

Unleashing a New Renaissance in Nigeria's Visual Arts Sector, Boosting and Redefining the Nation's Creative Economy

By

Professor Frank Agbiyoha Omoh Ugiomoh, PhD. FSNA; FPACA AICA

Abstract

Every age is a modern – a new beginning, a departure from previous orthodoxies. What marks newness in ongoing temporalities includes exploring unique and alternative ways of engaging old habits that foster existence and accompanying realities. Hence, situating Nigeria's creative economy within our contemporary realities, which are marked by numerous cultural innovations, is appropriate. These cultural modernisations involve transactional models that facilitate vast inter- and intracultural mingling, and what is more, these models make appropriations, parleys, negotiations, and purchases appear effortless, ensuring convenience and efficiency. Considering the above cultural scenario and its universal grounding, this paper features examples and grounds available to Nigeria's creative economy, which manifests as novel contractual platforms. The most important among these include various cybernetic cultural wins. Thus, creatives are at once glocal, a term that combines 'global' and 'local', indicating that they are globally connected and locally rooted in their cultural identity. The paper addresses the following pertinent questions: How exactly do the new transactional models work to enhance visibility and earnings for creatives in Nigeria? What specific examples of cybernetic cultural wins come to mind about Nigeria's creative economy? How can artists ensure they can adapt to these glocal and global demands while maintaining their unique cultural identity? Artists and creatives now learn new techniques for making, engaging in social interactions, and attracting patrons, as well as showcasing their talents and financial worth, all from the comfort of their homes and studio spaces. The above transactional models and realities all

translate to enhanced visibility and earnings for the contemporary player within Nigeria's creative economy. The future looks even rosier.

Introduction

A prefatory note to this paper speaks to the theme of its address, that is, the clause "unleashing" or to "unleash", which means to "give free rein to something". It is crucial to realise that contemporary culture projects and brings significant technological innovations that currently vitiate old orthodoxies or ways of actualising things. Such new technologies require discussing their values, merits, and demerits. While domesticating them for their values, we must explore ways to capitalise on their newness and contribute to shaping their improvement as models for future engagements. Such deliberate action or attitude coheres with contemporary cultural concerns regarding our engagements in culture within sustainable thinking and practices for a robust future.

What does it mean to claim to be modern? This question lies at the heart of our exploration. Understanding the concept of modernity is not just a theoretical exercise but a key to unlocking the potential of this paper. In his lectures at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, John Picton (2003) traces the word modern to a Latin origin in the word *modo*, which means "here and now" or "just now". This understanding draws attention to the zealous use of the word in the diverse circumstances operationalised in discussions. The reality in conventional understanding reveals that every age was once modern. It is a matter of consummate reason that there are collections of previous modernities within any modern era. Hence, the truthfulness of the word "contemporary" originates from the Medieval Latin term "contemporārius," meaning "existing at the same period". An assemblage of modernities in a given contemporaneity defines a particular "here and now", which stands as its modern consciousness or age. The role of technology in shaping improved models for future engagements is a source of hope and optimism in our exploration of modernity. A modern consciousness typically articulates a shift away from previous orthodoxies and traditional ways of achieving objectives and perceiving reality.

A Renaissance, or a rebirth of technical and habitual engagements, presupposes alternative and better ways of accomplishing tasks that reflect human progress or civilisation. The vogue in contemporary modernity zeroed in on digital/internet/cyber-culture. Cyber-culture, a term that refers to the culture that emerged from using computer networks for communication, entertainment, and business, is a significant aspect of contemporary modernity. Its concerns address the use of computer networks for communication, entertainment, and business; hence, it is reduced to a social condition, as human life in the contemporary world is increasingly influenced by digital reality. Specifically, the term "cyber-culture" as a theoretical concept gained prominence in the 1990s when researchers approached the internet from a culture-oriented perspective. Thus, the embrace of cyber-culture privileges plural dimensions that allow for shared attitudes, practices, and goals associated with the world of computers.

Nevertheless, it is a truth that new beginnings or renaissances do not always lead to effective cultural outcomes that aid the advancement of civilisations. Herein lies the crux of the matter and the focus of this paper. The paper aims to investigate the urgent need to embrace digital culture. By suggesting ways in which creative individuals and collectives can harness digital/cyberculture to bolster Nigeria's economy, we underline the importance of this topic. What, then, is digital culture? It encompasses the behaviours, practices, and values that evolve from the use of digital technologies, such as smartphones, social media, digital collaboration tools, innovation management, cloud infrastructure, and software that serve digital environments, which form the basis of the digital world, including the internet.

The value of digital culture outlined above raises important questions about our subject. How exactly do new transactional models, such as digital platforms and blockchain technology, work to enhance visibility and earnings for creatives in Nigeria? The potential of these technologies to revolutionise the creative economy should inspire hope for the future. What specific examples of cybernetic cultural wins impact Nigeria's creative economy? How can artists adapt to these glocal and global demands while maintaining their unique cultural identity?

A glance at the table below highlights the differences between traditional modes of cultural transactions known in Nigeria’s developing creative economy.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE DIGITAL CULTURE

	TRADITIONAL CULTURE	DIGITAL CULTURE
Communication & Collaboration:	Primarily in person or vis traditional media such as telephone	Predominantly digital, uses collaboration tools and not limited by physical proximity
Decision-making:	Typically hierarchical, with decisions moving from top to bottom	Often more democratic, facilitated by digital tools that gather input from a variety of sources
Learning and development:	Primarily structured, classroom-based training	Continuous self-directed learning typically facilitated by online resources
Innovation:	Usually slower due to limitations in collaboration and knowledge sharing	Faster because digital tools enable rapid prototyping, testing and iteration
Customer engagement:	Usually in person, via email or on the telephone	Often through digital channels, allowing for personalized, real-time engagement
Work:	Usually 9.00 am to 5.00 pm at assigned locations	Flexible, remote and decentered

Table 1. An Overview of the Differences between Traditional and Digital Cultures (Source: Kerner 2023)

Exploring unique and alternative engagement methods and technologies holds significant cultural value and significance. Adapting to new ways of doing cultural things involves aligning with a positive trend indicator.

Such newness implicates harnessing new knowledge for its worth as a testament to cultural growth and its appreciation. Untested and unembraced new knowledge breeds cultural sterility. After all, the word "technology," derived from the Greek word *techne*, refers to the application of skill and knowledge. Thus, the term implies what it has taken from humankind and what it will continue to take from humanity to utilise its psychobiological and physical attributes in bringing about a better society for humankind. Technology, then, defines human progress through time. From an artistic and historical perspective, new cultural devices mark time with greater accuracy, helping to segregate fluid, mobile time into identifiable cultural cleavages, durations, and spatial intervals. The cyber/internet culture is a new entrant in human ingenuity. The table above clearly shows its advantage against old orthodoxies. An overview of Nigeria's creative economy in contemporary realities presents a diverse range of genres and typologies. How they have fared and endured over time regarding their supporting technologies remains a core and pertinent aspect of this paper.

Historical Context of Nigeria's Visual Arts Sector

Nigeria's visual arts traditions possess enviable historical depths spanning over 8000 BC and counting. They possess culturally unique forms, embodying enviable aesthetic ideals, principles and histories. The birth of the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries heralded the emergence of philosophical modernism and its innovations. The era introduced technical advancements in machinery and industrial technology. The technology of the machine age depended on the skilful manipulation of devices. In other words, an overarching way of cultural production remained trapped in the analogue rituals and practices. Yet, Nigeria's visual arts and culture explored how analogue technology functioned within society as items of ritual engagement, as well as collective and individual items of prestige and adornment. In this guise, as products dependent on skilful dexterity and manipulation, they provided economic well-being for those who engaged in the trade, as well as bequeathing to the artists notable social status.

Evolution of Contemporary Visual Art Practices in Nigeria

Modern art in Nigeria aligned with the colonial enterprise, where Western Europe set out on a supposed civilising mission to other non-Western

civilisations. Unlike the strong-arm tactics of colonialism, modern art in Nigeria was born through the appropriation and ingenuity of Aina Onabolu, who embraced the Western art style that emerged from its academic tradition. Its forte was the veneration of reproductive verisimilitude or mimesis. On the other hand, ancient traditions of Nigerian art extolled stylised idealism, which Pablo Picasso appropriated. For Pablo Picasso, the African artist, approached his art and artistry from an uncommon creative ingenuity. He noted that while Western art had become trite due to its overreliance on realistic techniques, African artists engaged in creative dialogue with sensory images to create a unique formal outcome. He thus adopted the African artist's approach of creative dialogue with form to birth cubism. The intercultural dialogues and creative insights that Onabolu and Picasso engaged simultaneously offered a creative template that hosts contemporary world art and its impelling ideologies. Writing on "Modern Nigerian Art and its Trajectories" (Ugiomoh 2022, 189-195), I noted thus: The development of contemporary Nigerian visual arts in Nigeria benefited from [...] trained and self-taught workshop attendees. The products of workshops and formal academic traditions had distinct stylistic identities. Works by artists trained in traditional academies often reflected one of three styles: iconic or realistic, symbolic or abstract and nonrepresentational or speechless art. In comparison, artists trained in the workshops engaged mainly in representational and abstract styles [that emerged from auto mannerism] (p. 189).

The above broad stylistic outline accommodates discernable ideological and optical regimes that dovetail. Pertinent to the discernible trajectories in Nigerian visual arts development, the following formal regimes thus: 1. appropriation of Western academic style typified in Aina Onabolu's exploits and the entrenching of academic art traditions in Nigeria's education itineraries (late 1880 -present) (See Plate 1, Portrait of Dr. Sapara by Aina Onabolu). 2. anticolonial visual rhetoric and cultural nationalism (the 1950s-1970)see Plate 2, Romance of the Headload II by Solomon Wangboje. 3. Postcolonial and domestic colonial compassions, in the neo-romantic styles of Obiora Udechukwu and Gani Odutokun among others (1970-1990) (see Plate 3, Tycoon and Stevedores by Obiora Udechukwu and Plate 4, Police Brutality by Gani Odutokun). and 4. the diasporic visionaries of our contemporary era (1990 to Present).

Globalisation and Nigerian Visual Arts

The complexity of optical regimes characterises the visual arts of the contemporary era in Nigeria, positioning it as a significant player in the global art scene. Like every contemporaneity, the old, the not-so-old, and the new find space within its ambience. The concern of this lecture lies with the diasporic visionaries, a new entrant within the congeries of optical regimes in Nigeria's visual arts. For accurate dating, 1990 marked its debut. Interestingly, the period happened to mark an acute cyber/internet culture globally. Several cultural shifts contributed to its emergence, as previously noted in 2022.

In the late 1990s, young art graduates increasingly opted for professional studio practices. This trend was in contrast to the pioneering artists who taught them, having combined teaching with studio art practice. The rise contributed to the early professionalisation of young artists in visual arts programs at Nigeria's collegiate educational institutions. The number of visual arts programs increased from approximately five universities in the 1970s to twenty-nine programs at universities, nineteen at polytechnics, and fifty-six at colleges (Ugiomoh 2022, 193).

Ugiomoh noted further on the outcome of the burgeoning cultural turn of the late 1990s in Nigeria: This proliferation resulted in a creative outburst of styles and expressive methods after 2000, including a resurgence of traditional techniques, experimentation with new materials, and the exploration of digital art. A wave of global postcolonial environments and interculturality also gave rise to dynamic local and international art market institutions that encouraged diasporic inclusivity among artists. By 2014, works by Nigerian artists accounted for the majority of lots in auction sales in Lagos and London, at 57% and 81%, respectively. Thus, styles, themes, concepts and materiality spread across the iconic, symbolic, and conceptual genres (193). The Current State of Nigeria's Creative Economy

Theoretical Foundation

The visual arts function as a cultural good; hence, they equate to a commodity, according to Karl Marx in *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867). In Marx's theory, a commodity is bought, sold, or exchanged in a trade relationship. However, art is a unique good or commodity because it is not expendable like other goods. However, a

commodity has a use value and an exchange value. Pierre Bourdieu, influenced by Karl Marx's concept of economic capital, developed the concept of cultural capital to illustrate how individuals are defined by their personified, portrayed, and customary assets, in addition to their economic wealth and social class. The visual arts are well-positioned within the framework of symbolic capital. It is the grounds of supposition within Nigeria's creative economy and its organisation around individuals and institutions, such as private and institutional collectors, galleries, art auction houses, and art fairs. With such individuals and institutions, art possesses exchange values representing expended labour.

Nigeria is steeped in financialised capitalism in a neoliberal global economy. In the global creative economy, art world institutions, including art dealers, gallerists, artists, curators, museums, and government and private institutions, record significant measures of effectiveness. The above relevant structures in Nigeria's art world are vivid and function optimally. The visual arts sector of the creative economy, as indicated by available data from 2013 to 2017, shows an increase from \$3,401,266 to \$5,539,648. The above value pales in insignificance compared to the general global outlook controlled by the United States of America, with 2017 data from ArtPrice.com at \$2,604,000,000.

Nevertheless, a diverse mix of old and new artists demonstrates high performance in the global art market scene. A 2017 record shows Ben Enwonwu holding the record for being the highest-selling artist in Nigeria, having earned \$4,057,247 from fifty-three artworks, which translates to an average of \$76,552 per work. Yusuf Grillo follows with earnings of \$992,038 from fifteen artworks, showing an average of \$66,136 per work, and Peju Alatise earned \$118,409 from four works, amounting to \$29,602 per artwork. The above data and sales statistics are key to understanding the dynamics operating within the creative economy and how the sector fares. Personal incomes, adequately documented, provide growth indices crucial to national planning and strategies for growth within an economic sector. Personal incomes are a key indicator of the health of an economic sector. Only a handful of artists come within the valuation locating system of the nation's economic statistics. Such a situation is not sufficient for national planning and anticipated strategies to stimulate growth, develop necessary strategies based on statistical outlooks, and so on. Below are relevant

statistics that apply to the creative economy of visual arts. The data presented here remain provisional since they lack holistic values. Thus, institutions and steps are required to bridge the existing data assembling lacuna.

	Country	Turnover	Market share
1	United States	\$2,604,000,000	42%
2	China	\$1,674,000,000	27%
3	United Kingdom	\$1,178,000,000	19%
4	France	\$310,000,000	5%
5	Germany	\$62,000,000	1%
6	Italy	\$62,000,000	1%
8	Austria	\$62,000,000	1%
9	Nigeria	\$5,539,648	0.09%
10	Others	\$310,000,000	5%

Table 2. Geographical Distribution of Fine Art Auction Turnover in 2017 (Egwu & Ogoye-Atanga 2023, 355).

The above volume of global art market transactions places Nigeria's art trade in ninth place, behind other countries such as China, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Austria. This ranking is significant as it indicates Nigeria's position in the global art market and its growth potential. Other countries worldwide shared 5% of this volume of art trade.

The Nigerian Art Market at Auction (Value, USD)					
YEAR	Arthouse	Bonhams	Sotheby's	Others	
TOTAL					
2013	\$1,331,958	\$1,758,549	\$0	\$310,759	\$3,401,266
2014	\$1,012,967	\$1,318,047	\$0	\$481,098	\$2,812,112
2015	\$1,086,540	\$1,774,330	\$0	\$129,525	\$2,990,395
2016	\$1,333,915	\$2,263,001	\$0	\$198,008	\$3,794,924
2017	\$765,724	\$3,309,444	\$1,345,631	\$118,849	\$5,539,648

Table 3. Value of Artworks sold by Nigerian Artists at Auctions, 2017 (Egwu & Ogoye-Atanga 2023, 352).

Nigeria's earnings from art in 2017 of \$5,539,648 (approximately N1.84 trillion) placed against its N7.44 trillion budget equate to 4.025 % of Nigeria's budget. The art market institutions in Nigeria and the United Kingdom are the sources of the above data. These are the Nigerian Arthouse Contemporary, Terra Kulture, Mydrim Gallery, and the United Kingdom-based Bonhams and Sotheby's.

Three-Year Auction Sales of Nigerian Artists Across Major Auction Houses				
Auction House	2022 (GBP)	2023 (GBP)	2024 (GBP)	3-Year Total (GBP)
Bonhams	1,554,039	2,785,082	1,732,112	6,071,233
Sotheby's	1,422,540	696,309	770,608	2,889,457
Total	2,976,579	3,481,391	2,502,720	8,960,690

Source: GoudenFara
Note: Hammer price include premium

Table 4. Value of Artworks sold by Nigerian Artists at Auctions in the United Kingdom from 2022-2024 (Source: GoudenFara, May 2025)

In Table 4. Bonhams and Sotheby's sales data for 2022, 2023, and 2024 totalled (10,485,815,623.272) ten trillion, four hundred eighty-five billion eight hundred fifteen million, six hundred twenty-three thousand two hundred seventy-two Kobo. The data excludes deals from art dealers, direct sales from galleries, and Art X Lagos, a new entrant to the art market institutions in Nigeria. Also, only the top ten highest-selling artists account for the above data and earnings from the visual arts. Many activities centred on the creative economy also encourage tourists from one region or nation to another. Tourism is a significant source of wealth for many nations. Thus, the percentage of visual arts input into the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) remains underestimated, but it contributes meaningfully to the nation's earnings.

Despite the promising report, the creative economy in Nigeria faces grave challenges. Private institutions and individuals dominate the entrepreneurial space, while government support remains thin. The government owes the agencies within the creative economy space to provide an enabling environment for doing business. The current situation is concerning, and we must address these issues to ensure the growth and sustainability of Nigeria's creative economy.

Strategies for Boosting Nigeria's Visual Arts Sector

Considering the strategic location of the visual arts sector within Nigeria's creative economy, there is a clear need to explore significant avenues for its institutions (mainly private) and actors to become more productive. Nigeria is a nation without a national museum and gallery worth its status. In this regard, strategic avenues for cultural actions and activities remain poor. Such situations do not encourage actors in the sector to perform optimally and engage in allied economic activities; the above calls for sustaining and improving the available infrastructure and technologies. However, Nigeria's art world institutions continue their activism and vibrancy. Massive weekly exhibitions continue to take place in Lagos.

Meanwhile, such exhibitions are held less in the outskirts of towns and cities peripheral to Lagos, as Nigeria's cultural production hub. Required critical attention to these exhibitions remains inadequate. The art, as a metaphor, demands narration by the critic to open its appreciation vibes to the audience, as well as to the developing art history of Nigeria. Data

collation units and centres within the National Gallery of Art and the National Museum remain non-existent, despite the presence of representative offices of these government institutions in all states of the country.

One key factor in boosting the creative economy is leveraging new technologies through continuous education that enhances its embrace. The advantages of the cyber or internet age, discussed earlier, require that its values be appropriated for optimal gains. New technologies become valuable only when people put them to use. The rise of digital culture presents numerous benefits and challenges. On the positive side, the cyber age fosters improved communication and the adoption and appropriation of new ways.

The adoption of new transactional models, such as digital platforms and blockchain technology, enhances visibility and earnings for creatives. These technologies have revolutionised the creative economy, inspiring unhindered visibility, enhancing earnings through direct negotiations between artists and patrons/collectors, and easing financial transactions for players in the creative sector. Two significant platforms of the new technology that facilitate the above conveniences are the Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) and Smart Contracts (SC). The above blockchain technologies break down barriers, guaranteeing access to innovative alternatives that also enhance proficiency, greater responsibility, and increased financial return for artists through lower costs. It eliminates the chain of middle persons, which accounts for one of its advantages. Virtual contacts and distribution networks play a disruptive role within the hitherto traditional value chains. NFTs are programmed to identify unique artworks and record their ownership on a blockchain. While the blockchain functions as a secure ledger stored in a decentralised digital framework that privileges open access, allowing for unhindered transactions.

Ease of access to information makes available to artists workshops, art residencies, competitive offers, and opportunities for bidding on exhibitions, art biennales and triennials. The above constitute open arenas for visibility and cross-cultural dialogues and exchanges. In particular, residencies allow for continuous learning and adaptation, efficiency, and innovation, while enhancing global connectivity and leading to

international Job creation and entrepreneurship opportunities. It inspires great potential for growth and learning.

The documentation processes ensure the effective tracking and reporting of art market transactions both locally and in the diaspora. The advantage of reporting on the creative economy's economic and financial values and monetary inflows is that it positions the sector in its true light and highlights its contribution to Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As mentioned earlier in this lecture, the volume of Nigerian art sales is an unrealistic and conservative estimate, amounting to approximately four per cent of the 2017 budget. The internet enables the effortless collation of data while documenting significant economic transactional outcomes. Credible data and statistics encourage pragmatic planning, infrastructure development, mobilisation strategies and expectations. Statistics matter.

However, there are challenges to innovations. A few challenges require mentioning as this paper approaches its conclusion. These include security concerns, privacy breaches, the digital divide and the potential erosion of cultural diversity considering the contexts of "deepfakes". The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies raises ethical concerns about information integrity, fairness, and accountability. The homogenisation of culture within digital platforms can lead to the loss of habitual values and cultural diversity. There is a need to rethink how to preserve cultural heritage in the digital age and diligently work towards such ideals. Digital systems are also vulnerable to cyberattacks and require robust security measures to protect sensitive data and infrastructure.

In conclusion, the Renaissance signals the rebirth of old habits and processes in new and dynamic ways that conform to the spirit of a new age. The advent of digital culture in the cultural arena, while a definition of new technologies, demands committed and positive-yielding engagements for meaningful rewards. Digital culture, like innovations in civilisations, is unique in the values it bequeaths to society, unlike traditional modes of cultural production, technicalities, and transactions. In this regard, it offers significant benefits for artists, the cultural industry, and society, while also posing challenges. If effectively deployed and managed, it has excellent potential to lead to a positive and equitable future for Nigeria's creative economy. It is essential to note that the flow of

information, statistics, and credible data is crucial in advancing any creative economy. In keeping with contemporary ideology on sustainable practices and habits, it is important to always act with reverence for the future of our planet.

Citations:

- Kerner, Michael Sean. "What is digital culture?" (TechTarget, 2023), <https://www.techtarget.com/searchcio/definition/digital-culture>.
- Marx, Karl. 1818-1883. *Das Kapital, a Critique of Political Economy*. Chicago: Regnery, 1959.
- Okoro, Samuel Egwu and Soiduate Ogye-Atanga, "Towards Frontiers of Decolonization in Contemporary Nigerian Art Markets, in *The Routledge Companion to Decolonizing Art, Craft, and Visual Culture Education*, edited by Manisha Sharma and Amanda Alexander (New York and London: Routledge, 2023), 346-362.
- Picton, John. *African Art Lecture Notes*, School of Oriental and African Studies, August 2003.
- Ugiomoh, Frank A O. "Modern Nigerian Art and Its Trajectories" in *Black Orpheus: Jacob Lawrence and the Mbari Club*. Eds. Kimberli Grant and Ndubuisi Ezeluomba. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with The Chrysler Museum, Inc. and the New Orleans Museum of Art, 2022) 187–195.
- Ugiomoh, Frank A O. "Private Art Collecting at the Contours of a Nation's Heritage", in *Ijinle: The Aisha and Gbenga Oyeboade Collection*, edited by Adenrele Sonariwo (Milan, 5 Continents: SMO Contemporary Art, 2022), 210.
- Ugiomoh, Frank A O. "The Art Collection of His Majesty Nnaemeka Alfred Achebe, in *Chiemedie Museum, A King's Passion: A 21st Century of Patron of African Art*" (Milan, 5 Continents: SMO Contemporary Art, 2023), 83–88.
- Xia, Huang "Understanding Bourdieu – Cultural Capital and Habitus" *Review of European Studies*, Vol. 11, 2019. Doi. 10.5539/resV11n3p45