

NGA: Looking Back, Marching Forward

By Oji Onoko

The unveiling of the Abuja Biennial logo by the National Gallery of Art (NGA), in December last year marked the climax of its series of activities and programmes in 2014. It was year in which the parastatal went all out to realize its mandate-promotion of visual art in Nigeria. On the logo, the Minister of Tourism, Culture & National Orientation, Chief Edem Duke said: "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. I implore you to regard this official logo unveiling as the beginning of a bigger global event that has the capacity to contribute immensely to the larger pool of economic diversification."

According to 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. "Abuja Biennial is designed by NGA as a bi-annual artistic fiesta to draw participation of artists from Nigeria, Africa and other parts of the world in response to yearnings of the Nigerian Visual art Community," he explained, adding: "one of the objectives of the Biennial is to create awareness and a platform to reposition Nigerian art among the comity of nations and galvanize our overall national development. The Abuja Biennial was mooted by the NGA as convocation of productive and prodigious creative minds from all over the world so that artists of the finest stock will converge in Abuja with the sole aim of cross-fertilizing diverse creative emotions for the benefit of our Tourism and Creative industry."

Billed to hold in November this year, the Abuja Biennial is an event most Nigerians both in the visual art sub-sector and the general public will be looking forward to.

Of equal significance was *The Art of Friendship 2* held in 2014, another dimension of NGA's numerous media of showcasing, promoting as well as projecting the contemporary material culture in Nigeria which is endowed in modern Nigeria visual arts. It was initiated in 2012, as a platform for Nigerian artists to cross-fertilize ideas with their counterparts from other nations through their embassies in the country. *Art of Friendship 2*, the second in the series involved Nigeria and four other countries- Republic of Czech, France, Italy and Korea. The exhibition which took place at the FCT Archives and History Bureau, Abuja had 40 works of art on display, comprising of paintings, mix-media, drawing, sculpture and printmaking. Nigeria's works for this exhibition were some of the best of our national collection with artists cutting across the six geo-political zones of the country, of different generations, schools, movements, training and styles, all embedded in the philosophy of "natural synthesis." There were names like Kolade Oshinowo, Kunle Adeyemi, Jimoh Buraimoh, Olu Ajayi, Mufu Onifade, Monday Akhide, Mu'azu Sani, Abiola Idowu and Kaltume Gana to mention but few. According to Abdullahi Muku, DG, NGA, the exhibition was a forum to use cultural fiestas to preach the message of peace while Ngozi John-Uyah, the Curator of the exhibition sees it as "a cultural conversation between five countries, from three continents speaking in one voice." Another edition holds this year.

The maiden Nupe Art Conference/Exhibition which held in Bida, Niger State was equally striking. The well-attended event was hosted by the Etsu Nupe, HRH Dr. Yahaya Abubakar at his palace. The topic, "Nupe Arts: A Renaissance, had the guest speaker, Ndagi Abdullahi declaring that the ancient Nupe Arts was the origin of the famed Nok Culture, the

Ife figurines and the Benin Art all rolled into one! “The ancient Nupe people were not just the masters of Arts, but they were by and large the originators of the Arts of ancient Nigeria,” he posited, adding: “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!”

Quoting authorities to buttress his claim, he stressed that when Prof. Leo Frobenius first came across the Ife figurines in Yoruba land, he rightly predicted that the original centre of production of these figurines must be up North in the KinNupe general area since there was not any institutionalized background for the so called Ife figurines in Yoruba land and that Prof. Alan Ryder demonstrated far back in 1965 that the so called Ife bronzes are actually Nupe bronzes “since and as he proved, the ‘Ife bronzes’ were actually produced by the Nupe people!”

But why did the emerging arts of Nok culture, Benin masks and Ife bronzes become so popular while Nupe Arts which was the cradle remained at best obscure? Abdullahi was silent on this. This is a subject art scholars, critics and historians may interrogate at this year’s edition...

The children were not left out of NGA’s activities as the annual Children’s Day Celebration/Art Exhibition took place at the International Women Centre, Abuja and the 22 states of Nigeria where NGA has offices. The children at the various centres displayed their talents in painting, drawing and performance art. The works on display on the theme, “Say No to Child Labour” showed that even at their young age they are repulsed by child labour and want a stop to it.

At the International Conference Centre (ICC), Abuja, in December, the children also had a swell time courtesy of NGA. Tagged, “Rainbow Art Children Expression,” with the theme, “Unlocking Creativity-Christmas through the eyes of the child,” the event was geared towards stimulating values, identifying talents, motivating parents to love art and encouraging young ones to choose art as a career.

The Fair featured seven segments: Art Competition, Folktale, Face Painting, Hat Making, Bead Making, Head Tying and Cartoon Characters. Each category had specific tasks for the children to bring out their innate talents. According to the Director, Educational Services, Dr. Evelyn Otaigbe, the seasoned-themed, “Children Arts Expression and Exhibition” seeks to engage the mind of the child in more ways than one. “Children learn more through play and we believe these festivals like Eid- el-Kabir, Easter, Christmas and Eid-el- Malud would be great opportunities to interactively engage our children’s minds with a reflection on lessons about the season. It is also an opportunity to teach civics, artistic expression and creativity and through that get the best of the child in terms of the essence of conflict resolutions, role playing, core essence of the arts and learning using artistic mediums.”

Otaigbe added that the Fun fair is NGA’s opportunity to be more involved in the community in its charity outreach. “We intend to bring our children from the orphanages to enjoy this day, with other children. We are not simply going to pay them a visit at their own domain, but bring them to join us and participate at the program. This is our way of giving back. Through this, their own minds can also be stimulated, and they develop a curiosity and interest. We are unraveling these minds and giving back to the community through arts education.” There is thus great expectation for the 2015 edition.

NGA also had Art Fairs in two geo-political zones: North-West (Kaduna) and South East (Enugu).

Going through the mounted works inside the Conference Hall of Nigerian Air Force Club, Kaduna, the guests praised the quality and NGA for choosing the theme, “*Together Again*” which captured the mood of the nation. As the Chairman, Governing Board, NGA,

Barrister Hipo Onwugbuke represented by Hajia Aishatu Adamu, also a member of the Board, put it: "Art is here again calling our attention to what we do and what we need to continue to do that will guarantee our unity and peaceful co-habitation. On the other hand, the theme *"Together Again"* is a positive challenge that must be embraced without prejudice."

In all, 69 works were exhibited by 44 artists. Summing the feeling of the artists on the platform provided by NGA, Temidayo Odutokun, who is with the Kaduna office says: "It's a good way to showcase our works, to keep us in practice and to also document art." 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 same sentiment was expressed by the artists who participated in the Enugu exhibition, tagged, *"Together Again 2"*. The artists showed good grasp of their various media, a tribute to the vision of the Director General of NGA, Abdullahi Muku who initiated the Art Fair two years ago to provide them a window to practice and display their works beyond their normal schedules.

This year, the Art fair train moves to other geo-political zones...