

## **Nigeria: The Artist and the Floral Gap**

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**Abstract:** *This paper is the report of an academic research largely carried out in 2012 based on flowers as a source of inspiration for creating metal sculptures. The work took place in the sculpture studios of the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria. It is focused on the relevance of the Nigerian artist to this present age of global warming. This is in view of Kleiner (2013) who asserts that artists and architects can affect history by reinforcing or challenging cultural values and practices through the objects they create. There is a dire need for Nigerian artists, especially sculptors, to consider flowers as a relevant subject matter for the execution of their works as against the general assumption that flowers are not African. In a philosophical way, this study also addresses the issue of less representation of flowers in the art of Africa as proposed by Mazrui in 2004. A number of metal sculptures which attempt to fill this floral gap as it were, have been illustrated and analyzed in line with the ideological thrust of the paper and a few conclusions and recommendations drawn up.*

**Key words:** *Flowers, Floral Gap, Nigerian Artist, Hibiscus, Metal, Sculpture.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Nature is the essential element that births society. It informs human decisions and reasoning as expressed in religion, literature, philosophy, art, economy, geography and other fields of human endeavour. Human existence is sustained by food, clothing and shelter which are all products of nature. According to Karl Wohimuth (2014) before the discovery of crude oil “agriculture was the main stay of Nigerian economy”. The Nigerian nation depended on agricultural products like palm oil, groundnut and cocoa for her foreign earnings. Indeed nature is a raw material, and in respect to this Vikka (1997) explains that the value of nature can be understood in terms of its monetary worth; a factor that he refers to as the “instrumental value” of nature. This composite nature includes humans, animals, vegetation, land forms, and water bodies.

In respect to the artists and their work, Schwimmer (2000) describes nature as a “raw material”. By this he refers to nature as inspiration (idea) for art and also the source of the different media artists use. Apart from representing nature, artists also make use of a variety of media like wood, skin, stone and wax in the execution of their art. These materials are all products of nature. Unfortunately, it is difficult for the humans to exist in perfect harmony with the environment they live in; “people cannot live without changing nature” (Tellegen 2014). In addition, the author explains that the environment, which also refers to nature, “has become strongly associated with damage and decay caused by man”.

Where nature inspires a work of art, the form is either replicated or distorted, yet bearing resemblance to the original form. For some reason, nature has been the preferential theme for artists and designers. Artists, both contemporary and traditional confirm the notion that there exists a relationship between them and their natural environment. This is a relationship that has been observed over time. Moffat (2007) opines that “the cave art of all social groups consists of five principal motifs: human figures, animals, tools and weapons, rudimentary local maps and symbols or ideograms”. To further buttress this, Adams (2006) says “the upper Paleolithic man produced a wide range of small sculptures made from Ivory, bone, clay and stone these depict humans, animals and a combination of the two”.

Traditional Nigerian art is evidence to this statement. There are idealized, stylized and naturalistic human and animal figures in the arts of Nok, Essie, Ife and Tada. Kleiner and Mamiya (2005) enthuse that “there are two questions that bother on the artist before beginning work: what shall be my subject? How shall I represent it?” In their opinion, the most universal answer to the first question was an animal – Bison, Mammoth, Ibex and Horse were the most common images of the Paleolithic period. The cave dwellers happen to be the first to express these natural forms as subjects in their art.

How artists come about their subject matter is best known to them; there are no restrictions to the choice of subject matter in contemporary art. The artists are at will to choose for themselves what their subject matter should be. Adams (2007) opines that, subject matter is what is manifestly represented in a work of art including figures, objects, narrative, shapes, colour and other visual elements. Sale and Betti (2004) state that “the figure (or human body as it is known in art parlance), has held centre stage for artists throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. The figure has been called the still-life of contemporary art”.

During the last two centuries, the encroachment of Christianity, Islam, Western education, Market economies, and other colonial imports have led to increasing secularization in all the art of Africa (Kleiner and Mamiya 2005). These changes have to do with style, techniques, materials, philosophies etc. Not much changed as it pertains to subject matter. The relationship between Africans and their wildlife cannot be over emphasized. Traditional African art repetitiously shows evidence of interest on the subject of the human being, and a host of animals like the tortoise, birds, lizards, and elephants. Most times these animals had some ancestral belief attached to them. The mythology of the Bamana people of Mali is an example. It tells the story of an antelope named Chi Wara who first taught farming skills to human beings. Hence they produced a head piece adapted from the antelope. The headpieces were worn by members of the Bamana society to represent the mythical agricultural animal during dances held at sowing and harvest times (African art museum, 2007). This relationship is also seen in several art traditions in Nigeria.

Similarly, broken fragments of the Nok sculptures of Nigeria suggest representations of the complete human figure. The stone sculptures of Essie are vivid examples of the interest in the human forms, though rendered in an idealized proportion. Ife Artists produced highly naturalistic human and animal figures in bronze and terracotta. A few organic forms like snails and insects were found in Igbo-Ukwu art. Like the Bamana people, traditional Nigerian artists were probably drawn to these forms for particular reasons they sought to satisfy through art.

The emergence of the non-formal art centres like Mbari Mbayo in 1964 and the introduction of Art into the Nigerian School Curriculum, through the combined efforts of Aina Onabolu and Kenneth Murray gave birth to generations of artists that include Nigeria's renowned printmaker, Bruce Onabrakpeya (b. 1932). He experiments with form, in relation to Nigerian folklore, myths and legends. He expresses his affinity for nature in his series of prints and paintings on Ahwaire the tortoise (Ekeh, 2005). Similarly, in the surrealist paintings of Abayomi Barber (b.1934) plants and humans have been recurrent subjects. Other celebrated motifs in African art are: chameleon, crocodile, ants, lizards, birds, fish, elephants, snakes and a host of others which are also common to the Nigerian contemporary artist.

Contemporary art in Europe is not any different; Kiki Smith (b.1954) is one of such artists. In the early 1990s, she adopted the life-size human figure including the different body fluids (e.g blood, tears and semen) as her subject (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation 2014). In like manner, Antony Gormley (b.1950) expresses his affinity for nature. Many of his sculptures are based on his own body as a model (European Graduate School EGS, 1997–2012.) He seems to show a stream of unending ideas using the human figure in its simplified form.

Nigerians are known to produce landscape paintings of beautiful scenery and humans in daily activities like fishing, trading, Dancing at ceremonies, and portraiture (bust). It means that nature is a great source of inspiration for these artists. Some of these ideas are expressed in titles like Chief (2005) and Teenager(2006) by Lasisi Lamidi, and Atilogu dancers (2004) by Biola Idowu.

Nature is a stream of unending inspiration for artists, however, there are three forces that have been identified fighting the existence of nature. They are extinction, adaptation and variation. These forces affect nature thereby creating uncertainties in the future of the environment. Recent studies have shown a threat on the existence of nature. "More than one-in-four of all flowering plants are under threat of extinction" (Jowit, 2010).For the Nigerian artist this finding should be a wakeup call, it should open new frontiers and give new inspiration for the kind of art being produced. Kleiner (2013) asserts that artists and architects can affect History by reinforcing or challenging cultural values and practices through the objects they create.

Still within this "flowerless" society, five flowers were selected for the research which has formed the basis for this paper. They may have some significance at the moment but their future existence is not certain since there is a threat to their very existence. Selection of flowers in this context goes beyond aesthetic admiration, the cogent reasons have been stated alongside the flowers as listed below;

- i. **Hibiscus:** This flower is known to virtually all students of Biology at the Secondary school level in Nigeria. Also the popular "purple Hibiscus" by Chimamanda Adichie (2003) has given it a prominent position in the Nigerian society.
- ii. **Sunflower:** Is a seasonal flower which has recently acclaimed a new status in Nigeria. It is now an export commodity; farmers are encouraged to cultivate it in large quantities.
- iii. **Rose:** This is a popular name given to girls in Nigeria, it is also one of the most popular flowers in the world. Its red variety is generally accepted as a symbol of love.
- iv. **Zinnia elegans:** is a small seasonal flower, and it represents the population of wild flowers in Nigeria.
- v. **Oxalis triangularis:** this was the newest flower to be known to the researcher perhaps because it is a rare one. The study found them inspiring and included them as part of the selection.

**Aim of the Study**

In the light of the discussions above, this study seeks to project flowers from Nigeria with the aim of promoting a flower culture. In addition the study has composed flowers into identifiable household objects that the average Nigerian can identify with. Available literature shows an abundant representation of flowers in European, Oriental and Islamic art, but Africa has been portrayed by certain scholars as ‘a deflowered culture’ (Goody 1993). This assertion is in consonance with Mazrui (2004) who opines that ‘there is a “floral gap” (insignificant representation of flowers) in African culture’. Contrary to this, Africa is a home to many flower species. The Kenyan embassy in Japan (2014) reports that, “Kenya has become the European Union’s biggest source of flower imports” making it one of the world’s greatest producer of flowers.

**II. Methodology**

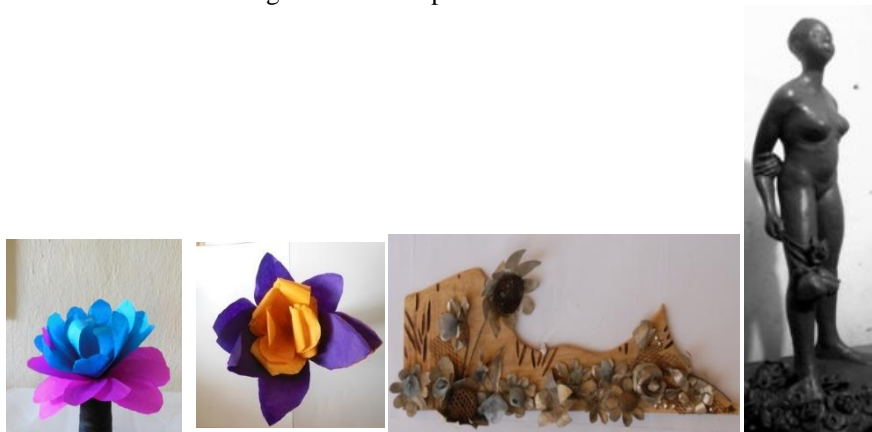
**Observation:** The observatory stage resulted in a series of sketches that were further developed. This step provides for a proper understanding of the subject matter and formed the foundation for the studies.



**Plate 1:** flower study, Artist sketch book (2012)

**Experimental Study**

A pilot study was necessary to ascertain what materials were best suited for the desired effect. In this stage the researcher tried out various media, observing their responses. A set of miniature sculptures were produced. The studies in this preliminary category comprise of flowers in representational or stylized form, showing their characteristics/ features. Paper, Resin, plastics, fabric, sheet metal, zinc and aluminum sheets were experimented with. Below are images from the experiments.



**Plate 2:** Images from studio experiment (2011/2012) **Source:** Artist

After deciding on two media, mild steel and aluminum sheet, it became eminent that two techniques had to be adopted. Riveting in the case of aluminum and welding in the case of mild steel. Generally the following steps were taken in executing the works.

- 1 Drawing and cutting of templates on paper.
- 2 Tracing the templates on the material i.e. aluminum and metal sheets.
- 3 Cutting of aluminum and metal sheets.
- 4 Forming them into the desired shape.
- 5 Cutting of iron rods, straightening and bending to suit the composition.
- 6 Welding of the sheet metal and iron rods or joining the aluminum sheets by riveting after which resin or araldite was used to fill up gaps.
- 7 Finishing; this entails dressing, filling, smoothening and application of patina.

In executing these sculptures the researcher divided the studio work into two stages of execution: I. Representational stage II. Abstract stage

### **Catalogue of Sculptural Works**

This artist produced a significant number of metal sculptures to depict floral forms as a direct response to the ideas espoused in this write-up. It is a humble attempt to contribute to the ecology of flowering plants in Nigeria. The aesthetic qualities that they convey are necessary off shots of representational art which makes them both appealing and meaningful.

### **Umbrella**

The object represented in this composition is an umbrella, bearing several flowers. It resembles a flower bulb turned upside down. The tip of the half –way opened umbrella is dressed with a small lily that serves as the junction or the source of the several stalks of the flower. From the small lily a thick rod extends upward and is curved at the end to form the handle of an umbrella. It is an umbrella and at the same time a collection of flowers. An umbrella provides us with comfort and in addition, beauty and scent that comes from the flowers which are found around our homes, offices, schools, hostels, and hospitals. The artist has depicted some irregularities in the flowers and despite their disparity in types they sit together to provide that ideal comfort which flowers give us. Unless we are careful, we may not see some of the things that flowers do for us.



**Plate1, Leni Satsi, Umbrella, 68.5 cm, sheet metal and iron rods, 2012**

### **Grief**

Grief is a representational sculpture composed of six stalks of the five different flowers listed above; some are in an up-right pose and others come in up-side-down position. The flower petals are made from aluminum and metal sheets. They are painted in bright colours of yellow, red, pink and grey to represent the stalk which were made from iron rods. The entire composition sits on a wooden base which symbolizes the earth on which vegetation sits.

Greif portrays the situation of flowers on the globe. Flowers never express themselves in words so we could never say how they feel. However they express their beauty as if nothing was at stake but on the other

hand the human is very conscious of their temporal beauty. Humans are also responsible for the destruction of flowers and several other elements of nature.



**Plate 2,** Leni Satsi, **Grief**, aluminium, sheet metal and iron rods, 2012

### **Spiral Roses**

It is a composition of two full bloom rose flowers (about life size) with several other stalks formed in a spiral flow over a cylindrical base. Its petals are made of aluminum sheets cut individually, formed to shape and composed into a bulb which is attached unto the stalks made from iron rods. Welding was applied as a technique in joining parts of the composition together.

The rose flower is neither white nor pink. A layer of off-white coating was applied over the petals downward and the rest is a dark shade of grey to give the base solidity and balance.

The spiral lines suggest wind action and continuity. It also symbolizes the hostility we dish out to nature. We often put nature in an unfavorable condition which eventually truncates their existence. The Rose itself symbolizes love, friendship and partnership a relationship built between people as they interact. Everywhere, people make friends; we make partners in business, in sports and other aspects of life. This partnership should be symbiotic rather than parasitic.



**Plate 3,** Leni Satsi, **Spiral Rose**, 71cm, mild steel, aluminium and iron rods,2012

### **Broom**

The broom is very symbolic in African culture and it forms part of the gifts presented to a new bride in many African traditions. There are even taboos against using brooms at night to sweep and using them to flog young maidens. Vacuum cleaners are beyond the reach of an average Nigerian. Brooms are part of a typical African home; it is used to tidy the home which means it is used for “dirty jobs”. A collection of a few flowers into a broom like bunch, dropped somewhere in a house could do well to enhance the already tidied environment. After cleaning the next step is decoration and a little of it makes a difference as flowers have done well to spice up our homes.

The concern here is that Africans could gather broom sticks together for sweeping but couldn't gather flowers in the same manner and just gaze at them in their homes when it has the power to liven up and relax its viewers. The work is a careful arrangement of iron rods of different thicknesses to form a relief bunch held together by a band. Some of the strands that form the bunch extend from the band to end with some beautifully shaped flower at their tips



Plate 4, Leni Satsi, **Broom**, 81 cm, sheet metal, 2012

### **Multifaceted**

At first look **Multifaceted** resembles a hibiscus but in this case the funnel shape of the hibiscus is de-emphasized. It is made from sheet metal and some few iron rods. It comprises two flowers, a large one and a tiny one attached onto the petal of the larger one. It is an attempt to explain biological interference on the evolution of organisms. The result is called variation. Such species that undergo these changes develop features that slightly differentiate them from their kind. It is a piece with multiple views, a sculpture in the round; concave and convex. It expresses the many uses of flowers. Flowers are food, medicine or ornaments. They express sorrow, joy, love and affluence. It is made to assume a grey- green- metallic colour scheme which is symbolic of agriculture. The work was inspired by a study of the hibiscus flower after the rain; the rain drops just hang there on the petals for some time before they finally drop; this, the artist has also tried to portray in the surface treatment.





**Plates 5 and 6, Leni Satsi, Multifaceted, 50x53cm, Sheet metal, iron rods and bearings, 2012**

### Fall I

As soon as flowers begin to bloom it is expected that in a short while they begin to fall too, some translate into fruits for fruit trees, while the others just fall to mark the end of their season. **Fall I** is a view of a section of flower petals that have fallen to the ground. One important thing is the spaces that occur within the frame, the interplay between the bare ground and the petals; this leaves a natural balance for the work to exist without much input from the artist in creating the composition. Amongst the petals are also stalks and dried leaves that form an interesting composition. Flowers could also be interesting when they fall. The fall is symbolic of a short lived life. Day after day, the average life span of the human has continued to decline.

The sculpture is a juxtaposition of several petals of different sizes and shapes, put together in a rectangular picture frame. They are painted in a flat grey colour and mounted on a flat wall.



**Plate 7, Leni Satsi, Fall I, 58.4X76.2 cm, sheet metal and iron rods, 2012**

### Fall II

**Fall II** is an interpretation of petals falling to the ground; the neutralized peach or orange colour is symbolic of a stage where flowers are assumed to have completed their circle, after this a fruit is expected to emerge. When humans die at a young age it worries the society. In many societies in Africa the death of an old man or woman is marked with celebration, a lot of feasting and dancing. Death will only be beautiful at a mature age. As opposed to **Fall I**, this second fall is a fall in maturity; it is something that is celebrated. Stencil was first produced on paper from which the five exaggerated petals were cut on mild steel, filled and hammered into curves. The individual petals were then coupled into a relief composition.



Plate 8, Leni Satsi, *Fall II*, 66cm, sheet metal, 2012

#### What should the Nigerian artist do?

1. **Work:** this means identifying the problem and communicating it, probably with a solution. Artists should do what they know how to. They should draw, paint, sculpt, and write on the issues they have identified. Artists in Nigeria need to learn from the likes of O'keeffe. We know that relics and artifacts are evidence of past cultures. In the same vein, the art of today stands as historical evidence tomorrow.
2. **Exhibit:** After the artist has worked there will be a need to take the information (works) to a wider population considering that only a handful get to visit the artist's studio. This forum will allow people to interact with the works and also hear from the artist. The essence is to provoke the minds of individuals on the issue at stake.
3. **Approach the environment with care:** The Nigerian society is battling with the problem of waste management. Rather than create waste, artists can turn waste into art. We cannot but mention Kainebi (b.1964), Anatsui (b.1944) and Ekpe (2012) who have used waste cans and bottle tops to create outstanding works. Similarly, rather than abuse nature, Nigerian artists should esteem nature, propagate it and find it meaningful in executing their works. Above all artists should be at the fore front to advocate for the protection and preservation of nature.
4. **Join the rest of the world:** Gradually the world is turning into a global village. Nigerian artists should not be left behind. There are artist groups and institutions in the West concerned with nature and its conservation. One of such groups is Artists for Nature Foundation (ANF). Nigerian artists need to initiate such groups, encourage member's participation through timely exhibitions, seminars, workshops and competitions.

#### Advocacy

Growing up as a child in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city, I remember that my neighborhood had lots of ornamental flowers and trees which were planted by the government. Only a few individuals were able to maintain these flowers, as most of these flowers were either cut down or allowed to wither away as the seasons changed. Today in Nigeria my observation is this, when an average Nigerian succeeds in building a personal house, rather than plant ornamental flowers, there is more attention on fruit trees like guava, mango and pear. This is not a bad idea however it has its implications. Little wonder only a few Nigerian girls would appreciate the gift of a flower. This is so despite the fact that there are wonderful species of flowers growing on the continent and in Nigeria too.

The study advocates that artists should utilize the less representation of flowers in African art and in contemporary sculpture as a new frontier for Nigerian sculpture. There is a need for Africans and Nigerians in particular to explore flowers as a subject matter in sculpture this is because, the "floral gap" consequently, symbolizes extinction; in accordance to the law of use and disuse (use it or lose it) as propounded by Charles Darwin (1809-1882). If flowers are not included in our art, there is a likelihood of its extinction among Africans perhaps with the exception of Kenya and a few other cultures who relate with them in terms of economy, food and medicine and this may be applicable only to a few flowers. What then happens to the rest?

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