion”. It is therefore difficult to separate an African from her religion. The daily activities of the African are usually punctuated by her act of worship in order to maintain a peaceful existence within her universe.

Contributions and Achievements

Michael Olusegun Fajuyigbe has contributed immensely to the growth, development and history of pottery and contemporary traditional art as a whole considering his proficiency in production of works that affect the society positively; his works convey some philosophical messages that could be classified as didactic. He is as well a teacher who has greatly invested in art both in theory and the practical, and has continued to advance the knowledge of art and aesthetics.

His major contribution in academics is teaching and mentoring of student artists who have chosen visual arts as their career. He is a lecturer of art history, studio management and aesthetics in visual arts in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Art is no longer used for the sake of art, the contemporary use of art now transcends its religious reasons. It is now used for the advancement of the society where the artist and admirers of art and aesthetics play a major role. A beautiful art made without the people to admire it is simply meaningless and purposeless. In Africa, art therefore serves multifunctional purposes among which are religion, therapy, prestige and status and recently, store of value.

As art in contemporary times are identified as giver of aesthetic pleasure and recorder of history, therefore contemporary potters should strike a balance between aesthetic and form to continue to make them and their works relevant in the society where art speaks the language of its creator. Therefore, there is need to help every art observer to interpret the language of art from one culture to another.

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