

THE ZARIA ART SOCIETY: A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

BOOK REVIEW



PRESENTED BY

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AT THE NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM TITLED: ART IN NIGERIA  
AT THE END OF THE CENTURY HELD AT  
AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY ZARIA

9TH - 11TH NOVEMBER, 1998.

BOOK REVIEW

TITLE OF BOOK: THE ZARIA ART SOCIETY: A New Consciousness.

EDITORS: DR. PAUL CHIKE DIKE & DR. PAT OYELOLA.

PUBLISHER: NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, LAGOS NIGERIA.

YEAR OF PUBLICATION: 1998

NO OF PAGES : 294

----- 399 BLACK/WHITE & COLOR PLATES.

REVIEWER: DON AKATAKPO; Ph.D.

Overview:

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The bane of most publications on contemporary African art in existence is that they cannot be confidently tagged substantive as such. This is because the information contained in them often reflect some degree of ethnocentrism, application of wrong methodologies, poor information processing and management leading to the dissemination of ideas which are questionable. Others are improper interpretation of existing theories, art forms and artist intentions among many others. This however has been the trend for decades.

But on the contrary this publication titled: "THE ZARIA ART SOCIETY: A New Consciousness" appears to overshadow all other related works in contemporary African Art, especially that of Nigeria. It is quite timely while its approach is authoritative, conducting enquiries and raising discourse concerning the evolution and development of modern Nigerian art.

The book consists of several interesting sections which we shall group into five integral parts for our convenience. These sections are as follows:

- i. The Introduction
- ii Essays
- iii Interviews/Recollections
- iv *Zaria Art Society Insight*  
Artist Profiles and
- v. Extract from Uche Okeke's Diary.

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The opening chapter of the text inflects on traditional African setting and way of life with emphasis on how erstwhile artistic foundations have now become sources of inspiration for modern artists who explore their symbolism and other contextual possibilities. Artists in whose hands these encounters started to reveal themselves over time were, J. A. Okeredolu, Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan and Ben Enwonwu who emerged on the art scene much later after them in the late 1950's - when the yearning for political independence was at its climax in the country. Most of them are already late.

Accounts from the book also make us deduce that while these pioneer artists were working in European materials and modes which they were exposed to, the generation that came after them, at least after Enwonwu, were already kicking against what their forebears we have mentioned had already imbibed. They were fresh intakes at then now Ahmadu Bello Nigeria College of Arts & Scienc Technology University, Zaria who became overwhelmed with the spirit of "collective consciousness". Their national interests however led to the formation of the "Zaria Art Society" whose

creative activism has left indelible imprints on Nigeria's artistic terrain. Paucity of literature on the society is why they have become a focal point in this work. But as we shall come to note later on in the publication, membership of the society has remained a subject of emotional, political and intellectual contention before now. And for the first time, the names of its members are authoritatively presented in the text.

They are, Yusuf Grillo, Simon Olaosebikan, Uche Okeke Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Oseloka Osadebe, Okechukwu Odita, Felix Ekeada, Ogbonnaya Nwagbara and Ikpomwosa Omagie, the only female among them.

#### The Essays

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The essays are four in number and written by scholars with diverse training and views about contemporary Nigerian art. The geographical spread of these scholars makes it easy for them to provide a balanced view on the topics assigned to them without undue influence or consultation with fellow scholars for ideas that could lead to bias results. They are based in Lagos, West, East and the North. This same rule seem to apply to the selection of the curatorial team that packaged the art exhibition.

The leading essay by Cornelius Adepegba, Professor of African Art History and Director, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria is titled; "The Zaria Rebels and the spirit of their "Rebellion" in Modern Nigerian Art". In this work, Adepegba clarifies assumptions surrounding

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membership of the society. For instance he pointed out that, Solomon Wangboje, Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, Uche Okeke and Jimoh Akolo were not classmates except for the fact that their duration of training in Zaria overlapped. This in itself is interesting because he was able to highlight the versatility of their training as reflected by what each of them is known for today.

He approached his essay from a historical point of view. The success of the paper is hinged on the fact that it situates the story of Zaria Art Society within the context of Nigeria's artistic disposition of the early 1960's. Adepegba equally reviewed the amount of influence the "so called" "rebels" have had on the growth of Nigerian art today. Interesting high points of the paper are explanations concerning the link between when the association was instituted and Nigerian's year of independence. Some of the intrigues involved in the decision to cite the Institution in Zaria equally form part of his discussions. Furthermore, he espouses on recollections from them and their teachers. From his deductions, he posits that not all the students of the first three sets of Zaria school graduates (1959, 1960 and 1961) were against the curriculum being operated by the British lecturers at that time; rather, what they were not at home with according to Adepegba was, and I quote, "their teachers abhorrence of their making any recourse to their African art background in their works. Whether the teachers

accepted individual innovations that did not appear African is however not indicated. This posture is further buttressed by the fact that some forms which were used as models during sculpture classes were deviations from the classical Western tradition, thus affirming that even the teachers were only averse to indigenous art forms. Therefore, the differences in views which generated between teachers and students did not emanate from pure artistic consideration according to him. Rather they were muddled up with political and racial passion. Suggestions that all artistic development in the country should be regulated by the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) were equally made in the paper. He however concluded by discussing briefly, the life, works and efforts of the group toward forging and shaping an identity for contemporary Nigerian art, noting that, "the essence of such account is to help us imagine the invisible under-current of their ideas. CONFERENCE PAPER

The article that comes after this by Ola Oloidi is entitled; "Zarianism: The crusading spirit of A Revolution in Nigeria". The approach is also historical while the thrust has to do with the issue of relocation of the institution from Ibadan to Zaria. In this highly incisive paper Oloidi revealed controversies surrounding this decision by the British irrespective of agitations from Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first President, Ben Enwonwu, adviser on art matters to the colonial government, Kenneth Murray, District Officer, Lagos Protectorate under the British Colony and

Aina Onabolu, Nigeria's first academic trained artist. Other eminent Nigerians and Europeans who also resisted this move include, Mrs. Ransome Kuti, Rev. Father Kevin Carroll and Akinola Lasekan among many others who believed the action was a deliberate one aimed at stalling the development of art in the country because the northern environment appeared uncondusive for art training and practice especially when it comes to the production of wood carvings which the southern part of Nigeria is well known for.

The paper also records that these new intakes at Zaria experienced environmental stress and victimization on Campus causing disillusionment among them. However, this prolonged stress was quickly translated into a silent revolution by Uche Okeke through the support of late Simon Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Demas Nwoko. This was in 1957, but the outcome of their efforts became obvious in 1958 when the Zaria Art Society was formed. Although the association survived for only two years, the 1961 independence exhibition which was held in Lagos attests to the fact their revolutionary efforts were not in vain.

After pointing out that Uche Okeke, Yusuf Grillo, Demas Nwoko and Bruce Onobrakpeya personify the spirit of "Zarianism", Don Akatakpo focused attention on Bruce Onobrakpeya who he regards as the "Epitome of Dreams and Realities of the Zaria Art Society". He acknowledges him as one of Nigeria's most prolific printmaker, and perhaps the most celebrated and publicized contemporary artist in Africa today. Akatakpo

recounts Onobrakpeya's major artistic achievements which made various groups, organisations, academic institutions and other countries bestow on him, awards and honours of all sorts, and at different levels.

Instead of engaging more in historical or formal discourse of Bruce Onobrakpeya's style, he makes further enquiry into how he is able to create visual balance between indigenous concepts (themes), which he explores for communicating contemporary ideas; and other aspects that have to do with decoding traditional symbols and objects for the visual enjoyment of his audiences whose psychological and emotional states he successfully penetrates. The reason for this is quite simple. It is based on Onobrakpeya's ability to experiment exploring repetition through firm control of image within pictorial space. This findings are based on studies by European and African scholars such as Mount, Walhman, Lawal, Lawrence, Jegede, Adepegba and Quel to mention some of them. Their various efforts at diagonalizing the works of this creative mystique form the thrust of the essay when it is further perused. The writers submission is that through the technique of thematic and formal repetition the artist succeeded in achieving his Zarianist ideals. These ideals and dreams which are well espoused in the paper include, the ability to draw inspiration from themes, myths and legends from within his Urhobo cultural matrix and other interesting artistic traditions in the country. Don Akatakpo also posits, that, the pyramidal format of arranging compositions which

is quite common with the artists works makes it possible for him (Onobrakpeya) to relate with the Supreme Being who to every African is the Perfect Creator.

The fourth essay titled, "Natural Synthesis and Dialogue with Mona Lisa" is by Jacob Jari. In this study, emphasis is on the contribution of Zaria Art School towards the establishment and growth of other major art institutions in the country. He mentioned principal actors associated with this developments. For instance, late Irein Wangboje founded Benin Art School, while Nigeria will ever remain grateful to Yusuf Grillo and Uche Okeke for laying artistic foundations at Yaba College of Technology, Lagos and Nsukka respectively.

After highlighting the contributions of both members and other non-members of the Zaria Art Society who as ex-students of the institution made input to the artistic development of the nation, Jacob Jari subjected the synonym, "Natural Synthesis" to critical examination. In the process he recapitulates Uche Okeke's words, and I quote, "Natural Synthesis" means the unconscious effort to assimilate what is the cream of foreign influences and wedding them to our native art culture".

It is pertinent to mention that some of Jari's views are not in agreement with certain pronouncements by some persons involved in the Zaria revolution stressing that it was incidentally timely because it coincided with nationalist struggles in many African countries, including Nigeria. The author is not quite certain that all members of the association

were honest in their intention because no art form according to him, could develop, thrive or blossom in isolation of other arts. He disagreed with certain western paradigms with which most African works were adjudged because such criteria were formulated by the same group (Europeans) of people whose training curriculum they kicked against. In fact, Jari almost convinces us in his paper that, "perhaps the society was a myth, perhaps its members arrogated to themselves some undeserved credit". These views seem to be based on the fact that the Natural Synthesis ideology was taken for granted by the initiator. Nonetheless, history has vindicated them.

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Interviews/Recollections

This portion of the book is made up of Questions and Responses based on a standard questionnaire designed by the organising/planning committee incharge of the entire project i.e; the publication, symposium and art exhibition. Persons interviewed are Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Felix Ekeada, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Yusuf Grillo all based in Nigeria. Uche Okeke however left the country for the United States not too long ago, Included in this section also are Okechukwu Odita's recollection of his Zaria days. Odita is equally based on Ohio, U.S.A.

The chapter in question makes interesting reading in the sense that all of them bared their minds freely on how and why the society came into existence. Each person also

provided individual interpretation of the term Natural Synthesis which was the motto of the group. As for Uche Okeke, it meant the synthesis of old and new ideas, old and new techniques, while Demas Nwoko conceptualised it as the evolvement of a completely new culture. He refers to the use of European implements and does not emphasize that such a culture must necessarily be African in orientation. In a different vein, Felix Ekeada translates it to mean Patriotism, which implies "Freedom" of expression within the atmosphere of political independence. For Onobrakpeya, it is an examination of culture - past and present for onward blending with relevant aspects of foreign concepts. Grillo, in his own case came up with contradictory comments. According to him, "if the synthesis is natural," then it's not an issue, How then do we analyse this statement which he believes you do not need to crack your brain about ?

On this issue, Odita merely reflects on the question of curriculum at Zaria between the 1950's and early 1960's based on his training at Zaria and Ohio State University in the United States of America where he underwent ethnocentric academic orientation. From all their utterances it can be assumed that these topical issues appear to be in line with Jacob Jari's view about allowing sentiments to infringe on the ideological goals of any progressive group.

"The Zaria Art Society: Insights" by Simon Ikpakronyi is another intriguing paper in the text. Perhaps, it should

have been grouped along with the essays, The paper addresses the question of appellation - Zaria Rebels - the birth of the society, its composition and objectives as well as its contributions to contemporary Nigerian art.

He begins by tracing the history of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria which took off from Ibadan where its original aim was to produce art teachers for the country and equally notes the shortcomings of the curriculum which was not designed to meet the need of Africans. According to Ikpakronyi, the situation changed as soon as the school was transferred to Zaria in 1955 with more emphasis on professionalism. In spite of the new location, it was able to serve as melting pot for the country's second generation artists.

Another important issue that the author conveniently deliberated upon is that pertaining to the objectives of the society which he claims was predicated on traditional and modern values. Simon Ikapkronyi's thesis is further underscored by his step by step account of how their activities metamorphozed into several art institutions including the Asele Institute, Nimo Anambra State, art associations, schools and movements including the formation of the society of Nigerian Artists. Through their effort's a virile cultural policy has also been instituted with the National Gallery of Art (NGA) to manage the affairs of the different interest groups within the association.

## Artist Profiles

This chapter was compiled by David Dale, a renowned international artist. Focus is on the profile of artists whose works are being exhibited along with the book launch and symposium.

The arrangement is chronological in sequence. Pertinent information that could be elicited from this section include place and date of birth, training background, influences and contributions of each person to local and international art circles. Dale pin-points Grillo's interest in mathematics as a major influence in his use of planular forms for depicting the social life of Lagos where he grew up. His interaction with architects made him develop interest in stained glass, mosaic, santex and other materials which can be used to embellish buildings on monumental scales.

The quintessential qualities of Demas Nwoko's building experiments that combine earth (mud) with saw dust have ultimately become recognised and accepted by architects including government. The Bendel State Cultural Centre, Benin City, his private home in Idumuje Ugboko, Delta State and New Culture Studios, Ibadan are interesting examples of his creative genius. Some of these projects are profusely illustrated in the text along with his early works - paintings and sculptures of the late 1950's up till the mid 1960's.

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Nwoko brokered new grounds in theatre design, seasoning of wood including its use for furniture and interior designs.

He hails from an environment where wood can be found in abundant quantity. His early works, paintings and sculptures reflect political undertones according to Dale. They derive forms from the memorable artistic traditions of Nok and Ife cultures. Details of his research and experiments occupy a large portion of the text, which should be of interest to ceramists, sculptors and architects.

Another renowned figure is Uche Okeke, founder and records custodian of the Zaria Art Society's activities. He is strongly associated with the Uli art movement with base in Nsukka. Excerpts from his diary which form part of this publication bear testimony to the fact that Okeke had already conceived a future for himself before going to study at Zaria, but incidentally, Zaria became a crucible where some of his ideals crystallized.

The works of Uche Okeke who is quite vast in theoretical and studio aspects of art cut across several phases as reflected by illustrations in the publication. They are his pre-Zaria period which extend to include the Zaria Art Society days and post-Zaria experiences. Subsumed within this classification is the Uli period and his civil war drawings. The early 1960's happen to be his most productive years when it comes to drawing and painting before engaging in the execution of mosaic and documentation of contemporary Nigerian art in general.

Simon Okeke, late painter and sculptor is being remembered on this memorable occasion for his interesting contributions to the visual arts of today. His exposure to international art styles through travelling/tours abroad did not inhibit him from recognising the uniqueness of Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin, sculptures which he encountered in Nigeria and British museums where he was engaged in laboratory studies. Okeke's approach to art is quite different from that of his colleagues as we can observe from the illustrations. They are often striking. Simon Okeke lost his life during the Nigeria/Biafra civil war. He was a perfectionist.

A one time secretary of the Zaria Art Society is Okechukwu Odita who disagreed with the views of some of his peers over the training curricula at Zaria. Although he left this country in 1963, Odita has continued to project the philosophy of his academic group in far away America through exhibitions, lectures seminars and publications. His works too are profoundly rooted in African culture. This however is not because they expose him to cultural conflicts but for his interest in African forms and symbolism which are probed by exploring the limits of the color spectrum as controlled by light theories and the rainbow as references. To be more knowledgeable about Odita's creative sensibilities, it is necessary to peruse the text and also have direct visual contact with the works during the art exhibition.

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Bruce Onobrakpeya is a rare example of a child brought up in the christian faith but/<sup>who</sup>also imbibed through oral tradition, myths and legends which he took advantage of to interrogate his culture by exploring motifs from both experiences - chirstian and traditional. David Dale's treatise raises some unknown facts, Onobrakpeya was actually excited by the Zaria environment which was a contrast to his Ughelli home town. The excitement and euphoria made the artist appreciate the large anthills, trees and Islamic architecture prevalent in the northern part of Nigeria. The dye-pits at Kano and the Adire eleko designs of the Yoruba speaking people were looked upon for design synthesis with a view to forging an African identity. While it is noteworthy to mention that space cannot provide us that opportunity to enumerate all his artistic contributions, the few which we shall mention here are quite notable. He pioneered new avenues in print making, illustrated books, produced paintings in multi-media, painted murals, published books, developed plastocast techniques etc. Thus Onobrakpeya's creativity spans several periods whose details are well catered for in this publication.

In a project of this magnitude, the efforts of all who belonged to the society must be credited irrespective of the nature of their contributions. Osadebe Oseloka and Felix Ekeada appear not to have been much involved in the widespread dissemination of "Zarianist" ideals. The landmarks of Oseloka include a mural design for the Mbari Artists

Club in Enugu in 1963 while Ekeada contributed towards the beautification of Owerri town with sculptures. Both of them were experimentalists who worked in clay, produced points, oil paintings, posters, color beads and charcoal media.

The broad based training these crop of Nigerian artists were exposed to in Zaria coupled with their ability to pick up jobs with organisations where they made their relevance known is laudable.

Ogbonnaya Nwagbara operated in this manner. Despite the several job opportunities at his disposal after obtaining a master's degree in 1981 from U.S.A., his untimely death in 1985 put an end to such dreams.

Extracts from Uche Okeke's diary of 1957 - 1961, form the concluding part of the publication. It gives an account which scholars in the discipline of contemporary Nigerian art must be updated with. The entire story of Zaria Art Society can only be meaningful if the text is read. Therefore, scholars, artists, art promoters, collectors, curators, libraries, institutions and researchers should endeavor to acquire it.

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