

## **ART CRITICISM, PATRONAGE AND THE ARTIST'S CREATIVE WILL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Generally, art criticism and patronage are seen to have contributed tremendously to the positive development of the visual arts. While this is true, it has in one way or the other, influenced the artist, thereby placing limitations on him, stifling his creative potential, his individuality. This fact, because of its subtle nature, is not easily recognized by many. This paper, therefore, throws light on how the role of the art critic and patron interferes with the creative freedom of the artist. A survey of the available information reveals the extent of the problem. Based on the findings that the critic and patron equally pose a problem, the paper has pointed out some ways which if the artist must follow, shall be of benefit to him.

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is claimed that the chief aim of art criticism is understanding. Critics want to find a way of looking at works of art, and thinking about them, which will yield the maximum of knowledge about their meanings and their real or alleged merits. Secondly, an art critic's goal is also to create delight or pleasure. To be sure, we derive some pleasure from understanding; from knowing what it is in art that gives rise to our emotions and the sense of gratification we may feel. (Theory of Art Criticism, 612). Egonwa (180) puts it this way; "that criticism is to prune performance in art, assess trends, announce breakthroughs and advocate for practitioners for the comfort of the artist in the art eco-system". To achieve these purposes, it has been observed that ranking and evaluation as aspects of art criticism and patronage seem to interfere with the freedom of the artist. But it is the desire of the artist that he or she be given the freedom to create. As Okeke (1982) has put it, the artist should select and equally render his inspired creative concept without interference (cited in Chukueggu, 13). This desire seems to be a mirage where critics and patrons of art exist. This paper tends to show how ranking and evaluation and patronage, in spite of their contribution to the development of art, also stifle the creative freedom of the artist. The paper will see whether it will be possible for the artist to gain total creative freedom or license.

## **The Influencing Power of Ranking and Evaluation**

Ranking and evaluation of an artist's work which the critic also does, could have some influence on what the artist creates. This influence manifests subtly. Criticism of art which is more or less informed talk about art sometimes makes the artist to look closely at what they usually produce. This is because critics in the process of creating an understanding for the work of art points out certain things which are noted by the artist. Of course, some artists may deny that critical opinions influence them, much less that critical opinions constitute standards for their works. Nevertheless, many other artists, in their desperate pursuit of recognition, endeavour to discern the critical standards which seem to be the most prominent in the places where they wish most to be admired. And such artists are bound to adapt to such standards (Theory of Art Criticism, 613).

Most people focus on the purposes of criticism, that is, the need to understand art and to seek out satisfaction. But they do not realize that they end up formulating a body of opinions and reactions which indirectly serve as standards for the creation of arts. It is worth noting here that one does not accuse the critic of any wrong doing because as individuals, they may not have set out upon the critical enterprise with the goal of influencing what artists create. Some have argued that if a thorough and satisfying interpretation is carried out, evaluations may not be necessary because they see it as a much abused aspect of art criticism. However, it has been rightly pointed out that people evaluate or rank art works for various reasons. In many cases, ranking and appraising works of art is unavoidable. For instance, in a situation where a gallery or museum has limited fund to acquiring new works of art, the museum trustees and staff would be compelled to evaluate the works, and spend their money on works which are considered important and superior. The same is common with individuals who wish to collect works of art. They are encouraged to buy what pleases them (Theory of Art Criticism, 613, 650). Indispensable as it is, there are opinions that see it as a cog in the wheel of the creative progress of the artist.

## **REACTIONS AGAINST RANKING AND EVALUATION**

Richards (cited in Unegbe, 1-5), also supports the above opinion but added that the critic takes care of the aesthetic and moral minds of the public by being a judge of what is of high aes-

thetic and moral values. However, Unegbe takes a different view. Unegbe points out the adverse effect such has on the artistic creations of the artist. He sees it as unfortunate, arguing that the trend of the critic trying to point towards the right direction for the artist and thereby wanting him to abandon his proper vocation of making, creating, imagining and representing, to seek the satisfaction of the needs of the society, muddles up the business of the artist. "There is no doubt", he states further, "this kind of censoring or guiding (policing) the artist through art criticism, distorts or disfigures the business and the stature of the artist". Though, he admits that the artist may be hired to carry out certain art works of relevance to his society or another, but maintains that the society suffers in general if it reduces the artist to this kind of use. Unegbe sees the artist as a medium. And as a medium, the artist passes to his audience whatever his imagination catches, even in glimpses, without necessarily bordering how his audience will perceive them, or judge them with regard to their moral values, their usefulness or otherwise their worthlessness (Unegbe, 1-5). Unegbe quotes May (17) thus:

Artists... forever unsatisfied with the mundane, the apathetic, the conventional, they always push on to newer worlds. Thus are they the creators of the uncreated, conscience of the race.

Then Unegbe in his final analysis concludes that it is this artistic licence or carelessness of leaping without fear of fall that is the hallmark of the artist's creative courage. He then asks the critic to allow the artist to operate according to the inner beats, tunes or melody which he (the artist) perceives in himself (2002:p.14). Ugiomoh (2001, p.89), his colleague and contemporary had earlier argued this, stating that art dies in the arid excesses of rational interventions.

A renowned sculptor and art historian who also considers the problem the artist faces in the midst of criticism particularly in Africa is Adepegba (38). Adepegba in a lecture he delivered at the First Culture and Creative Arts Forum (CCAF) entitled; "Past in the Present: A Misleading Expectation in Modern African Art", among other things, asserts that Africans who studied abroad and avoid African subject matter, or, recognizably African forms were sometimes considered betrayers of the inheritance. According to him, Africanity is expected by Western audience of contemporary African artist. On the other, originality is expected. The artists are criticized for either leaving traditions behind or for embracing traditional elements (Kennedy, 16).

**PATRONAGE AND THE ARTIST'S CREATIVE POTENTIAL**

There is much truth in what Okpu (167) stated, that those who have chosen to take art as a profession, must eat and live with it with the patrons. This assertion has been earlier made by U. Okeke (29) and it is within this, the creative freedom of the artist is weighed. It is obvious before every discerning eye that this takes away something from the artist – this time not only the art work he pays for, but much more than that – part of the artist's freedom as he goes on buying his works. The effect of patronage in art has really bordered artists and art scholars. And they have been expressing their opinions and observations. In reviewing their writings, one finds that all point to the same direction. In other words, all their observations are the same. Wolff (18), discussing about artists who will be freer to pursue their own creative inclination, looks at the view of Vazquez. According to her, Vazquez (84) says:

The artist is subject to the taste, preferences, ideas, and aesthetic notions of those who influence the market as much as he produces works of art destined for a market that absorbs them, the artist cannot fail to heed the exigencies of this market: they often affect the content as well as the form of a work of art, thus placing limitation on the artist, stifling his creative potential, his individuality.

Wolff in addition to what Vazquez has said, argued that any suggestion that in earlier times artists were totally free to pursue their creative potentials without regard to audiences and buyers is quite mistaken. The case of the modern African artist is more disturbing. Even in contemporary art patronage where art has changed from being a society's necessity to something you think of only when you have some surplus (at least in the Nigerian situation), the financial success of the artist depends on the whims and caprices of those who can afford to patronize him, as asserted by Okpu (163). This is a view she shared with Grillo (53) who believes that one of the major unsatisfactory features of art patronage is that the patrons have to like or appreciate the work of the artist for him to succeed. That means the artist is constrained to do the type of work he believes the patron likes. Then Okpu, considering this unfortunate trend, concludes that it is very possible that an exceptionally talented young artist may starve because what he/she is saying or portraying is not understood by the collector or patron.

To some scholars this dictatorial tendency in art patronage is more discernable at the foreign scene in relation to the modern African artists. One of such scholars to point out this is Jegede (35). According to him, “as patronage is no longer sought, or received, as in traditional society from the community but from a selected group with an international composition, the artist now anticipates the market and produces with the ultimate goal of holding exhibitions or of satisfying a foreign clientele”. Ikwuemesi (25) also laments such situation, stating that even as the international art market is controlled largely by Europe and America, the situation is further worsened by western patrons, critics, and media. Citing an example from the international art scene, he states,

since it remains desirable in the West to hold on to masks and other classical art forms as archetypes of African arts, the mask has become a notable element in most African works of art. to the creators of such works, this may be a virile means of having a grip on a market that has opted to remain selective and misrepresentative in relation to the art of Africa. This trend, although supposedly promotional of the cultural heritage is like holding down the tail of Africa so that it does not move forward culturally and artistically.

Similar opinion has earlier been expressed by Artist Kofi Antubam of Ghana (cited in Mount, (5) and an art scholar, Debebs (6). All are of the view that this trend does not give modern artists the freedom to address contemporary issues with idioms that could equally be described as contemporary. Looking at the situation broadly or generally, one observes that those who fall victim most often are the younger generation artists. As rightly pointed out by C. Okeke (11) the younger generation artist, because he is in a survivalist attempt, often finds himself chained to the wanton demands of his generous patrons (cases abound where major art patrons dictate to young artists such themes and concepts and even styles that they (patrons) would want to see in art exhibitions). C. Okeke (11) does not hesitate to condemn such extremes, stating that perhaps if these bizarre demands are made only for commissioned projects, it may be pardonable but when it involves exhibition – bound materials, a series of problem emerge for the artist, and his art.

## Conclusion

The foregone points to the fact that art critics and patrons may have directly or indirectly tried to stifle the creative freedom of the artist as they perform their role of collecting and bringing art to the understanding of the public. It is indeed a critical issue. However, looking at the opinions of two scholars here, would enable us to proffer an answer to the problem. These opinions are expressed by Gbaden (69) and C. Okeke (11-12). Gbaden has pointed us to the two paths that are always open to the visual artist – the broad crowd-filled path, and the famished path. The second, which he approves, encapsulates genuine artistry. However, he says, it is left for the artist to choose. C. Okeke's (11-12), is a reminder to the artist. "The artist", he states, "should know that it is his duty to assert the supremacy of his feeling and sensibilities over those of his audience. What he says, and how he says it, must come from within him. His set goal in creative practice should not be to acquire wealth but a sublime art". It is the position of this paper that if the above ideas are taken seriously by the artist, he will claim that desired creative freedom. And even if it is not total, it would go a long way in liberating him in his art. Invariably therefore, the artist has to have a strong will and damn the consequences of his creative actions, just as Oscar Niemeyer, the world renowned master Brazilian architect, (a.k.a the skyline sculptor) has exercised his power over his clients. Niemeyer, in answer to a reporter's question in an interview of how he reconciles his ideas of beauty and the client's requirements. He answered: "I couldn't give a shit about the client. Beauty and form are my goals. Architecture is invention" (Newsweek, 46). Indeed, architecture is art and art is truly invention.

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