



Jess Castellote, ed. *Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos Private Collections: New Trees in an Old Forest*. Gloucestershire: Bookcraft Limited, 2012. 302 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-978-8135-78-4.

Reviewed by Frank Agbiyoha Ugiomoh (University of Port Harcourt - Nigeria)

Published on H-AfrArts (November, 2013)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti

## Expanding the Art Historical Discourse in Contemporary Nigerian Art: Some Thoughts on Art Collection and Patronage

*Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos Private Collections* suggests in its subtitle—“new trees in an old forest”—the reality of an engaging artistic culture with enviable historical depth. However, the book’s preface makes clear that this art is in dire need of critical, historical exposure. Appreciating the value of contemporary African art presently requires readable interventions from allied fields of the humanities, such as art criticism, history, sociology, and aesthetics, to illuminate its shaded visibility. The book’s focus is on 249 works of art produced in the last twenty-five years by one hundred artists. This artwork is in the hands of approximately forty-eight private collectors who live in Lagos. The book adopts a tripartite periodization schema: pre-1955, 1955-65, and 1965 to the present.

An edited collection of four essays, the book opens with an essay authored by art historian dele jegede in which he highlights the institutional frames that host contemporary art as cultural practice. The frames, understandably, go beyond calling attention to infrastructural necessities to the identification of diverse temporal realities that are at the core of accomplished artistic practice—appropriate exposure of the artist, commodity valuation, and a hike in aesthetic awareness. For jegede, any earned accolade of a work of art begins in its cultural space and milieu, as they are the loci that accord it currency. Lagos, as he notes, has been and remains critical to the visibility of contemporary visual arts in Nigeria, a visibility driven mainly by private individuals and institutions. However,

two vital supports for the visibility of art—an engaging critical attention and support from government—wait actualization in Nigeria. The essay suggests readable trends among the artists and their work in the collections featured in the book, but ends with a cautionary note on the eclecticism and hybrid contexts characteristic of the development and practice of contemporary Nigerian artists.

The art of collecting artwork, the impetus for this text, is central to the outlook of an art world. This is the focus of the essays by the other three essayists, Jess Castellote, Tobenna Okwuosa, and Sammy Olagbaju. Each author approaches the idea of collecting art from a different trajectory, enriching the subject. For example, Castellote, an art connoisseur, categorizes the collectors as a “tribe” and repositions collectors in Nigeria as the real motivators of its art world. Of note is the reversal here of roles between the critic and the collector. Conventionally the critic canonizes the object as art for his or her art world. Castellote argues for the importance of the local collector given the social and economic history of art in Nigeria. Okwuosa, an artist, in his essay, gives a historical overview of art collection in Nigeria. The representational history that he provides encompasses the origin of the auction platform, its sustenance and monetary rewards, and major players and artists whose work has been featured among collectors before and after the art market in Nigeria became a recognized institution. Olagbaju, an avid art collector and the final essayist, brings personal experience to bear on

what it means to collect and relate to a work of art for its value as the material and spiritual testimony of a period and geographical space. The habit of collecting artwork develops slowly and often from the lure that the work itself instigates. Usually, a collector caught by the bug of acquiring works of art goes a step further to also commission work from artists. In the long run, he suggests that collecting in Nigeria remains a patriotic act toward building a national heritage. He goes further to indicate ways to encourage this phenomenon, specifically recommending the controlled promotion of outstanding masterpieces through endorsed prints of originals.

The artwork documented in the book provides some data on select holdings by members of the “tribe” of Lagos collectors, although the work is devoid of formal analy-

sis and contextual connections. This is the book’s major drawback. Its most compelling feature is to advance an agenda in historicity for Nigerian art. Historical authentication coupled with formal evaluation should make modern and contemporary work more of a collective heritage. This then is to say that the enigma of the image is dispelled, at least in part, with words. Renewed emphasis on the image in recent times increases the importance of formal analysis incorporating content to place it in historical context. Despite the aforementioned flaws, the book goes beyond a focus on iconography that has constrained the study of African modern and contemporary art. Thus the book’s attention to the central issues of art merchandise, patronage, collections, and collectors in Nigeria, it is hoped, will open art historical studies to accommodate the complexity of Nigeria’s art world today.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrarts>

**Citation:** Frank Agbiyoha Ugiomoh. Review of Castellote, Jess, ed., *Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos Private Collections: New Trees in an Old Forest*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. November, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36394>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.