

# From the Margin to the Centre: Creative Footprints of Self-taught Artists in Modern Nigerian Art

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## Abstract

Self-taught art is a reflection of man's innate creative ability. In Nigeria, self-taught artists have, at various periods and through diverse creative channels, contributed significantly to the development and dynamism of Nigeria's art modernism. However, unlike in the West where considerable interest, research and documentation have been accorded self-taught art, this terrain remains highly uncharted and as such, inadequately documented in the discourse on modern Nigerian art. No museum or gallery specifically caters for this creative niche; no exhibition as yet, has showcased the works of these artists under the umbrella of self-taught art. This paper seeks to highlight the phenomenon of self-taught art in Nigeria by discussing its history as well as the creative footprints of some self-taught artists whose art careers are representative of its manifestation in modern Nigerian art. Textual and visual materials were used in order to facilitate a better understanding of self-taught art in Nigeria. Self-taught artists in Nigeria consciously strive to locate their art practice within the corridors of mainstream art through active participation in art exhibitions. Practicing within the framework of a globalized art space has equally granted these artists access to new media, emergent art trends and the economic dynamics of the art marketplace. This has made for vibrant and artistically fecund studio practices which have contributed to the diversity and richness of modern Nigerian art. Self-taught artists have shown that one could have a successful art practice without formal art training.

**Keywords** – mainstream art, modern Nigerian art, self-taught art, self-taught artists.

## 1. Introduction

Art is a continuum which comprises a plethora of styles, techniques and media. As a process, it is subject to a wide range of variables which work in consonance with three vital components at the baseline of creativity. These are a keen sense of observation, fertile imagination and extraordinary memory. They not only ignite the creative spirit, but equally serve as the driving force behind the sustenance of art practice. To produce art, one or more of these components must be present before ideas or experiences will effectively assume visual reality through the different channels of artistic media. The practice of art involves formally trained artists, informally trained artists as well as those that are self-taught. Self-taught art in particular, highlights man's innate perceptive and creative ability. A critical examination of world art history shows that self-taught artists have made significant creative strides in the global art space. Much of Pre-historic art, especially the cave paintings, represents earliest known forms of self-taught art and this, arguably, locates the Pre-historic man as the progenitor of self-taught art.

In the historical narration of modern art in Nigeria and in the West, the phenomenon of self-taught art shares a parallel timeline of origin which can be historically located in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from the shared history, its manifestation is also traceable to certain individuals whose art careers strongly define this unique creative niche. In Western art culture, the artist, Henri Rousseau, a French Toll Collector, was the first self-taught artist to be anointed by the art world (Kallir 2000). In modern Nigerian art, Rousseau finds kinship in Chief Aina Onabolu, the first recorded self-taught artist in modern Nigerian art and who incidentally, is also the pioneer of Nigeria's art modernism. Although it shares certain commonalities with its manifestations in modern Western art, self-taught art in modern Nigerian art exhibits a peculiar attribute which characterizes its trajectory in the Nigerian art space. It continually strives to integrate itself within mainstream art and as such, readily submits to the dynamics of the art marketplace.

This conscious posturing towards the economics of the marketplace is quite at odds with the authenticity controversies that trail some of the various categories of self-taught art in Western art cultures. For instance, Outsider art or *Art Brut* lays claim to works produced outside of the margins of mainstream art and as such, the creative process is not expected to be influenced by the dynamics of the art marketplace. Another marked difference between manifestations of self-taught art in Nigeria, and in the West, has to do with the various

descriptive terminologies which surround self-taught art in Western art cultures. Descriptions like *Art Brut* or outsider art, *Neuve Invention*, Primitives and Naïve-primitives, among others, are not commonly associated with self-taught art in modern Nigerian art. Again, unlike in the West where considerable attention and study has been extended to self-taught art, this terrain remains highly uncharted and as such, inadequately documented in modern Nigerian art. No museum or gallery specifically caters for this creative niche; no exhibition has showcased the works of these artists under the umbrella of self-taught art. The consequence is the unwholesome understanding and appreciation of the various creative strands which define modern Nigerian art.

The point being made here is not necessarily to hang a neon sign on these artists in order to proclaim their self-taught status, but to highlight the importance and significance of this field of study and consequently document it for historical and artistic relevance. This paper, therefore, seeks to highlight the phenomenon of self-taught art in Nigeria. It examines its history, early manifestations and its conscious move from the marginal spheres of existence and acceptance to a more centralized location. In addition, it discusses the creative footprints of some self-taught Nigerian artists who are actively involved in the creative dynamics of modern Nigerian art. Furthermore, this essay examines popular art culture as well as informal art training settings in Nigeria where autodidacts and informally-trained artists have, within the dictates of their respective artistic sensibilities, engaged art outside of the boundaries of formal art training structures.

## **2. Early manifestations of Self-taught art in Modern Nigerian art**

The earliest footprint of self-taught art in modern art in Nigeria is traceable to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This period signaled the emergence of a creative consciousness that circumscribes the early beginnings of modern Nigerian art. The source of this creative consciousness is Aina Onobolu, Nigeria's first recorded and acclaimed self-taught artist. He is widely regarded as the pioneer of Nigeria's art modernism. Before indulging in the review of Onobolu's creative antecedents as a self-taught artist, it is necessary to examine the socio-cultural and political atmosphere which pervaded colonial Nigeria during this period. As a multi-ethnic assemblage, Nigeria is a country of diverse cultures. In pre-colonial times, indigenous art forms were at the root of daily living and affected almost all spheres of existence. Its production was guided by the belief system of the different cultures that produced them. Traditional artists were usually trained through a well established apprenticeship system which ensured the continuity and sustenance of the traditional art forms.

However, during the colonial period, the colonialists observed the strong influence which indigenous culture exerted on the people and identifying this as a potential barrier to achieving their mission, sought to dismantle this influence by initiating a systemic attack on Nigeria's indigenous cultures and art forms. According to Offoedu-Okeke (2012, p. 35):

The colonial era made tremendous effort to dismantle indigenous systems of art and cultural value and impose in their place a foreign system in which traditional and cultural mores were forcibly usurped by the judicial, religious, educational, governmental and economic systems of the colonial powers.

Under the crusading tactics of the British colonialists, traditional art forms were seen as fetish objects and the traditional artists were perceived as people already condemned to hell unless they refrained from producing such idolatrous images. The effect of this onslaught on the indigenous art culture was enormous. Some of the traditional artists were displaced and the age-long system of apprenticeship that ensured the practice and sustenance of traditional art also suffered considerably. The establishment of academic institutions with strict British curriculum further weakened the influence which the indigenous culture had on the Nigerian people. It is noteworthy that during this period, formal art training fashioned after the academy tradition was not taught in Nigerian schools. The colonialists were of the belief that the rigours of such art training were beyond the capability of the African people and as such, an African was not capable of naturalistic representation after western ideals. It is in the light of these prevailing circumstances that the self-taught status and contributions of Aina Onobolu to the development of modern art in Nigeria can be understood and appreciated.

Aina Onobolu (1882-1963) was born at Ijebu-Ode in the present Ogun State, Nigeria. The centrality of Onobolu in the discourse on modern art in Nigeria in some ways equate to that of Pablo Picasso in the discourse on modern Western art despite the fact that both artists were influenced by diametrically opposed factors. Whereas Picasso was greatly influenced by traditional African sculptures, Onobolu found inspiration in Western art tradition through naturalistic illustrations in some local and foreign newspapers, magazines and text books.<sup>3</sup> Prior to acquiring formal art training from 1920 to 1922 at St John's Wood Art School, England and later, at Academie Julien, Paris, Onobolu had already achieved public recognition as an accomplished self-taught artist. The zeal which framed his quest for artistic excellence was fuelled by a deep-seated desire to disprove the

erroneous belief of the white man that an African was incapable of naturalistic representation after western ideals. According to Oloidi (1989, p. 95):

Onabolu abhorred, and was bitter about, the popularly accepted racialist notions of the non-missionaries that no African, not even the already culturally Europeanized ones, was endowed with the creativity to produce art or true picture like a white man.

In order to disprove this notion, Onabolu, as early as 1895, began to develop his artistic skills through constant practice. He drew from objects, memory and other photographic drawings. His oil painting, *Director of Public Works Quarters* executed in 1903 eloquently proclaimed his artistry and creative ingenuity notwithstanding skepticism in some quarters regarding the authenticity of the work. In his bid to dispel any lingering doubt regarding his artistic proficiency, his water color painting, *Mrs Spencer Savage*, painted in 1906, was executed in the presence of friends and other uninvited guests especially visiting curious Europeans. Elated by the success of this painting, Onabolu (as cited in Oloidi 1989, p. 96) proclaimed that 'God was impartial in his endowment of various talents to mankind.' Onabolu received official recognition by winning a special prize in the Agricultural Show organized by the White administrators in Lagos. During this period, he was already proficient in portrait painting. The year 1920 was also eventful in his professional art career as a self-taught artist. Apart from having painted portraits of the Lagos elite and other important personalities, Onabolu held his first solo exhibition in Lagos where he showcased over two hundred works. The significance of Aina Onabolu's self-taught status in relation to his artistic accomplishments was not lost on him. He is quoted as saying: 'I up to this time studied under no Art Master, except under the great teacher – experience, whom Cicero called the great tax-gatherer.' (Onabolu, as cited in Oloidi 1989)

The commitment and persistence with which he pursued his interest in art representation after Western ideals laid the foundation for the development and growth of modern art in Nigeria. He was appointed formally by the British colonial government to teach art in secondary schools in Lagos; a task he carried out at great personal discomfort. Through his persistent agitation, the British colonial government was persuaded to formally introduce art into the academic curriculum of Nigerian schools. He was also instrumental to the arrival of an expatriate art teacher, Kenneth C. Murray to Nigeria in 1927 to assist him in the propagation of formal art training in Nigeria. However, contrary to Onabolu's expectations, Murray championed a creative ideology that was radically different from Onabolu's ideology which laid emphasis on naturalistic representation of the academy style. Murray advocated the revival of indigenous art and encouraged its fusion with western techniques. These two opposing creative ideologies became templates for the unfolding dialectics of modern art in Nigeria. Murray's training program and the curriculum developed from it is quite significant as it became the template for art education curricula in Nigerian secondary schools (Offoedu-Okeke 2012, p. 37).

The art career of Akinola Lasekan (1916-1974), another self-taught artist and a second generation pioneer of modern art in Nigeria also represents the progressive movement of self-taught art from the periphery towards the centre. Born in Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria, Lasekan's art codified the spirit of nationalism which enveloped colonial and immediate postcolonial Nigeria. His works depict a broad range of subjects narrating daily life experiences. He was an accomplished portrait painter and cartoonist. Akinola Lasekan is widely regarded as the first Nigerian newspaper cartoonist. His political cartoons played a significant role in the struggle for Nigeria's independence. Lasekan's attempt to acquire formal art training in 1945 ended prematurely when he left two days after enrolling at the Hammersmith School of Art, London. He felt that the School had nothing new to offer him. In the same year, his works, along with that of another Nigerian self-taught artist, Justus Akeredolu, who pioneered the art of thorn carving, were exhibited in the Church Missionary Society (CMS) headquarters in London. Akinola Lasekan's commitment to art propagation made him set up a correspondence art school known as 'Lash Studio' which benefited many young Nigerians including Uche Okeke, one of the leading lights in postcolonial modern Nigerian art. Though an autodidact, Lasekan greatly encouraged formal art training and contributed greatly in this regard. He taught art at some point in the Enwonwu College of Art, as the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria Nsukka was then called, at the behest of the then President of Nigeria, Rt. Hon. Nnamdi Azikiwe.

### **3. Popular Artists and Informally-trained Artists in Modern Nigerian Art**

From the second half of the fifth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, formal art training at the tertiary level in Nigeria received tremendous boost through the establishment of art training institutions. Radical creative ideologies as well as developments in artistic media and techniques meant that the boundaries of art were continuously redefined. Beyond the standardized and structured framework of formal art training, self-taught art

also flourished under the socio-economic, political and cultural environments of pre-colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. Within the creative spaces that these existential determinants stimulated, popular art culture became a fertile breeding ground for autodidacts whose creative forays were essentially geared towards advertisement for local businesses using avenues like wall murals, billboards, painting, literature illustrations, painted vehicles and signage.

Certain features characterize popular art culture. It emerged along with changes in the socio-political life of the new Africa. Secondly, the art mainly served to advertise products and services for local businesses in the form of posters drawn on billboard, walls or on privately-owned transport vehicles. Thirdly, a significant number of these artists are sign writers who are self-taught. Usually removed from the rhetoric which surrounds elitist art in terms of artistic identity, patronage and avenues of contact between works of art and the viewing audience, popular art culture is readily accessible to the people and its end products or services are usually commodified. Popular art is also reflective of the state of the socio-political, economic and cultural environments in which it is produced. It is also an evolving process, adapting to changes in the environment. Kasfir (2000, p. 33) is of the view that 'Sign art reflect more directly the encounter between modern life, commodity form and the African artistic imagination.' Over the years, popular art culture has experienced significant growth and diversification in its targeted audience. In her assessment of this shift in emphasis, Kasfir remarked:

While popular cultural production in the newly postcolonial Africa of the 1960s and 1970s were intended for newly literate audiences of urban workers with ties to rural cultural idioms and values, popular culture has been moving steadily in the past twenty years towards an increasingly more sophisticated audience with strong interests in electronic media such as videotape and television.

One major disadvantage of popular art culture, especially as it relates to sign art, borders on recognition and reputation. Individual artistic identity is rarely assumed in sign art and thus, it is commonly relegated to the status of anonymous folk art. At times, some popular artists escape such fate when their works are re-contextualized to fit into the schematics of mainstream art. The popular artist, Augustine Okoye, known as Middle Art, is an example. He was lifted from obscurity in the 1960s when his works drew the attention of the German expatriate, Ulli Beier. The commodity halo was divested from his work and exhibited as art instead (Kasfir 2000). In the appraisal of paintings produced by this class of artists, especially in painted vehicles, one notices a rather intuitive approach to composition which is usually determined by the structure or format of the surface to be painted. Laws of perspective and proportion are not strictly adhered to and in most cases, the paintings incorporate texts. Also, the works are often didactic in nature. Allegorical themes abound and in most cases, are visually representative of folk expressions. Fosu (1986, p. 41) noted:

Some of the fascinating folk expressions are those dealing with allegorical themes. These are usually more creative. Varied in subject content, they are characteristically expressed in animated naïve style. They are neither a duplication of the traditional style nor a foreign imitation. Simple and compact in form, representative figures are reduced to basic concepts. Complex and diverse subject matters are sometimes treated in single compositions, pointing to the mastery of the complex rhythm of the popular life-styles of which the artists are themselves a part.

The painting shown in Figure 1 is representative of this style.



Figure 1. *Vehicle painting by a popular artist.* © George Odoh

The creative footprints of informally-trained artists have also played important roles in mapping the artistic terrain of modern art in Nigeria. Of the various workshop experiments conducted in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria the Oshogbo workshop experiment conducted by European expatriates, Susanne Wenger, Ulli Beier and Georgina Beier in the early 1960s stands out as one of the most fecund and visually rewarding experience in the historical narration of modern Nigerian art. Although separated by the mode of acquiring art skills, formally trained artists and informally-trained artists are exposed to the same environmental experiences. However, the structured and unstructured nature which characterize the learning processes of these two classes of artists, account for diverse creative responses to environmental stimuli. To have a firm grasp of this, the dynamics which surround the production of works by untrained artists and their trained counterparts must be taken into consideration as Kasfir (2000, p. 48) averred:

To even begin to chart the complex spectrum of works being produced by African artists, one must deconstruct the important differences in training, knowledge, attitude and types of artistic production among untrained artists (so-called autodidacts), those who are informally trained (usually in workshops or cooperatives), and those formally schooled in universities or independent art schools.

The different modes of acquiring art training confer on the artist a certain cloak of artistic consciousness and identity. In the case of formally trained artists, the structured nature of formal art training not only creates artistic consciousness; it also involves mastery of technique, familiarity with world art history and exposure to specialized materials and equipment (Kasfir 2000, p. 48). In spite of the fact that these training experiences usually initiate an aura of superiority among formally-trained artists, it does not automatically stamp on their works the seal of artistry, originality and authenticity.

For the Oshogbo artists, the absence of such learning experiences described above did not in any way diminish their artistry and creative vibrancy. Drawn particularly from the Oshogbo environ and other neighboring towns like Ife and Ibadan, many of the participants were members of Duro Ladipo's theatre group. The recruitment approach sought primary school leavers, illiterates or those who have not moved beyond Oshogbo to acquire skills and wisdom. Encouraged to develop their own peculiar style, the participants were provided with art

materials and occasional workshop experience. Beier (2001, p. 48) noted that 'one remarkable aspect of the Oshogbo experiment was the speed with which the young artists discovered their own style.' The Oshogbo artists drew inspiration from Yoruba mythology, 'linking the past with the present, the spiritual and the physical and the intangible and the tangible' (Odita 2010, p.7). These obvious benchmarks coalesced into 'refreshing new ways of narrating African stories in modern ways' (Fosu 1986, p. 47). Notable artists of the Oshogbo workshop experiment include Muraina Oyelami, Twins Seven-Seven, Jimoh Buraimoh, Gift Orakpor, Rufus Ogundele, Jacob Afolabi, Nike Davies-Okundayo and Adebisi Akanji, among others.

The Abayomi Barber School also encouraged artistic effervescence among informally-trained artists. The School started in 1973 through the initiative and instructional directives of its mentor, Abayomi Barber. Devoid of any established curriculum, admission into the school was not based on any specific entry requirements. However, instructional methodologies laid emphasis on the importance of drawing to sound art training. It also encouraged the need to borrow from certain instructional guidelines used in formal art training like the need to be perceptive and observant. In addition, familiarity with perspective and proportion was encouraged. The creative antecedent of its founder is indicative of the influence of self-taught artists on the development of modern art in Nigeria. Barber's creative interest straddles the fields of music, painting and sculpture. His art career followed a non-traditional route that included attendance to seminars, regular museum visits and apprenticeships at sculpture studios. His informal artistic development was also sustained by his persistent recourse to nature as a potent source of instructional materials and ideas.

Abayomi Barber's prolific art career came to limelight in 1952 when he relocated from Ilesha to Lagos. He not only won the Elder Dempster Lines Silver Cup in the All Nigerian Festival of Arts, but also secured a commission to paint Harold Cooper, the outgoing expatriate President of the elite Ikoyi Club. The successful rendition of the portrait attracted another commission to paint Cooper's successor, Milner Haig. Barber's painting style is characterized by the predilection to incorporate hidden messages into his compositions especially, his landscape paintings. Inclined towards naturalism, his paintings reveal a well-honed sensitivity and mastery of the effects of form, light and shade. Yoruba culture also feature prominently in his works. It is these creative paradigms that he injected into the creative methodology of the Abayomi Barber School. In his assessment of the Abayomi Barber School, Odiboh (2005) stated:

Abayomi Barber, the mentor of the School, and his followers are opposed to Western stereotypes that link African identity/authenticity with the grotesque, weird and crudely rendered. Despite the School's mandate to depict African subject matter, themes, portraits and landscapes — particularly of the Yoruba peoples, it has not earned the benevolence of an "African authentic" seal of approval by Western authors and critics. Yet within Nigeria, the Abayomi Barber School has been more successful than Osogbo and comparable workshop experiences. Barber and his adherents command higher prices locally than other workshop schools, and, swimming against the tide of "primitivism," they have established a movement that features pictorial naturalism, magical symbolism and ethereal conceptualization.

Notable artists of this school include Muri Adejimi, Olu Spencer, Busari Agbolade, Toyin Alade, Kent Ideh, Bunmi Lasaki and Bayo Akinwole, among others.

#### **4. Creative Footprints of Self-taught Artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigerian Art Space**

The period starting from the ninth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards saw the emergence of a new breed of self-taught Nigerian artists whose art careers have not only been significantly shaped by a well grounded familiarity with world art history, but also synchronizes with the age of technological advancements. These artists grew up encountering such terms like globalization, internet, global warming, terrorism and postmodernism. They have drawn inspiration from diverse sources and use various art genres to express themselves visually. Exposure to specialized media as well as continuous re-definition of what constitute art have also made these artists to re-evaluate already acquired creative voices and to seek new pictorial languages that will effectively communicate their understanding of the world they live in and their place and role in its dynamics. Some have equally moved beyond the homestead to chart new pathways in the global art space. The artists discussed within the framework of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian art environment are a microcosm of a larger presence of self-taught artists in modern Nigerian art. While some have successfully located their respective art practices within the centre of mainstream art, others remain unsung and unacknowledged. However, from their respective zones of artistic effervescence, these artists provide undeniable evidences of the creative fecundity of self-taught art in Nigeria.

Sunday Jack Akpan is a self-taught artist whose professional art career is not tied to influences from any

established art school or workshop experience. He trained as a mason in the art of funerary sculptures and reliquaries but has pushed the boundaries of this art form to new levels. This has earned him global reputation as a contemporary artist. Offoedu-Okeke (2012, p. 230) remarked that ‘he epitomizes an image of the self-taught African artist who converts a culturally rooted yet utilitarian medium into an apparatus of high art by redefining its scope and conceptual structure.’ Working mainly with cement and other masonry materials, Akpan produces fascinating images of people, both living and dead, infusing into the sculpted pieces, symbolic and transcendental qualities. These images are rendered in a highly naturalistic manner and are often painted to enhance its visual appeal. At times, his works assume a postmodernist slant as a result of the installation-like assemblage of the sculpted heads. It is also observed that Akpan’s art connects to a tradition of funerary sculpture extensively practiced in West Africa which he has used to introduce ‘the marginal spheres of the enigma, the requiems and reliquary images into contemporary African high art.’ (Offoedu-Okeke 2012, p. 230). Sunday Jack Akpan has been featured in numerous high profile exhibitions such as *Les Magiciens de la Terre* held in 1989 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in France; Keith Niekling exhibition in London in 1991, *An Inside Story: African Art of our Times* held in 1995 at Setagawa Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan and the 49<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale held in Italy in 2001.

As earlier stated, various art genres have been explored by self-taught artists in Nigeria in their search for creative fulfillment and artistic relevance. A good number of these artists have pursued meaningful and vibrant art careers in the field of photography. Kelechi Amadi-Obi is one of such artists who have made giant strides in this area. His creative forte encompasses painting, photography and publishing. Amadi-Obi holds a Law degree of the University of Nigeria but has abandoned the legal profession to pursue a career in art. His interest in art was ignited during his undergraduate days in the university. His early works were mostly watercolour and oil paintings which depicted Lagos cityscapes and female figures in alluring poses. The artist’s proficiency and mastery of the watercolour medium as well as the photo-realistic paintings which characterized his studio outputs, contributed to his visibility and subsequent recognition in the Nigerian art scene. Although photography was an important aspect of his work process at that time, his serious involvement in this medium occurred much later. Carefully crafted photos of models he made as reference points for paintings sparked off the interest to seriously explore photography (Elophotos, 2012, n.pg).

Some of Amadiobi’s works has been featured in major exhibitions. These include: *Snap Judgement: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* held in 2006 in New York; *Depth of Field* held in 2005 in London and *Transferts* which held in the city of Brussels, Belgium in 2003 among others. The artist is also a recipient of the St Moritz Style Award for photography which he won in 2004. His painting style which is generally marked by creative lighting has also been reinvented in his photography to produce dynamic and aesthetically alluring images (See Figure 2). Recently, he has ventured into the publishing and fashion industry with the launch of a fashion magazine, *Mania Magazine*.



Figure 2. Kelechi Amadi-Obi, *Fashion Photography*. Source: [www.kelechiamadiobi.com](http://www.kelechiamadiobi.com)

George Oshodi, a graduate of Business Administration of the Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, Nigeria, is another self-taught artist who has pushed the boundaries of creative photography. He worked as a photographer for the *Comet* Newspaper between 1999 and 2002 and from 2002 to 2008, was a member of the Associated Press. In 2004, he won first prize as the Fuji African Photojournalist of the year. His creative interests cover areas like photojournalism, artistic documentary photography and activism. He is widely exhibited and his works have been published in many international and local media such as the *New York Times*, *Times Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *The Guardian*, London, *The Telegraph*, *USA Today*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *Der Spiegel*, CNN and *BBC Focus on Africa Magazine*. Other notable self-taught Nigerian artists who have made names for themselves in this field are Ebiware Okiy, Adolphus Opara and Andrew Asiebo just to mention a few.

The field of painting is another area where self-taught artists have distinguished themselves. Onyema Offoedu-Okeke is one of such artists whose art epitomizes the active involvement of self-taught artist in the creative dynamics of modern Nigerian art. From the visual outlay of his works, the artist seems to have extricated himself from the trappings of cheap popularity instigated by short-cut tactics to creativity. His professional art practice exhibits an in-depth and well sustained ritual of exploration and experimentation with media and technique. The artist's inquisitiveness, well-thought out vision and professional work ethics make for an art practice that has been rewarded by panoplies of highly conceptualized visual testaments some of which have re-mapped the frontiers of aesthetic experience in modern Nigerian art. According to Areh (2009):

Since 1995, Onyema has introduced various artistic styles such as “trapezoid”, “drizzles” and “rectilinear pannelation” as major stylistic interventions in the Nigerian aesthetic lexicon. They have been adopted and reconfigured into different manifestations by several artists.

A transposed introspection into Onyema Offoedu-Okeke's *oeuvre* provides pedagogical notes for assessing the various synthesized experiences which frame their configuration. It is quite evident that in contemplating Offoedu-Okeke's works, one runs the risk of being hypnotized by dense pictorial colour fields. The sensation can be likened to that of participating in a 'visual dance' in which the accompanying lyrics may be alien but the drumbeats surprisingly alluring and edifying. In as much as it may appear difficult to achieve full penetration and consequently, gain full comprehension of the dialectics between Offoedu-Okeke's thematic posturing and its formalistic renditions, it is within the aura of mystery and elusiveness which characterizes this relationship that the inventiveness, artistry and technical proficiency of the artist can be appreciated. Onyema Offoedu-Okeke clearly understands the intricacies of his plastic voice and has developed a highly emotive pathway through which he choreographs his ideas into well-ventilated visual submissions. His art practice reveals a conscious recourse to the past as a means of engaging the present. Ugiomoh (2012, p. 36) rightly observed that “Onyema Offoedu-Okeke is one artist who has nurtured a deliberate passion to re-engage an African renaissance in a manner that is as unique as it is incisive. He brings the past into the present in allegories that are “qualitatively other”. Naturalism, stylization and abstraction are pictorial navigational tools which the artist utilizes to anchor experiences on two dimensional formats. His understanding of the physical and psychological properties of colour projects a certain aesthetic quality into his works. His painting *At the Hairdressers* (Figure 3) shows the influence of traditional African masks on his art and also highlights the artist's use of carefully orchestrated colours to agitate his compositions.

Segun Aiyesan is another self-taught artist who has carved out a niche for himself in the Nigerian art scene. The eclectic and experimentalist spirit which guides his search for artistic eloquence has resulted in a prolific and vibrant art practice. He produces works in pastel, watercolour, oil and acrylic. He dexterously manipulates their peculiar characteristics to weave interesting and expressive visual narratives around the vicissitudes of life. Recently, he has experimented with material collage which gives his paintings a sculptural quality. Texture plays an important role in his compositions. Unconventional formats are also explored. The broad range of works which outline his studio programme reveals the predilection to constantly re-engage particular themes using different compositional strategies. His restless spirit and persistent search for artistic wholesomeness account for this. According to Aiyesan (2008, p. 14): ‘Art is a journey of evolution whose ultimate destination I do not know nor encumber myself with such fore-closing preoccupation since the fulfillment is actually in the newness and freshness of every destination.’ The artist's ability to successfully navigate between various stylistic modes of representation without losing clarity of vision stamps on his art practice, the seal of creative inventiveness. An example of his work is shown in Figure 4.



Figure 3. Onyema Offoedu-Okeke, *At the Hairdressers*.  
2001, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 inches. © Onyema Offoedu-Okeke



Figure 4. Segun Aiyesan, *The Empire –Colonialism and the Colonized*.  
2012, mixed media, 36 x 72 inches. © Segun Aiyesan

Alimi Adewale is another artist without formal art training experience. His art career started under the tutelage of the renowned portraitist, Kamoru Sarumi. Working mainly with palette knife, his works are highly textured and are imbued with sculptural qualities. They also reveal the deconstruction of pictorial elements whereby subjects are stripped of unnecessary details leaving behind the essence. The artist expresses the view that his works revolve around the “transformational and emotional impact of colors on people and places, which is conveyed through expression of minimalist paintings.” He further reiterates that his “paintings reject the need for social comment, self-expression, narrative, or any other allusion to history, politics, or religion” (Adewale, as cited in *The Nigerian Daily* 2011). Despite the claim of non-narrative function, his work, *Evening at Apogbon* (Figure 5) makes commentary on cosmopolitan life in Lagos. Alimi Adewale operates a studio in Lagos and has taken part in a number of solo and group exhibitions.



Figure 5. Alimi Adewale  
*Evening at Apogbon*, 2010, oil on canvas.

Source: <http://www.artslant.com/global/artists/show>



Figure 6. Peju Alatise, *Captain Red Tape*, 2012, mixed media. © peju Alatise

Peju Alatise trained as an architect but has built quite a reputation as a successful studio artist. In addition to being a painter, sculptor, mixed media artist and installation artist, she is also involved in jewelry designing, bead making, visual arts consultancy, creative writing, leather accessory designing, building finishes and interior designing. She has artistically morphed all these creative interests into an art expression that is visually engaging, unique and novel. Alatise (2013) expressed the view that every work she produces tells a story and that her paintings have become heavily three dimensional while her sculptures are given a painterly finish. She further remarked that 'The execution of each art-piece is a result of experimenting and understanding characteristics of materials with the desire to present them in a contemporary-African aesthetics language'. The expansive scale and scope of her art practice is a reflection of the intense energy which she channels into her work process. It also highlights the level of perception, imagination and conceptualization that has been brought to bear in her prolific and experimental studio practice.

Alatise's paintings, sculptures, mixed media works and installations provide fresh aesthetic encounters which add to the diversity of modern Nigeria art. In their unique compositional phrasings, most of her works confidently navigate the shifting boundaries of the constantly evolving globalized art environment. The themes and formalism of her works reveal her responses to life's experiences as well as the readiness to explore and experiment with diverse materials. In the painting *Captain Red Tape* (Figure 6), the artist addresses bureaucratic bottlenecks which usually characterize administrative structures in Nigeria. These situations encourage inefficiency and affect the development of both material and human resources. In conceptualizing the theme, the artist's experimental disposition is clearly emphasized. Strips of canvas material painted with red hue constitute the primary compositional tool. These strips are arranged in a crisscross pattern and glued together. Using this process, she depicts a relief image of a man trapped in a web of red strips. Newspaper cuttings are equally incorporated into the strips and relate messages that touch on the numerous socio-political and economic problems in Nigeria. The compositional approach is two-pronged, the literal and the metaphorical. These are combined in a creative and ingenious manner to effectively drive home the underlying message of the theme. Peju Alatise's visibility in the Nigerian art scene has grown exponentially in the past few years as a result of her vibrant art practice. The effectual outcomes of her experimentalist approach to studio work places her firmly on

the pedestal occupied by other distinguished Nigerian female artists like Nike Davies Okundaye, Lara Ige-Jacks and Ndidi Dike.

## 5. Conclusion

The Nigerian art scene is a melting pot for artists coming from different creative backgrounds. Within this mix are self-taught artists who are actively involved in its creative dynamics. From its peripheral manifestations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, self-taught art has become a significant and intrinsic aspect of Nigeria's art modernism. Self-taught artists have, at different times, and using various creative channels, explored their innate creative abilities. They have engaged art at their respective levels of artistic development and maturity. Practicing within the framework of a globalized art space has granted them access to new media, emergent art trends and the evolving dynamics of the art marketplace. Their works reflect the peculiar manner in which they have responded to design challenges and media domestication. In their respective compositional and thematic phrasings, their works, while providing fresh aesthetical windows which add to the diversity and richness of modern Nigerian art, have equally engaged existential issues which lie at the heart of humanity.

Furthermore, self-taught artists have also shown that one could have a successful art practice without formal art training. It is recommended that critical scholarly attention should be given to self-taught art in Nigeria in order to effectively appraise and document this unique creative strand. This will make for a better understanding and wholesome appreciation of this creative strand that has contributed to the richness and diversity of modern Nigerian art. As one takes a panoramic snapshot of the Nigerian art landscape, it is very obvious that the creative footprints of self-taught artists are embedded within the pixels of the resultant image. Self-taught art as a unique creative niche will continue to attract admiration and attention.

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