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Contemporary Metal Sculpture in Nigeria: A Discourse of Methods and Style of Three Sculptors.

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Abstract

Keywords

Sculpture,
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Style.

Man has used metals for many centuries for fashioning various tools and implements necessary for his survival. The earliest evidence of man's use of metal is a copper awl unearthed in Tel Tsaf, an archeological site in Israel, dated 5100 B.C to 4600 B.C. The discoveries show that for over 6,000 years perhaps, man has fashioned metals to meet his needs. Sculpturally, metals have been used in various ways especially since the classical renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries. Contemporary sculpture is replete with new ways of working with metals to produce aesthetically pleasing forms. This study explores the use of wrought iron for sculpture. Particularly, it examines the works of three contemporary sculptors Odogwu Fidelis, Steve Ekpenisi and Oladele Ogbeyemi, who have unique approaches in their combination of metal and pigments as surface patinas for their sculptures. The study is both practice-led and historical in nature. It will use data from direct observation of the sculptors at work, and published articles for historical depth. Evaluation will be by direct analysis of their finished sculptures from photographs and videos. The result will show how their unique styles are valuable additions to Contemporary Art in Nigeria.

Introduction

The word contemporary connotes modern, popular and what currently exists and is in vogue. One can also say that contemporary could be related to things that are linked, coexist, and exist at the same time. Contemporary sculpture is

diverse, and the use of metals has been explored in so many ways. Metal comes in different types and ranges like Gold, Silver, Copper, Tin, Lead, and Iron among others. The distinct properties of various metals make it possible for diverse applications in metal sculpture. Ugochukwu and Adenle (2020) notes; that the use of metal

sculpture provided a wide range of possibilities that complemented man's efforts in environmental beautification in many cultures over many decades. The 20th century offered and also ushered-in the new forms of sculpture which were different from the traditional kind of art form (modelling and carving). The contemporary metals sculpture has witnessed tremendous transformation, from simple forms in wrought iron to more creative inventions. The artists Odogwu Fidelis, Steve Ekpenisi and Oladele Ogbeyemi, have unique approaches in their combination of metal and pigments as surface patina for their sculptures. Each sculptor's work is discussed, from the production stages to the finishing, including brief biographies and analysis of the sculptures presented for this study. The research examined particularly, the application of patina to their sculptures, as this is the major difference in their stylistic rendering and why they are unique when compared to conventional wrought iron sculptures. Their practice has led to new knowledge, new idea and understanding of using patina on metals sculptures.

Creative process

According to Gregoire (2019) "... creative people are complex and contradictory. Their creative processes tend to be chaotic and nonlinear which seems to mirror what is going on in their brains. Contrary to the "right-brain myth," creativity does not involve only a single brain region or a single side of the brain. Instead, the creative process draws on the whole brain. It's a dynamic interplay of many diverse brain regions, thinking styles, emotions, unconscious and conscious processing systems coming together in unusual and unexpected ways"

The creative process is a guide or laid-down principles, which the creative practitioner follows in order to achieve his or her goal to create art. There are no hard and fast rules; the creative process varies from artist to artist. Some employ it for mental contemplation, which enables the artist to ponder and think about the work of art to be created. The problem is solved in the innermost thought contemplation before execution, while for

others, the mental contemplation opens up a dialogue and it is merged with the practice, the practical process of actualizing the creative work.

In the words of Vittoria (2020);

"The creative process allows you to unlock your best ideas. It gives you the creative elbow space to figure out what satisfies your spirit and what turns you off, and it provides you full permission to dive into the deepest corners of your imagination. It encourages you to scrap ideas that don't work without damaging your ego and, most importantly, to bring you closer to yourself and create something you're proud of"

The creative process differs from artist to artist, depending on how the artist has fashioned out his or her own method. Vittoria maintained that the creation of art starts from the mind before the actual creation commences. There are five stages of the creative thinking process, they are; preparation, incubation, insight, evaluation, and elaboration (although occasionally the names can vary). Art creation is achievable, no matter the medium of expression, however, the creative process may be slow, involving more preparation, imagination, and self-reflection. Sometimes the creative person is basked in inspiration, allowing the mind and body to simulate the task until that "aha!" moment when he throws himself into the next creation (Vittoria, 2020:5). While Gregoire (2019:2) and Moore (2022) are of the same view that; creating art does not just happen, there is a definite trajectory to the creative process. Beginning with the spark of inspiration and finishing with the completion of a work, these five steps; Inspiration, Percolation, Preparation, Creation, and Reflection, guide the art creator. Ugochukwu (2017), alluded to these also when he stated that, there are five stages of the creative process, starting from; mental contemplation of idea, making drawings, gathering of materials, execution of idea, and reflection / finishing.

1. Mental contemplation of idea involves a brain storming session within the artist, composing patterns from sequences of ideas as they evolve in his subconscious.

2. Drawing is the representation of the ideas on paper. It helps the artist to focus on the concept and form that he intends to create. He is able to visually structure proportions or modify aspects to suit the material and intended finish.
3. Gathering of materials enable the artist bring together parts and bits of the proposed sculpture in material form. In the process, he is able to select materials that fit into his concept appropriately bearing in mind the eventual assembling of the various parts or the fashioning required to bring the bits together into a composite whole.
4. Execution of idea involves the process of fabrication and creation from the paper drawings or sketches to the desire of the artist in metal form.
5. Reflection and finishing; this is the part where the artist criticizes self-first, or in other words self-evaluation. When the artist is satisfied, the creative work is presented to the public as the final consumer, who is the final arbiter in the creative judgment.

Methods and Stylistic Approaches of the Three Sculptors

The three sculptors in the study use similar approaches in the production of their works. These are discussed under individual names to show the differences and similarities. The stylistic analysis is discussed after this.

Odogwu Fidelis

Odogwu Fidelis, Born in Agbor, Delta state on the 17th of November 1970. He graduated from the Auchi Polytechnic, Edo State in 1991 majoring in sculpture. He is fondly called 'The King of Metals' by his pairs, Odogwu has held several solo and participated in numerous group exhibitions. Odogwus' style is more of naturalism and abstraction. He was trained by Ben Osawe, one of Nigeria's foremost contemporary artist, who merged traditional Nigerian Art style with European classical modernism. Odogwu's style is influenced by Osawe's approach to sculpture. His rendition of the African motif speaks volume of his ancestry, while his style is influenced by the art of Ben Osawe who died in 2007



Fig.1: "The Acrobat"
Artist: Odogwu Fidelis
Size: Unknown
Medium: Miled steel rods and Metal plates
Year: 2003
Location: Unknown private collection
Source: Courtesy of Artist Collection



Fig.2: "Involuntary Duty"
Artist: Odogwu Fidelis
Size: Unknown
Medium: Miled steel rods and Metal plates
Year: 2017
Location: Unknown private collection
Source: Courtesy of Artist Collection

Odogwu Methods

The processes governing the production of Odogwu's metals sculptures are discussed below:

- a) With the aid of a guillotine or angle grinder, he cuts flexible milled steel rods ($\frac{1}{4}$ rods) to build up the skeletal frame of his sculpture; this also depends on the type of design. If it is a larger sculpture, a larger size of rod is used.
- b) The process of plating involves a systematic activity of tracing and cutting. You place your paper on the constructed armature, it can be any type of paper available for use; it could be newsprint or other soft plane paper, that is not too rigid, for it to rest well on the skeletal frame metal. The process of tracing can be done by rubbing ones palm on the surface of the paper, this enables one to see the line pattern created by this move, that is, the lines or impression left on the paper when placed on the metal armature or skeleton. A pair of scissors is used to cut out the paper pattern and transferred to the metal plate.
- c) Tracing out of all the parts that needs to be plated or covered with metal plates commences, this is successfully done with the aid of the chalk or fragments of Plaster of Paris (POP). The patterns created are cut out of flat metal sheets.
- d) The cuts out metal sheets are beaten to shape, with the aid of hammer, and welded to the skeletal frame sculpture, with an arch welding machine. This forms the positive space, while the areas intentionally left open becomes the negative space. As an alternative to plating, quota rods can also be used, it is cut into smaller bits and used to create a design.
- e) After all the parts are solidly welded, it is grinded with an angle grinder to clean up rough edges and areas. During this process excess carbon are removed and the sculpture is properly cleaned.
- f) Finally, antirust or red oxide is applied on the surface of the metal sculpture, with a spraying machine. Using the spraying machine is very efficient, and it can reach deep corners where the human hand or paintbrush is not able to reach. In the absence of a spraying machine, one can use a simple paint brush. After applying the anti-rust paint or red oxide, a rough texture can be achieved by sprinkling wood sawdust on the

surface of the sculpture and allowed to dry, before a final patina is applied. At this stage extra care is taken to apply the colours into selected sections so it spill into areas where it is not needed, which might mess-up the work. It is recommended that sable brushes are used for more effective result.

5. Reflection; is the finished stage of the sculpture where it is presented to the audience or art consumer. See Figs. 1 "*The Acrobat*" and Fig. 2 "*Involuntary Duty*", by Odogwu.

Pictorial Analysis of *Acrobat* (fig 1) and *Involuntary Duty*(fig 2)

In '*Acrobat*' Fig. 1, one can observe that Odogwu's ability to interpret his subject were rendered in an accurate manner, and precision. The female figure is seen to be twisted at an angle of 360 degrees. The movement portrayed as that of a professional athlete, with the hair do between her legs. Her tummy facing the sky, the two hands touching the base, and left leg is seen hanged mid air, while the right leg stands on the base. The head appears to be looking at the base directly. She is seen to be wearing short pant, the body is exposed, on her waist is something that represents beads. Her chest especially her breast area is tied with cloth. One can notice something that looks like a design, which is visible at her two sides, starting from the waist of the bead line to the armpit. The designs were created with flexible quota mild steel rods, arranged horizontally and diagonally, allowing for openings and negative spaces. The base was constructed in a rectangular with another rectangular flap to allow for proper rest and contact with the bare floor. Highlights of deferent shades of colours were used as patina.

'*Involuntary Duty*' 'Fig. 2, the butterfly is seen here about to consume the flower, perhaps in the bid to cross pollinate the flower, bit then cross-pollination is common with bees. The sculpture revels, a full-blown butterfly with two primary colours, comprising of red, blue and two secondary colours of green and lemon. The designs are repeated on both sides of the butterfly wings. It appears that the butterfly slowly move

towards the hibiscus flower with its buds of seven colour balls sticking out of the flower. The main body of the flower is presented as flowing waves like movement, represented with flat bars, this was left in it's natural colour of brownish /red oxide.

Steve Ekpenisi

Steve Ekpenisi was born on the 13th of August 1978, in Abavo, Ika South Local Government of Delta State, Nigeria. He had his early education in Nkwo Primary School, Udomi, Abavo, and post-primary in St. Charles College, Abavo. He studied sculpture in Federal polytechnic, Auchi, Edo State, where he graduated as the overall best student with distinction in the 2007/2008 academic session.

Steve uses flat metal sheets cut into strips which looks like flat bars to create his art. Like Odogwu, Steve employs the same method as a guide but a little differently. Steve is more 'holistic' in his approach. He does not construct armature before embarking on his creative adventure. His approach is more of a combination of the mental and his physical ability. He is guided by his mental contemplation, the power of imagination and the ability to replicate what exists in the mind. Steve showed consistency in his creative works. His mastery and skillful handling of metal works are exceptional. His ability to bend, beat and shape strands of metals into something that is unique, separates him from his peers.



Fig.3: "The Crown"
Artist: Steve Ekpenisi
Size: Unknown
Medium: Miled steel rods and Starns of metal plates
Year: 2018
Location: Unknown private collection
Source: Courtesy of Artist Collection



Fig.4: "Divine Messenger"
Artist: Steve Ekpenisi
Size: Unknown
Medium: Miled steel rods and Starns of metal plates
Year: 2020
Location: Unknown private collection
Source: Courtesy of Artist Collection

Ekpenisi Methods

- a) Cutting of flexible milled steel sheets to build up his sculpture. Using a sizable gelatin cutter. One must be precise, the sizes would have been marked by 2, 4, to 8 centimeter, the size may vary, depending on the size of the work. 'I slice discarded metal sheets into smaller flat bars, unit them into weaves to create my sculptures. I work from one part of the object to another' say Ekpenisi. He begins his sculptures by creating the eye balls, and then link them to the other parts of the body, using discarded metal plates, rods, stainless steel, mild steel, scrap metal and disposed cans of different products.
- b) He employ assorted types and household items of metals' for his artistic expression. 'The more you in cooperate the sculpture with metal bars, and other found objects the more you make room to create and observe the positive and negative spaces', says Ekpeni.
- c) His found objects are at times beaten to shape, or reshaped with the aid of hammer, and welded to the sculpture, with an arch welding machine.
- d) After all the parts are solidly welded, it is grinded with an angle grinder to clean up rough edges and areas, during this process excess carbon are also removed.
- e) Finally, antirust or red oxide is applied on the surface of the metal sculpture, with a spraying machine and other colours are equally applied.

Analysis of Fig. 3, "The Acrobat" and Fig. 4, "Our Pride"

In Fig. 3. 'The Crown,' it is quite fascinating that Steve doesn't employ or create amateur for his sculpture. The amateur is a skeletal frame that guides the artist to add up flesh to his creative work. One can liken the amateur as the human skeleton, providing support for the human flesh to for movement. Imagine a human being without a skeleton, movement would be impossible. In the case of Steve, amateur is not an issue to dwell on. Observe the flowing in and out of the metal flat bars like knots tying. This sculptor can be liken to the weaverbird. He his ties and knots his strands of metal, from the top scarf of the female burst to

her clothing, except for the treatment of the facial representation. The finishing of the base, fussed the female bust sculpture into it, the base has been represented as another work of art on its own. It appears that the artist employed the technique of modelling and casting to archive this, thereby employed two methods in his creative out put; construction and modelling and casting. The form is naturally represented and abstracted as well.

Fig. 4. 'Divine Messenger: the viewer is thrilled with the mid-air suspended angel. It is believed that angels are not men, probably why the artist did not define the sex. The form is faceless, suspended by the piece of clothing in mid-air, the wings detailed, and one may mistake this rendition for being modelled and cast in metal, but this is not the case. Steve's sculpture are usually life size or larger than life. In both figurative and imaginative modes, he employs direct creation carefully studied and created like *Divine Messenger*, with finishing that gives the impression of an antiqueart.

Oladele Ogbeyemi

Oladele acquired a National diploma with upper credit from Lagos State Polytechnic Ikorodu campus in 2015 and later proceed to acquire a Higher National diploma in Fine arts, sculpture Major in the prestigious Yaba College of Technology with upper credit in 2019. He makes use of junks, found objects and scrap metals along with drawings, painting and mix media. Hia many areas of expertise makes him a subject of interest and gives him an edge in his experimental creations.

Oladele employs the process of assemblage, cutting, beating, bending and weaving of metal into artistic intricate precision to create and achieve his artistic concepts. Usually an idea of the concept is nursed. A systematic laid-down guideline or rules are judiciously followed to achieve the concept through, sketches, photographic images.



Fig.:5 “*Dragon*”
Artist: Oladele Ogbeyemi
Size: Unknown
Medium: Miled steel rods, plates and found objects
Year: 2020
Location: Unknown private collection
Source: Courtesy of Artist Collection



Fig.:6 “*Tyrannosaurus*”
Artist: Oladele Ogbeyemi
Size: Unknown
Medium: Miled steel rods, plates and found objects
Year: 2021
Location: Unknown private collection
Source: Courtesy of Artist Collection

Methods

He uses junks, found objects and scrap metals as a source of inspiration for his art. He follows the same process as Fidelis Odogwu for his metal sculptures but uses colours in a very different way for his sculptures. While Odogwu uses colours as plain spread across surfaces, defining boundaries, Ogbayemi uses colours as a painting on sculpture. His rendering of paints on metals gives the impression of the metal used as a format for a piece of painting. This is quite unique because his works are viewed from two perspectives: As a sculptural piece, and as a painting as well (within the sculpture).

Analysis of Fig. 5, “*Dragon*” and Fig. 6, “*Tribe*”

In Fig. 5. ‘*Dragon*’, Ogbeyemi incorporated found objects to create his art. One can see components of motor car parts, motorcycle parts,

engine parts, among others that makes up this *Dragon*. Like Odogwu, he starts by constructing amateur for his sculpture as a guide before assembling the parts to fit into it. The wings are made-up of quarter rods and metal sheets, the head, arm, body, legs, tail are made-up of found objects. Engine pugs were used to represent the drag on toes.

Fig. 6 ‘*Tyrannosaurus*’, the major components that make up Ogbeyemi's *Tyrannosaurus* are scraps from engine parts of cars and power generator, spark plugs, bicycle chain, suspension spring and other found objects. The *Tyrannosaurus* was a bipedal carnivore with a massive skull balanced by a long, heavy tail. Unlike its large and powerful hind limbs, the forelimbs of *Tyrannosaurus* are short but unusually powerful for their size.

The most complete specimen discovered measures between 12.3m and 12.4m in length. Ogbeyemi finished the metal sculpture with variety of primary, secondary and complementary colours, which gives it a painterly finish. The artist carefully applied his colours with the same dexterity as the metal sculpture.

Conclusion

One can conclude that the works created by these sculptor artists are not devoid of beauty, especially when one considers creative in genuity and freedom of self expression, which has appealed to the audience and can be judged to be beautiful. Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) holds that; when one encounters beauty, our experience of it is an experience of freedom. However, beauty is not itself an objective property of things. When we judge that a natural work of art is beautiful, we are making a judgement about an object but we are ascertaining that the object has certain effect on us (and that it should have the same effect on all who view it) The effect produced by the beautiful object is to set our understanding and imagination in free play that leads us to judge the object to be beautiful.

This paper analyzed the works of three artists whose contribution in the sculpture genre is significant in this regard to contemporary Nigerian art in their use of metals for their stylistic representation and the creative use of colours as patinas, which relatively distinguished their imprints from their contemporaries. Ideally, the works under study connotes conventionalism in the rendering and use of metals in welded sculpture, but the use of colours is unique. The article brings to light how superficial additions can be useful in the aesthetic rendering of sculpture, a practice that hitherto was common to paintings and some other members of the visual arts. This in a nutshell is in synch with the world's contemporary focus on the new and the unique.

Contemporary art is an amalgamation of *the different, the unique and the strange*. In both content, concepts and contexts, contemporary art is stretching boundaries and redefining meanings and perceptions of conventional artistry. The retort to material exploration and exploitation in contemporary art is almost in-exhaustive and useful in the multifaceted dimensions that the art of contemporary era is opening up. Where emphasis is on the new, the unexplored, and the uncharted, the input of contemporary art and indeed sculpture to the evolution of ideas and techniques unfolding in today's world cannot be over-emphasized.

Contemporary art teaching and practice in Nigeria should of a necessary encourage and imbibe the culture of creativity and inventiveness in the rendering of art forms. It is clearly the way forward not only for art practice, but also for the direction of technology and creativity globally.

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