

## DEVELOPMENTS IN THE VISUAL ARTS: A DOCUMENTARY FROM CRUTECH ART SCHOOL

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### Abstract

This paper reports developments from the Visual Arts School of Cross River University Nigeria. Visual Arts in Nigeria has evolved through varied phases of growth with records of Technical, proficient, vocational, and self-reliant artists. Although art is as old as human existence, art schools are relatively new. Contemporary art schools are part of liberal art education. Multi-specialism is an added advantage to the arts and to economic and cultural advancements. The visual arts as a subject had suffered relegation, only a few students had interest in the course; parents even refused their children to study arts. However, the story is different as research has it that the art school has graduated a huge number of artists who are currently practising and own studios in their various specializations; such as graphics, textiles, painting, ceramics, and sculpture. Findings also indicate professional development in academic positions in various educational institutions and creative/cultural sectors. Consequently, the study adopts a qualitative research approach using interviews, observations, literature, and photographs. The study recommends research on emerging art studios, art galleries, and other art institutions in Cross River State.

**Keywords:** Art School, Development, Self-reliant, Professional, Artists

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### Introduction:

*Art is an idea that belongs to everyone. It is found in every culture, whatever physical form it might take, whatever emotional, aesthetic, or physiological challenge it may offer, it is not separate from life, it is the very description of the lives we lead. As a process whose cumulative result is the art form, the content becomes what is been described (White, 2011).*



**Plate 1:** 200 level students in a figure drawing class

**Source:** Abetianbe, Calabar,

Visual Arts in the Cross River University of Technology is overdue a comprehensive compendium of activities that designs and characterises its history. This study is flexible enough to transcend the features espoused in a single issue, and undertakes to capture relevant documentary, which revolves around the development, growth, and stature of the Art School in CRUTECH. According to history, local artists with no formal training who also worked with apprentices produced art objects. With the emergence of formal education, Art Schools emerged with very different academic orientations. This has witnessed a radical yet positive valve in visual arts activities in Nigeria; Egonwa

(2012) defines Visual Arts as “Visual Arts are about Visual Culture in our time. It is concerned with everything we see, have seen or may visualize painting, sculpture, movies, television, photography, furniture, jewellery, apparel; in short, all are aspects that communicate through visual means”. He explains further that; the visual arts discipline has its own language like other disciplines. Dot, line, shape, colour texture, and form are the building blocks of that language.



**Plate 2:** Visual Arts Department's Permanent Building CRUTECH

**Source:** Abetianbe, 2023

Visual Arts Department started in the Polytechnic of Calabar (POLYCAL) in 1998 as Fine Arts Department. It ran 2 years National Diploma programme for four years before being transformed into a department of visual Arts and Technology in Cross River

University of Technology (CRUTECH) Calabar in 2002. The Department was created for training manpower for the globalized dimensions of today's industrial professional and economic challenges (Ajibade, 2005). According to Ajibade, (2005) "CRUTECH's Visual Arts and Technology Department is different from the regular Fine Art Programmes obtained in other Nigerian Universities because firstly, it is broader in the sheer scope of Courses and areas of specialization, accommodating contemporary thinking about visual cultural practices in social, academic and industrial contexts. Secondly, the Fine Arts curriculum used in Nigeria's Universities is formalistic and geared toward the creative expression of the 'beautiful' as ornamental environmental appendages. However, the Visual Arts and Technology programme is designed to bring the broad spectrum of Visual Arts into the functional service of industry, economy and technology.



**Plate 3:** Studios in Visual Arts Department, UNICROSS  
**Source:** Abetianbe, 2023



**Plate 4:** Studio Areas in the Department of Visual Arts, UNICROSS

Since Industry and Technology are pivots of the contemporary world, the Visual Arts and Technology Department aligns with the laudable process of social change. Accordingly, the current time is programmed to project Nigeria and African cultural

identities to protect indigenous visual idioms. The students are trained to explore new materials, concepts, and production methodologies, by interweaving theory with practice and adopting experimentation as a mechanism for creative interrogation. The Department runs a four (4) year Bachelors of Art (B.A.) certificate B.A in Visual Arts and is structured into five specializations; Painting, Sculpture, Ceramics, Graphics, and Textile Design. The Department is well equipped with workshops and studio spaces for students to explore their creativity to achieve the vision of the Department which is to train professionals in Visual Arts at all levels whose skills parallel artists from anywhere on the globe. The mission of the Department is to break away from conventional artistic studies and institute a broad-based study in Visual Arts through Research, learning in art, and Technology. This mission has been proven right, as the Department has graduated artists and developed academics with proficient, technical vocational and self-employed persons. Statistics from 2015 Admission was

68 students, 2016-recorded 63 students, 2017-recorded 170 students, 2018 set recorded 179 students, 2019-recorded 150 students, and 2020 recorded 86 students.

The Art School has inculcated good academic values, and transmitted valuable skills to students; who create art, think critically, and acquire valuable technical skills. From the above, it is obvious that there should be a proper documentary of the Art School in UNICROSS. By so doing, it would have initiated institutional research.

#### **Overview of the Art School:**

Visual Arts Department from henceforth shall be known and addressed as, the Art School, started off with eight (8) students in the year 2004. However, this should not be a problem, but judging from a society where art is rarely recognized, with parents refusing their children to study art as a course. Some primary and secondary schools do not offer arts. Visual Arts was relegated to the background and obviously became a source of concern to art scholars. The neglect runs across primary, secondary, and tertiary

institutions (Enamhe, 2001). According to the findings from a research undertaken by Ajibade, Enamhe, and Oloidi (2011) titled, "Is Fine Arts Inevitable Requisite for Bachelors Degree in Visual Arts? Notes from the Admission Policy of a Nigerian University". There was a dearth of students for the B.A. programme in the university due to the lack of Fine Arts at the secondary school level and this was a requisite for admission. It became expedient for the Department to establish a flexible entry requirement, which was to admit students without a Fine Arts background. This flexible entry requirement yielded positive results by increasing the number of students admitted to the Visual Arts Department. From the research, it was discovered that students coped well even without a Fine Arts background as far as the curriculum and training conditions are right.

Recorded on the self-study form B document of National Universities Commission (NUC) 2021 for accreditation that, the department has graduated over 1000 students and that the graduates have gone on to excel in the arts

and creative industries in Nigeria, Africa, and beyond. The department has enjoyed full accreditation and just concluded one in 2021, which recorded full accreditation. The department started postgraduate studies in 2011, offering Master of Arts, Master of Fine Arts, and Post Graduate Diploma programmes in all the studio specializations. Doctor of Philosophy full-time programmes commenced in 2021. The Department has graduated over 97 candidates with Master of Arts, Master of Fine Arts, and Post Graduate Diploma degrees. According to Akpang (2018), the then Head of the Department in the post-graduate handbook affirms that postgraduate content should be framed in both creative and analytical philosophies. In view of this, the teaching courses in the five specializations are to provide students with the opportunity to explore new materials, concepts, and production methodologies, by interweaving theory with practice and adopting experimentation as a mechanism for creative interrogation. The above assertion has created an art school in Calabar with a broad contemporary, hybridism, inter-

culturalism, and globalism, irrespective of socio-religious, political, or varied kinds of contemporary art lexicon. Notwithstanding the fact that artists strive to assert their individuality and originality, as well as foster a group style or identity. From the numerous exhibitions held in school, which is a requisite for graduation at all, levels of scholarship, an art school recognized by the imperative of a proper transformation of art that has determined this paper's content.

Understanding of creative ideology, appropriation of media and experimentation. It is important to know the materials, techniques and diverse influences and subjection by the artist to certain modes of experimentation. This leads to historical reconstruction to account for the developmental sequence of artworks. As art lovers, there is believe that technique has an important place in art.

Nsukka art school is known for Uli motifs and designs; UNICROSS art school explores the rich potentials of Nsibidi and Ekpe motifs to promote the cultural revivalism. The cultural interface and appropriation of

ideographs and graphic designs are recontextualized into a new kind of aesthetic hybridism from different conceptual and contextual perspectives. Pertinent to this study is to feature the Art school, artists and artworks explanatory principles for understanding the nature of art, which is never static.

Ugiomoh (2012) argues that the character of an age can be seen as reflections in the artworks they create within its time, and art reflects the past, present, and future of a given space. As an Art School, there are creative practices that become common to members of the group. An inter-human element in cooperation and manifestation characterize the age, allowing for Cross-Cultural ideas, knowledge, and materials, which become a style. Consciously and unconsciously, because they occupy a common space, and work together, a relationship is formed with a dominant influence from the union. The Art School is designed by style and common practices.



**Plate 5:** Visual Arts Gallery,  
UNICROSS

**Source:** Abetianbe, Calabar, 2022

The Artists may design contemporary Nigerian Art differently but share common ideologies, which speak of styles and aesthetics, rendered in individual creative capacities. As Artists trained to attain professional competence that fits them into the competitive art economy, it behoves on them to showcase professionalism by demonstrating visionary creativity from experimentation and explorative knowledge, having spent some years together, studying and practicing, they exhibit cultural willingness and inspiration which cannot be separated from their artworks. Consequently, subjecting artworks created by the artists from UNICROSS to interpretation constitute

a platform through which the art school has developed a medium of expression and interpretation, which has birthed an artistic cultural enterprise in style, growth and status. The training in the department has produced graduates into the needed skills and techniques as well as professionalism to excel in various career paths in the creative industry. They are tasked in various areas including research projects, which is an independent creative investigations, seminar presentations and industrial practices. The evidence is seen in the participation of artists in the yearly Calabar Carnival costumes, floats, props and other paraphernalia of the Carnivals.

For over twenty years, the Art School has graduated artists, with excellent entrepreneurial skills, doing well in different fields of art some self-employed and others employed in secondary and tertiary institutions. In the University of Calabar (UNICAL), ex-students are employed in Fine and Applied Arts Department, in the Faculty of Arts, which was established in 2014. They are Jeremiah Unimke (Ceramics), Elemi

Enya, and Ugbe Gabriel (Sculptors), John Agbor (Painter), Bismark Odey and Anthonia Adie (Graphics), Joy Mbang, Elizabeth Ushie, Ngozi Chukwuma (Textiles). Some of the artists mentioned above are very innovative, striving hard to assert their artistic prowess equipped by their creative synergy and launched into contemporary artistic circuit of members of the prestigious Art Incubator, comprising of a group of Artists in Cross River State. They exhibit annually since 2017, across different fields of the visual Arts.

Ecoma (2021), describes Art incubator as connectively derived from the point of view of an artistic condition propelling audience reaction of which art is used to excite reaction as an instrument of change. Clarifying the issue, he emphasized that, Art incubator also refers to the artistic hatchery to birth and to encourage young and budding artists as a sort of culturing process and a support for art development. It is an exhibition that continues to celebrate and promote healthy dialogue between the past arts traditions of Cross River region and the contemporary

national art performance on a scale that is admirable.

Akpang (2021) while addressing people in the art incubator Exhibition declared that the array of works on display visually adduced to the growth that Calabar art scene has witnessed over the years is largely promoted by the Art incubator group. It also reflects the emerging aesthetic idioms in the paradise city, one that creates new visions of cultural forms through appropriation and restaging of Cross River Cultural heritage.

At the University of Cross River State, some artists who performed well after graduation are retained to lecture. Clement Akpang (Sculptor), Okon Ayi (Painter), Nkami Eval Elemi (Graphics), Joy Moko Eroma (Textile), Peter Agba (Ceramics), Ambang Ekong, Abetianbe George, Christian Inyang, Anwan Inyang (Graphics) and Freedom Odum (Painter),

The emerging studios and art shops are not left out. Ex-students have started serious art practices, pursuing vigorously the creative

agenda of the contemporary historical epoch  
for understanding studio

Experimentation. Arguably, here is the fact  
that creative themes, media, techniques, and  
forms provide the basics for developing a  
useful framework for studio practice. Some  
of the artists include Michael Ekperikpe who  
is an indigene of Calabar, and one of the  
pioneer graduates from the Art School who  
had his Bachelor's degree, and MFA in 2006  
and respectively. 2011. He owns an Art  
studio called "Mic Natural" along Marian  
Road in Calabar. He also trains and mentors,  
young artists during their Industrial Training  
period from the Department. In an interview  
with the artist, he stated that, the CRUTECH  
arts school has helped and reshaped his  
approach in studio art practice over time that  
he still implements what he learned".



**Plate 6:** Michael Ekperikpe in his  
Graphics Studio

**Source:** Abetianbe, Calabar, 2022

Aloma Matthew Ezeji from Ebonyi  
State is a sculptor by specialization but  
practices virtually all areas of Arts. He  
graduated from the CRUTECH art school in  
2015, and owns a Studio named "Alotex Art  
Studio" located along Target Road, Calabar.  
He also trains and mentors art students on  
internships from the Department. According  
to Alaoma, art has been his means of survival  
since he graduated, and through art practice,  
he has been able to marry his wife and build  
a house in Calabar.



**Plate 7:** Mr. Alaoma Mathew in his Apprentice  
**Source:** Abetianbe, Calabar, 2022



**Plate 8:** Sculpture by Aloma Matthew Ezeji  
**Title:** Rescue Mission  
**Place:** Sculpture Garden  
**Source:** Abetianbe, Calabar, 2022

Jeremiah Unimke is from Obudu in Cross River state, and graduated in 2012 from CRUTECH art school. He is currently an academic staff in UNICAL, and combines studio art practice. His studio "Jerry Unik" is

located along Ekong Etta Street of Marian Road, Calabar. In an interview with him, he stated that through studio art practice, he was able to fund his master's degree (MFA) before he was employed. Therefore, he sees studio practice as a means not only to make money but also to mentor and train upcoming artists. Dorcas Bassey graduated in 2013 and had MFA in 2019 from CRUTECH Arts School, specialized in Graphics design. She owns Ankara fashion studio along Marian and is a member of Art Incubator Calabar exhibition group.

Victor Agba is a sculptor by specialisation and the organizer of the annual Ediye Calabar Arts exhibition. He is currently the personal assistant to the Chief of Staff to the Governor of Cross River State on creative media and publicity, Lawrence Okon graduated in 2019, specialising in Graphics design, and owns a studio called "Art Box" along Marian. For development in academic positions in the University, the Department has had the following Heads of Department: Victor Ekoma, now a Professor was head of the Department from 2002 to 2004. Ben Ekanem

2004 to 2006, Prof. Chike Aniakor 2006 to 2011, Chris Echeta 2011 to 2012, Dr. Wole Oloidi' 2012 to 2013, Dr. Babson Ajibade now a professor 2013 to 2017. Dr. Clement Akpang from 2017 to 2021. Prof. Bojor Enamhe 2021, while the present acting Head of Department is Mrs. Emekpe Omon. Senior Academic Staff in CRUTECH Art School. Prof. Chike Cyril Aniakor is a contract staff and very valuable to the Department. He is described as the grand art historian, one of the great scholars in Nigerian arts. A painter and scholar of Igbo architecture, a poet (Francis Beacon), a creative inventor of the Uli paintings. A prolific researcher whose contributions shows a mastery of the art and art history. His paintings and drawings reveal the indigenous root of the modern world. His students are greatly influenced by his drawings, whereby his style is seen all over the students' artworks (Enamhe, 2016). Aniakor's book "Reflective Essays on Art and Art History, 2005, explores the various dimensions of the creative consciousness, the nature of art objects and a visual idiom of form and the inevitable contextualization of

art forms in the social and historical conditions that impact on artistic creations, and which in turn they reshape.

Prof. Babson Ajibade is currently the Director of Academic Planning at Cross River University of Technology (CRUTECH). He has been the Dean of Faculty of Environmental Sciences, and the Head of Department. A professor of African Visual Culture, one of the editors of the book "Creative Media Arts; A practical source book (2014).

A team of staff headed by Prof. Ajibade under the sponsorship of Tetfund IBR research funding produced Industrial throwing wheel and pug mill, involving the fabrication of metals and other mechanized elements to produce Equipments that reduces the human energy application in the production of ceramic wares.



**Plate 9:** Industrial Throwing Wheel and a Pugmil for Ceramics  
**Constructed by:** Staff and Students of Visual Arts  
**Source:** Babson Ajibade, 2023

This is an indication that the Art School is significantly taking its place in the socio-economic space. The Art school has extended its boundaries to include designs and fabrication of design-aided equipment for studio utilization. According to Enamhe and Ekpe (2012), "Art empowers individuals with skills that widen the base of participation in the society, create jobs and decentralize the economy. Prof. Bojor Enamhe is currently

the Director of Centre for Educational Services at the University. One-time Director of Academic Planning also served as the Director of Quality Assurance. She is Professor of Art History/Art Management. Her research focuses on facilitating artistic mobility, encouraging art enterprise and young and budding artists, as the art of culturing process and support for art development. She is the originator of the Art incubator Calabar, birth in 2017. With her art management background, she has since 2017 held annual exhibitions in Calabar, Cross River State with alumni of the Department for the promotion of visual arts in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Dr. Wole Ololdi is an Associate Professor. A painter and one of the pioneer staff of the Department. He has served on several committees at the University. He is currently the coordinator of certificate verification for the newly admitted students in the Faculty of Environmental Sciences, an assignment he has been doing for over ten years now. Dr. Clement Akpang is a sculptor, Art Theorist, and designer. A fellow of the Royal Society

of Arts (FRSA) England. A contemporary post-colonial Avant-gardist, an Author of two books, “Analyzing Art, A Short Guide to Art Appreciation, Criticism and Research in Visual Arts, and Nigerian Modernism 1900 – 1965, 2019.

Dr. Sukanthy Visagapperumal Egharevba is a painter and was appointed Postgraduate coordinator in 2016 - 2021. She is of Sri Lanka by birth and a Nigerian by marriage.

Dr. Frank Uti is a Graphic designer and illustrator, teaching graphics in the Art School. Dr. Jame Etikudoh is an experimental Ceramics and studio-based artist. Omon Emekpe is currently the acting Head of the Department and a sculptor. Umana Nnochiri is a textile and fashion designer. A very strong personality in the Carnival Calabar Passion 4 Band. She owns and operates a studio where she designs and constructs garments, costumes, and textile fabric production. A brief interview with her explains some of her ideas in the field of textile and fashion design. She believes in the grooming of young art enthusiasts who may take over in the future. Outside academic

commitment, she practices and owns a studio called “Studio 08” located behind Industrial court by Murtala Muhammed High Way in Calabar where she trains students on internship and handles contracts from clients within and outside Calabar; she is also the Chairperson of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), Cross River State.



**Plate 10:** *Textile fabric production in the Department of Visual Arts by Students*

**Source:** *Abetianbe, Calabar, 2023*

Others in the academic profession are Ayi Okon, Nkami Babatope George Abetianbe, Esu Ayi, Peter Undie, Justin Obong and Joy Moko Eroma. So far so good, the Art School is becoming a maker of influence, crucial to many narrations because of the number of students churned out every year. A need arises for further research on emerging artists, art studios, art galleries, and other art institutions in Cross River State. It is imperative to note the remarkable resiliency and ability to survive in spite of the many

adverse conditions in which the art school finds itself across time and space.



**Plate 11:** Visual Arts Department  
Sculpture Garden  
**Source:** Abetianbe, 2023

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