

## Art and the Environment: Appraising Aesthetics Values of Visual Arts in Lagos

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### ABSTRACT

Aesthetics is a critical reflection on art, culture and nature. It is the principal underlying factor for the works of a particular art movement or theory of art, i.e. cubist aesthetic. However, the conscious effort to recreate aesthetics order in Lagos State is welcomed development creating beauty and ambience environment regardless of diverse groups, religions and socio-cultural differences. This study therefore examines aesthetic characteristics of a number of environmental sculptures and murals at strategic places in Lagos with a view to understanding their socio-cultural context and connotation in the environment. Using qualitative methods, this study relies on field work, while photographs of works were critically analysed. The study extends the frontiers of knowledge on visual literacy of forms, symbols, patterns, and motifs; it creates awareness on the socio-economic benefits of arts and artists in the built environment.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics values, Environment, Visual literacy and Art.

### INTRODUCTION

The term 'aesthetic' is derived from the Greek word 'aesthesis', meaning sensory perception. Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that deals with nature of art, beauty and taste encompassing the creation or appreciation of beauty. In its more technical epistemological perspective, it is defined as the study of sensory emotional value, or judgment of sentiment or taste (Magrane, 2012). In other words, aesthetics study how artists imagine, create and perform works of art. It further be explain as what happens in Artists' minds, when they see and hear words; and the ways they interprets it to the society. It is also the study of artist feelings about art, why they like some works and not others or; how art can affects moods, beliefs, and attitude towards life. Baumgarten (2007) observes that aesthetics emphasizes the sensory, rather than intellectual nature of judgments. Therefore, judgment of aesthetic values relies on the ability to discriminate at sensory level. Aesthetic value could be viewed from innate beauty of natural or manmade objects that has the capacity to elicit pleasure (positive value) or displeasure (negative value) when appreciated or experienced (Magrane, 2012). In other words, an aesthetic appreciation is needed to trigger a positive environmental consciousness so that

people can appreciate visual artworks mounted or displayed in the environment.

Magrane (2012) further argues that visual art can speak emotion, as well as find a way of articulating the richness, and diversity of relationship between man and his environment. In the same vein, visual art in the environment is capable of unveiling the unseen beauty and attraction that abound in our environment. This is the reason most art objects and designs are erected at different locations in the city to elicit a sense of beauty and harmony between art and the environment. Therefore, objects of art are positioned strategically to create aesthetic function and useful purpose as well as feelings of enjoyment in the environment. However, the ability of people to perceive, recognize, and understand the visual languages spoken by sculptural images, murals, and graphic signs in both rural and urban centers goes a long way to ascertain the level of visual literacy of people in the society. It also show the acceptance of artworks and designs in the environment where they are displayed.

A lot of works of art were commissioned at the independence period in Nigeria to showcase the cultural diversity of the country and also to serve as symbols for most national establishments. The

development of public or environmental art in Lagos State is also devoted to the preservation of relics, cultures, civilizations and traditional materials of rapid changing people. Lagos has the largest and best collections of environmental art because of different tribes and groups residing in Lagos State. For instance, there are statues of the Nigerian fallen soldiers (*Soja Idumota*) who fought at the civil war in the late 60s. Their statues were erected at Idumota, Lagos Island in the 80s; they were incidentally moved to Dordon barrack in the 1990s. There are also monumental statues of Nigerian's heroes and heroines erected in strategic locations in Lagos State. An inward look at Lagos state gives a picture of a state playing host to the entire Nigeria represented by different groups of people from all walks of life (Government of Nigeria, 2007; *City Mayor*, 2010). In addition, Lagos State remains the commercial nerve centre of Nigeria, because everybody has come to Lagos State for survival (Oduwaye, 2006; Encyclopedia Britanica, 2011).

In the city of Lagos, many beautiful and valuable mural paintings adorn different places such as bridges, bus stops, road junctions and public buildings (Plates 1, 2, 3 and 4). There are also monumental sculptures of heroes and heroines erected in Lagos to beautify the environment and keep memories of the historic deeds alive (Plates 5 and 8). There are also beautiful landscapes with horticultural design at roundabouts, notable junctions, and public places; modern architectural designs also spice up the aesthetic values in the city of Lagos. These aesthetic substances are part of the conscious efforts being made to recreate aesthetics order in the city of Lagos. It is against this backdrop that this study examines aesthetic characteristics of selected environmental sculptures, graphic signs and murals at strategic public spaces in Lagos State.

According to Plato and Meskin (2013), aesthetic value is the worth of an artwork or natural object that gives pleasurable appreciation and satisfied experience to the viewer. This is an overwhelming phenomenon created by an encounter with a particular work of art that lingers on for as much time one can find another work of art that is comparable to it. In the same vein, aesthetic value can be termed as the worth of artwork judging by the lasting satisfaction it gives to the end user. Here, emphasis on pleasure or displeasure has always appeared to pose a challenge to the objectivity of aesthetic values and aesthetic judgments. Going by this statement, one tends to weigh the dexterity of the artist on one side, and look at the shortcomings or inadequacies of a

particular work of art on the other side. Plato and Meskin (2013) further argue that aesthetic value is a matter of personal preference or like; therefore, what is pleasurable to someone may be unpleasant to another. Hence, viewers' aesthetic responses or feelings are a matter of choice; it is the satisfaction derived from a particular work of art that counts.

Kant (2001) considers aesthetic judgment as 'subjective', as it is rooted in pleasure or displeasure, but Kant further argues that judgment of beauty involves a claim to universality. When a natural or manmade object merits aesthetic quality, many people will reckon with the beauty embedded in it, there will not be two way judgments. The judgment that something is beautiful (aesthetically valuable) involves the claim that other people should agree with the judgment. Summarily, to know aesthetically pleasing objects, one must be able to identify the presence of aesthetic features of an art object these include: presence of symbolic reality, unity of fascination, and aesthetics appraisal (Markovic, 2012). It is when these features are present that one would be able to determine the aesthetic values in a visual work of art.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF VISUAL ART

Art generally is the concept of human mind, expressed through any medium, to appreciate nature or human activities (Mbahi, 1992). The exercise is to show art as providing conceptual illustration from nature and manmade objects with aesthetics quality as well as efficient functions for the use of man. It is interesting to observe that art is life, and there is life in art; in that, every day of man's life; he speaks, wears and practices art. An artist sees what layman cannot see in the environment, and transformed them to valuable objects. He sees creativity, beauty and recreation out of what other people considered junk, waste and condemned materials. The artist turns waste to wealth by picking waste objects and materials from the environment and turns them around to form new appreciable objects as evident in plate 9. In this process, Oguntona (1986) argues that art is an aspect of mental development which embraces imagination, creativity, aesthetics and functions. Therefore, a piece of artwork is either made to function as an object of beauty or as a useful object for specific purpose. Summarily, art has both aesthetics value and utilitarian purpose, such that, the components of art are made to function, and at the same time be appreciated for their aesthetic physical appearances.

The value of art to human being in the home and city environment is immeasurable, thus, art plays a major role of sustaining humanity in all fronts. Art is inseparable from everyday activities of human being because art is all around us. The role of art and artist is inexhaustible because he makes relevant art objects to beautify the environment. Art is capable of providing skill and competence for higher education in architecture, science, technology and engineering, as well as urban design. Through art, one is able to develop a language of expressing ideas, feelings, emotions and moods.

The visual arts and artists activities are therefore revelations of nature, man, and environment of how the world really is, and the way earth revolves around us. By this assertion, the creative ingenuity of many artists around the world has helped to recreate our environment by adding beauty to the natural habitat. The works of visual art primarily serves aesthetic purpose to enliven the home and environment, making them adorable and pleasant to live there on. So, some of the sculptural works mounted at strategic places in Lagos are meant to immortalize heroes and heroines, as well as beautify the environment.

### VISUAL ART IN LAGOS STATE ENVIRONMENT

Generally, display of art in both private and public spaces adds beauty to entire look of the environment. The display of art in the public space started in form of concern to integrate socio-cultural and ecological approaches to develop the environment, and makes it aesthetically habitable for human being (Magrane, 2012). In this direction, visual art has been employed by the Lagos State government as a measure to create aesthetically pleasing environment while addressing social and political issues relating to natural and physical environment.

The making of murals and sculptural art in the public spaces is to show how citizens should think, get connected, and respond to the society socially, philosophically, economically and spiritually (Baumgarten, 2007). However, this response depends on the subject and theme of visual art in question as displayed by the artists. In most cases, environmental arts in Lagos are commissioned by government and the people who could afford the cost of artworks. The artist produces works of art that have strong social and cultural values worthy to be displayed in the public space. The artist equally recognizes the features of aesthetic values to be depicted in his work. The major purpose of executing artwork in the public spaces in Lagos is for beautification, to serve as a reservoir of

people's cultural history, and to address pertinent issues in the society. For instance, some of the environmental sculptures and mural paintings in Lagos address societal vices and youthful misconduct (Plates 3, 4 and 10).

### ENVIRONMENTAL ART IN LAGOS STATE

Works of art add aesthetic values to the environment in Lagos; these works equally carry messages meant to be remembered and preserved for generation yet unborn. The information is for historical knowledge that may be consulted from time to time. These aesthetic objects at times perform duties greater than the spoken words. These works of art can be used to raise awareness about challenges, and provoke public response to environmental insecurity, risk and sustainable future where necessary. Through many of these works of art display in Lagos State, a lot of people have been able to find solutions to issues of lives. For instance, 'empowerment' (Plate 10) at the Yaba roundabout is a pointer to the fact that education is a life insurance that is capable of giving life meal ticket to the youths.

Generally speaking, this study observes a beautiful environment in Lagos State, where most spaces that were once known to be dirty and occupied by miscreants, artisans and petty traders of all sorts and transporters have been transformed to neat and quiet environment (Plates 2, 3, 4 and 8). The public spaces are equally decorated with horticultural landscaping with beautiful walkways. The surfaces of columns and available plains under the bridges in Lagos State have now been embellished with different works of art with themes that focus on diverse kinds of subject-matters ranging from historical matters, personalities of note, building life, career, sporting activities, health matters and socio-cultural activities depending on the location. The type of space available under the bridges also determines the type of subject matter to be painted on them.

The paintings on the walls of bridges have added beautiful appearances and warm reception to the public space in Lagos State. Such public spaces with environmental art include Ojuelegba, Obalende, Ikeja, Lekki Peninsula, Ojota, Ikorodu, Maryland, Tinubu Square, Ojodu Berger among others. The works in these spaces attract people to pose and take photographs against the painted background. It was observed that most passers-by cannot resist gazing to desire aesthetic pleasure. Aesthetic expression is the representational part of the contents of visual artwork and the attention it derived from people (Winston and Cupchick, 1992). By this position,

it is not only the content that can be understood (or misunderstood) by the people, as a work of art may not be understood but its physical appearance must be quite appealing and attractive to the extent that it keeps the viewer's ever gazing at it.

The aesthetics display of visual art works at the popular Tinubu Square reminiscence the past of Lagos State wearing a new looks in the Lagos Island. The first artistic work that catches attention is the "Wings of Liberty". It is a water sculptural fountain, a piece produced with fibre glass the wing of liberty probably recalls the freedom of Lagos and entire Nigeria from Colonial rule at independence in 1960. The subject is semi-realistic in nature as it is a presentation of birds' wings that can be discerned while the real birds were not actually depicted.

Tinubu Square has become a recreational place for relaxation and enjoyment since the garden was rebuilt in the 90s. It has become an attractive centre of activities for commerce, commuter and passers-by. The reconstruction of Tinubu Square with the embellishment of aesthetic forms has added values that attract people to sit comfortably and relax within the fenced square for as much as time permits individual before they would proceed on their daily activities. Aesthetics content of the works of art at Tinubu Square makes the place a sight you cannot pass-by without turning your neck around at 360° degrees to behold the breath taking wonders of aesthetic values of the sculptural pieces mounted in the square. As you go along the sides of the square, you will also feel the coolness of breeze caused by the fountain.

One could hardly pass by the Tinubu Square without being fascinated to the aesthetic happenings at the place. You will always want to have a better glance of the sculptural pieces mounted within the fenced square. The beauty of the creative art works combined with the horticultural design of the flowers as well as the fountain will certainly arrest your focus. It is really an aesthetic experience that elevates the atmosphere to become wonderful scene to behold. In view of this is the reason, Ognjenovic (1997) argues that aesthetic experience as a special kind of object relationship with man, in which a particular object strongly engages the subject's mind, overshadowing all other objects and events. Hence it is not a matter of I do not like art, but that of pronounced aesthetic values that is pleasurable to the environment.

The monumental cenotaph in memory of Late Madam Efunroye Tinubu (Plate 8), after whom

Tinubu square was named, is another sculptural piece that adds value to the aesthetics of the environment. Madam Tinubu was irrepressible opponent of the slave trade and British Colonial Government. She was an Icon of enterprises and leadership, her immense wealth and nationalism earned her prestigious title of Iyalode of Egba land till her death in 1887. There are also the figurative sculptural expression of onetime popular blind drummer called 'Kokoro' the blind drummer and a female dancer. Kokoro was a freelance 'sakara' drum player and singer. He earned his living by going from place to place to entertain people in Lagos Island in the 1970s.

The figurative sculpture at Maryland is a revelation of rich culture of Nigeria. Here are podiums with people dressed in traditional attires of Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Efik, Tiv etc., which portray different culture in Nigeria. The sculptural pieces are so naturalistic in rendition without missing any mark. It is really an aesthetic sight to behold as it welcomes indigenous and foreigners as they go in and out Lagos Mainland. The images were strategically placed at the cross junction of Maryland going to Ikeja. The finesse of the sculptural pieces encompasses painting of the figural objects with gold colour; the podiums were painted white with black rectangular marble bases. Also depicted on the podium are indigenous symbols and motifs identified with different people of Nigeria. Beyond the excellent artistic display by the artists, the work is an epitome of aesthetic value arresting attention of passers-by it also add to beauty of Maryland junction and environs.

Under bridge at Ojuelegba, there are some visual expressions of aesthetic values rendered in painting medium. Parts of figurative mural paintings were visual records of King of Lagos, Oba Rilwan Akiolu for people's recognition. There is also mural painting of the highlife musician, Alhaji Fatai Rolling Dollars (Plate 2). The idea behind the mural painting is to make available some of the important personalities that have live in Lagos. These works of art are also contributory negative activities among the youth in Lagos State towards cubing. Towards realizing this goal, graphic illustrations that forbids street trading (Plate 4) which is common among the under-age; as well as drug abuse among (plate 3) the youth were painted. Apart from the primary goal of passing information to the people, the works of art also add to the aesthetic values of the corridors and public spaces in Lagos State. The murals at Ojuelegba under-bridge were painted by trained Graphic artisans. Their painting was able

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to pass the message across to the society. At the Lekki Peninsula roundabout is “Courage” (Plate 9) which is made of collection junk materials put together to form an object of art. A critical look on this art piece reveals how much courage the artists has to put together in turning summoned wasted materials into a piece of artwork capable of arresting people’s attention. The title suggests, it takes courageous minds of the crew of Artists from the Universal studio, Iganmu-Lagos to execute such magnitude and aesthetic construction work.

Empowerment (plate 10) is a fibre glass work mounted to create environmental beauty at the Yaba roundabout in the Lagos Mainland. This sculptural piece is a depiction of books on which some figures are seated; and others are standing. At the top is a standing figure wearing academic gown. The whole idea behind this sculptural work is to further impress the value of education in the heart of the youths. At Yaba roundabout is a popular open space where many passers-by every day; hence this taught provoking artwork can be seen as performing aesthetic function as well as sending meaningful messages to the society. The sculptural piece was made by the crew of ten (10) Artists who participated in the modeling of the work, as well as casting processes from Iponri studio, Lagos led by Abu Junna.

Plate 6 is the statue of Eyo Masquerade in Lagos Island. The *Eyo* masquerade is so popular in Lagos. Such that the cultural history of Lagos will remain incomplete without *Eyo* masquerade. *Eyo* is a cultural festival restricted to the Island whenever the occasion arises for the *Eyo* masquerade to entertain people of Lagos. The *Eyo*

masquerade was to depict shapes by Francis Donedu, a Cubist stylistic Artistic that derives pleasure in making metal construction by using basic shapes. There are also Lagos White-cap Chiefs’ (Plate 5) statues at Ojodu-Berger. White cap and wrapper is the dress code and symbol of a high chief in Lagos. The whitecap is shown to flow to the back of the left shoulder of the chief. The chiefs are well dressed, with beads on their necks. These three figurative sculptures usher motorists in and out of Lagos State. For over a decade when these statues were unveiled, they have become a symbolic identity to Lagos built Environment. The hands expression, as depicted by these figures is salutation among the chiefs in Lagos. The white colour painted on the objects connotes the aquatic splendor of Lagos.

Togetherness (Plate 7) is a group of wooden sculpture erected at *Ile-Zik* roundabout, which is located between Ikeja-along and *Mangoro* Bus/Stop. The objects are arranged interestingly in circular form that gives a rhythmic visual art flow that catches attention of passers-by.

This abstract work suggests putting heads together or dialogue by human being in order to resolve issues. It could also be a representation of human beings in unity, love and harmony. The inscriptions on the objects are symbols and motifs that are common features in Lagos State. There are also maps of twenty Local Government Areas of Lagos State depicted on the objects. The art pieces were erected in 2017 as environmental sculpture to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishing Lagos State. The sculptural piece was carved by a group of Artists whose names were not known at the time of this study.



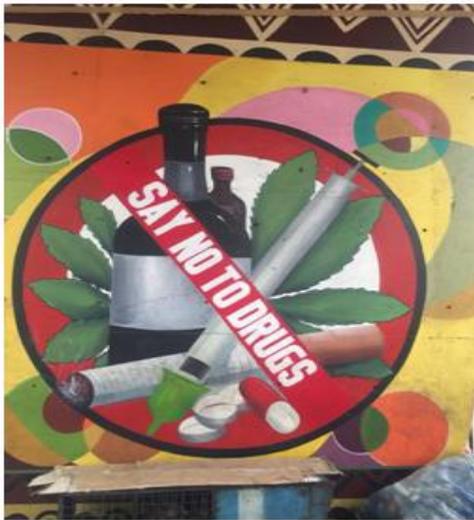
Plate.1

Title: Socio-cultural Activities  
Medium: Enamel paint  
Location: Law School’s Wall  
Artist: Road-side Artist



Plate.2

Title: Fatai Rolling Dollar (Highlife Musician)  
Medium: Enamel paint  
Location: Under-bridge Ojuelegba  
Artist: Road-side Artist



**Plate.3**  
 Title: Say NO to Drug  
 Medium: Enamel paint  
 Location: Under-bridge Ojuelegba  
 Artist: Road-side Artist



**Plate.4**  
 Title: Street Hawking  
 Medium: Enamel paint  
 Location: Under-bridge Ojuelegba  
 Artist: Road-side Artist



**Plate.5**  
 Title: Lagos White-cap Chiefs  
 Medium: Fiber Glass  
 Location: Ojodu Berger  
 Artist: Unknown



**Plates.6**  
 Title: Eyo Masquera des  
 Medium: Metal Construction  
 Location: Lekki Penisula Roudabout  
 Artist: Francis Donedu



**Plate.7**  
 Title: Unity  
 Medium: Wood  
 Location: Ile Zik, Ikeja  
 Artist: Unknown



**Plates.8**  
 Title: Late Madam Efunroye Tinubu  
 Medium: Fibre glass  
 Location: Tinubu Square, Lagos Island  
 Artist: Unknown



Plate.9

Title: Courage  
Medium: Fiber Glass  
Location: Lekki Round-about  
Artist: Universal Studio Crew



Plate.10

Title: Empowerment  
Medium: Fibre glass  
Location: Yaba Round-about  
Artist: Abu Jinna and group

## CONCLUSION

The study highlights artistic expression displayed in different locations to beautify and preserve cultural values in Lagos State. The general overview of sampled works retraced historical events and people in Lagos while other works reveal the need to keep alive our socio-cultural responsibilities as good citizens of Nigeria. From this study, it could be how artworks have brought out the aesthetic values in the environment. The study reflects on different places in Lagos State that are decorated with environmental art in order to preserve cultural artistic values. Some of these places were previously known to be hideout for criminals and refuse dumping sites, but now have been aesthetically transformed. The displays of visual arts in public places can be said to have improved the level of visual literacy in Lagos State as people can now benefit from the social and cultural importance of the built environment.

Arising from the foregoing, environmental Art have brought out aesthetic values in Lagos State which subsequent administration has always improved upon. In this regard, this study recommends that Lagos State Government should employ the services of visual Artists to produce more artworks to add beauty to the entire State. If adopted, this will help improve visual literacy among the people.

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