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African Traditional Sculpture and Aesthetic Realism

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Abstract

Traditional African sculpture which is one of the essences of modern art movements in the world of art has not been attributed with that aesthetic identity. However, a close look at the traditional African sculpture reveals the artistic and aesthetic qualities. African traditional sculpture was regarded as mere objects or crafts. That possibly was due to the evaluation of traditional African sculptures with the standard of other cultures. This paper therefore, examines characterizations; identify the elements of aesthetics in relation to traditional African sculptures and the intellectual and creative ingenuity of the African traditional sculptor. The study applied the exploratory approach and it is hoped that the observations made on aesthetics on traditional sculpture will shed some light on the general concept of aesthetics. This is to provide a contributive account to the existing literature on African aesthetics.

Introduction

Every civilization attempts to organize and arrange the world so as to better understand it. In the course of its development a civilization achieves a certain order, through a system of conventions which suitably express its fundamental attitude. African Art results from such tendencies which it expresses. These arts emerged

through a man (artist) at a given time and place. In creating the ideological and artistic systems by which he has expressed, helps in projecting into the art philosophy, and the literature, of the society which is a reflection of the same fundamental preoccupations. These preoccupations which are expressed in various media are those of the time, material, moral, economic, social and spiritual circumstances. The artist endeavours to give a more universal and eternal significance to them through the amplitude and quality of his vision.

African Art portrays the social, historical, religious, and cultural background of the societies in which they originated. These works of art may not be instantly comprehensible to people who are not familiar with the context in which they were produced. According to Balogun (33) there may even be a total loss of communication when a work of art that originated in given setting is observed in an entirely different one. The language of the work of art (in the sense of form) may thus prove totally undecipherable where there are no commonly shared elements to permit interpretation. Aniakor (4) wrote that not everyone possess the expertise for artistic evaluation and judgment. That may be the reason why Segy (4) said, the Westerner is often misled by what he brings from his own cultural background.

Many books and articles have appeared concerning African Art. Some dealt with the subject from an ethnological standpoint; others confined themselves to the works on their aesthetic merits; still others, by means of comparative analyses. But the concept of aesthetics of African Art has not been given its preferences. Aniakor (4) said that large stock of aesthetics in traditional African works of art have vocabularies from which evaluators can readily draw upon when commenting on art objects. The study therefore, examines the characteristics of elements and principles of aesthetics in relation to African traditional sculpture.

Concept of Animism

A study of the African Sculpture should take into consideration the cultural background from which the art springs. And to have a better understanding and deeper appreciation of African Sculpture, it would be well to examine one of the four concepts attributed to African civilization. The four concepts are: Animism, fetishism, magic and mythology. The aim of this paper is to concern itself to animism which has strong bearing to the discourse.

Animism is a belief that all objects - both "inanimate" and "animate" possess vitality or are endowed with indwelling souls. Thus animals as well as men, earth, water, vegetation, and minerals are invested with souls. The indwelling soul, moreover, is non material; it has its own thought and will (Segy, (8)). This was the idea of Pablo Picasso when he said: "...when the form is realized, it is there to live its own life", Henry Moore on his own said: "The sculpture which moves me most is

full-blooded and self-supporting, fully in the round; giving out something of an energy and power of great mountains, it has a life of its own independent of the object it represents.”

Traditional Africans believe in Nature Spirits which according to them inhabit trees, rocks, mountains and hills, forests and bushes, rivers and river-courses, and other objects such as pots, mortars and matchets. There are also animal spirits and sacred snakes, insects and certain diseases. These many things of the earth are thought to be occupied or moved by intelligent and living spirits who are normally invisible to people (Mangiri, (28)). This concept of animism was carried over into the African’s attitude toward sculpture. That is, the sculptures produced by different ethnic groups were based upon this concept. This is a brief world view of the

African’s about animism. Segy (13) noted the Africans were concerned with spirits or powers, whether of natural forces, ethnic or family ancestors, or spirits wanting to do harm. Through the medium of the sculpture the various spirits were localized, concretized in carriage, hence brought among the living solely to enable the petitioner to approach and influence them for his benefit.



**Fig. I: Statue in hammered copper, representing the god of war
Height 3ft.6ins. Dahomey**

Source: Boris de Rachewiltz, (Introduction to African Art)

Sieber in Ogunduyile (4) in a study of the art of Igala discovered that: “African art is deeply involved in human spiritual goals and it lies at a central core of beliefs. After presenting his informer with selected sculpture pieces, he observed that the Igalas aesthetic evaluation were based on familiarity with styles, knowledge of predetermined function and critical awareness of comparative excellence. He also noted that the Igalas’ do not see the need for analysis and dissection of art, neither could they see the need to understand it, discuss the motivation of the aesthetic attitude or to determine the social utility of the craft”.

Fagg in Ogunduyile (40) notes that: African art is of the people, by the people and for the people, and expresses values, both social and religious which are shared by both the artist and the community as a whole. He went further to say that the concept of art for art sake was absent in traditional African art, because art object was recognized for its ability to fulfill specific functions and it is often related to the belief and culture of the environment.

Thompson in Ogunduyile (40) posits that Africans have aesthetic concepts or criteria for assessing aesthetic objects. But that aesthetic judgment is carried out in spoken rather than written words.

Aesthetic Awareness

The word aesthetic comes from the Greek word *aisthanomai* (aesthetic) which means “perception” from which is formed the adjective *aisthetikes*, which pertains to sense perception. Aesthetic perception is a special kind of pleasure that comes from using your senses and your mind. This specific perception is that perception which through the perspective of beauty may be considered one of the attitudes of the mind. These attitudes or sometimes – called powers of the mind apply various kind of order to the world: the orders of goodness, wisdom and beauty. They all belong to the branches of philosophy, ethics, cognition and aesthetics. Aesthetics is considered as a source because it constitutes well-defined subject-matter; and that subject matter is beauty. Therefore, aesthetics is defined as the study of the science of beauty of the beautiful. Aesthetics is also seen as a branch of philosophy that provides a theory of the beautiful and of the visual arts.

Aesthetics as seen from the definitions, originated from ancient Greece which deals with art, its creative sources, its various forms, and its effects on individuals and cultures. According to Lazzari and Schlesier,

American culture art practice demonstrated a clear aesthetics long before there was written materials about it. That modern aesthetic theory in the West became a field of study in the eighteenth century. When many philosophers thought that art dealt with beauty; and that beauty could be universally defined for all times and places. It goes further to say that universalist position is discredited now, as we recognize that there is no worldwide agreement about what constitutes beauty. In addition, philosophers today consider many other qualities besides beauty as significant attributes of art (6).

To dwell on the aesthetic preferences of African Sculpture it might be appropriate to discuss terms associated with aesthetics: Aesthetic Attitude, Aesthetic

Quality and Aesthetic value, Aesthetic judgment, Aesthetic experience and Aesthetic object.

Aesthetic Attitude describes the particular attitude of the mind confronted with the objects, which are considered beautiful. It is a disposition of the mind to look for beauty in the world and to value its phenomena by this principle.

Aesthetic Quality and Aesthetic Values are the features of an object or phenomenon, which are perceived as beautiful. Usually, it is the shape of an object, its appearance that is a vehicle of beauty. Such categories as form and construction are here under consideration. When it comes to value, we are usually speaking about the arrangement of parts, about splendor, elegance, decorativeness, about the sublime, which may refer to the content of a phenomenon as well as to its appearances that are ascribed to it, for instance, to human activities while speaking about a beautiful deed.

Aesthetic Judgment means the decision taken while appreciating and valuating an object or phenomenon with regard to its aesthetic qualities and values. It is the very moment when decision is taken whether one likes something or not. But it must not stop there. It should prove which of the qualities are considered the most valuable and why. That is the task of art critic and aestheticians who comprehend the nature of beauty and aesthetic preferences.

Aesthetic Experience brings forward such questions as: what does happen in the mind in course of the appreciation of beauty? What role does beauty play in life? What is the nature of aesthetic pleasure or satisfaction?

Aesthetic Object: This term denotes not only an object which is the subject of aesthetic consideration but also refers to the problem of a class of objects that are considered aesthetically valuable. The question is: does such a separate class of such objects really exist?

African Concept of Aesthetics

In most African expressions, aesthetics simply means good. The goodness of an object or phenomenon is seen in its totality in the African concept of beauty. That includes the tangible and the intangible forms. The goodness of the tangible is experienced physically; something one can see and touch, which is satisfying and gives pleasure. The intangible aesthetic perception deals with the purpose and functional qualities of the object or phenomenon, which may not have the physical appropriations. The African sees in the object and/or event the physical and the spiritual. The African sees beauty in terms of the splendor, creativity, sensitivity, elegance, decorativeness of the content of a phenomenon as well as its appearance, functionality and human activities including a beautiful deed.

It is a considered opinion that everything created, produced by man can be a vehicle of aesthetic appreciation. The works of art appear to be the most suitable for this purpose since one of their functions is to be beautiful. It seems therefore; right to say that aesthetics deals with art and its objects. Aesthetic qualities can be perceived from not only from constructed environment; man-made things but also from the natural environment. But this paper is confined to works of art “African Traditional Sculpture”.

African Traditional Sculpture was one of the ways made to preserve history, because of lack of written records. The lack of writing, however, resulted in the focusing of creative energies upon sculpture making, which preserved the Africans most important concepts about the world and man’s relationship to it. Powerful shapes were the result, “speaking” in plastic language. Besides preservation of history, the sculptures were instruments of social communication that utilizes harmonies and disharmonies in form, shape and sound to communicate emotions to the senses. African traditional sculptures were useful and functional.

Having looked at the terms associated with aesthetics and the African concept of beauty, it becomes imperative to examine some African Traditional Sculpture, whether the carved figures whose purity and rigour of design testify to a standard aesthetic level.



Fig II: Antelop with its young.
Bambara Wooden Statue
Height = 2ft.10ins
Courtesy: Boris de Rachewiltz,
(Introduction to African Art)



Fig.III: Motherhood. Dogon Wooden
Statue 2ft.9ins
Source: Boris de Rachewiltz,
(Introduction to African Art)



Fig. IV: Senufo Wooden Mask with two faces. Height 11¹/₂ins. Ivory Coast
Source: Boris de Rachewiltz, (Introduction to African Art)



Fig. V: Wooden Statue of a woman. Senufo. Height 2ft. Ivory Coast
Source: Boris de Rachewiltz, (Introduction to African Art)



Fig VI: Mendi Statuette of a Woman. Height 1ft.9ins Sierra Leone
Source: Boris de Rachewiltz, (Introduction to African Art)



Fig. VII: Motherhood, Bakongo Statuette in wood with brass ornamentation. Height 10ins
Source: Boris de Rachewiltz, (Introduction to African Art)



Fig. VIII: Plaque of Benin Warrior, Bronze. Height 43cm x 31cm
Source: Boris de Rachewiltz, (Introduction to African Art)

African sculpture is produced for a specific purpose: either for aesthetic value, religious ceremonies – representing a deity, a king, priest, or as an effigy or mask during traditional festival. Generally, characteristics of African sculpture were the horizontal, vertical and diagonal features – geometrical rendering. Most of the figures are highly stylized, some are naturalistic or abstracted. All the sculpture pieces are well-coordinated, all the parts function in unity, each side flows into the other with such fluidity and each side suggests continuity with the sides not seen. Look at figure viii, it is sculptured structurally with great aesthetic designs. It has complex attachments of helmet and ropes with thorns – sharp pointed objects – protective instruments.

Africans admire the beauty of the human body, perceive and value it aesthetically. See the beauty or goodness of the shape of the neck in fig. vi – portraying the ring folds of the neck of an African woman. Other characteristics of beauty include: the protruded mouth thin and thick lips; broad, straight and pointed nose, the decorative crown or plaited and adorned hair styles, and voluptuousness of the woman – their breasts, eyes and the soft curves of the body. Look at fig. iv. This sculpture piece tends to relate the physical and the spiritual relationship of mankind. Fig. iv shows double images possibly representing a male and a female with open mouth and large teeth.

If one analyses these figures aesthetically going by the preferences discussed above, they embody the aesthetic qualities and values. African Sculpture pieces are works that are beautiful and serve a purpose in that society. That is called the beauty of usefulness, with regard mainly to the function of that piece. A sculpture piece is good when it fits its purpose, when effective in use. It has been noticed that the qualities that are considered aesthetic are referred to the appearance of that object or piece. We can judge its appearance with regard to its function. The more a form fits its purpose, the stronger is our feeling of its perfection. The perfection of shape is already an aesthetic value. The function of an art object is perceived together with, or even by its form; this way of thinking brought forward one of the first definitions of beauty. It was an idea of the ancient Greeks that beauty is the usefulness of things that it derives from visual and functional perfection as reflecting each other. That was Socrates, who said: which is good is also beautiful.

Aesthetic Characterizations

Looking at the aesthetic values much further, Pettit (159, 60) advanced three aesthetic characterizations: the first is the characterization of a work by reference to the motive of the artist, as sincere or whatever. The second is the characterization of a work by reference to that which it represents. And the third is the characterization of a work of art as inventive or creative.

Taking from the above characterizations, one sees the African traditional artist's imagery as a projection of his acknowledged or secret obsessions, whether figurative, surrealistic or abstraction. From the various aesthetic descriptions of a work of art, African Traditional Sculpture is in terms of what it represents, in terms of its truthfulness. To understand such an aesthetic description involves realizing that one can assert it or assent to it sincerely only if one has had a certain experience, just as one can assert or assent to a normal description only if one has the appropriate belief. Some writers on African art had always judged the arts with Western standard without taking into consideration the culture from which these arts were produced. On inventiveness or creativeness, African Traditional artists (Sculptors) were very creative. It is their inventiveness that opened the artistic doors of the Western world, whose artists were influenced by African art. They saw in the arts, the stylistic techniques of African mask and carvers and attempted to arrive at the high intellectual abstractions. Cubism and other movements have therefore, pursued this intellectual abstract approach to greater height. These sculpture pieces were carved in the styles that can be observed because their form was designed to suggest or represent rather than portray.

Each discipline has its own system of words, phrases, and rules. To learn and understand the language of the new discipline, one needs to learn a whole new set of words, and a new set of rules for putting those words together. It is the same with the language of aesthetics. All the objects we look at are made up of certain common elements. They are arranged according to certain basic principles. The elements of aesthetics are: line, colour, texture, space, sound effect, light, time-motion (movement), rhythm, value, shape and form among others. African sculpture embodies these characteristics (elements). What makes African sculpture seem inferior in the eyes of some critics is a matter of personal philosophy or emotional and inexperience of a critic of the elements, theories, principles, and the cultural values from where such sculpture were produced.

The basic purpose of African sculpture is to represent something. It is true that some sculptures are nonrepresentational, but does that make them meaningless? Or does that remove the aesthetic qualities in them? Such works have the beauty, conceptually designed for a purpose, and have a higher aesthetic quality, because of their convincing power of mimesis seen as natural and beyond conventional laws of artistic production of non-European art. This corroborates what Jean Jacques Rousseau in Rene Huyghe (244) said that art is more authentic when it has least suffered the refining process of culture.



At the Ancestor's Conference II Installation. Okpeye wood, 1995, 100cm x 220cm x 19cm
Source: El Anatsui (A Sculpted History of Africa)



El Anatsui Tapper, Mixed Media wood, raffia, palm fibre & cloth
1995, 183cm x 60cm
Source: El Anatsui (A sculpted History of Africa)

Having had an analytical look at the sculpture of El Anatsui, of the contemporary period, it becomes more appreciative. El Anatsui's sculpture pieces are the modifications or an extension of the concepts and beliefs of Africans. The artist used one of the elements "rhythm" to construct the pieces, to communicate feelings

and ideas. The works create sensation structurally. He applied “installation” an age old method of sculpting by Africans to communicate his messages. There is dynamism in the sculpture pieces. This artist also used rhythm and texture to capture the idea of movement. There is that “force” vitality, energy, and soul in this piece. This makes it truly African.

Conclusion

The African Traditional Sculpture pieces are a manifestation of Africans’ conception of the universe, life and the environment around them. Their sculpture pieces contain all the aesthetic elements, principles and theories which make an object appreciative.

All evaluations are made on the basis of criteria for the merit of the kind of art in question. An aesthetic evaluation is one which is made on the basis of a selection from the total body of relevant criteria of merit. It is impossible to distinguish the aesthetic by special object, by a special characteristic attended to, or by a special emotion.

Those who wish to appraise African art aesthetically must free themselves from other cultural tendency (Standards) as measuring rod. African art (sculpture) can only be studied with great degree of consciousness, openness, involvement and energy, but not illusion. Egonwa (19) while making reference on Oguibe’s masquerade theory said that, African art forms are like masquerade performance which must be viewed through a multiplicity of frames for full enjoyment. That is the African art.

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