

Visual Arts

Stories by Tajudeen Sowole

WITHOUT westernised preservation laboratory, a group of Osogbo-based Sacred Grove Artists appear to have perfected the art and science of sustaining aesthetics of old cultural works.

With the support of volunteers under Susanne Wenger Adunni Olorisa Trust (AOT), set up to manage the legacy of the Austrian-born artist and mentor, the Sacred Grove Artists are currently embarking on campaign of *Save Our Art! Save Our Heritage!* Part of the campaign to *Save Our Art! Save Our Heritage!* is an ongoing art exhibition scheduled to end in the first week of January at Wheatbaker, Ikoyi, Lagos. Most of the works on display are that of the New Sacred Art Movement artists, a group of loyalists who derive its professional callings from being beneficiaries of Wenger's mentorship. Recall that the group, in 2009, at Quintessence Gallery, Falomo, Ikoyi, showed *A Legacy of Susanne Wenger: An Exhibition of the Artists of New Sacred Art Movement*.

As commendable as the efforts of the Trust and the Sacred Grove Artists is in getting the damaged works at the site restored, observers would argue that preservation requires advance technique aided by digital technology to sustain a proper management of the works. But there is nothing to worry about. The artists, according to co-chair, *Save Our Art! Save Our Heritage!* Robin Campbell, need little or no such input; the traditional and native technique in preservation, which has been used for over several decades are still resilient. She disclosed that even, Julius Berger, a well-known expert company in cement came to the grove and assured that the artists were on the right track in restoration and preservation, "though gave the artists little advice." In cements, and with assistants of some of the artists, most of the sculptures in the grove, were originally produced by Wenger (1915-2009).

Having sustained a global tangible cultural status as well as institutionalisation of the matriarch, Wenger (1915-2009), the



Artists working on some of the works.

For Grove's Art, A Rescue Mission With Indigenous Expertise

iconic Osun Osogbo Grove, southwest Nigeria is, clearly, frantically being rescued from losing its artistic contents of over four decades. In 2005, the global body, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) conferred its prestigious Heritage Site on Osun Grove. But to sustain the cultural and artistic values of the site, the AOT is using the *Save Our Art! Save Our Heritage!* exhibition to raise fund and keep the works of restoration / preservation of the Grove alive.

Inside Rufkatu Hall, on the first floor of Wheatbaker, some of the over 100 exhibits were on display for preview shortly before a formal opening of the exhibition and auction. Arguably, *Save Our Art! Save Our Her-*

itage! is the biggest post-Wenger exhibition or art gathering in Nigeria. Also on display were works of non-members of the Sacred Grove such as photographer, Adolphus Okpara and painter, Polly Alakija. Two of Wenger's works: a batik donated to the event by, Berlin and a painting were also on display. The batik, a colourful print, according to Robin Campbell, co-chair of *Save Our Art! Save Our Heritage!* "will be on auction."

Chair of *Save Our Art! Save Our Heritage!* Mr Femi Akinsanya confirmed the eagerness of the old artists to train young ones. He noted how keeping the artists working at the grove require funding, Akinsanya said as a voluntary organisation, "there is a

limit to what we can offer." He hoped that the *Save Our Art! Save Our Heritage!* exhibition will help attract attention to the needs of the trust.

Basically, funding sustenance of the grove is a challenge, which AOT is facing. One would think that the UNESCO listing of the site provided an advantage to generate tourist destination - outside the yearly Osun Osogbo Festival - that could at least sustain the preservation of the grove. The tourism drive, according to Adesanya, was an ongoing effort, which includes working with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and government of State of Osun. He assured that "once the works of restoration are done at the grove tourism drive will be intensified."

Wenger, who spent most of her over 40 years residence in Osogbo adopted the Yoruba culture and native religion just as she organised workshops for the indigenous artists.

A Textile-Inspired Journey Of Void To Form On Adeshina's palette

WITH a background in textile design, Ademola Adeshina uses the canvas broadly by appropriating fundamentals of art creation. Late arrival of visitors to the opening of the artist's solo art exhibition titled *Void To Form* at the moderate lobby space at

Moorehouse Hotel, Ikoyi, Lagos, notwithstanding, Adeshina had at least one guest with whom to share his findings about genesis or basics of art creation.

In art parlance, content of forms such as styles and techniques are, perhaps, most often taken for

granted as the results of individual artist's skills in whatever chosen medium. But Adeshina argues that before a form is achieved, there comes a proper articulation and usage of the blank space known in technical term as 'void.'

Being a textile artist, Adeshina should know better about the transition from void to form in the intellectual journey of appropriating creative contents. "It's like a child, fresh with blank mind. Whatever the child grows up with becomes the basis for a formative period," Adeshina tells his only guest during a tour of the works on display. "The child's mind is represented in my canvas, preparing for the sketches and paintings."

Taking art of textile design from the mills onto the canvas as seen in Adeshina's rendition of blue hues such as *Family Circle*, *What Goes Round* and *Supplication* as well as multi-colours like *Proverbs -II*, *Eye Contacts* and

Symbols of Authority for examples afford a better appreciation of the depth of artistic contents in the end product that becomes fabric.

Apart from the artist's thematic focus on basics of transition from Void to Form, it's of interest seeing his walls accommodate non-textile art forms. In fact, portraits in stylised realism and semi abstract or impressionism are two other forms pronounced on display.

In compartmented faces such as *Fragments of Beauty*, *Nma (Beauty)*, *Olori (King's Wife)*, and *Oju Ewa*, an artist whose skills in design and patterns is very glaring, making the portraits appear like prints from the textile mills. Still on Adeshina's design skill as an asset, works like *Migration*, *Exodus*, *The Way We Are* and a collage of photograph cut out, *Perception* explain the strength of the artist in colour control. In vertical renditions, these works strengthens the eclectic textures

of Adeshina's exhibits.

Still on the diversity of the displays, two works: a core abstract *The Source* and a landscape, *Grazing* also expose the artist's quality across genres and themes. Specifically, *Grazing*, which attempts to meet classic form would hardly be pushed aside, particularly in the artist's toning of greenery against a poetic blue sky. For *The Source*, there appears to be a thin line between the form as an abstraction and capturing of a water sprouting spot.

Taking the concept of *Void To Form* beyond art space, Adeshina expands his thoughts, noting, "Maturity is the 'form' of expressing those values and morals, which is embedded in every human."

In his contribution to the brochure of *Void To Form*, Chief Adeniyi Adediran of Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho notes that the exhibition presents Adeshina "as a bundle of divergent talents".



A painting titled *Family Circle* by Ademola Adeshina