



Dr. Tolulope Oladimeji Sobowale *teaches sculpture and art history at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ibogun Campus, Ogun State, Nigeria. His research interest is in the area of contemporary issues in Nigerian art with particular interest in figural representation and welded metal art. He is a member of Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA), Society of Nigerian Artist (SNA), Lagos Studies Association (LSA) and member Best of Ife.*



Dr. Okunade Adeyinka Michael is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife. He bagged his B.A. in Fine Arts (1990), M.F.A. in Ceramics (1997), and M.Phil. (2018) at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

His academic contributions include numerous journal articles on Nigerian art, ceramics, and architecture. Notable publications include works on traditional pottery, climate-responsive architecture, and outdoor pottery sculpture. Okunade is a member of several professional bodies, including the Society of Nigerian Artists and the Arts Council of the African Studies Association.

In addition to his teaching and research, Okunade has actively participated in various exhibitions and creative projects. His work extends to community service within the university, where he has held roles such as financial secretary and treasurer of Awovarsity CICS Ltd. His research interests focus on the revitalization of traditional Yoruba pottery and contemporary ceramic practices among others.



Dr. Abejide Foluso Modupe, Lectures at the department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile - Ife, Nigeria, where she had her bachelor of Arts degree, Master's of Fine Arts and later her doctorate degree in African Arts Studies from the same University.



Dr. Siyanbola Afeez Babatunde has a Ph.D. in Graphic Design from the Department of Industrial Design, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria. He had his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in the Department of Industrial Design (Graphic Design Option) Federal University of Technology Akure, Ondo State Nigeria. His research is focused on interface design, user experience, photography and branding. He has presented research papers at conferences and published in journals both locally and internationally. He is a photography enthusiast and brand consultant. He also strives to support small scale enterprises with design solutions that enhance the market performance of their products. He takes graphic design courses in the Fine and Applied Art department of Olabisi Onabanjo University Ogun State. He is a member of Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) and other relevant associations. Dr. Afeez Siyanbola is currently a Postgraduate Fellow at Department of Visual Communication and Design, Buckinghamshire New University.

ANIMAL AS METAPHOR IN MURAINA AKEEM'S WELDED METAL SCULPTURES

Authors:

Dr. Tolulope Oladimeji Sobowale,

*Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria
sobowale@oouagoiwoye.edu*

and

Dr. Okunade Adeyinka Michael,

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

and

Dr. Abejide Foluso Modupe,

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

and

Dr. Afeez Babatunde Siyanbola,

*Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria
afeez.siyانبola@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng*

Abstract

The use of animal as metaphor is synonymous with African art and believe system that has continued to exist despite the effect of Western contact. Animal motifs feature in the artistic traditions of the Ashanti, Bamileke, Benin, Nok, and Yoruba people among others. The use of animal in art is link with mystical power associated with each of the animal used. Foreign contacts with the African artists have

really influenced their artistic creativity, which has reflected in the form, materials, theme and techniques. In Nigeria, despite cross Atlantic influence, contemporary artist still reflects their cultural background in their works. Muraina Akeem, a contemporary welded metal sculptors in Nigeria explores animal as his subject matter and yet there is a dearth of information about him and his creative art in scholarly works. This paper therefore discusses his medium, techniques and content with a view to documenting his efforts and contributions to the development of contemporary welded metal art practice in Nigeria. A few of his works are purposively selected as they relate to the context of the study. To achieve this, both primary and secondary methods of data collection were employed.

Key Words: *Animal, Motif, Metaphor, Welded Metal, Sculpture.*

Introduction

Contemporary art in Nigeria is characterized by dynamics of change and continuity and the shift in traditional styles became inevitable due to the flux of foreign ideas, which ultimately influenced all aspect of the people's life. According to Filani (2005) contemporary Nigerian art can be said to have been mainly defined by the formal school system which came in as a result of the spread of western education. The exposure to western education by many Nigerian art students gave them the access to academic training that broadened their knowledge and scope in the theory and practice of art. The exposure to western education also gave them access and knowledge in the use and experimentation of foreign materials cum techniques to achieve personal expressions in their artistic works.

From the ancient time, traditional African artists used animal motif as metaphor and other devices of representation as vehicles of expression, by using animal characters to define human values and encourage thinking about human social disharmonies. As such, the animals most often found in African art are those that are most familiar or those through which irony and paradox are most tangible. Moreover, given animals suggests different things to different groups of people in Africa. Animals in African Art therefore, celebrates African cultural diversity as well as the brilliance with which ideas are given form through plastic art with emphasis on metal.

In modern time, forms, meaning, and essence in their sculpture (with emphasis on welded metal art) varied from the focus in the works of traditional artists, which is linked with spiritual and mystical interpretations. Presently, the works are used as a metaphor to communicate and reflect contemporary issues in the society as against the meaning and purpose of using the motif in the traditional time.

The artist's medium of expression (welded metal sculpture) came into limelight through a Spanish artist called Julio Gonzalez who used the skill in the artistic possibilities of new materials and a new method borrowed from industrial technology, to construct welded iron sculpture in 1927, Osborne (1970), Gardner (1976) and, Andrews (1983). In 1930, Gonzalez new art caught the interest of his contemporary period, Picasso then asked him for technical assistance, and the two of them created welded iron structures that resembled Gonzalez's work. Consequently, from this time, this new found technique (of welded metal) marked the emergence of a major modern medium in sculpture and was thereafter preferred to the old

ways of making sculpture out of metal and the influence began to spread from Europe to America and latter to other parts of the world.

In Nigeria, modern welded sculpture came into limelight in 1963 through a second year National Diploma (ND) student of Yaba College of Technology, in Lagos by name; Victor Uwaifo. Uwaifo, ventures into using metal junk (from auto mobile) in execution of his (ND) project titled "Saxophonist" in plate 1 (below), at Yaba College of Technology, in Lagos. The trend has continued to flourish, resulting into various forms, themes, styles and approaches. Uwaifo's saxophonist is currently housed at the School of Art, Design and Printing, Yaba College of Technology Museum. Prior to Uwaifo's saxophonist, metal is known to be part of physical accompaniment in house project featuring in particular as buglers and rails on building through the Afro-Brazilians (Sobowale 2023).



Plate1: Saxophonist

Source: Muraina Akeem

The use of welding in making metal sculpture continued to give the sculptors more discoveries in their experiments and from it, the artists were beginning to create assemblages. Assemblages are works, which were composed by joining separate objects and

materials, in direct opposition to academic idea that a sculpture must be a homogeneous object of stone, bronze, or wood. Gilbert (1942) in his own opinion defined assemblage as a technique of piecing individual segments or objects together to realize sculpture. Assemblage often came as a result of being able to convert or recycling discarded metals most especially from machines and auto parts and giving it a new life by assembling them together to form a sculptural piece.

Adeleye (2019) study documented Akeem Muraina's metal-morphosis, which involves experimenting with discarded and used metals to manage waste and become self-sufficient. The study also showcased the style, technique, and innovations used in the actualization of some sculptures produced, along with a brief analysis.

While Oligbinde, Orelaja, Solomon, Onigbara and Odunlami (2023) study focused on the manner in which wastes have brought attention to the necessity to properly care for the immediate environment. Engineers, environmentalists, campaigners, visual artist and even world leaders have always been deeply interested in the issues of waste contamination. The study aims to investigate the ways in which various Nigerian artists and engineers are utilizing their abilities and assets to protect and maintain the quality of life for local residents in the continuous fight against climate change.

Kayode (2006) study looked into how artists and other professionals developed interest with their ingenuity creative knowledge in giving new life to old discarded objects that constitute nuisance to the environment. Through the artist efforts, the society is saved from being vulnerable to environmental hazard. According to Mbonu-Amadi (2024) Muraina Akeen in his exhibition which marked his three

decades career as a studio artist delves deeply into the text, using the vividness of art to convey a spiritual understanding of Nigeria's faltering economy.

Recycling or conversion according to Filani (1999) is a creative improvisation, renovation and utilization of abandoned material which are recreated as new raw materials to satisfy artistic ends. He also mentioned the possible areas where materials could be converted for use with an example of the use of junk metals to recreate artistic forms. Filani (1984) notes that, the scenario, unknowingly results in challenges and therefore gives the artists the opportunity to be more creative and more inventive.

Corroborating the above, Ademuleya (1999) observes that the numerous inventions and discoveries made so far have not only made it possible for today's artists to be rich in variety of materials, using various possible media in producing his creative art, but it also served as a challenge to him as he began to see himself as part of the inventive process. The artist, according to him, experiment into such materials or other related materials creatively harnessed to be able to meet today's ever growing and changing needs. This statement is obvious in Muraina Akeem's work as it takes someone with a critical creative mind and, an inner eye (*ojú inú*) to be able to recreate these discarded but found objects into what could be seen and appreciated as a work of art.

Andrew (1983) notes that after World War II, arc welding became extremely popular among young artist. Perhaps this had something to do with the usefulness of welding in salvaging the broken debris of an industrial society and forming it into shape (welded sculpture) with new meanings. Thus, through assemblage, the artists were able to

resurrect and bring to life what seems to be a lively work of art from things regarded as useless and abandoned. This is highly reflected in the contemporary creative welded metal sculptures of Muraina Akeem in which he was able to combine and convert some automobile parts considered as useless into tangible art piece.

The nature of modern metal sculpture cannot be complete without adequately looking at the revolutionary and significant role played by the use of metal in the twentieth century art arena from Europe and America down to the other part of the world. Balogun, (2008) observed that the field of sculpture, due to the industrial revolution in Europe and America has been invaded by numerous media of expressing aesthetic form, and that metal, is a material explored for diverse creative essence to satisfied aesthetics demand especially through various processes of welding. He notes the wind of industrial revolution which blew across the western world in the eighteen centuries as having greatly revolutionized functionality of iron in different techniques and form for figurative purposes.

Muraina Akeem, a short biography

He was born in April 1966 and hails from Ibadan, Oyo State in Nigeria. He holds a Higher National Diploma in Sculpture from Yaba College of Technology in Lagos and a postgraduate degree in Technical Teacher Education from the Federal College of Education Technical, Akoka, Lagos. He is married and blessed with children. His interest in metal sculpting started in 1990 in his student days at the Yaba College of Technology where he had diligently understudied his lecturer Olu Amoda in metal sculpture.

After his study, he took up an appointment as a studio manager in the latter's Riverside Studio on Majoro Street, Onike Iwaya, Lagos. He taught Fine Arts briefly at St. Peter's Grammar School, Oyan in Òsun State during his National Youth Service Corp in 1994 and 1995. He was the general secretary of the society of Nigerian artist Lagos branch between 2003 and 2009. An active member of the Art Zero group, and a member of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation. He was a founding member of Sculptor Association of Nigeria (SCAN)

On returning to studio after his one-year teaching service in 1995, he went back to metal sculpting with the use of zoomorphic representation for his artistic theme to express and communicate his mind to the world about happenings in his environment. Muraina Akeem's adage, "Pay attention to what is lesser than you so that greater things in life can pay attention to you," captures the essence of his philosophy. This he has achieved in the use of what people regards as lesser things (junk, scraps and waste metal) of which after patience (*ifarabale*) and careful thinking (*aroinle*) couple with his inner eyes (*oju inu*) he was able to put life in them through his artistic skill (Lawal, 1974).

According to Uwaezuoke (2001), a glance at his work will surely evoke a cue to explain the thoughts behind each of the scrap images, and that his works is a call to the obtuse mind of the material-driven modern man. He prides himself on his giant strides in technology but seems strangely oblivious of the fact that he has upset the natural balance that not only maintains his environment but also guarantees his very existence.

For the realization of infrastructural development, trees have to be cut down and thereby deprived the environment its source of oxygen.

Edu S.H., the Chairman, Nigerian Conservation Foundation commented on Muraina's images that "the crux of the matter in his work is stemming man's stupid and wanton devastation of his environment in the name of conquering nature" (2001).

Production Techniques

The production techniques involved in the making of the welded metal works of Akeem is direct arc welding. This is a process of joining two or more materials, usually metals, permanently to form a homogenous item. Arc welding is a type of **welding that uses a **welding power supply** to create an **electric arc** between an electrode and the base material to melt the metals at the welding point (Sobowale, 2015). The ends of the two metals that are to be united are subjected to heat, pressure or a combination of both and are brought to molten state. A filler (an electrode being a material used to produce a weld) is placed between the two molten metal parts to form a molten pool or weld puddle. On cooling, a strong permanent bond is formed between the two metals, thereby forming a joint.**

The emergence of arc welding into the execution of figurative welded metal art work as mentioned above has since added to the way and manner metal art works is been done. This new method is considered faster and less expensive compeered with forge and cast metal works, thus, this make many modern artists who are interested in the technique to adopt it for the production of their welded metal works this day.

Welded metal works as it is today require the use of various modern equipment's and tools. These, the artists are using for the execution of their creative welded metal works. The variant mechanical tools

require skill for it to function to the taste of the artist, therefore, the skill of an individual artist and interest on the materials and tools to be use will determine the outward appearance of his product.

In the cause of this study, a visit to Akeem's studio was made in order to have a first-hand knowledge on the process of his creative welded metal works, it was observe he relied in the use of arc welding machine as a major equipment in the execution of his works along with some tools such as hand grinder, wire brush, arc saw, hammer of various sizes, pliers, vise, plate cutter and other consumable materials such as metal sheet, rod of difference sizes was also noticed along with various found objects

Thematic Analysis of Muraina Akeem's selected works

In *Pains of the Loved One (horse portrait)* (Plate 2, next page), the love men generally bestowed on the horse is not a true love. Men uses horse only for their selfish end. They forcefully move the animal by pulling the belt and chains put on its mouth and neck through which it will be dragged to where it is not even convenient for the animal. Thus, such an act gives some pains and injury to the animal particularly when it is being led to war.



Plate 2: Pains of the Loved One (horse portrait)

Source: Muraina Akeem

The idea of the love showed to the horse could be likened to a Yoruba adage which says, *ife a fe adie ko de nu*. Man love for chicken is not a sincere one. Man's care and love to this animal at the end of the day is for him to see that the animal has good health and strength to achieve his self-centered desires. This type of love could also be likened to the manner people in corridor of power are relating with those working under them such as the civil servants among others.



Plate 3: A line for the Loved One

Source: Muraina Akeem

In "A Line for The Loved One" (Plate 3, above), the artist analyzes human emotions as they relate to their opposite sex by using a frog in this piece. Generally, in the night, female frogs comes out from their hiding to attract and chase the love of their opposite sex through the sound they make. It is how sweet and attractive the sound is to the opposite sex, waiting among the male frogs that will attract its feelings and quickly search for the one giving such a loved sound amidst several females beckoning for emotional recognitions. Once an approach is being made, the female frog will quickly back the male and left the scene before the male gets distracted. This again propelled the Yoruba saying "*oko won lode l'opolo fi gbe ti e pon*".

Likening the frog attitude with man, man also had a way they secure and protect the feelings for their loved one through marriage that will afford them to cohabit, and putting rings in the hand of their partner and prevent others from chasing their spouse. The frog attitude of making a choice amidst the jazz like sound from several others could also be compared to man's nature of getting attracted to a particular type of song as there are many musicians trying to get their music to people and every one of them as numerous as they are, have their own fans.



Plate 4: Orphans (hawk chicks)

Source: Muraina Akeem

In "Orphans" (hawk chicks) (Plate 4), the artist uses the piece of work to campaign against war. War leads to killing of several innocent souls that knew nothing about its cause. The occurrence of war have left many children to be orphans in our society particularly in the Northeast and some Southern part of Nigeria where bandit and terrorist and government forces clashed and killed themselves leaving some children to no parents to care for their needs, which will eventually dash their hope and bright aspiration in life.

Looking at the little hawks, one can see in them the feelings of neglects as they stand alone missing their mother. Their look probably suggest that their mother who supposed to understand their feelings and needs might have being fired by the hunter or might have being caught in the midst of tick fire during the cruel act of constant bush burning caused by human actions to the animals in their natural domains. Consequently, the artist is using this work in collaboration with the government campaign against the act of incessant bush burning in order to preserve the environment and its habitats.



Plate 5: For how long

Source: Muraina Akeem

In "For How Long", (Plate 5), a cow was depicted at rest supposedly seriously meditating on the cruel act of human to their life. Cow is among the animals that is being used by the people to cultivate the ground during planting season, the same animal will still be used to convey their load and harvested crop back home during harvesting. Despite the usefulness of the animal to man, they are still very unfortunate because when man is in need of meat, the animal (cow) comes first to their mind to slaughter in other for man to satisfy their wants. In this piece of artwork, the artist used it in comparison with what the retiree's experience during their active period. The retirees

in our society were used by their employers to accomplish goals during their active time in their separate places of employment, but as soon as they departed the service, they were swiftly forgotten and discarded when it came to anything positive. Many retirees have met an early death as a result of their employer's callous actions after they had reached the pinnacle of their abilities.



Plate 6: Too Close for Comfort

Source: Muraina Akeem

While in "Too Close for Comfort" (Plate 6), the artist carefully make use of discarded automobile and machine parts to form a seated cheetah, a fiery carnivorous animal. The animal was depicted seated and yet looking very fearful as no weaker animals should dear move closer than necessary to intrude in its life or looking down on the likely possibility of getting attack by the quietly posed fiery animal.

The artist is probably using the piece in Plate 6 to pass a message to the viewers that they should be mindful of their steps when getting unnecessary close to people or places that are being protected by law. Around us in our environment, laws were being made either by government or by individual to guide and protect their interest. When such law is being violated, the consequence is not always palatable as

it could lead such person to an unexpected situation, serious injury or loss of life. It could also lead to criminal penalties as fine, probation, community service and civil penalties such as damages, injunctions and, restitutions. There could also be administrative penalties, reputational damages and, employment consequences, loss of rights and privileges and financial implications.



Plate 6: Too Close for Comfort

Source: Muraina Akeem

“Vigilante”, (Plate 7, above) is another piece in which the artist expressed his passion in the use of what is believed to be a waste from automobile and industrial machine. The artist used his artistic creativity to make another savanna animal the Giraffe. This animal is naturally very tall and endowed with a very long neck that affords it the opportunity of gazing through a long range thereby giving it the chance of seeing the possibility of enemy from afar. The work is done to draw man attention to the importance of being conscious of man need in protecting and securing himself from foes. The work is made to alert people to how crucial it is for them to understand how to secure and protect themselves from threats. If man can be conscious of the coming danger, he will be able to prevent it and take all

necessary measures in making sure his protection of life and property is secured.

Basing on the foregoing, one will agree with Signature Beyong (2024) that Muraina Akeem's works intersect art and storytelling with a unique glimpse, where metal transcend its physical form to become a medium for the expressions of profound narratives and timeless truths.

Conclusion

Looking at the artist work, it is affirmed that these scrappy metal devices have a life of their own or even a kind of soul. A look at the creative welded metal art works from Akeem provokes a cue to explaining the underlying thoughts behind each of the scrap figures. The elements from which the sculptures were made from as said earlier has being discarded and considered useless with no life in them before they met another creator who through his creative skill has bestow on them a long everlasting life. In addition, the artist places more value on them by using them (the discarded found object) as a creative art piece.

Muraina's idea of using objects already rejected could be liken to the biblical saying of Jesus that "the stone rejected by the builder has becomes the head of the cornerstone" Matt. 21:24. This is true of the materials used by Muraina in the creations of his animal motifs, these items has already been thrown away as people believed that they were no more useful but only for them to come later and accept them with more interest in their present state as they were being seen as an expensive art works. Uwaezuoke (2001) asserts that his creative

idea has also helped the society to relieve the environment of so much scrappy untidiness through the artist means of recycling.

The contribution of Muraina Akeem to the development of welded metal sculpture in the modern art scene in Nigeria is therefore tremendous. His creativity in converting discarded auto parts to make welded sculptural pieces which are today in collections of people both home and abroad cannot be over looked, hence, his contribution to creative knowledge is worth mentioning and documented for future purposes.

The findings reported in this paper on the life and works of the artist have contributed to solving the problem of poor documentation in contemporary Nigerian art. Ikpakronyi (2007:1-2) has observes that the attitude of the Nigerian art historian in documenting the life and works of our outstanding professionals in art during their life time is poor. This has often forced them to rely on second hand information that may not be sufficient to discuss the artist and his works from friends and colleagues, newspapers, magazines, exhibition brochures and catalogues. These second hand information avenues can never give detailed information like the artist background, his works, techniques and style as well as concepts and theme of his works. This paper, however, was able to give adequate attention to such details.

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