

African Art Studies in Kenya

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While I acknowledge crucial art spaces outside of, but at times in conversation with, Kenya's university framework, such as Kuona Trust, Watatu Paa ya Paa, the GoDown Arts Centre and Twaweza Communications, this paper serves as a preliminary inquiry into the divide between apparent higher education infrastructure and the dearth of conventional academic art scholarship being produced in Kenya. The objective of this contribution is to draw attention to and inspire increased participation in African Art Studies at African-based tertiary institutions. I applaud the advances being made by African scholars and pay tribute to these pioneers in the emerging field – Kojo Fosu, Olu Oguibe, Okwui Enwezor, Salah Hassan, Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, Rasheed Araeen, Kwame Anthony Appiah and others too long to catalogue here – discussing African art from diverse perspectives, including history, aesthetics, iconography, modern and contemporary art and philosophy. To this already canonised group of scholars, I must add local trailblazers, such as Peterson Kamwathi, Kimani Njogu, Magdalene Odundo and Alvin Wahora. Indeed, there is an urgent need to begin to document the narratives accompanying art works and to create a resource of Kenya's artistic heritage for later research and analysis beyond the display and sale of art.

African Art History as a discipline inhabits a relatively disempowered space in Kenyan tertiary institutions. The subject continues to be subsumed under general theoretical background knowledge to studio art courses as it was taught in the 1950s and subsequent years. Those who teach art history are painters, sculptors and graphic designers who acquired art historical knowledge as part of their studio training but not as research experts, making them unqualified and many times uninterested in devoting full attention to in depth scholarly endeavors. Remaining part of studio art and lacking dedicated art history departments, students are not trained to interrogate the art of their people, to integrate the views and opinions of traditional artists, to review and reinterpret 'traditional' ideas within modern and contemporary settings and to imagine, implement and apply models and theories for the study of Kenyan and African art. Moreover, while art history has yet to be recognised as a discipline in universities, departments of fine arts or design, as well as history, archaeology, sociology and anthropology, also have not taken interest in setting up programmes to study African art. The resultant knowledge gaps between artistic production and studies in African art speak volumes.

This divide has profound implications for students, whose lack of exposure to art – materials of production, philosophies, terminologies, local knowledge – regrettably has made students and local scholars dependent on non-African colleagues for research on Kenyan art. Indeed, higher education institutions do not offer the kind of support that makes the cost of travel, training, books, journal subscriptions and conference participation affordable, placing

Kenyans at a disadvantage in participating in such global discourses.¹ Moreover, local emphasis on practical studio training means that students from these institutions of higher education are ill equipped to engage in such discourses.

Rather, the role of the artist in Kenya is acknowledged widely as being one situated within industry and commerce. The fact that courses at the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University are skewed toward applied and industrial art, supposedly meeting the needs of the economy and industry, speaks to the limited terrain imagined for the artist, as well as African art centred knowledge. Gleaning through a few long essays and dissertations of masters degree students, it becomes clear that they are largely collaborative projects with industry. The former Chair of the Fine Art Department of Kenyatta University, George Vikiru, agrees that the works produced by students are not 'real theses' that include all the analytical and theoretical components of such an endeavour.² Similarly, Jennifer Wambugu, of the Kenya Institute of Education, lists inadequate lecturers, outmoded books, no clear method or approach to teaching art history and lack of appreciation from the Kenyan public as major contributing factors that explain the state of art history in higher education institutions.³ Designer Pido Odoch, also known as Dr John Peter Odoch of the University of Nairobi's School of the Arts and Design, adds further insight, noting lack of funding, appreciation of art history in the National Museum and in the broader society and the chauvinistic division of East African historians depending on their biases and interests. Moreover, respondents pointed to the absence of institutional support in prioritising a culture of research, writing and publishing, donor and commercial driven art projects for trade and tourism, poor funding for field research, nonexistent academic resources, apathy, the perception of art as *jua kali*,⁴ staff teaching overload and the difficulty in developing new courses in universities. Inadequate resource materials, limited objects in museums and galleries, lack of pioneers and mentors and low public interest also were seen to play a significant role in the marginalisation of art history in universities and beyond. Sadly, it is difficult to change this perception and situation, and the art market, though competitive, provides a regular and sustainable financial support for artists.

The profitability of commercial art attracts many artists to work towards monetary gains outside of higher education. Zeddy Rop of Kenyatta University is of the view that Kenyans 'Focus on money making of art such as practical art ... Kenyan art has been based on practicals with no theory.'⁵ The drive has been on the moneymaking ways of art such as the practical aspects. This is detrimental to research, which offers less financial reward. Ken Kamau, a professional artist trained at Kenyatta University, offers further insight into the realities of the terrain explaining, 'I sometimes paint according to the dictates of the galleries and my clients.' The reason Kamau gave for this is he has to 'put bread on the table.'⁶ The commercial aspect of art was expressed consistently among the sixteen lecturers, policy makers and art enthusiasts interviewed in May-July 2012. Odoch says 'Kenyan art historians

¹ Chika Okeke-Agulu discusses similar problems in Nigeria in 'Art History and Globalization,' *Is Art History Global: The art seminar*. Ed. James Elkins, 2006, p 203.

² Personal interview with George Vikiru, Nairobi, December 2010.

³ Personal interview with Jennifer Wambugu, Nairobi, June 2012.

⁴ 'hot sun work'

⁵ Personal interview with Zeddy Rop, Nairobi, June 2012.

⁶ Personal interview with Ken Kamau, Nairobi, December 2009.

spend most of the time looking for bread and butter.⁷ This trend is disturbing as it reinforces certain long held negative notions about Africans and smacks of a ‘naive art’ methodology.

In this twenty-first century, we are confronted with the problem of how to adapt, modify, transmit and use traditions in a spectrum of ways and forms in order to understand our past, to learn lessons from it and to provide guidance for the future. We need to bring all sources of information – tangible and intangible, traditional and modern, oral and written – together in a comprehensive critical methodology that can be used to study and represent the art of Kenya. There must be a new method of integrating formal studio art, traditional art, African Art Studies, language, technology, economy, philosophy, music, performance, governance, objects and their respective historical contexts, narratives and content to establish the interconnectedness in Kenya. The present method of teaching art ignores the complimentary roles of philosophy, aesthetics, religion and other knowledge systems that accompany them. Being a relatively new field of study, experimenting with methods and strategies, what is the way forward for African Art Studies in Kenya? What techniques should be used or privileged to unearth new information, reinterpret old knowledge and seek new sources to provide a better understanding of Kenya’s art? How can we better articulate and engage with Kenyan art? What role has it played in the past and what roles can we imagine for the future? What directions are available for African scholars committed to contributing to the discipline? How can Kenyans bridge the gap between practical art and scholarly criticism?

⁷ Personal interview with Pido Odoch, Nairobi, July 2012.