

# Art of Friendship

By  
Oji Onoko

It was a year of intense activities for the National Gallery of Art (NGA). It began on an intellectual note with the maiden Nupe Art Conference/Exhibition which took place in the ancient city of Bida, Niger State. Traditional artists from the nooks and crannies of the old Nupe kingdom displayed different works ranging from paintings, sculptures and textiles to the admiration of all present. The highpoint of the event was the lecture, titled, "Nupe Arts: A Renaissance" delivered by the Secretary, Nupe Culture & Resource Centre, Bida and Head, Research & Documentation, Governor's office, Minna, Dr. Ndagi Abdullahi who asserted that the ancient Nupe people were not just the masters of Arts, but were by and large the originators of the Arts of ancient Nigeria. "The ancient Nok culture is now being discovered to have had its epicentre, and origin located in the Greater KinNupe of former times whence the culture actually spread to the Jos Plateau area where it is now associated with Kwai and Jos Tin mines!" he declared.

This was followed by the annual NGA Children's Day Art Competition which drew pupils and students from the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) to the Women Development Centre, venue of the occasion in Abuja and the 22 state capitals of Nigeria where NGA has offices. The children had a swell time displaying their talents in all aspects of visual art and performance.

Then came "Art of Friendship" initiated in 2012 as a platform for Nigerian artists to cross-fertilize ideas with their counterparts from other nations through their embassies in Nigeria. The "Art of Friendship 2" the second in the series involved Nigeria and four other countries- Republic of Czech, France, Italy and South Korea. The exhibition which took place at the FCT Archives and History Bureau witnessed an impressive crowd which included the Minister of Tourism, Culture and National Orientation, Chief Edem Duke, Director-General, NGA, Abdullahi Muku, management and staff of the Gallery, the Ambassadors of the participating countries and their Cultural Attaches, artists residing in Abuja and numerous foreign and local art lovers. There were 40 works of art on display, comprising paintings, mix-media, drawing, sculpture and printmaking.

The Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Centre, Abuja later played host to the NGA 5th National Visual Arts Competition/Awards in the Primary, Secondary, Tertiary and Professional categories. The exhibited works showed great promise from the budding artists. The winners were rewarded with cash prizes as incentive to do more and a motivation for others to strive for excellence.

The train then moved to Kaduna for the second edition of the NGA in-house exhibition, tagged, "Together Again" at the Nigeria Air Force (NAF) Club with the apt theme of peaceful co-existence and unity among Nigerians. The exhibiting artists were more than grateful for the opportunity to showcase their works by NGA. The Art Fair was inaugurated by NGA last year in a deliberate move to encourage professional artists in its employ to produce works for public exhibitions thereby sharpening their skills and developing bodies of works just like their peers in studio practice. The Art fair equally took place in Enugu for most of the NGA artists in the South East zone. Elated by the quality of the 42 works on display by the 32 in-house artists, the NGA Director General who sees the initiative as a balancing act, stated: "As reflected in the creative evidence before our very eyes, these artists who have never faltered in their daily administrative duties have also not forgotten all it takes to keep the sustenance of their professional discipline in motion and tempo."

But the peak of it all for NGA this year was the unveiling of the Abuja Biennial Logo at the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua which heralds the hosting of the Abuja Biennial in the last quarter of 2015 in the Federal Capital. According to Barrister Hipo Onwuegbuke, Board Chairman, NGA, the logo is not just a design but a symbolic representation of a global convergence of artists, art scholars, enthusiasts and more on the city of Abuja. The Minister of Tourism, Culture & National Orientation, Chief Edem Duke put it succinctly: "The unveiling of the Abuja Biennial Logo is just a route; a modest ceremony laden with expectations of the eventual creative enterprise. Beyond the unveiling lies the actual Abuja Biennial, a global event that will assemble the best creative minds from all over the world on the soil of Abuja. The Biennial opens the double window of opportunities to international artists, tourists and patrons whose presence and patronage are capable of energizing our economy."

On a somber note, however, 2014 was also a year that NGA lost some of its dedicated and hardworking staff. There was the burly but jolly good fellow, Mr. John Elisha Inja, an Assistant Chief Research Officer and Curator, Jos, Plateau State; Mrs. Clara Joel Ifejola, a Higher Executive Officer based in Minna, Niger State, who died during childbirth; Mr. Yakubu Jamilu, an Admin Officer 11, in Lafia, Nasarawa State and Mr. Idikwu E. Ikande, a Higher Technical Officer in Minna, Niger State. But the most tragic was that of Mr. Yakubu Mohammed, an Admin Officer 1 in Lafia, Nasarawa State whose entire family-wife and two young children- were wiped out in a collision with a tanker on the Lafia Akwanga road on their way to celebrate the last Sallah in his home town of Mama, Wamba LGA...

We can only wish them eternal rest.

*Onoko is Assistant Director, PR/Media at the National Gallery of Art*