

AFRICAN INDIGENOUS ARTISTIC KNOWLEDGE IN THE COMPREHENSION OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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Abstract

Many visual artists and art spokespersons still model contemporary art and its analyses after the mainstream Euro-American prototypes. Many creative collectives still consider the indigenous knowledge system in art making inferior or not fashionable. This fact is obvious in their aesthetic analyses of current art. Conversely, while Africa is considered by some to have nothing to offer, more than ever, indigenous African artistic knowledge, paradigms, theories, and philosophies culled from their imprint on African art forms are shaping aesthetic discourse in the contemporary art world. These paradigms, if understood and given their place in the regime of trending episteme in contemporary art discourse, have the potential to open up fresh analytic vistas hitherto unknown. By sifting these ways of knowing through intense stylistic and iconographic methods of enquiry using selected African arts, their validity in the interrogation and understanding of contemporary art will be established. They include masquerade theory and what comes after six is more than seven; the Yoruba of Nigeria holds that there is more to any issue beyond its immediate alter extrapolation, both theories posit a multi-perspective in the analyses of artforms similar to what foreigners term eclecticism, but devoid of its foreign derogatory meaning. Accumulation theory and narratology jointly and separately aver that facts derivable from artworks are in layers, and must be ideologically excavated. The Urhobo, 'uchukru reke' conceptualised as " part of a whole is a whole", expounds the situational symbolic interpretation of forms in the African worldview. All these paradigms derive from their practical application in the African creative forge and as such are indispensable in the aesthetic and iconographic analytic enterprise of the informed aesthetician, critic and art historian. Besides, they advocate multiple but flexible perspectives in the analyses of contemporary arts. The results are that new art classificatory terms and models are engendered. Significantly, they have immense potential to unlock interpretive difficulties in comprehending the aesthetics of current African, albeit contemporary global art and visual culture. They aggregate the African contribution to knowledge yet to be adequately acknowledged globally.

Keywords: Indigenous Artistic Knowledge, iconography, Stylistic Analyses, Masquerade Theory, Visual culture.

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge in this context means a body of facts produced within a culture zone arising from cultivated cosmology, history, mores and nurture. Such ways of doing must be substantially homegrown as enabled by inherent contexts which may be environmental, political, religious and or naturally epistemological. It must not be seen as borrowed beyond the exigency of cultural diffusion. Technology is universal in application on encounter, but can develop simultaneously in different ethnicities. But artistic knowledge production is largely design-driven, which makes it imperative for the discourse to be design-centred. Knowledge is a precursor of practice, which is why the review of any related literature outside the knowledge of the emergent practice is incomplete. The Chinese say, “what I know I do”. Can anyone give what he does not have?

What Africa has to offer humanity is in the confines of its knowledge system. It is on this premise that a consideration of the application of such knowing in the analyses of current art globally becomes not just pertinent but justifiable on the basis of aesthetic equity. The art of Africa provoked a major paradigm shift in Western art beginning from the late 19th century, which ruled the art world in the 20th century, even up to the present era. This paper attempts to present some of these as an advocacy to create awareness among the body of art spokespersons.

The African knows that the physical is subject to the spiritual. The material is inferior to the immaterial (Egonwa 2023). This is the principal reason his application of perceptual laws in the interpretation of forms in art making is conditional. To Africans, “seeing is not always believing”. This has been shown in many classical works of art across diverse geopolitical zones in Africa. The smiling visage of the *mintadi* figure, a supposedly mourning stand-in statue, is well known. (Fig.1). Thus, what artistic images denote are meant to be read, understood before their messages are digested. How images package ideas iconography, is very important in contemplating all categories of objectified artistic statements. The non-formal content of the art form is a parcel that must be unwrapped to behold its contents. It is largely conceptual, with multiple layers of ideas that give physical validity to the perceptible matter called the art form. The Benin say, *ama fanoko*

eeghe emwi no ru weeh. (Transliteration; if you do not unwrap a parcel, there is no way you can know its contents.)

Fig. 1, Mintadi, Old Kingdom of Kongo, African art, soapstone **funeral figurine**, 16th Century

Iconographic Analyses

Iconography is actually an advanced image script. That is writing with pictures intended to be



readable to all. In the enterprise, familiar images are sequentially arranged with the hope that their reading will aid the comprehension of the theme expressed.

Panofsky (1892- 1968), one of the leading Western scholars who has dealt extensively with the subject, thinks there is a stage in the analysis of an object in which iconography is not the issue. He then christened it *pre- iconographic* stage. This idea in Africa is non-existent. While endorsing his threefold meaning construction, the three stages are present at the point of analysis. Rather than his threefold pre-iconographic and *iconographic, and iconology* stages, I submit to a twofold scheme; *inherent* and *bestowed* iconographic meaning levels. The meaning common sense assigns to objects is inherent, but the one intelligence assigns is bestowed and is often connotative. The common sense meaning of images does not require a second or third person interpreter. The bestowed iconographic meaning derives substantially from the cultural context and requires the agency of experience and intelligence to decipher. This is because images are veiled by what Lanier

(1982) calls ‘screens’ which the one viewing them must perceptually permeate in order to comprehend them as intended by the maker. What one has known, believes, encultured in; knowledge of image making of and intellectual prowess are components of these. They function as screens between the preceptor and any artificial image.

Fig. 2, “I See a Tree”. Consider this image used to illustrate picture writing, such as cuneiform. I See a Tree.



Fig. 2. I See a Tree. Author’s Illustration, 2025

Stylistic Analyses

Style ordinarily has to do with the appearance of an objectified entity. How an image is configured in terms of shape, size, colour, texture and orientation in space. In a general sense, it represents a way in which an artwork is organized such that a manifest constancy in formal properties is discernible (Egonwa 2023). Looking into the details of style becomes inevitable when the intention is to present the denotative qualities of the object of discourse to relate it to a workshop, school or to authenticate its authors or origin. It is no less important in the interpretation of the meaning ascribable to any visual form, no matter it’s aesthetic autonomy as an inventive entity. For us in Africa, style analysis is an intellectual activity enriched by many disciplines. The tendency to emphasize a part of any figure deemed vital to an artistic objectification derives from an indigenous art-making principle called *proportion of significance* (Egonwa, 2023). It is not due to a lack of the Western concept of representational idea of proportion or human anatomy. Rather than being a weakness, it should be appreciated as creative assertiveness in emphasizing the essence of the idea expressed. Amongst the Igbo West of the Niger who prefer to be known as the Anioma, a child can be surnamed after its mother. If its mother is the dominant significant other around that child, as perceived by the community. So you could have a boy described as Okafor

Nwa Mgbolie. Prof. Soludo governor of Anambra State popular name is nwa mgbafor. This is a proportion of significance playing out in traditional surnaming.

In these and such like creative inventiveness, the artist is expressing an inspired idea, imagined, visualized and contemplated before its execution.

This representational perspective is useful in determining the aesthetic and functional appropriateness of contemporary visual expressions instead of solely adopting the popular Euro-American approach. It should be added as a method in the current analytic enterprise for a more global, inclusive interrogation.



Fig. 3. Bambara, chi -wara, wood

The Bambara artist's renditions of the antelope (male mature one and a female backing a male baby antelope) *Chi wara* exemplifies the deployment of art-making principles perhaps unknown to the Euro-American artists at that time. The application of perceptual laws and pursuit of imitation in artistic expression is only one perspective to the task.

Conversely, it is not so that there are other approaches, such as when the African artist selectively reduces surplus features from what common sense regards as a complete figure or object and focuses on the essential; he deploys the classical art-making concept of *brevity*. The configuration becomes terse, and morphological abstraction emerges.

Africans developed multi-disciplinary thinking far earlier than modern research did. As Linguists in our culture use proverbs, metaphors, amongst other figures of speech, so artists do in visual language to transmit deeply felt aesthetic ideas, many of which cannot be verbalized. In this approach, the uninitiated foreign eyes see it as schematic, child-like, grotesque, etc. It must be known that African art is created to add value to reality, not to simulate reality. Art here seeks to *present* and not to *represent* the idea. The makers are not in any way naively and endlessly attempting to imitate nature!

When what is depicted is not properly described, its association with loads of metaphoric ambience may be impaired; description in this context may not necessarily be illustrative. Symbolism may be shortchanged, and ambiguity may set in. In African method/culture history, this is akin to skipping vital pages of a judgment report and still going ahead to give a ruling. African artistic renditions are dialogically summarized. This is what is rightly termed *stylization*, but often wrongly referred to as *distortion* or *naivety* (Adepegba 1995) by some of us and the West for a long time. When they taught our children that our forms were distorted by whose perceptual laws, habit and worldview was their interpretation based? When their sons, like Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian and Paul Gauguin, learnt from us and began to create art borrowing profusely from our knowledge of art making, did the West condemn them? African knowledge systems must be promoted by Africans by being proactive in their application in our studio-led research efforts.

Masquerade Theory

This is a classical analytic African theory similar to some other popular perspectives, yet not well applied or promoted in our scholarship. In ancient Africa, a good part of which has been handed down till this day, art is largely conceptual in its presentation. If African art is selling today, it is mostly for these classical, enduring qualities. One of these factors is that “the idea behind the form is more important than the physical object”. The ideas flavour the ordinarily tasteless matter of the object.

Masquerade in Africa is considered to belong to the spirit world. Its origin is abstract, mystical, complex and a large system. It is not just a theatrical device as it is conceived in the West. Like

art, it is invoked to minister to selected human needs as situations demand, such as aesthetic, judicial, medical, spiritual and sundry secular functions.

Epistemologically, it takes creative mindedness to decipher the multiple packaged ideas in an artistic phenomenon described as a masquerade. This is the genesis of the Igbo saying that “one does not view a masquerade from one position”. Contemporary conceptual art globally is enmeshed in this creative-mindedness. The application of this analytic approach becomes inevitable if one hopes to make a headway in the mediation of productive thoughts on current art. Yet this fact is still not adequately understood, much less canvassed.

Meaning in current art is multi-layered; therefore, its elucidation must engage multiple probing tools. This is the kernel of the construct that to appreciate the performance of the masquerade, one must view it from several viewing positions. A parallel to this is the *elephant carcass theory*. Simply rendered, it recognizes the multi-layered form typologies and nature of meaning in a single African art piece, like the variety of meat types in the carcass of an elephant. Applied to any artwork, productions must now be interrogated from several viewpoints such as media, technique, context, symbolism, function and aesthetics. Failure to adopt this method not only attenuates valid knowledge decoding and production in contemporary art.

Ozioma Onuzuluike’s ideologically laden ceramic narratives of recent times cannot be fully appreciated by looking at any of them from a single perspective.

Visual culture

Elsewhere (Egonwa 2025), I stated that visual art has mutated into visual culture in our time; that it is concerned with everything we see, have seen or may visualize – in short, all aspects of life that communicate through visual means. For the material object researcher, such as artists, this means a multi-disciplinary mindset in looking at images which have outgrown the text exponentially. He has to be in a state to visually comprehend any material culture one encounters as images; this enables the percipient to be a participant observer and aesthetic partaker of its pleasurable component, if she or he chooses. It is an advanced and applied form of visual literacy. It is boosted by socio-cultural intelligence, good observation, association and environmental nurture.

I would like to postulate that this is the crux of the African approach to material objects creation and utilization. Hence, the easy integration of the art into aspects of the culture. So the art is considered in terms of its functional and aesthetic relevance to cycles of life. This is what visual culture advocates have lately realized. There is art in everything, everywhere and in every way. But many do savour it but cannot see or support policies based on that understanding. *Visual culture is an appropriation from the African indigenous knowledge of material objects management.*

In the words of Mokwunye(2025), a person who can see an object, understand what he has seen, interpret it to himself and is able to represent or describe it to another person, to the person's understanding, has observed well. Please note that this representation need not be imitative as the West has popularized according to its thinking. This is the kernel of visual literacy/ culture.

Conclusion

The concern of this paper is the dire need to get recognition for the global South in art appraisal methods by considering select African contributions to pictorial analyses. I strongly affirm that African classical knowledge systems have much to offer the already anaemic and monosyllabic analytic principles of Euro-American art scholarship. African art did it to studio art practice in the second half of the 19th century, with a bountiful harvest of African art-derived styles in world art. Whenever you see Pablo Picasso, ask him what Africa's masks taught him. What has been done in this short paper, for the expediency of space, only pointed at the masquerade's feet with hope to gaze at the full figure in the future. It represents my core values for the African knowledge system of the future.

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