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Studio art practice, principles and mentorship: a synthesis of ideas, Aghara-Ottorharmattan workshop, Nigeria

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Abstract

Keywords

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Facilitators,
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Ideas

Art practice thrived in Nigeria creative climate especially at the early period of the 70s, when the informal training and mentorship was the order of the day, it is worthy of mention that formal art training also thrived and paved way for some of the frontiers in that championed the art in the academia. The merger of town and gown came to actualization through industrial training (I.T) popularly know as Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES). Younger artist were eager to tap into the wealth of experience of the master artist in order to understudy, replicate and possibly chart a creative course for themselves. It is obvious that some of the present emerging artists no longer embrace mentorship. However, some master artists are at the forefront of making sure that the fire of creative prowess in Nigeria is kept ablaze hence the Harmattan workshop at Aghara-Ottor and other workshops. Bruce Onobrakpeya, whose creative works of art cuts across the various areas especially in sculpture, painting, textile, ceramics, graphics, among others, are reckoned with within and outside the shores of Nigeria. The paper highlights his enduring studio practice, ideology, mentorship and general contribution towards the growth of visual arts in Nigeria and beyond, while also analyzing some of his creative works.

Introduction

The history of art practice dates back as far as man's existence, from the cave period to the modern and contemporary time. Over time, art practice took a wider look on the creative works and recognition of art practitioners, from the artist studio to his or her prowess of producing meaningful works of art, to the role of artists as cultural producers, arts advocates, community builders, innovators and general mentorship. It was clear that artists are blessed and equipped with the freedom to create, chart a new course towards a path suited to particular strength and interest, especially in the areas of drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics, graphics, printmaking, print media, video/digital media, installation, performance, among others. Ugochukwu, Egwu and Nnodi, (2019) the general conclusion reached by artists, through that art are more accurate and emotional than those reached by politicians, scholars, scientists to mention but a few. Art is akin to a written language and documented commitment to a perspective which is invaluable to the society. In the studies of Famule (2016) and Jaji (2010) if one truly wants to get involved and practice art, such can be achieved through mentorship. Mentorship can be acquired by informal and formal training system.

Training is the preparation of oneself, through instruction and practice. Where by the child learns by imitating his superior. Mentoring enables the more seasoned professional to share his or her experience with a beginner. Ugochukwu (2019) points out; mentorship is about achieving personal growth and development. The benefits of being a mentor includes a personal fulfilment through knowledge and skill sharing, shaping of relationship, leadership skills, career preparation and cognitive growth. Good training is most essential, no matter how much or little natural ability the pupil may possess, such splendid opportunities must bear fruit in time to come, and it will be the fault of the student if he or she has not availed himself to the fullest extent of such chances as are offered him, and if he fails to give proof of this in after life (Toft, 2004).

Succinctly for a sustainable mentorship, the mentee must be ready to submit self to learning with open mind and must be humble in every aspect, and only then one can get the best from the master. It is believed that one can always get the best from ones master when that individual surrenders totally. The responsibility is for the trainee to keep in mind, remember all that was imparted during the period while creating and documenting.

Creating and documenting art is of most important. It's necessity cannot be over emphasized. One of the problem that confronts Africa, especially Nigeria could be linked to non documentation. It is important to document, owing to the fact that scholars like Puritt (1999:71) believes that multitude of publications on renowned Western artists are ubiquitous, while documentation on Nigerian artists and art continues to lagfar behind.

The master and mentor

Mentoring takes effect when there is an agreement between the mentor and mentee. It is confidential and sacred, an individual that is more experienced usually mentors a younger person. Like Bruce Onobrakpeya, who has contributed immensely to the growth of fine arts, through the Harmattan workshop which holds annually at Agbarha-Otor in Delta State, Nigeria. Onobrakpeya is also the CEO of Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation (BOF). The Harmattan workshop is best known for training, production, interaction, research, experiment, residency and especially art related programmes. According to Peters (2016) "Harmattan workshop is a realization of a great art vision which has brought succor to Nigeria art and indeed African art..." Peters (2016: 415) notes, the positive impact of the harmattan workshop training on the participants are overwhelming. Participation in the programme cuts across different nations. The scenery and the content of harmattan workshop at Agbarha – Otor is significant and can favorably compete with other international workshops, especially in terms of it's traditional content.

Mattick (2003)...traditional artworks are detached from their original loci of ritualized significance and made available for the imposition of new meanings. It is perhaps, impossible to conceive of a modern nation without relying upon the characteristics of professional behavior of Industrial Designers, artisans and craftsmen as indispensable to community growth and development (Swindells, Atkinson and Sibley, 2001).

Ogunduyile, Kayode and Ojo, (2008) argued that it is impossible to conceive a socio-economically viable society, without reckoning on the economic contributions of people who are into the practice of the skills of their vocations or trades. Akinlami (1999) also notes that man, in history has distinguished himself from other creatures by being skillfully creative and by inventing tools to suit his comfort. Comfort in this sense embraces food, good health, and privacy by the way of shelter, clothing, and protection among other things.

It cannot be learned in isolation but requires interactions between teacher and students, students and students, and between students and materials. The depth of content to be covered as a separate school subject in the curriculum is enormous for the number of periods allocated to it, (Ogunduyile et al, 2008). The Harmattan workshop is an avenue where practical experiences can be acquired. though an informal education setup as a retreat where artist converge, work in synergy and shear ideas. The purpose is to sustain creative ideology, build manpower and self sufficiency especially in an economy like Nigeria.

The Workshop venue is situated at the Onobrakpeya Arts Centre, Agbarha-Otor, Delta State, Nigeria, while the head office is at No 41, Oloje Street, Papa Ajao, Mushin, Lagos State. In the words of Puritt (1999:70) "Nigerian and Western scholars...are intrigued by the vicissitudes in Onobrakpeya's art. He consciously rejected stylistic borrowing from the Western academic traditions and favored instead an approach which addressed the issues of visual

language of both his Urhobo heritage and other Nigerian traditions". However, this also allowed the facilitators to bring-in their own creative ingenuity during the workshop.

According to Onobrakpeya's foundation (2020);

The workshop is held every year in sessions of two weeks each. Usually starts at the middle of February and can go beyond August. The number of sessions depend on availability of funds, and consequently, an advertised session will be cancelled if funds are not available.

Nature of the workshop

Being an informal educational setup, their syllabi and curriculums are neither rigid nor in-flexible and there are no permanent staff members. Broadly, the Workshops are divided into two sections: the first section which is both instructive and interactive, and designed for both experienced artists and beginners. The subjects offered are made available to the facilitators who can supervise and teach them, while the second session takes place in August, known as the August retreat and is designed for artists who use the period to develop their own ideas.

Subjects that are usually handled in the first session include: Painting/ Mixed media, Printmaking, Textiles Design/Fashion, Pottery and Ceramics, Wood Sculpture, Metal Sculpture, Stone Carving, Blacksmithing, Jewelry/ Craft, Computer Training, Photography, Leather Craft, and Bronze Casting. Participants choose and specialize in one subject in a particular session. They are free to try their hands on other subjects after fulfilling the mandatory requirement in their selected area, if time and materials are available. Alumni of the Harmattan Workshops with permission could use the etching press for printmaking during the off season.

In both February and August workshops, invited experts and participants make presentations in the evenings on given topics. These take the form of seminars, talks, films and slide presentations.

During workshops, participants interested find time for devotions every morning, Fridays and Sundays. Physical exercises like jogging and walking, and such recreational activities like swimming, football and table tennis are also available. Participants may also take part in drama or visit places of interest like the Turf Club in Abraka or generally enjoy the rustic scenery of the workshops environment.

Facilitators for the various sections of the workshop are carefully selected. These facilitators are also participants who engage in their own creations during the sessions but are looked upon by participants for leadership and instruction during the workshop. The facilitators are drawn from diverse backgrounds such as; the academics, professional artists, local craftsmen etc. Special craft programmes are designed to enable participants, in particular from the indigenous community, acquire skills that will enable them have a source of livelihood. Numerous ways and techniques have developed, and ubiquitous of new materials and innovations, giving the creative individuals the opportunity to chose from and explore in other to reinvent in a world around them.

The foundation has always worked and collaborated with primary, secondary school children and students from higher institutions. They visit the center as fulfilment of their educational requirements, particularly during the workshop sessions. Special programmes are designed by request for secondary schools. Polytechnics and universities. Ogunduyile, Kayode and Ojo (2008) notes;

“the various art and design schools are responsible for training of graduates in the various disciplines of Fine Art and Industrial Design....., and also gain experience outside the university environment, especially with the guide of the master artists in their own diverse area. It is expected that graduates in these options keep the professional banner flying and earn the profession very high societal repute through practice and ethics”

Also, corporate organisations that wish to empower youths in their areas of operation also partner with the BOF as the infrastructure for these are available in the foundation. All these may take place within or outside normal workshop sessions.

Analyses of selected works from the workshop

From inception, facilitators that have been prominent at the Agbarha-otor harmattan workshop includes; Sam Ovraili (painting), Dr. SeunKukoyi (Sculpture), Prof. Bruce Onabrakpeya (Print Making), Dr. Mrs.Kukoyi (Textile), Barrett Akpokabayen (photography), Demola Tajudeen (Computer Graphics), Djakou Kassi Nathalie (Ceramics). However, this paper centers it's documentation, analysis and evaluation on art pieces produced during the 2005 Harmattan workshop, especially participating artists/facilitators like; OjoOlaniyi, Emmanuel Kama, AdeolaBalogun, Peju Layiwola, Sam Ovraili, Cyril-Egware Pamela, Kunle Adeyemi, Nweze Philip, Oladipo Afolanyan, and Nelson Edewor.



Fig.1 *Ejire* (twins) by Ojo Olaniyi.
Epoxy Deep Etching.
Year: 2002



Fig.2 *Flowerpot* by Emmanuel Kama
Medium: Terra cotta
Year: 2005

Fig.1 Ojo Olaniyi's *Ejire* (twins). Is a tale centered on the existence of twins according to the Yoruba mythology; In Yoruba land, the birth of twins is welcomed and celebrated with a deeply rooted belief that twins bring happiness, joy and attract supernatural wealth to the family; (Leroy, Olaleye-Oruene, Koeppen-Shomerus, Bryan, 2002) Ojowas able to maximize the use of space. His application of colour and general rendition shows his mastery of his art style. The image of the woman at the center is seen carrying two children as they are breast feed at both sides. Her hear-do is the typical representation of that of the core Yoruba tradition, she is seen wearing beads on her neck that drops at the larval, both arms appears to be tattooed, she is also seen to be tying a wrapper-clothing around her lower body part, while her upper part reveals she was topless. There are six images of what gives one the impression that they are twins sounding her, two at both sides and two other below. Further below her feet, are also images of six figures, they are all

represented as females. One could observe that there are something that looked like motif designs all around the creative work which gave it a border-line, framing and possible finishing.

Fig. 2. Kama's *Flower* pot is quite exceptional, a well rendered, glazed and finished terra cotta piece. His elongated pot gives one the impression of a of a sea shell and a pendant necklace. Even though the dimension is unknown, one could see that he used, controlled and explored his colours well enough. The splashed colours in red oxide gives one the impression of human forms, not too clear if they were male females. The heads were slightly bent forward, showing signs of age. It also appears as if the sky was raining on them. There are also something that looks like inscriptions on the vase, though it wasn't legible from the photograph made available before the researcher. The artist possess this rear trait and ability to control his colour pigments. Thereby making his works to stand out among others.



Fig.3 *Untitled* by Adeola Balogun
Medium: Steel Metal(Assemblages)
Year: 2005

Fig.3. Balogun's *Untitled* piece gives one an impression of horse riders. His medium of expression are assemblages of wood, metal, comprising of found objects like wires among others. They are either set for a Polo sports game or Durbar festival. They are static, no form of movement, as if they were waiting for the blast of the whistle so that activity could commence. The vertically arranged woods symbolizes the horse riders, with probably the polo sticks and swords if Durbar festival. The found objects represents the decorative ornaments found on the horses. The semi curved woods also represents the horse heads.

Fig. 4. *Happy Women*, a mixed media piece by Layiwola, appears to promote peace, tranquility, and harmony among the female folk or gender. Her use of colour was well handled, from the



Fig.4 *Happy Women* by Peju Layiwola
Medium: Mixed Media
Year: 2005

background, one could see that the colours progressed from dark tone to a lighter one. The images presented one with that of what one sees in fairytale movie. One could see that they were gathered to celebrate or revolt against something that has favoured or infringed on their fundamental right as against their wishes. A closer look would revile the true nature of the images. Are they really or truly happy? One may be tempted to ask, but then, this maybe another interpretation of the famous Afro bit legend, Fela Anikolapokuti's song "*Shuffering and Shmiling*" we have built our shock absorbers to the point that we are no longer bothered by our daily encounter. Whether positively or negatively. Layiwola's piece should have been dedicated to all those going through one abuse, violence or the other.



Fig.5 *Untitled* by Sam Ovrarti
Medium: Oil on Canvas
Year: 2005

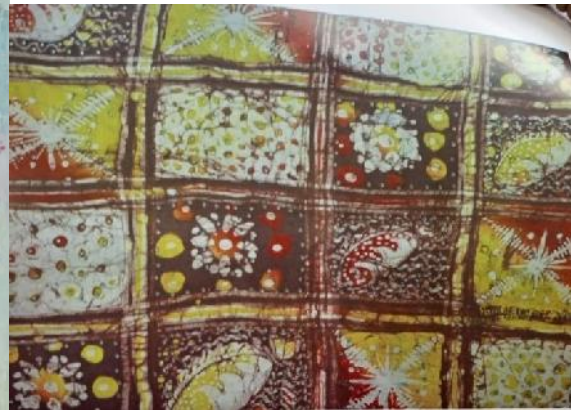


Fig.6 *Life Underwater* by Cyril-Egware Pamela
Medium: Surface embellishment on Batik Year: 2005

Fig. 5. Ovrarti's *Untitled* piece depicts gathering. A conglomerates of colours employed to drive home his message. It appears the abstracted forms gathered for a function, looking at the attars of various native clothing's. They may be gathered for traditional wedding, or a festival, where people appear in colourful attire. One could see representations of *female* headgear, and caps. He colour combinations are quite fascinating, his use of purple was dominant, followed by royal red, very light green, with touches of deep blue and few black out lines. This artists has proven himself overtime, especially in his water colour exploration and rendition. His play with the primary and secondary colours leaves one speechless, no doubt, his mastery of water colour can also be seen here at play, mere looking at this untitled piece, which gives one the impression of water rendition.

Fig. 6. Pamela's *Surface Embellishments on Batik*, tells her story on eight deferent panels. They seems to be interpretations on inter galactic activity and experiences. Her batik creation is not devoid of the play between the sun, moon, and star. One could also observe the representations of day and night activity. Batik creation as an

original common method and heritage of Indonesian country and has turn out to be a world heritage. The development of batik in Indonesia varies in plan media, and function. Contemporary batik, or cutting-edge batik designers are creativity personified of the advent of present day batik designers, they are increasingly numerous in form and function. In the past, batik products had motifs that have been nevertheless sacred and additionally functional. Like Pamela's *Surface Embellishments*...modernization has triggered a degradation of functions and values in making batik, which has shifted into products that have consumptive, financial and individualistic values.

In our world today, batik plays a very necessary role, with a new interpretation into a current batik design. This new creativity in field of batik has obtained distinct interest from each the patron community and in the market. In general, batik designs and new motifs are snippets of repetition of historical motivations or even leaving the unique common motifs of the place and transferring to modern motifs, to meet the tastes of today's society which are completely realistic and instantaneous (Damayante, 2020)



Fig.7 *Royal Procession* by Kunle Adeyemi
Medium: Plastocast
Year: 2005



Fig. 8. *Crush* by Nzekwe Philip
Medium: Bronze
Year: 2005

Fig. 7. In Adeyemi's *Royal Procession* finished in Plastocast. The concept is the typical procession found to occur during festival celebrations and prominent among Kings. His forms are rendered in abstractions. The King leads, while others follow closely behind. A typical scenario of what is found in Benin Kingdom, during the 'Igwe festival' the king is dressed in a different attire, with other three, whom are probably his cabinet members, while others are dressed in white attires. The background is represented with light brown, outlined at the upper part with purple, and a touch of white, which may give the impression of the cloud, These choice of colours seems to separate the images from the background.

Fig. 8. Philip thrilled his views with his piece, titled *Crush*. The sculptures facial expressions

were not rendered in pure abstractions, nor were they rendered in realistic manner, but then, one could conveniently tell that the features and attributes of the human being is prominent. The lower part of the body is purely abstracted. The youngsters seems to be looking at each other, they are not sad nor were they laughing. What confronts the viewer is that there is a little smile, which wasn't obvious. Probably they were shy. Could this be love at first sight? Another striking feature about the two love birds was that, the artist created them separately, this ordinarily allows for ease of cast and not create unnecessary locks and undercuts in sculpture. When these two forms are eventually separated the title *Crush* may change to another title to better describe the form and the action.



Fig. 9. *Untitled* by Oladapo Afolayan
Medium: limestone
Year: 2005



Fig. 10. *Untitled* by Nelson Edewor
Medium: Assemblage
Year: 2005

Fig. 9. Afolayan's *Untitled* piece is reminiscent of the history of the Nok culture; Tosoede, Igbo Ukwu, Ife and Esie Stone Sculptures among others. The abstract facial depiction, a representation of the head and neck alone. His medium of expression is limestone. Limestone is a non-clastic sedimentary rock composed mostly of calcium carbonate (CaCO₃), usually fashioned at the backside of shallow seas. The solubility of limestone makes it without problems eroded; caves and sink-holes are regular facets of limestone terrains. Limestone can vary appreciably in hardness, the softer varieties being very convenient to cut, the harder ones regularly are as hard as marble. It also varies in colour, from brown to grey, yellow and white (artofmaking.ac.uk, 2023). Limestone were used in replacement for marble, especially during the Roman Empire for building and creating sculptures.

Fig. 10. Edewor's *Untitled* assemblage, looks like an assemblage of Looms. There are different types of loom; Back strap loom, warp-weighted loom, treadle loom, tapestry looms, ribbon band and inkle weaving, dancing looms, circular Looms among others. The loom is also used to create local traditional fabrics, like the fabrics of the indigenous people of Nigeria which has proven to be distinct over time.

In the south of Nigeria, loom weaving survived today in small scale in a few areas, where local specializations are still in demand, notably in Yoruba town of Ijebu-Ode, and far to the east in the Igbo village of Akwete. In central and northern Nigeria, there are still a relatively large number of women using these looms in the Epira town of Okene, the Nupe capital Bida, and in Hausa cities, particularly Kano (Sachwani, 2020). Looking at it from another perspective, Edewor's piece could also suggest an assemblage of Musical Harps, one could notice the woods and various colours of strings, coupled with the harmonious coloured balls, this may suggest various harmonic tones emanating from the assembled harp.

The harp is a stringed musical instrument that has a single strings jogging at an attitude to its soundboard; the strings are plucked with both fingers and it dates back to 15,000 BC and it is one of the oldest instruments. The name originated from the Old German, Old Norse, and Anglo Saxon words which means 'to pluck'. There are more than 18 types of harps. Harps can be made and played in a number of ways, standing or sitting, and in orchestras or concerts. Its most frequent structure is triangular in shape and made of wood. Some have more than one rows of strings and pedal attachments. The largest variety of harps can be found in Africa (verbnow.com, 2023 and Wikipedia, 2023).

Cognizant the creative works produced during the Harmattan workshop of 2005, one can agree that the workshop is a synthesis of conglomerates of ideas, which has emerged at its own time. The proceeds keeps evolving after each workshop, areas like Painting/ Mixed media, Printmaking, Textiles Design/Fashion, Pottery and Ceramics, Metal Sculpture, limestone Carving, and Bronze Casting were captured this time around. One can also agree that mentorship is of essence and paramount when the issue of synergy between the mentor and the mentee is tabled. The Harmattan workshop can be considered to be the appropriate place where talents are groomed and nurtured by the older artists who have carved a niche for themselves in the various fields of creative enterprise. They include professionals and academics that are distinguished and prominent at the forefront of making sure that the practice of art is preserved for continuity and posterity.

Recommendation

It is strongly recommended that the repertoire churned out during the annual Harmattan workshop should be acquired by museums, collectors and gallery owners hence publicity should be paramount in the effort to reach out a wider audience, and since art is a long-term

investment, while the art market can be stable or show large returns on investment during boom times, it is one asset that can easily plummet in value during seasons of recession of which individuals like art patrons can as well key-in and take advantage.

Art practitioners should be encouraged to seek patronage, in order to move the profession forward and indeed to an enviably height.

The history of traditional art requires interrogation, whether art can be utilized to safeguard cultural tradition, in the same process, artistic inspiration occurs through different cultural exchanges, one should be concerned on how to bridge the obsolete narrative gap between tradition and innovation.

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