

AFRICA DIGESTS THE WEST: A REVIEW OF MODERNISM AND THE INFLUENCE OF PATRONS-CUM BROKERS ON THE STYLE AND FORM OF SOUTHERN EASTERN AND CENTRAL AFRICAN ART

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ABSTRACT

Modern Africa Art did not appear from nowhere towards the end of the colonial era. It was a response to bombardment by foreign cultural forms. African art built itself through “bricolage” Modernism was designed to justify colonialism through the idea of progress, forcing the colonized to reject their past way of life. Vogel (1994) argues that because of Darwin’s theory of evolution and avant-garde ideology which rejected academic formulas of representation, colonialists forced restructuring of existing artistic practice in Africa. They introduced informal trainings and workshops. The workshop patrons-cum brokers did not teach the conventions of art. Philosophically the workshops’ purpose was to release the creative energies within Africans. This assumption was based on the Roseauian ideas integrated culture which is destroyed by the civilization process. Some workshop proponents discussed are Roman Desfosses, of colonial Belgian Congo, Skotness of Polly Street Johannesburg, McEwen National Art Gallery Salisbury and Bloemfield of Tengenenge. The entire workshop contributed to development of black art and the birth of genres like Township art, Zimbabwe stone sculpture and urban art etc. African art has the willingness to adopt new ideas and form; it has also long appreciation of innovation. As a result there is creation of entirely a new art form which hinges greatly on modernism and pre-colonial art.

Keywords: *Modernism, patrons-cum brokers, Art*

INTRODUCTION

“Informal school implies art workshops of varying scope and duration aimed at producing artists with minimum fuss and exposure” (Aschafferburg, 1998). The distinct characteristics of workshops as already mentioned are that they are informal, irregular and very flexible in terms of preadmission qualifications and teaching methods. They are operated on ad-hoc basis. This is the case with the informal schools in colonial and post-colonial Africa.

As already mentioned colonialism forced a restructuring of existing artistic practices, but did not do away with it. The roots of all workshops lie in a number of separate but similar events occurring at different places. One popular example is that of Pierre Romain – Desfosse’s whose workshop Ateleier d’Art de Hngar founded in Elizabethville (now Lubumbashi) in 1950 during Belgian’s last decade in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He believed that his “Katanga students would be contaminated by exposure to Western art and the uniformising of aesthetics white masters’, Romanian – Desfosse’s sought to imprint on them a new visual sensibility at the crossroads of African creativity and late – colonial modernism”. Kasfir (1999) Romanian Desfosse’s approach is like all the European mentors of the time . He insisted that his students should look at nature for inspiration. The students in nearly all the colonial art workshops were uneducated or low status people in the colonial society.

MODERNISM AND THE BIRTH OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART

African art history encompasses not only the colonial period which coincide with the 'modern' period in the west. "Modern art with its imperative of formal evolution and abstract art with the claim that it transcended social forces provided an exemplary array of evolution like developments" (Kasfir, 1999). Therefore the modern came hand in hand with colonialism and is closely associated with the imposition of social and economical transformation based upon colonialist theories of improving the native. Gidden cited in Kasfir (1999) defines "modernity" as a new kind of civilization which swept away all previous social orders".

However, to an African citizen whether artist, businessman or anyone else "modernism/modernity" is a mixed bag containing both good things (education, medical care consumer goods) and bad things (culture deterioration, greed, warping of social fibres, corruption and excess power) to undermine traditional values. In a way passing of modernization means passing of mentality of the colonial era. In Western Europe and North America "contemporary" connotes the art of present and recent past while modernism encompasses an ideological break with the academic practice (Kasfir, 1999). Africa was seen as the home from which the specimen of evolution could collect. This notion had an immense influence on French artists like Picasso, Braque and their counterparts. Indeed Africa served as a bridge between two different twentieth century histories.

As a result of the Darwin theory of evolution and the Avant – grade ideology, which rejected academic formulas of representation, colonialists forced restructuring of existing artistic practices. However, they did not do away with the practice. The patrons- cum brokers instead introduced informal trainings and workshops for Africans throughout Africa.

INFORMAL TRAINING OF AFRICAN ARTIST

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PURPOSE OF THE WORKSHOPS AND UNDERPINNING PHILOSOPHIES

The purpose of the workshops was on practical level to provide would be participants with skills that would enable them to be practioners. However, philosophically "the workshop's purpose was to release the creative energies which were thought to lie deep within these individuals. This belief has its historical and intellectual origins in Rosseauian ideas of integrated culture which is destroyed by the civilization process ..." (Kasfir, 1999). The state of nature and traditional society are idealized as pure sources of artistic inspiration.

ISSUES OF PRIMITIVITY

In 1957 Frank McEwen the founder of the National Gallery in Salisbury (now Harare) suggested something by way of a metaphor “... one of the strongest inexplicable feature occurs in the early stages of development through which many of artists pass, they appear to reflect conceptually and even symbolically but not stylistically, the art of ancient civilization mainly Columbian. We refer to it as their Mexican period ...” (McEwen, 1970). Whether one calls it “nilotic equities or a Mexican period the pliable seem to be something Carl Jung might have called “archetypical images”. Both Romain Desfosses in Congo and Frank McEwen in Rhodesia embraced the Jungian notion of collective unconscious in which artists retained deeply ingrained archetypical ideas and forms imprinted as cultural memories. Romain Desfosses in his ‘nilotic equities’ was thinking of a very ancient datum like lost web completely forgotten but still alive well buried in unconscious.

Mudimbe (1994) argues that the concept of a primitive ‘Nilotic’ or other complex is very questionable. He further points out that the Congolese artists like Bella, Kalela, Mwenze, Kibwanga and Pili Pili who were students of Romain Desfosses invented an ‘original’ texture and the artistic necessitated by the fact they were situated at the intersection of local traditions and the artistic and the artistic modernity of Romain Desfosses. On one side was the luminous inescapable influence of village life, on the other not so neutral gaze and speech of their teacher. Romain Desfosses played the fatherly role (he called his students my children) and attended to both their physical and emotional well-being. Desfosses saw himself as a Master and his mission as teaching the young Congolese how to ‘see’ guide them in a new discipline –painting. (Mudimbe, 1994). He did not give instructions as already mentioned. He was a romantic celebrating his pupils’ creativity as ‘springing from pure and fresh source.’

The Ateleier d’Art le Hangar workshop gave birth to a Le Ecole de Lubumbashi. A similar workshop conceived of the idea that, “there must be a strong opposition to every method tending towards the abolition of African personality to the advantage of a uniformising aesthetics of white masters” Cornet et al. (1989), cited in Mudimbe (1994). The aim of Romain Desfosses, Frank McEwen Zimbabwe Pancho Guedes, Mozambique, Cecil Skotes Polly Johannesburg and many others was to consciously assume the role of the father figure, they believed in an innate Africa artistic imagination one radically different from Europe. They invited local artists they considered capable of growth into a discipline that by digging into blurred memories could bring forth new argument and ideas, which Kasfir (1999) calls “a new acculturated ground of creativity” hence the birth of new genres like township art in South Africa. Tinga –Tinga and Zimbabwe stone sculpture. The patrons –cum –brokers only encouraged them to draw, paint and sculpt from what they saw; Mudimbe (1987) argues that “...it was also oracular that they were his disciples.”

MOZAMBIQUE

Pancho Guedes a Portuguese architect turned his house in Lourenco Marques (Maputo) into a meeting place of young artists who showed interest in visual art. Ulli Beier (1968) “Guedes hold no formal classes but encourages criticizes, buys work and at times provides monthly allowances that enable artists to work full-time without financial worries.” African artists here use brushes and paint on canvas a new media.

The most outstanding artistic from the Maputo experiment was Valentine Malangatana who’s painting of twisted emotionally charged figures who appear in acid hues of yellow, red green, orange blue, blood red . His work included the last “judgment” (Dentist, 1981). The Portuguese authorities once imprisoned him for revolutionary ideas. Malangatana was

engaged in teaching young artists to relate their art to their culture. This is in line with Susan Vogel's (1994) assertion that "From the beginning of the century some artists asserted their right ...to use any media within their command, others wanted to search for the inner Africanness that they consider innate." All African Artists use Western and traditional media to produce their art but their art remain African both in nature and content.

TINGA-TINGA THE ART OF EASTERN AFRICA

Tanzania and Kenya

This art is so common in East Africa "Whether you are in Nairobi, Mombasa, Zanzibar or Arusha, Lamu or Tanga, there are hundreds of Tinga artistic expressions" (William, 2005). It is an art form that is not traditional. It is part and parcel of contemporary African culture that is born out of modernism. Its provenance can be one artist –Edward Saidi Tingatinga who became a street vendor after losing his job as a gardener. He bought fruit vegetables and cycle to Oyster Bay district to sell door-to-door. It is during this time that he began offering his skills as a painter, decorating houses and producing wall paintings. From this activity he was able to collect tins of paint and scraps of hard board and in his spare time began to paint animals and other scenes for his own amusement (William, 2005).

In the 1970s a tourist bought one of his artworks and began to promote it. "His paintings were soon in high demand.

Themes of Tinga-Tinga Art

"Tinga –Tinga art is particularly tourist art founded throughout East Africa" (William, 2005:33). It is brightly coloured painting of birds, animals, urban and village scenes. It is not traditional. It has been popularized by the demand for it among tourists.

TOWNSHIP ART (SOUTH AFRICA)

Polly Street Centre Johannesburg

In South Africa the apartheid government saw no reason to encourage black artists to pursue academic studies. Instead it encouraged the development of 'craft' in the rural areas because it fitted well into a divide and rule Bantustan policy that emphasized cultural distinctions among ethnic groups. The government created conditions, under which African township art would develop in cities during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. "In townships the informal workshop has been where black artists have developed not only their technical knowledge base, but also their consciousness" (Kasfir, 1999). The most widely known and respected of these workshops is Polly Street Centre in Johannesburg which opened its doors in 1949.

One of the most critical roles played by white liberal intelligentsia other willing consumer and audience was the provision of informal training in community centres for the African Townships. The custodians of these artists – who were their mentors allowed a cadre of modern black artists beyond the wire – craft, and souvenirs producers and older genres of tribal art. Prominent artists in the first group were Durant Sikhali, Ephraim Ngatane, and Sydney Khumalo, all from Polly Street Centre under the tutelage of Cecil Skotnes. "Skotnes' teaching philosophy was forged in the school of enlightened pragmatism" (Berman, 1993). His initial idealistic objective of nurturing an intrinsically black African artistic idiom was soon subverted by his students' own ambitions to assimilate Western representational conventions. Skotnes called Eduardo Villa among others. The two mentors shared their professional skills and added depth to the training skills and techniques.

The combination of white instruction and patronage was set to determine both the direction and limits of modernism for black artists who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s. The uniqueness of South African workshop is that this occurred with the all-encompassing official ideology of apartheid in which all were caught. White reviewers and gallery owners promoted township art. Township art is "...based in social realism and was not founded on specific aesthetic propositions nor did it give rise to any homogenous style..." (Kasfir, 1999; Berman, 1993). The promotion of township art was aimed at discouraging more experimental directions.

Self-Realization

"The main identifying features of Township art were its subject matter and its source" (Berman, 1993). The artists were from black townships. The primary themes were everyday life of the community they lived in, the human situation amid daily anguish and hardship of existence in a deprived society. Today that same art would be called "social realism." It testified to the spiritual resilience of its maker. The phenomenon of Township art coincided with the dawning of "Black consciousness" among township residence. As already seen most Western immediaries have come down on the side of advice rather than direct training. The assumption being that Africans have innate artistic abilities, which need to be uncovered in practice. "This notion was open to racial interpretation, that blacks were natural rather than created artists (so unlike whites) need formal instruction" (Kasfir, 1999). Polly Street Centre became a point of contention since the belief was if carried a step further black artists would be contaminated by the exposure to many European derived ideas. However, some former Polly Street Centre students moved further from documentary approach to more abstract and experimental art. Some of the artists who became prominent in this genre are David Koloane, Durant Khumalo and Ezroun Legae.

All in all Polly Street has contributed immensely to the development of black art and artists in South Africa. These artists' style influenced both black and white visual artists approach to both subject and matter.

Art Gallery Workshop Zimbabwe

As one can see the history of modern expression is short in Africa and it varies from country to country. The history of twentieth century African art is intricately connected to the influence of expatriates and patronage of Europeans. In this occurrence Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) was not spared.

In 1957 the National Gallery was opened in Salisbury (Harare). Its first director was an Englishman Frank McEwen who became "the founder of the Salisbury Workshop School in Rhodesia" (Kasfir, 1999). This Workshop School went through many transitions over the years. The 'experiment' as it is usually called 'when McEwen gave painting materials to Thomas Mukarobga (192-1999) and Paul Gwichiri whom he had hired as a young museum attendant. McEwen referred to their earliest paintings as a type of 'adult child art.' When emphasis shifted firm painting to stone sculpture a few years later McEwen referred to a 'Pre-Colombian' phase which followed 'a phase of heavy primitivism' before achieving personal sophistication (Kasfir, 1999). It is important to realize that McEwen was familiar with stone sculpture of Henry Moore the British sculpture whose monumental works of Matisse, and Picasso which are enough for him to frame the workshop sculpture in that kind of modernist discourse. Frank McEwen universally lionized in 1960s and 1970s has recently been found wanting in the post-modern criticism, he has been judged as "excessively purist and an icon of high-modernism". (Kasfir, 1999).

Pedagogical Approaches

The presence of McEwen provided one key element to the framework of the experimental workshop; artistic guidelines, albeit information through the process of critiquing weeding and discarding works falling short of expectations. He did not give direct instructions. “He was drawn to unconventional theories of Matisse’s teacher Gustav Moreau which forbade direct instruction or copying and stressed that the artists should reach inside themselves for sources of creativity (Vogel, 1994).

McEwen furthermore drew his originality during sculpture lessons from travelling exhibitions of Picasso and Moore, which he brought to the Gallery. Moore’s monumental figures must have provided explicit models of how to exploit stone as a sculptural media. Moore’s 1963 piece “Divided Head” is monumental, abstract and has a lot of geometric lines like the Zimbabwe stone sculpture of the early 1960s. A variety of sculptors were assimilated into McEwen’s project these include Joram Mariga of Vukutu Nyanga and his nephew John Takawira these artists abandoned their early representational styles and quickly followed McEwen’s advice “to deep within themselves to a collective Shona mythology and avoid anything that bore the taint of airport art” (Kasfir, 1999). This includes all realist representations and common carving materials like wood and soap stone. Serpentine replaced soapstone. This is purely a reflection of modernism which rejects the past. MacEwen looked for Shona ethnography and history as an explanation of the sculpture.

Tengenenge Zimbabwe

Tom Bloomfield a tobacco farmer turned his farm into a sculpture park in 1965 after economic sanctions were imposed on Rhodesia. Economic sanctions were a result of the then Prime Minister Ian Smith’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). “There would be no longer market for tobacco (Lyten, 1994). Chrispen Chakanyuka taught Tom Bloomfield how to sculpt. Tools were made out of farm implements. Training was irregular, Tom Bloomfield gave full freedom to artists (he himself did not have formal art training). He organized competitions on certain subjects. Sculptors with good sales remained others left. The works were sent to the National Art Gallery in Harare. Later McEwen and Bloomfield disagreed on the quality of work and as a result Tengenenge works were marketed in South Africa. It is important to note that most of the carvers at Tengenenge came from Malawi, Angola, and Mozambique. Some of the outstanding artists are, Leman Moses, Manzi Akuda, Ndali Wilo, and Josiah Mailolo. Shona sculptors are: Henry Munyaradzi, Bernard Matemera and Daminien Manhuwa.

As patronage played a crucial role in the promotion of Shona sculpture, both McEwen and Bloomfield played a role of a father figurehead to the barely literate sculptors. They (McEwen and Bloomfield) like their modernist workshop proponents throughout Africa provided materials, ideas and directions of how the art they were encouraging the African artists would follow.

EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

The Makonde Sculpture

“The *Makonde* sculpture of Mozambique and Tanzania raise many awkward questions for Western museums regarding entangled issue of commodification” (Kasfir, 1999:109). The other producers of this art are the *Kamba* whose art is more commercial. It is on the art, commodity division of Western classification, because it is marketed through cooperatives and is geared towards curio markets at home and abroad. The *Makonde* sculpture has a long history with pre-colonial market. The Makonde sculpture has a long history with pre-colonial

market and examples in many ethnology collections, which predates the entry into export according to (Vogel, 1994). “The Makonde of Mozambique was subject to extensive secularization and Christianisation during the colonial period, nationalist African politics have made many of them refugees often in Tanzanian capital Dar es Salam.” They have started making carvings for the tourist market.

The youth can longer retire to initiation camps in the bush Initiation is in the suburban houses where Mapiko masks dances occur as they did before Mapiko mask is produced by sculptors in “small family groups who regard themselves having deep cultural connections to their work....Since 1930s most of them have resisted commercial opportunities to produce curios according to specifications from patrons in the manner of the Kamba carvers of Kenya” (Kasfir, 1999).

Innovation and Adoption of New Forms and Ideas

Contemporary *Makonde* sculpture is dominated by forms that are a radical departure from their pre-colonial art (Vogel, 1994). The new genre and style is called Mandenga in the *Kinakonde* language better in Kiswahili as *jinji* (satan). It first min Tanzania in the early 1960s, the artist to produce this was Samaki Likonkoa. Unlike the angular realism that had characterized much of the pre-colonial *Makonde* figures sculpture “the new sculpture was serious anti-naturalistic and frequently employed erotic and social caricatures” (Kasfir, 1999). Through seemingly a new sculpture and to a large extent a new style, iconography of *nmandenga* was drawn from Makonde oral tradition concerning nature spirits and from masquerade of the same name. It is important to that no *Makonde* Person would purchase or use such figure. They are intended for art market commodities. The marketing success of *Makonde* sculpture can be attributed to Mahommed Peera, who like Tom Boomfield in Rhodesia encouraged artists to find their own directions. To date *Makonde* is in the “privileged spheres of art” (Kasfir, 1999). Furthermore in 1989 a Makonde sculptor John Fundi was included in the high profile *Magiciens de laTerre in Paris*. *Makonde* sculpture stand out in the stylistic range of pre-colonial and colonial Africa, it has been subjected to continual reinvention, innovation by both its makers and supporters (patrons –cum-brokers).

According to Vogel (1999) “...African art has a long standing appreciation of innovation and its willingness to adopt new ideas and form.” As such there is creation of entire new art forms which are deeply rooted in modernism. This implies that there is a remarkable continuity in the African artistic vision. African artists from the beginning to the present day manifest the same idea about the purpose of art. It is functional, content is of prime importance to them. Critics and audience expect that the work of art should have a readable message. As such there are according to Cole (1990) “...icons in the pre-colonial which keep on recurring in the art of Africa today.” Icons are a collective reference to the images, which are significant in the visual expression of a particular culture or belief. Some of the icons which keep on recurring are, woman and child, this denote continuity the perpetuation of society. Male and female couple equate well to marriage which implies family and civilization. It is important to note that the use of the so called new media was “a response to bombardment by alien cultural forces” (Vogel, 1994).

CONCLUSION

Modernism has shaped the face of nearly all contemporary African art genres. Patronage played a crucial role in the promotion and shaping of genres African artists identify themselves with. These include the likes of Zimbabwe stone sculpture, *Makonde* sculpture Mozambique, Tanzania and Township art in South Africa. African art has a strong willingness for both innovation and new ideas. It is this willingness that has seen African art

of any type rise to international acclamation and discourse. African artists also rely on the 'usable past' and new technologies.

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