A CRITIQUE OF TWO OF UWA USEN’S SCULPTURES
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Abstract
Artists from various cultural milieus have and continue to hold varying assertions about the potency of their works. Contemporary art today is a portal that stirs discussion in and outside scholarly circles and the aim of raising awareness to existing problems. Today, artists continue to evoke consciousness in the minds of viewers and followers of their works through exhibitions of topical issues with the aim of bringing lasting solutions to them. Statements artists make with regards to the inspiration that informed the body of work produced give insight into the thrust of their work. This study takes a look at two of Uwa Usen’s sculptures against the backdrop of a statement he made that holds that his work is a solution to some Niger Delta problems.

Keywords: Critique, art, contemporary, exhibitions

Introduction
Message has always been the thrust of most artists’ works from the primordial period of cave, traditional to contemporary times. For the cave period, the lack of written documents makes it impossible to understand the basis for their work. Gardener (1980:25) holds that “Any modern interpretation of this cave art must, of course, remain pure speculation. Properties common to all these paintings, however, provide researchers with some fairly definite clues to what they meant to their creators.” The time span between the cave period and today leaves a closed gap of hidden materials lost to time that leaves one wondering what the purpose and meaning of the works hold. The traditional period still stands as very recent with evidence of the overflow of such practices seen in contemporary times. In this regard, Gardener (ibid:442) holds that “…for African arts often play a role in everyday affairs, as well as in the life-crises rituals such as initiations, funerals and the continent’s other events that punctuate human existence.” This means that the works produced in the traditional period was not art but a type of opium and portal that gives the cave artists access to their creator. This is supported by Jegede (2002) who describes traditional African art thus: ‘An essential aspect of these pieces pertains to their spiritual connection. Before they metamorphosed into art objects in our museums, many artworks originated in cultural contexts that placed primacy on their spiritual efficacy’. This is a change and loss of control art had in comparison to how it is controlled in contemporary times. Art in traditional times engendered the socio-cultural life of people and the religious life, while, in contemporary times it is rendered as a means to evoke and provoke discussions for possible change in many cases.

This study is inspired by Uwa Usen’s (b. 1963) statement that goes thus, “Since art solves problems, then my art is a solution”. In local parlance, some artists and other people in other professions that display one skill or the other mouth with relish that ‘I learned this from my mother’s womb’. Among other similar clearly impossible exaggerated statements, many works of art are made to make socio-political commentaries for their actions. This is aimed at engendering positive changes from various societal ills raised by the artist. Positive change has since been made possible through the interaction that existed during the missionary and colonial periods.
that led to the gradual loss of the role of traditional art leading to the contemporary situation that art is in today. The missionary activity among others led to the setting up of a workshop in Oye-Ekiti. This engaged carvers, traditional African artists, to make images inspired by bible verses. This paradigm shift is one that left the production of works that served as receptacles for gods, spirits and the souls of kings and chiefs within the society the artist found himself. Some of such artists were Areogun, Bandele, Akin and Alawode attended workshops under Father Kevin Caroll.

Another workshop was run by Uli Beier in Oshogbo that was later handed over to Susan Wenger (d. 2009). It is important to add that Beier in Mount (1973:156) explains that ‘The Oshogbo art school was not an aesthetic experiment it was designed to create a living for these artists and build up a new function and a new social status for them…moreover, their work is not geared to the European collector alone’. Beier strove to aid change in the inspiration behind the works of these carvers, the context of their work and to enable them make a living out of these works. This continued while the colonial government made efforts to include Fine Arts into the school curriculum. This led to the establishment of the then Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology in Zaria. The workshops and the activities of the colonial government has made the practice and appreciation of art to become more liberal and to the loss of the traditional role it played.

The works

A number of issues in the artist’s milieu abounds and stretches beyond the serving president’s (President Shehu Musa Yar’ Adua) seven point agenda. In Usen’s work in Figure 1 titled ‘Peace in the Niger Delta’, he used a replica of a pulpit with a militant standing in as the preacher. He rebuts, perhaps, that their activities have become more potent and feared by the public and especially Christians than the preacher’s words. However, the work may also be viewed as sacrilegious due to the overall depiction.

![Figure 1: Peace in the Niger Delta](image)

The work points to the effectiveness of the actions of the militants in the Niger-Delta, depicted as a preacher standing before a lectern to preach in a church. The white colour of the marble signifies purity as against the black fiber glass used in depicting the militant which describes some of his
positions and actions in the region. Some of these include kidnapping, unrest, killing and hostage taking. The use of the dark color against a white lectern is pointer to the artist’s two pronged position. One, that the militants’ motive and mode of operation is justified and deserves fair hearing and secondly, that the oil companies and governments’ neglect, does not warrant taking arms so as to prove to both of them have failed.

The use of the lectern where a preacher speaks from during church services is contradictory to the message intended by the artist. It seems to the writers that the artist is actually in support of the militants’ activities in the region, and also makes it look as though the church gives time and perhaps voice to them on Sunday services. The artist’s ability to symbolize with the use of imagery is good, yet, the message in the work leaves one wondering what is been intended. The terror of the militants in the Niger Delta of the country might have stopped one or more Sunday services, such that it became very important to produce the work to elicit from government an urgent solution to bring lasting peace to the region.

Jarvis (2007:200) holds that ‘Art practice and process has historically been almost hermetically sealed from the public gaze, perhaps because that which is worthwhile and radical in art is at the frontier where real possibilities of failure are more often than not the ‘norm’ and where to invite the scrutiny…’ This implies the clear need for a symbolic relationship between critics, art historians, connoisseurs and artists to meet over the production of works. This is not to subject the artist to meet with these groups listed above over the production of works nor to subject the artist to censuring, but assist in the analysis of the thought and production processes of the artists’ work such that it will be possible to have a work that has clarity in his singular or diversely intended message.

Numerous themes and titles have been produced by artists but perhaps “matrimony” might stand as one of the ten most potent topics depicted in both positive and negative lights. The next work in figure 2 is a wood carving that he assumes might solve problems.

![Figure 2 Matrimony](image)

The work has a single body from where a male and a female head and neck project. This depicts the oneness expected of married couples. Two legs are depicted to suggest the different ideals that must be merged to bring marital bliss. Again, perhaps the male head made to be taller than that of the woman’s head is illustrative of the “husband is the head of the wife” in marriage. However, the work somewhat looks like a couple posed for a photograph. On this, the writers admit that the challenge of sculpting wood has not deterred the artist from depicting a unifying pose that elicits oneness in marriage. Again,
the work depicts two hands and two legs that are suggestive of both couple working hand in hand. Despite the conjugal bliss prayer for newly married couples, it continues to surprise people why some marriages do not last.

An artist turns in his or her mind titles and themes with the aim of establishing what is appropriate for his or her works. The revolutionary effect desired by Usen in positing that his art is a solution to problems might be intended to elicit a fast yet practicable approach to bringing an end to the Niger-Delta problem, and the problem faced by some couples in their marriages. The writers base their critique on the fact that the statement made by Usen was brought to bear in an exhibition where these two works were displayed. The big idea intended through those works is novel yet, it is not clear how the artist intends to solve problems when art works are not consulted like manuals to provide solutions to problems. The context in which he makes the statement may not be that which should be taken literally, yet, there is a need for artists to weigh their words so that there will be no incongruity. Furthermore, artists continue to attempt to make their work relevant to the generation they find themselves in, the thrust of their statement should not be such that tends to lure the viewing public to appreciate their works.

The uniqueness of sculpture in the round when compared to other dimensional art forms such as drawings, paintings and graphics shows a clear distinction in how they are viewed. For sculpture, the fact that it can be viewed in the round such that it can be critiqued both without the artist and title; especially when it is representational, brings to bear the distinctions. When it is abstracted, the opinion even tends to become diverse with the attendant contradiction of viewers’ opinion. However, when the works produced are brought under one particular theme, in Uwa Usen’s case, an artist’s statement, the works are subjected to the statement through experiences of what sculpture is in contemporary times.

Sculpture works displayed in public places and exhibition halls evoke discursion from viewers, such that a group out-rightly holds a position against the thrust of the artist’s work. In the light of this, Usen’s statement that his art solves problems brings to question what test modes he has subjected his works to so as to prove that they solve problems. Are the problems marital, cultural, religious, social or medical among others? What scale has he set to test and prove these? As much as the statement may have a broader coverage to his other work aside these two, he should be aware that there is a need to prove a statement before they are made.

**Conclusion**

Two of the works of Usen selected for this discourse look at the potency of the contemporary artist and his works with the aim of solving problems. The role of the contemporary artist is to evoke discourse through his or her works instead of driving at making the work look like an opium for the viewing public. It is important to point out at this juncture that Usen’s statement makes him sound like a traditional African artist that is known to produce works that are made to solve problems. Yet, he is a college-trained and practicing artist in a period where art has been taken from being a spiritual portal between men and their gods to a portal for the discussion of thoughts and ideas. He has not written concisely or extensively on his position so as to give insight as to how his works solve problems.

Dean (1999: 5) asserts that ‘A work of art that is aesthetically excellent, historically significant, and morally profound is a better work of art, overall, than one which is only some or none of these things (assuming of course that we hold the various achievements in the varieties of value constant across cases). This should therefore be the only concern of any contemporary artist since art today has been removed from its traditional African potency; an opium of social change, control and spiritual receptacle.

This is equally the same for contemporary African art no matter how strong the message and the target audience it addresses. Budd (2007: 360) added further that ‘…this omits what is a crucial component of any viable conception of artistic value, the aim of art, the particular kind of achievement aimed at by the artist…’ Presently, the aim of the contemporary artist is less potent compared to the traditional African artist no matter how hard he tries to reach a fast decreasing audience due to the economic downturn; since the type of reverence art experienced in the past has changed.
References


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