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# Color and Canvas: The Artistic Renaissance of Lagos

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## Introduction

Lagos is a city where a thousand stories unfold every hour in a dizzying, glorious whirl. Nigeria's bustling economic powerhouse and Africa's most populous city, Lagos vibrates with the energy of millions — drivers, market vendors, tech entrepreneurs, street performers, and, increasingly, artists. In the midst of chaotic traffic and thumping music, in repurposed warehouses and roadside studios, a new generation of creative minds has forged an artistic renaissance with reach and relevance far beyond the city's borders. This book, *Color and Canvas: The Artistic Renaissance of Lagos*, is a vibrant journey into the heart of this movement, revealing how art has become one of Lagos's defining forces and its artists among Africa's most influential cultural voices.

For decades, art in Lagos was shaped by tradition, religious cosmologies, and the shifting tides of history — from Yoruba artisans and royal courts to colonial-era educators and the expressive outbursts of independence. Today, Lagos is synonymous with innovation and diversity: painters pushing the limits of color and form, sculptors coaxing new meaning from ancient mediums, photographers reframing everyday life, and digital artists pioneering fresh frontiers in a rapidly changing world. Yet, this renaissance is not just about isolated mastery or international recognition. It is about the complex interplay of old and new, community and individuality, hustle and hope. In every mural splashed across the city's walls, each gallery opening, or raucous festival, the restlessly creative spirit of Lagos shines through.

This book traces the roots of Lagos's artistic explosion, exploring how the city's historical and cultural foundations have shaped its creative present. We'll journey from the legacy of visionaries like Aina Onabolu and the Zaria Art Society through to the independence-era search for national identity, and onward to the wave of new institutions, festivals, and artistic collectives that have propelled Lagos onto the world art stage. Along the way, we'll meet pioneering artists like Peju Alatise and Victor Ehikhamenor, whose work fuses myth, memory, and social commentary, as well as a host of rising stars redefining what it means to be a Nigerian artist today.

But the story of Lagos's art scene is about much more than the makers. This book delves into the spaces and communities supporting this transformation — from historic galleries like Nike Art Gallery to trailblazing contemporary hubs and independent creative collectives. We will explore how a passionate network of collectors, patrons, and curators is fueling the growth of a dynamic art market, and how art fairs and public installations are bringing creativity to the city's streets and skyline. At each turn, you'll find practical insights for witnessing this rich scene in person, connecting with Lagos's creatives, or experiencing the city through its art, whether as a traveler, collector, or curious outsider.

Lagos's artists do not merely capture beauty; they challenge assumptions, advocate for social change, and celebrate the eclectic, ever-evolving mosaic of Nigerian identity. As we move through the chapters, you'll see how art in Lagos is wielded as a tool for activism, dialogue, and community cohesion — revitalizing neglected neighborhoods, fostering cultural pride, and inspiring audiences at home and abroad. You'll encounter stories of resilience and resourcefulness, as artists navigate challenges from limited funding and infrastructure to debates over cultural ownership in a globalized world.

Ultimately, *Color and Canvas* is an invitation to witness Lagos as a thriving arts capital, where creativity serves as both survival strategy and catalyst for transformation. Whether you're an art lover, traveler, scholar, or simply curious about the forces reshaping contemporary Africa, you'll find in these pages a portrait of a city alive with color, courage, and dreams — a city painting its own future with every stroke. Welcome to Lagos, where the renaissance is now.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Genesis of Modern Art in Lagos

Lagos, the sprawling, pulsating heart of Nigeria, didn't simply burst onto the global art stage overnight. Its current creative explosion is deeply rooted in a rich tapestry of historical and cultural influences, a story that begins long before the contemporary art galleries and international fairs of today. To truly grasp the vibrant art scene of modern Lagos, we must first journey back to its foundational moments, exploring the pioneers and movements that laid the groundwork for this twenty-first-century renaissance.

The roots of modern Nigerian art, and by extension, Lagos's scene, can be traced to the early 20th century, a period when traditional forms began to intersect with Western techniques. This was a time of burgeoning national consciousness, even under colonial rule, and art was quietly, but powerfully, becoming a vehicle for identity and expression. One figure stands tall at the genesis of this transformation: Aina Onabolu. Born in Ijebu-Ode in 1882, Onabolu is widely regarded as the father of modern Nigerian art. His passion for painting ignited at the tender age of 12, drawing inspiration from the Western art he encountered in Nigerian magazines and missionary religious texts.

Onabolu's artistic journey was largely self-taught in his early years, as formal art training institutions in Nigeria were non-existent. He honed his skills while working as a marine clerk in the Customs Department in Lagos, dedicating his spare time to mastering European academic styles. By the age of 32, he was already exhibiting his work and had gained a reputation as a knowledgeable and skilled artist. His early portraits, such as the acclaimed "Mrs. Spencer Savage" from 1906, are considered some of the earliest outstanding works produced with modern techniques in Nigeria.

Driven by a desire for formal training and to champion art education in his homeland, Onabolu made a pivotal decision in 1920: he resigned from the civil service to pursue art full-time. This led him to Europe, where he became the first Nigerian artist to undertake formal art education abroad. He studied at the Académie Julian in Paris and later at St. John Woods College in London, earning a diploma in fine arts and a teacher's certificate in 1922. This experience equipped him with the European painting techniques, anatomy, and art education characteristics that he would later bring back to Nigeria.

Upon his return, Onabolu dedicated himself to integrating art into the Nigerian school system. He taught informally to enthusiastic students and then formally in several top schools in Lagos, including King's College and CMS Grammar School. His curriculum emphasized perspective, drawing, human proportions, and watercolor painting.

Recognizing the scarcity of qualified indigenous art teachers, Onabolu tirelessly advocated for the inclusion of art as a formal subject in the national curriculum and pushed the government to recruit expatriate art teachers. His efforts were instrumental in bringing figures like Kenneth C. Murray to Nigeria, who in turn played a significant role in reviving traditional handicraft and arts.

While Onabolu's focus on Western techniques was a critical step in establishing modern art education, it also reflected the prevailing sentiments of the time. Influenced by his missionary education, he largely disregarded indigenous art forms, viewing them as "primitive." This was a stark contrast to his European contemporaries, such as Picasso, who were at the same time drawing inspiration from the very simplicity of West African art. Nevertheless, Onabolu's singular determination and pioneering spirit laid a crucial foundation, proving that Nigerians could master Western artistic disciplines and paving the way for future generations.

The arts scene truly began to find its distinct Nigerian voice in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period brimming with the fervor of impending independence. Colleges and universities became fertile grounds for artistic experimentation, giving rise to two prominent schools of artistic expression: the Zaria School and the Osogbo School. These movements, though distinct in their approaches, were united by a shared desire to forge a modern Nigerian identity through art.

The Zaria School emerged from the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST), later renamed Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. In 1958, a group of undergraduate students, often referred to as the "Zaria Rebels," formed the "Zaria Art Society." Led by Uche Okeke, the group's founder and president, they challenged the Western-centric curriculum taught by their largely European lecturers, feeling it neglected their Nigerian roots and cultural heritage. Their core ideology revolved around a concept Okeke termed "Natural Synthesis."

Natural Synthesis was a call for the merging of the best of Western and Nigerian traditions, forms, techniques, and ideas into a hybrid art-making practice and conceptual framework. It was a response to concerns that Nigeria's artistic heritage was being eroded by foreign cultural influences. The Zaria Art Society members, including prominent figures like Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, and Yusuf Grillo, sought to create works that reflected the diverse cultures of the Nigerian state. They delved into indigenous cultural and artistic traditions, incorporating narratives from Yoruba, Igbo, Urhobo, and other cultures, along with Bible stories and local histories, to inform the content and style of their art. This innovative approach, which aimed to define a new national identity through art, still influences contemporary artists today.

In parallel, the Osogbo School blossomed in the Yoruba town of Osogbo in the 1960s. This movement was significantly guided by the German artist Susanne Wenger and her husband, the linguist Ulli Beier, who had emigrated to Nigeria in the 1950s.

Osogbo, a market town with a rich tradition of music, wood and stone carving, and metalwork, provided a unique environment for this artistic flourishing. The Osogbo movement initially gained momentum as a response to the desecration of the Osun-Osogbo Grove in the 1950s, with a group of people beginning to repair local shrines.

Wenger, who became an Osun priestess, dedicated herself to interpreting Yoruba traditional religion through her art and developed the Osun-Osogbo Shrine through her artistic and pottery techniques. Beier and Wenger, along with Georgina Beier, encouraged young, often unschooled individuals, many of whom were involved in Duro Ladipo's theatre group, to engage in art workshops. These workshops, held in Ibadan and later in Osogbo, aimed to provide a committed, critical audience for the artists and prevent their work from being solely driven by the tourist market. The artists, including figures like Jimoh Buraimoh and Nike Okundaye, combined traditional subject matter and stories with Western artistic media and techniques, quickly gaining international recognition. The Osogbo Art Movement demonstrated that tradition could be modernized from within, proving that talent, not just certificates, was paramount in cultural practice.

Beyond these nascent art schools, significant historical milestones and the establishment of early art institutions further solidified the foundation for Lagos's art scene. The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, famously known as FESTAC '77, was a monumental event that left an indelible mark on Nigerian and African culture. Held in Lagos from January 15 to February 12, 1977, FESTAC '77 was an extravagant international festival celebrating Africa's cultural achievements and legacies.

This festival, modeled on the World Festival of Black Arts held in Dakar in 1966, expanded its scope to include participants from across Africa and its diaspora, including North Africa, India, Australia, and Papua New Guinea. Nigeria's oil boom at the time provided substantial revenue, allowing for a lavish scale of festival activities, including the construction of the iconic National Theatre in Lagos and the Festac Town Housing Complex to accommodate the thousands of participants. FESTAC '77 showcased the best of African creativity, with artists and intellectuals from 56 African countries and the African diaspora participating.

The festival was a powerful statement against the historical marginalization of African cultures, fostering a sense of unity and solidarity among Black and African communities worldwide and reinforcing the ideals of Pan-Africanism. It sparked renewed interest in traditional African arts, languages, and philosophies, serving as a platform for reclaiming narratives that had been distorted by colonialism. Though its direct impact might be debated, FESTAC '77 unquestionably positioned Lagos as a significant cultural hub and brought African art to a global audience.

Alongside these large-scale events, the emergence of early art galleries played a

crucial role in providing platforms for artists and fostering a nascent art market. The Mbari Mbayo clubs, originating in Ibadan in 1961 with the help of Ulli Beier, were cultural centers for writers, artists, and musicians. The Ibadan club operated an art gallery and theatre and published works by Nigerian artists. Inspired by this, playwright Duro Ladipo opened a similar club in Osogbo in March 1962, converting his father's house into an art gallery and theatre. The name "Mbari Mbayo" inadvertently arose from a misunderstanding, as the Igbo word "Mbari" (meaning "creation," referring to traditional painted mud houses) was mistaken for the Yoruba phrase "Mbari Mbayo," meaning "when we see it we shall be happy." These clubs provided a lively local audience and spurred commissions for palace murals, stage sets, and even church doors.

Another significant early institution was the Didi Museum, established in 1983. Founded by Dr. Newton Jibunoh in memory of his younger sister, Edith, it is recognized as Nigeria's first privately owned museum. Inaugurated within Dr. Jibunoh's private residence in Victoria Island, Lagos, the Didi Museum aimed to serve as a forum for the research and preservation of arts and culture, and the exhibition of contemporary Nigerian art. Its inaugural exhibition featured works by Kenny Adamson and Adamu Ajunam, drawing over 1,200 visitors in five days. The Didi Museum has since played a vital role in nurturing the careers of many artists, establishing a familial link with creatives who often refer to themselves as "DIDI Artists" or "DIDI Museum Children."

These pioneering individuals, movements, and institutions were the quiet architects of Lagos's artistic future. They laid the philosophical and practical groundwork, challenging colonial artistic norms, fostering a unique Nigerian aesthetic, and creating spaces for artistic expression and education. From Onabolu's meticulous portraits to the "Natural Synthesis" of the Zaria rebels and the vibrant, traditional-meets-modern explorations of the Osogbo artists, these early decades pulsed with a determined energy. This was not yet the global phenomenon we see today, but it was the essential beginning — a germination of creativity that would, in time, blossom into the full-fledged artistic renaissance that defines Lagos in the twenty-first century. The canvas was being prepared, and the colors were being mixed, ready for the vibrant strokes of the future.

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