

Chief Lady Afi Ekong in the Art Historical Account of Modern Nigerian Art

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Abstract

This paper examines the career profile and contributions of a foremost female African Artist. Chief Lady Constance Afiong Ekong. The first female Nigerian artist to be academically trained. She was born in 1930 and died in 2009. She trained at Technical College in Oxford, The Saint Martin School of Fine Arts and Central School of Arts in Holborn and specialized in painting. A pioneer of modern Nigerian art whose contributions were broad based which comprised of solo and group exhibitions. She was the first female artist to exhibit in Nigerian in 1958, and also the first to internationalize her works. Administratively, she was the Art Manager to the National Council for Arts in Nigeria which gave art visibility. Viewing her paintings is like attending a history lesson which highlights her inspirations from traditional sources, and the documentation of colonial Lagos as visual statements of the growth and development of Nigeria as a nation. The paper concludes that she had positively contributed to the development of modern Nigerian art and given intellectual support to the unheard creative voices of the women. It is therefore recommended that the Federal Government should stop playing politics with the implementation of the National Endowment Fund for the Arts.

Introduction

Chief Afi Ekong as she was popularly known was born at Duke Town, Calabar on 26th June 1930 in the former Eastern Region part of which is now Cross River State in Nigeria. She died in Calabar on 24th February 2009. Her father was a trade merchant and her mother equally a trader and a housewife. She schooled at Duke Town and Christ Church Schools in Calabar. Her educational attainment, professional accomplishments, interaction and exposure cannot be fully understood or appreciated without a background mention of her early marriage life which like Rembrandt. Shaped her successes in life, though her husband died quite early and did not live to see her come full circle.

She married at an early age of 19 to Mr. Abdul Azizi Attah who was a District Officer in the colonial days. The marriage enabled her geometric progression as a lone female careerist, in a male dominated profession, and at a time she had no female predecessor in Africa. Chief Afi Ekong attended Technical College in Oxford where she studied men's and ladies tailoring and designs. She also attended Saint Martin School of Fine Arts and Central School of Arts Holborn where she studied history of costumes. She completed her studies in fine arts, applied arts and designs in England in 1957, and was back to Nigeria. She was a well-trained artist equipped with the necessary theoretical background to the practise and demonstration of her arts profession, which we have witnessed in the last four decades plus.

The documentation of contemporary African art in general and modern Nigerian art in particular is still at its nebulous stage of development. This provides the rationale for documenting her career profile. This prompted late Professor Ekpo Eyo to remark that Chief Afi Ekong was worth a Ph. D thesis if literature on her were available. The paper attempts to present freshly new insights into the life and works of Chief Afi Ekong in her 78 years of existence. It is strictly an art historical discourse on her contributions to modern Nigerian visual art, which had been selectively or incompletely discussed on its landscape.

The historiography of modern Nigerian art (and its chronological sequence) is essential in understanding her contributions to art. If we attempt to analyze her works outside this historical frame of reference as one of the first generations of Nigerian artists trained abroad, and if failing in cross-reference studies of those who did do earlier, we will miss the point of our study. According to Fosu (1986), "The first generation pioneers of African contemporary art were artists who in the 1900s found direction in modern art based on European aesthetic principles". This witnessed the birth of Modern Nigerian Art, which comprised academically trained artists who adopted tools, techniques and conventions of the art academy. By historical placement Chief Afi Ekong was among the first generation of modern artists in Africa. She was the first female artist in Nigerian to be academically trained and perhaps so in Africa until otherwise disproved by further researches.

The chapter of modern Nigerian art opened with Ania Onabolu (1882 – 1963). He trained in St. John Wood School in London, Academie Julian in Paris and returned to Nigeria in 1922, followed by Ben Enwonwu (1921 – 1994). Enwonwu graduated from the Slade School of Fine Arts in London in 1947, did postgraduate studies in anthropology and ethnography and came back to Nigeria in 1948 (Nzekwu, 1966). Chief Afi Ekong (1930 – 2009) was the first female in the pioneering efforts of modern Nigerian art and most likely the third in the row of modern Nigerian artists, a near contemporary of Ben Enwonwu. She came back from England in 1957 nine years after Enwonwu did. They both interacted professionally and we could see influences of European art training in their paintings. Enwonwu also sculpted her bronze burst. The beginning of 20th century marked the development of considerable artistic activity in Nigeria. The interesting thing was that these pioneering agents of modern Nigerian art lived and worked in Lagos, which according to Ola Oloidi as maintained in Dike (1995) “art, particularly outside Lagos and other important Nigerian cities, was still regarded as nugatory”.

Chief Afi Ekong’s contributions to Modern Nigerian Art

The public had always maintained a disparaging view about art and artists. According to Prof. Ola Oloidi those with unorthodox or unacademic background helped to reduce the image of art to a mere intuitive hand exercise thereby assisting the negative thinking about art. Chief Afi Ekong had quite early embarked on academic pursuits in art in very good institutions abroad. This in no small measure had helped to reshaped some of the misconceptions about art and artists. Her academic training helped to dispel the generally held view that art was not an academic or intellectual profession and as such was meant for those of below average intelligence or those merely with talents.

In 2005 at the University of Ife International Art Conference, contrary to some of the conferees views that all an artist needed was share talent, this writer opined that to be talented or skilled in any one area of the art is not enough. Talent alone is limiting and like a blunt knife can only be sharpened with a good education. The artist must be intellectually competent and possess the ability to not only practicalize his vision but also be able to contextualize his ideas in discursive terms.

Chief Afi Ekong by her position in society, public visibility in terms of professional image, and economic leverage, had helped to dispel certain societal impressions, un-informed utterances and deprecation of art as a profession or as a gainful career. Her professional image erased the fear among young artists that an artist could not be economically enterprising. Her exemplary image had shown that an artist can earn a sustainable living outside a paid employment. Thus according to Eze (1992), all an artist needs to succeed is to be “bold, ready to take risks, have energy, capital, socio-political education, operational brain, and experiences of art practice, art administrations and art market in other countries”.

By her membership and services to several organizations – traditional, ecumenical, local and international awards, honours and chieftaincies she contributed in elevating the social status of the modern Nigerian artist who should not seen as a bohemian only preoccupied with creativity but as a responsible citizen capable of being entrusted with social responsibilities, leadership role and having the ability of to give direction to others regardless of their professions. With her well rounded educational background she presents the artist as an elite receptive to his environment and issues, and by this encouraged the Nigerian public in the appreciation of art as something that must be cherished, acquired, and viewed beyond its artefactual value.

Her ownership of a large acreage of landmass, the Fiekong Estate in the choice area of Marian Road, Calabar, symbolizes the artist as landed gentry. The Estate houses her imposing residential building among other buildings which include the Bronze gallery with its beautiful architectural columns reminiscent of classical Greek architecture. Through the Bronze Gallery she made visible modern Nigerian art by bringing to the public glare her works and those of other younger generations of artists who needed to be exposed. A section of the gallery contains her ethnographic collections of traditional Nigerian art and a big hall for regular exhibitions. The gallery has directly or indirectly motivated the younger generations of modern Nigerian artists and assured them of a future while raising challenges of hard work to them. The gallery represents her legacy for the present and future generations of artists, art audiences, and the larger society as an extension of education for public good.

Her exhibition history dates back to 1958 with some well-meaning sponsorships. She had used her exhibitions over the years as an instrument of social mobilization for the art, by pulling the deserving presence of very important dignitaries. She had not only used the exhibitions to promote her works but most importantly as a medium to project younger artists. Through her weekly “Cultural Heritage” television programmes in the 1960s, she projected artists like Yusuf Grillo, Solomon Wangboje, Uche Okeke and Simon Okeke, who formed the nucleus of the Zaria rebels. Others were Eraboh Emokpae, Lamidi Fakeye, Akeredolu, etc (Ekong 1997). She was widely travelled and had exhibited in that breadth.

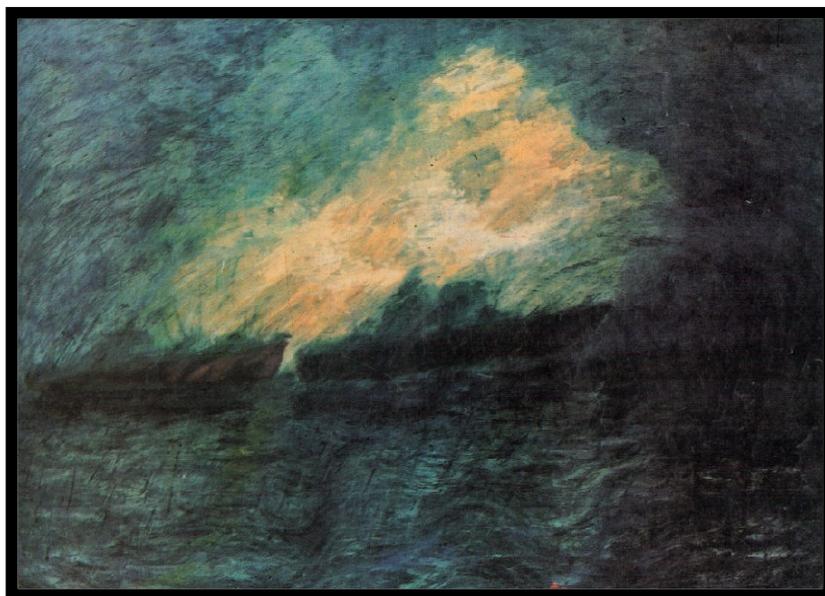
Afi Ekong’s artistic dexterity was not commonly found among the womenfolk of her generation. She was as versatile as the traditional artist who is a farmer, carver, flutist, hunter, palm wine tapper and a healer.

Wollstonecraft (1792) had observed that “if women were less capable than men it was only because they were poorly educated and had limited opportunities, not because of any inherent or natural difference in ability”. She was reputed for establishing the first art gallery in Nigeria, as a connoisseur, collector and donor of artifacts, an aesthician, environmentalist, fashion designer, interior decorator and above all, a distinguished painter. She established an art gallery in Lagos in 1968 ahead of government and corporate initiatives. Her foresight in the establishment of numerous art galleries had no doubt created relevant awareness and drawn the attention of policy makers in this direction, as well as corporate and private ownership of art galleries which fostered and redefined trends in modern Nigerian art.

Chief Afi Ekong’s Works

Approaching Chief Afi EKong through her paintings and drawings provides a new level of refreshing experience. Trained in the British art tradition but socialized within the African cultural space. She was fully aware of the immense resources of her traditional African culture and the need to tap from them. She adopted and adapted its ideology into her works. Her art works show great mastery of techniques and inspirational sources, which also propagate the rules of academy conventions, as propounded by the Greeks, highlighted during the Renaissance and spread into what is today’s modern Nigerian art. According to Prof. Ekpo Eyo as maintained in (Marc, 1998) the taxonomic system which placed Africans at the lowest rung of human development was also extended to the visual arts where Africans were thought of incapable of the noble process of creativity and as such lacked the skills of representing objects as they are in nature.

Lady Afi Ekong’s works paintings and drawings have proven to the contrary such misgivings which were, however based on the European misunderstanding of African aesthetics and its intellectual principles which ultimately revolutionized Global Art of the 20th century through Pablo Picasso’s cubist experiments. Afi Ekong’s nude female drawings are not only approximations of proportions as practiced in western art but are contributions on representational abilities of the African woman. (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1: Before the Storm, Atlantic view from Lagos, 1988
125cm X 91cm**

She was a figure of great importance in modern Nigerian art. It may not be too much to state that without her works our heritage of visual arts in Nigeria right from the 1950s to the present would have been appreciably the less. She portrayed the beauty and calmness of colonial Lagos and its life styles in the 50s, a visual statement on the growth and development of Nigeria. She cut across ethnic barriers to explore themes of cultural diversity by painting the Hausas, Fulani maidens, the Yoruba people, Igbo masquerades and her Efik culture in its ramifications (Fig 2). By her paintings she created an amalgamated national identity. Her works projected the

time traditions and cultural life of Nigerians as a social fabric, which bound the people together before the advent of colonialism and subsequent westernization.



Fig. 2: Ekpe Dancers, 1996
164cm X 107cm

Although we feel sorry for most of our disappearing traditional values, customs, belief systems and its classical sculptures, she, however, through her paintings documented the reality of their existence. She was inspired by the iconography of Yoruba woodcarvings, Benin bronzes of which she painted ritual scenes, shrines and its attendants, deities, ceremonies, the esoteric, and masquerades as a life force which depicts the presence of ancestors in the welfare of the living. The underlying motivation for her paintings could have been the misunderstanding and misrepresentation which visited African continent with the introduction of colonialism and Christianity. In contrast to her portrayals, Chief Afi Ekong was a devout Christian and an ordained Elder in the Presbyterian Church, but clearly understood her role as an artist. For those who practice Christianity in such as way as to show disrespect for culture, disdain for traditional values and branded things indigenous as satanic or fetish, there are lessons to draw from her paintings.

The period she came back from Britain was bustling with the spirit of nationalism 1957 – 1960. It was not particularly a period of great art appreciation. The country was involved in the struggle for self-rule and was under political pressure. Patronage was largely from expatriates and the standard of living for Nigerians was too low for art patronage. Nevertheless, she was quite productive and exhibited regularly. Her very interesting series comprised women gorgeously dressed with elaborate headgears popularly known as Sisi Eko. (**Fig 3**). Her paintings raised issues about rural and urban women. Through such paintings she advocated the centrality of women, liberation and empowerment, in the new independent Nigerian nation. This was then an idea ahead of its time, and only currently having a wider embrace by the Nigerian society.



Fig. 3: Two Yoruba Ladies (Sisi Eko), 1993
51cm X 41cm

Afi had a holistic education in the fine arts. Apart from her paintings, her training in men's and ladies tailoring, as well as studies in designs and the history of costumes are independent areas for further researches. The art training shaped the interiors of her home, gave her the personal touch in her appearance and clothing. Her paintings and drawings explored forms, themes, symbols, designs, and philosophic thrusts that are innately African. Viewing her paintings is like attending a history lesson in which one could be intellectually transported to the epoch of modern Nigerian's artistic development. She painted mainly in oils and her palette over the years gradually changed from somber earth colours to more brilliant and vibrant colours. Sometimes she painted with very raw colours, yet harmoniously orchestrated. Some of her paintings are charged with vibrant expressionistic high key colours and have a sense of drama. The integrity of her art rested on the most active elements of colours and movement. The painting "Before the storm Atlantic view from Lagos" (Fig. 4) has a baroque tendency with calligraphic brush strokes which shows firm professional practice.



Fig. 4: Life Drawing of European Women, 1957

The opinion that it is a kind of bonus for an artist to sell works while alive does not apply to Chief Afi Ekong. She was publicly visible, worked as an artist, and also reaped the benefits. Through her sustained practice in promoting art, artists and establishing galleries, she had continuously and consistently remained relevant to Modern Nigerian Art. She also made significant contributions and positively influenced the image of the African woman, the unheard voices of the rural women, and the unseen intellectual stamina in them which probably had been suppressed by benevolent sexism or gender inequality. Her advancement of the African womanhood was long acknowledged in 1962 when President Tubman Tolbert of Liberia knighted her. This writer maintains that most of what we experience today and probably take for granted as it relates to art development and propagation, seemingly favourable governmental dispositions, public image of art and the status of the artist, were not achievements bestowed by providence, but rather efforts made by pioneering artists like Chief Afi Ekong.

The crusade on the development of modern Nigerian art is not a linear structured one. The frontiers are boundless. Chief Afi Ekong no doubt excelled in field practise and promotion of art. In this respect, she was a chieftain who had in no small measure laid the necessary foundation enabling the creation and practise of art as a profession. She served as the secretary and manager of the Federal Arts Council Nigeria from (1961 – 1967), and chairman cultural sector of UNESCO National Commission (1973 – 1975) among other appointments. She gave the younger generation of Nigerian artists a worthy professional image which can be fertilized if the enabling environment as in a proper democracy is made to flourish. Afi Ekong in her will bequeathed the Bronze Gallery building to five of us practising artists in Calabar. she has equally not only been sung but had been given appropriate and proportionate placement on the committee of those who have contributed to national development through her numerous awards and national honours.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, this paper concludes that Chief Afi Ekong made immense contributions to the growth and development of modern Nigerian art, through her various art exhibitions which mobilized the upper cream of the Nigerian society for the arts. She established galleries which helped to promote art and artist including her government appointments and assignments which gave visibility to art.

Recommendations

1. This paper therefore recommends that the Federal Government should stop playing politics and urgently implement the National Endowment Fund for Art to aid in harnessing art for national development.
2. Ministerial appointments for information and culture sector should be professionalized, so that individuals with competent training in the art and culture could be appointed for proper service delivery.
3. The Cross River State Government should harness the legacy of Chief Afi Ekong the Bronze Gallery and transform it into major art center as a tourist attraction.

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