The Function of Art Historian in Nigerian Visual Arts

By

Onyeche, Honour Nkem M.
Department of Fine and Applied Arts Faculty of Humanities
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State
Phone Number: 08037113539
E-Mail:gmail.com

Introduction

Art means art work produced by man to give pleasure, to entertaining, to arouse feelings or to express himself. While the person expressing ideas and thoughts known as an Artist. Ganagana, (2011) defined art as the outward expression of our inner impression. Man's inner feelings need an outer expression or else there could be some untold consequences. This gives rise to justifying the saying that; a "impression without expression results to depression." Examples of works of art are drawings, paintings, statues, designs, dance, music, drama etc.

Applied arts also referred to as industrial art or craft, are those art works created by man and meant to be used to satisfy some material needs. Example of applied art are car, utensil, chair, pot, basket etc.

Ganagana, (2002), had argued that there is a continual explosion of technology and as such, it becomes necessary that people must continue to acquire new skills and methods of doing things.

To attain the specific goals and objectives for which the educational systems have been established, there must be an effective coordination of all units and the activities of the overall system.

In the description of a school as a social system, Hoy and Miskel (1987), stated that the school comprises of interacting personalities bound together in mutually interdependent relationships characterized by independent parts with clearly defined population. Thus, highlighting the complex network of social relationship within the system and the inherent uniqueness of the observed culture of the educational systems. Sustainable progress is only attainable if skilled and personnel have been recruited, trained and encouraged to perform various tasks, Koko (2005).

History

The history of human management can be traced to ancient management before the advent of industrial revolution Koko (2001).

History means the study of the past events to a layman. Academically, history is the study to understand man's immediate past, the present and gives accurate prediction of the future. It is a record of the past events, usually with an interpretation of their cause and an assessment of their importance.

History is basically one's own interpretation of what had taken place in the past. The interpretation may be scientific and as a result the evidence will be based on the materials collected – generally, the source of history are written and non-written. Putting the two terms together, art and history gives us a single term Art history. Art history is a course like sculpture, Art Education, ceramics, textile, painting, graphics etc is taught in most art schools in Nigeria. In most of these schools, the subject art history is taught only as a general subject alongside other subjects and not taken as a specialize subject. That is, art history is not offered at the first degree level. It is however, taken at the masters and doctorial levels with the same credit units as those of other disciplines. Art history deals with general characteristics and methods in the discipline of art. In art history, certain questions are asked about the object of study. The art historian provides answers to such questions, having sought necessary information from the artist or other sources concerning the form and the content of the art object. That is the major concern of studying art history. The object could be permanent or temporary such as embellishment of an object or painting on human skin.

It is the understanding of the meaning of an artwork that enables us to see its significant as well as to accept it as an object of beauty.

Basic things that are needed to be taken into consideration for the understanding of the meaning and the beauty of an artwork include:

The size of the artwork has to be clearly stated. The identification of the artwork possibly by name or title. The identification of the name of the artist that produced the artwork which should be known and written clearly on the work. The medium or media used in producing the artwork should be stated. The year the artwork was produced is equally important. In some instance, an artwork may be started and finished many years later. In such a case, it as to be sincerely stated so. This is very important as it influences the value of the work. Brief information about the artwork, that is, the meaning of the idea that informed the production of the artwork preferable at the back of the paintings and at the base for sculptures and related art forms. Doing so will go a long way in assisting the art historian in discussing such artworks. Among these basic information, the identification and title of artwork is somehow controversial. While some contemporary Nigerian visual artists feel that a work of art should be identified with title, others say that it is not necessary. The implication here is that a particular artwork is bound to have many titles from different people. The general opinion is that a work of art should have identity and

this in most cases is through the title as it is easier to identify with a title, and artists should endeavour to identify their artworks with title.

Other information, whether abstract, naturalistic can be discussed by the art historian without the aesthetic evaluation, that is, the organization of the various forms or design elements relating to their harmony and general organization can be analysed and discussed by art historian. All these form the basis upon which art history is built. The method of approach to the study of general history applies to the study of art history. This is because, art is an authentic expression of the concern of an age and community. Like general history, the source of art history includes oral history, written history, anthropology and archaeology. Though it is art history that this paper is discussing, explaining each of these sources in brief will further help our understanding of the issues.
Oral History

Is a verbal story about the past, passed on from one generation to another. The older people in the community are more effective in the dissemination or communication of oral history. The communicators of oral history can as well convey information or traditional artworks, stating the producers of such art works and other necessary information on them. Note that traditional artworks are usually not signed and other vital basic facts on them are also left out. It is those who lived at the time an art work was produced that can give the fact about it. It is important to note at this point that documentation of any art object begins with oral information before such information are written down.
The Written History

On the other hand is the information recorded on paper. This includes pictures from archives and other related areas through which we know about artworks that were produced and had existed in the past as well as contemporary artworks and the artists that produced them. Written history is a later development which came after oral history.

Anthropology
Anthropology is the scientific study of a man in both the physical and cultural context. The cultural context includes all element of man in society, his belief system, ways of acting and doing things which is visual art. The visual art as a manifestation of a people is through creative ingenuity while the appreciation of art is an element of cultural study which cannot be ignored.

Archaeology
Is the subdivision of cultural anthropology that deals with man's past. It includes both history and cultural which is the tracing of changes over time and the reconstruction of the daily life of prechistoric people as well as archaeological artifacts which are dug out of the ground, some of which have good information about the past and can be studied. Most of

our traditional artwork which gave pride to this part of the word were brought to limelight through archaeological activities.

Ethnology

Ethnology is the study of the culture and practices of living people as well as culture and practices of the people that are no longer in existence, though eyewitness and written records about such culture and practices survive. The ethnology studies the whole culture of such societies – social and political organization, religion, tradition, technology, economics, music, dance, visual art as well as other forms of art. Ethnologist studies are recorded for the generality of the people. All this contributes and provides information to the understanding of art history.

Art Historian

Art historian is someone who specializes in history as earlier mentioned, art historian is someone who specializes in the history of art. He discusses the nature, the effectiveness of the history of art and artifacts. As a professional, art historian could work in museums and art galleries as well as teach the subject – Art history. Just as it is essential for the keeper of museum and art galleries to understand the conversation of art works; provide public service by organizing exhibitions, answering questions on artworks before, during and after exhibitions as well as other related activities. The recording of art history is also the responsibility of art historian, because of their training in the language of art. They also understand the process involved in the making of artworks and other things in art, all of which aid the teaching of art history. Those who teach art history sometimes find themselves confronted with problems of syllabus, library facilities, equipment for the projection of slides and examination of papers.

The Role of an Art Historian

An art historian performs several roles which are relevant to the development and growth of visual art, including making the general public understand the working life of artists and their artworks.

According to Alagoa (2006), it is a fact of history that before the penetration of the Arabic and Western tradition in Africa, the continent had for log invented an indigenous tradition of documenting their culture or accounts.

Afigbo (1976) cited in N-ue (2014) testifies that in the period of decolonization our historians played positive role by creating the ideological amour with which the nationalists equipped themselves for their battle against the colonial rulers and their ideologies.

The primary function of an art historian is to investigate image depicted in an artwork, its characteristics and meaning as well as symbols used. Also, it is the art historians

responsibility to study the media, the technique, the materials and methods used which allows an agreement between the artist concept and the aesthetic form of an artwork. That is, the interest of an art historian is to identify a finished artwork, the period or the year it was produced, the materials used and find out if a particular artwork portrays what it claims to represent, whether it is unique in its general form or it is a copy from an original work. He ascertains the functions of the artwork, its specific and general meaning and discusses how the object fits into the community where it was produced. He identifies the producer of the art work and for whom it was produced. He also examines the comparism with other similar artworks, the conditions/circumstances and quality of its creation both internal and external and at the end the object is placed in a general framework of evaluation with similar or related art forms nationally or internationally. Nwachukwu (2007) defines understanding of a keen, attentive and undistracted listening and attention to get the details of the story as the client narrates it. It implies following the story lines verbal and non-verbal cues, including the mood and emotion. Understanding leads to factual interpretation and personalized reflection on the subject matter. Ogbogbo (2011), gives a perfect example that "that officials in the Ministry of Education has refused to understand why history as a subject should be given its pride of place in Nigeria's education curriculum.

How Art Historian carry out His Functions

Among the various responsibilities of an art historian is the organization of exhibitions, research had documentation of artworks, the compilation of catalogues and brochures for permanent and temporary exhibitions as well as national and international exhibitions. In carrying out his work, the art historian depends on the artist as one of his major source of information. He ask questions about colours and other materials used and whether he is producing artworks based on ancient or contemporary issues. The art historian does not ignore the process of making art, as a result, he finds himself trying certain materials. In doing so, he discovers certain things that are involved. It is not the primary concern of art historian to create artworks, but the observation of the various materials used in producing artworks.

Every art historian tries to identify the medium or media used in any artwork. As the art historian considers the medium or the media of the work, he also examines its condition. This is because most artwork might have suffered consideration damage through student, neglect, over painting or well intentioned brutal clearing. Therefore, the art historian has the duty to ascertain the stage of the artwork when it was initially executed and places it in relation to its present state. This requires good judgement and intuition of the art historian. Also the art historian sometimes finds himself dealing with an uncompleted artwork. In such a case, he has to consider other artworks produced at the same time with the artwork either by the same artist or a group of other artist before arriving at a conclusion.

Art historian should endeavor to know how the artwork was received by those who commissioned it or those whom the artwork was produced for and those who saw it at the time it was executed. How they had regarded it since it was produced is equally important. This is necessary because the wider the range of opinions about a particular artwork, the better, as that increases its values. The art historian also ascertains whether the artwork is figurative or non-figurative, abstract or wholly representational before embarking on discussing the image or images in it to comprehend the idea or ideas expressed by the artist sometimes the meaning of the artwork is quite obvious not only to the people who saw it at the time it was executed but also to others who saw it later patronage is also an important factor, which the art historian often considers. Patron do not only provide finance for the production of certain artwork, but also sometimes dictate what they want in an artwork. This may include ideas or concepts, arrangement of forms, types and use of colours, size etc.

Art historian on embarking on his function should be able to write adequately about the artists around him. It is quite difficult for him to write about artist he does not know, has not seen their works and does not know how they produce their works. It may be difficult for an American art historian to write effectively about Nigerian artists or their artworks in Nigerian. Information on what happens in contemporary at scene like traditional art can be taken separately from different points by different individuals and brought together to make a whole for a wider scope. But still, individuals can embark on effective research on the area they want to build together.

Conclusion

For art historian to be effective, he should attend art exhibitions, art workshops and seminars regularly and above all, he should interact with studio artists on regular basis and write down current issues rather than expending entirely on old ideas and what others has written rather improve upon what has been written about artist and their artworks. Doing so, the art historian will obviously achieve originally in his work. The role of an art historian is quite significant in the development of the art scene. He is the spokesman of the artist and the community at large, but unfortunately many artist are yet to be aware of their roles. He should understand and respect his various roles before the general public and that will encourage him to do his work diligently without bias. Our artist and art works are very relevant to the western world. We should endeavour to document them and know in whose collection such artworks are. We should write about our artworks for them to read and make reference to rather, than for them to write on our contemporary art for us to read and make reference as in the case of traditional art works. Our studio artists should assist and encourage indigenous art historians, especially at home, to write about them and their artworks. Doing so will not only popularize the historian, but will increase the value of their artworks. Gone are the days when foreign anthropologist, archaeologist, ethnographers etc were writing on our world highly rated traditional artworks. We may accept the fact that we were not better equipped then to do

so. What excuse do we have today that we are well trained and equipped.

References

Alagoa, E. J. (2006). The practice of history in Africa, Port Harcourt: Onyema Research Publications.

Ganagana, P. T. (2002). Essentials of curriculum and instruction: Theory and practice, Port Harcourt. Paragraphics.

Hoy, W. K. & C. C. Miskel (1982). Educational Administration: Theory into Practice. New York: Random House Inc.

Koko, M. N. (2001). Human Management: A practical Approach. Pre-Joe Publishers, A Division of Pre-Joe Ventures, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. 1(2), 9-10.

Koko, M. N. (2005). Human Management: A practical Approach. Published by Harey Publications Coy. Port Harcourt, Nigeria. 1(2), 21-22.

N-ue, U. S. (2014). "Humanities in good governance in the 21st century Africa. The role of history in Nigeria. Icheke journal of the faculty of humanities special edition, Vol. 12 No. 1.

Nwachukwu, D. N. (2007). The teacher counselor for today's school. Calabar: University Press.

Ogbogbo, C. B. N. (2011). "Beyond nomenclature: current challenges of historical scholarship in Nigeria." Journal of historical society of Nigeria, Vol. 20.

Sent from my Metro By T-Mobile 4G LTE Android Device