

Art and Marketing Challenges in Calabar Metropolis: Issues Facing Contemporary Studio Artist.

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ABSTRACT

Cross River State, located in the southern coastal region of Nigeria, covers an area of approximately 23,074.425 square kilometers and has a population of about 2.6 million people. Its capital city, Calabar—along with other major towns such as Akamkpa, Ikom, Ogoja, Ugep, and Obudu—plays a central role in the state's cultural and economic activities. The city of Calabar is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, vibrant tourist attractions, and distinctive culinary traditions. However, despite these cultural riches, the visual arts remain significantly underdeveloped within the metropolis.

This study investigates the challenges of art marketing within the Calabar metropolis, specifically through exhibitions organized by notable Calabar art schools, galleries, and professional exhibition collectives. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study relies on both primary and secondary data sources, including interviews, journals, and exhibition catalogues. The research reveals that studio artists in Calabar produce artworks that meet contemporary art standards, particularly in areas such as visual improvisation, experimental expression, and technical mastery of diverse media. These works are widely appreciated by audiences, who describe them as beautiful, innovative, and of high quality. However, despite this favorable reception, there is a consistent issue: most spectators are unable to afford the artworks they admire. This is largely attributed to the economic structure of Cross River State, which is primarily sustained by civil service employment, offering limited disposable income for luxury purchases such as art. As a result, the study identifies that the central marketing challenge facing studio artists in Calabar is not the ability to create or innovate, but the lack of art collection and patronage. The issue lies more in the economic limitations of potential buyers than in the quality or relevance of the art itself. Therefore, the study recommends that artists, curators, and gallery owners seek strategic collaborations with governmental institutions, private sector stakeholders, and international organizations. Such partnerships could create more robust platforms for art promotion and sales, thereby enhancing the sustainability of studio practice within the metropolis and beyond.

Keywords: Arts, Artist, Exhibitions, Calabar and Market Challenge.

INTRODUCTION

Cross River State, located in the southern coastal region of Nigeria, covers an area of approximately 23,074.425 square kilometers and has a population of about 2.6 million people. Its capital city, Calabar—along with other major towns such as Akamkpa, Ikom, Ogoja, Ugep, and Obudu—plays a central role in the state's cultural and economic activities. According to the 2006 Nigerian census, Calabar recorded a population of approximately 371,022 people (Ering, 2010). Historically, Calabar served as the capital of the former South Eastern State created in 1967. The city is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, vibrant tourist attractions, and distinctive culinary traditions. However, despite these cultural riches, the visual arts remain significantly underdeveloped within the metropolis.

Art historical evidence suggests that the culture of Cross River State has long been intertwined with artistic practices, as demonstrated by ancient artifacts such as the Ikom Monoliths, Calabar Terracotta, and more recent monumental sculptures scattered throughout Calabar (Enamhe & Unimke, 2019). These artifacts indicate a longstanding tradition of artistic appreciation among the region's indigenous populations. The establishment of

formal art programs—such as the Visual Arts Department at the Cross River University of Technology (now UNICROSS) and the Fine and Applied Arts Department at the University of Calabar (UNICAL)—has further enhanced creative consciousness among professional visual artists. These institutions have influenced artists' approaches to exploring media, techniques, and artistic forms.

This development underlines the depth of Cross River State's artistic heritage. Contemporary art practices have become increasingly experimental and innovative, with artists appropriating and domesticating media, techniques, and forms to harness socio-cultural themes as sources of inspiration. Inyang (2014) observes that contemporary artists operate independently of rigid aesthetic standards, enjoying freedom from traditional social or religious impositions, both in material choice and expressive style. As such, artistic production in Cross River State, like elsewhere, often mirrors broader social, cultural, and religious themes—depicting daily life activities, social struggles, and historical moments. As Jangid (2022) aptly notes, artists employ diverse forms of expression to convey societal feelings and document critical moments across time and space.

The growing body of creative work has also led to the establishment of frequent art exhibitions and professional shows organized by individuals, groups, private galleries, and academic institutions. These events, including notable exhibitions such as Ediye Calabar, Art Incubator, Watt Central Art Gallery, and Traces of Time, alongside the annual exhibitions by graduating students, serve as important creative rites of passage. Collectively, they have contributed significantly to shaping the contemporary artistic landscape of Calabar.

Despite various initiatives to promote visual arts in Calabar, a critical issue persists: the limited sales of artworks. A major contributing factor is the widespread lack of appreciation for original art among the general populace. Many prefer roadside artworks and mass-produced prints over original pieces, largely due to the perceived high cost of authentic works and a general lack of awareness regarding their value. Historically, art exhibitions and displays were not a mainstream cultural interest in Calabar; although in recent years, awareness has grown, the patronage of local artists remains limited. Buyers often favour works by established artists based in larger urban centers over those created by local talents.

This situation is compounded by a persistent perception that Calabar-based artists lack the technical proficiency to produce professional-grade artworks. As a result, potential buyers frequently undervalue local art, offering prices significantly lower than those offered in major cities. During an oral interview, Dr. Nnochiri recounted an instance where a collector hesitated to purchase a work by an unknown artist, instead opting for a piece by a better-promoted emerging artist—ironically, an artist originally trained in Calabar. This experience underscores the critical need for stronger promotion of local artists to cultivate a sustainable art market within the city.

Further observations reveal that artists who secure commissions and consistent patronage often do so through affiliations with political elites (Walker, 1877). Consequently, monumental projects in the city are typically awarded to a select few with political connections. In effect, aside from the rare external collector, the government remains the primary, and often sole, patron of the visual arts within Cross River State. In contrast, cities such as Abuja, Lagos, and Port Harcourt present a more vibrant art economy, where artworks are sold openly—on the streets, in galleries, and even during traffic congestion—providing artists with both visibility and financial incentive. This commercial vitality inspires continuous artistic production, offering a stark contrast to the situation in Calabar.

Feedback from exhibition groups in Calabar reveals that while art audiences express admiration for displayed works—often describing them as "beautiful" and "successful"—the primary barrier to acquisition remains financial incapacity (Oral interview: Egharevba, 2023). Thus, the fundamental problem lies not in the quality or quantity of artistic production, but in the mechanisms of marketing and collection within the metropolis. As Emekpe (2024) observes, the marketing of art in Calabar remains a significant challenge, impeding the growth of the local art economy. In response, this study investigates and consults private and public galleries, art schools, exhibition groups, and related institutions to propose strategies for overcoming marketing barriers. The scope of research includes an analysis of exhibitions held within Calabar and a review of responses from both artists and audiences. A qualitative research methodology has been adopted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the marketing challenges affecting contemporary studio practice in Calabar.

Calabar Arts Schools and Exhibitions

The University of Calabar and the Cross River University of Technology are the two major institutions offering formal art education within the Calabar metropolis. According to official records from the University of Calabar (UNICAL), the institution was established on October 25, 1975, evolving from the Calabar campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which had commenced operations during the 1973 academic session with 154 students. Upon gaining autonomy, UNICAL began academic activities in 1976 with initial faculties in Arts, Science, and Social Science, enrolling approximately 896 students. The Department of Fine and Applied Arts was later established in 2015, providing formal training for young artists in disciplines such as drawing, painting, and sculpture (Unimke, 2023).

In contrast, the Cross River University of Technology (CRUTECH), now known as UNICROSS, was founded in August 2002. One of its most prominent departments is the Department of Visual Arts and Technology, which houses five specialized units: Painting, Graphics, Textile Design, Ceramics, and Sculpture. Together, these institutions graduate over 200 prospective artists annually from their respective art programs at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Exhibitions organized by these institutions are considered essential rites of passage for graduating students, showcasing the creative achievements of emerging artists. For instance, notable exhibitions such as *Expression* (2015), *Visual Identity* (2020), *Transcoding* (2021), and *Emergence* (2021) exemplify the sophistication and mastery of media, technique, and form demonstrated by graduates (Expression, 2018; Emekpe, 2024). These events reveal a promising future for the region's artists, underscoring a strong technical and conceptual foundation.

Despite the evident artistic growth and professionalism fostered within these schools, a recurring trend persists: many graduates either abandon active studio practice or migrate to larger cities such as Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt in search of more favorable art markets and opportunities. The Lagos art market, for instance, offers expansive networks of collectors, galleries, and promotional platforms—opportunities that remain largely inaccessible to artists within Calabar (Okpok, 2023).

Several factors contribute to this exodus, including limited governmental support for the arts, low public awareness and appreciation of fine art, inadequate publicity for exhibitions, and the scarcity of effective art galleries and museums compared to those in more developed urban centers. Consequently, opportunities for professional growth and sustainable practice in Calabar remain severely constrained.

Thus, the principal challenge facing studio artists in Calabar is not the lack of creative ideas or technical skills, but rather the systemic issues surrounding the marketing and collection of artworks (Okon, 2023). As this study highlights, addressing these underlying structural barriers is crucial for the survival and flourishing of contemporary studio practice in the Calabar metropolis.



Fig. 1, Ceramic piece by Oluwafemi Ife MFA exhibition at VAT, CRUTECH.



Fig. 2, Oil on Canvas painting by Irene; B.A Exhibition at VAT, CRUTECH.



Fig. 3. Sculptural piece by Enameti. MFA exhibition at VAT, CRUTECH.



Fig. 4: Tapestry by Geralgine Umoh. BA exhibition at VAT, CRUTECH.



Fig 5: Photography by Joseph Ika; BA exhibition at VAT, CRUTECH.

Role of Arts in Society

Emerson defines art as an "expression of an impression," suggesting that art captures the effect of sensory experiences—what is seen, heard, or felt, and communicates them creatively. Similarly, L. de C. Bucher (1905) argues that art is not merely the expression of impressions but also the communication of ideas and concepts developed through personal experiences.

Over the years, art has played a significant role in human societies, serving as a response to life and existence. It promotes creativity, preserves history and culture, and fosters unity among people (Jangid, 2022). Despite the presence of both established and emerging artists in Calabar, the promotion of the arts remains relatively low (Okon, 2024). This lack of growth is attributed to the government's and public's stronger focus on tourism, with minimal attention given to the arts sector (Enamhe & Unimke, 2019).

Art has been described as "a process by which a community develops for itself a medium of self-expression." Indeed, works of art often contain more valid historical and cultural facts than formal history books, particularly because art reflects a people's way of life through form, content, and symbolic meaning (Enamhe, 2005). Art enables creative exploration of materials and media, employing skill to produce tangible artifacts or experiences with inherent socio-cultural value and aesthetic significance, as observed among the aboriginal communities of Calabar and Cross River State (Aye, 1967).

The societal role of art cannot be overstated. From the Old Stone Age, where prehistoric humans at Lascaux inscribed drawings and paintings on cave walls—to attract game and record the presence of organized life—to contemporary times where artists address social, political, and economic issues through their works (Jangid, 2022), art has remained a critical societal force.

The late novelist Chinua Achebe once observed that only committed artists and writers swim against the current. Similarly, Balachandra Rajan asserts that the contemporary African artist is no longer marginalized but now stands at the center, engaging society directly. In this context, works of art function as visual addresses to society, prompting reflection, dialogue, and change. As Wole Soyinka famously stated, "A man must know where the

rain began to beat him," emphasizing the role of art in societal self-awareness.

Finally, echoing Bertolt Brecht's famous idea, art is "not a mirror held up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it" (Brecht, 1930s). This perspective highlights art's power not just to reflect reality but to challenge and transform it, fostering communication, understanding, and solidarity among people of diverse cultures.

Arts Exhibitions and Responses

In Calabar, there is a prevalent lack of appreciation for original art among the general populace. Many tend to favor roadside art and prints over original works due to the perceived high cost of authentic artworks. The valuation of art in Calabar presents a significant challenge; compared to larger cities where established artists command higher prices, local artists struggle to receive fair compensation for their creations. This discrepancy discourages emerging artists from pursuing their artistic careers. Additionally, the lack of awareness regarding the value of art has been another obstacle. Historically, art was not a mainstream interest in Calabar. However, in recent years, there has been a growing awareness of art within the community. Despite this progress, many still prefer purchasing art from well-known artists in larger cities rather than supporting local talent.

Dr. Nnochiri, in an oral interview, shared an illustrative experience in which a collector cited a recognized emerging artist, trained in Calabar, whose career was bolstered by external promotion. This anecdote underscores the importance of promoting local artists to foster a thriving art scene in the region. Unfortunately, there remains a perception that artists in Calabar lack the skills to produce professional-grade artworks. Consequently, potential buyers often undervalue local art, negotiating lower prices compared to what similar works would fetch in larger urban markets.

In recent times, several art exhibitions have taken place in the state, organized by both private and public sectors. However, responses from artists, organizers, and audiences are often inconsistent. Apart from exhibitions held by the prominent art schools in Calabar, interviews revealed that while Calabar artists are creative and talented, the primary challenge in sales is the poor response from audiences who, though showing interest, are often unwilling or unable to make a purchase (Egharevba, 2023). Despite the high quality of works displayed, many exhibitions have resulted in little or no sales, highlighting the difficulties artists face, even when the cost of staging a professional exhibition is substantial. Below are some notable exhibitions that have taken place in Calabar:

Creolisation 2021

The Conceptual Creolisation exhibition, held from April 12 to 18, 2021, showcased works by artists Egharevba and Akpang. The art pieces ranged from mixed media and installations to paintings and sculptures. The exhibition was inaugurated by the former Minister of Arts and Culture, Brigadier-General Ukpo. Despite attracting positive comments and a high volume of visitors, the exhibition did not meet the success of similar shows held outside the state, where there was greater patronage and networking opportunities. No sales were made, and the interested buyers did not return as promised. The audience, however, expressed a desire for the artists to donate some works as souvenirs (Egharevba, 2023).

Survivance Exhibition

On March 27, 2023, the Survivance exhibition took place at the UNICROSS New Cafe, featuring final-year students from the Visual Arts Department. The exhibition displayed a diverse array of creative works across various mediums such as painting, textiles, graphics, and sculpture. Over the years, the Department of Visual Arts has held several exhibitions, but the Survivance exhibition stood out due to the large number of exhibiting students, making it comparable to art expos in places like London (oral interview with G. Blaze, 2023). The exhibition lasted for ten days and attracted visitors from various walks of life. Despite extending the exhibition to accommodate more art enthusiasts and collectors, only 10 percent of the works, primarily textiles, were sold. The Head of the Department of Visual Arts, Emekpe (2024), noted that the challenge of sales continues, with even invited guests expecting free works. Most sales were made to members of the department's staff, with only a few pieces purchased by interested visitors.

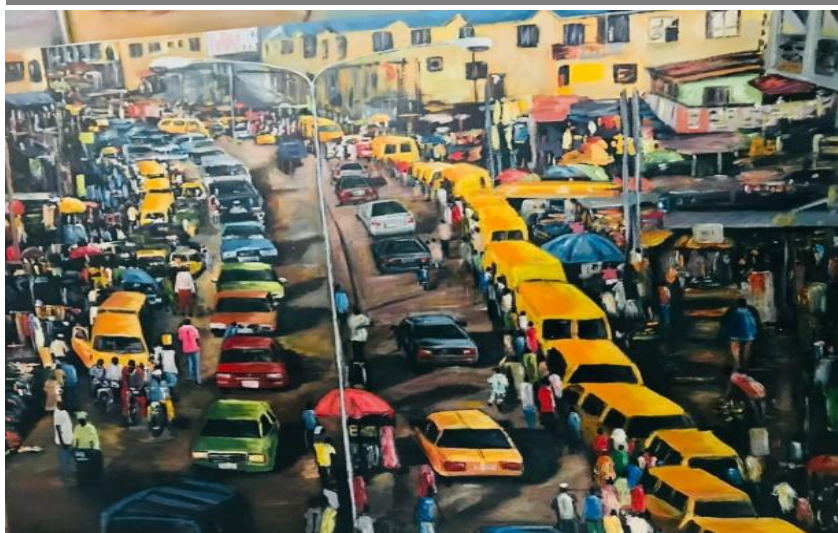


Fig. 6, Godwin Onen, Acrylic Painting on canvas. Work showcased during the exhibition



Fig. 7; The survivance Exhibition hall,2023.



Figure 8. His Excellency Donald Duke



Figure 9. Fabric Display by Umana Nnochiri at the Traces of Times Exhibition 2023

Terrific Tuesday at the Marina

Terrific Tuesday at the Marina was a collaborative art show organized by the Minister of Arts, Mr. Utsu, and held from March 22 to 24, 2022, at the Marina Resort. The event spanned two days and aimed to blend artistic expression with the vibrant leisure atmosphere of Calabar, renowned for its cuisine and relaxation opportunities. The show successfully integrated art and entertainment, achieving a notable 40 percent sales rate. This success is attributed to Mr. Utsu's efforts in inviting a number of dignitaries and art enthusiasts who were passionate about acquiring art pieces. The combination of a high-profile guest list and the resort's appealing environment contributed to the event's strong sales performance and overall success.

Art Incubator

Established in 2017, the Art Incubator is an annual exhibition designed to foster entrepreneurial and economic growth among artists, thereby developing the art market in Calabar. Founded by Prof. Bojor Enamhe, a lecturer at UNICROSS, the Art Incubator has featured various themed exhibitions, such as Monikim, Borderless, and Reflection, which have inspired artists to produce new works. Over the years, the exhibition has garnered approximately 30 percent patronage. Other notable exhibitions in the region include the Ediye Calabar Arts Exhibition, Colours of Cross River Art Exhibition, and the Watt Central Arts Exhibition.

Traces of Time, Calabar

The Traces of Time exhibition, organized by France-based curator Bose Fagbemi, is recognized as the most extensively advertised and largest exhibition ever held in Calabar, Cross River State. Featuring works from the 16th to the 21st centuries, the exhibition showcased art pieces by renowned artists such as Okpok Okon, Emmanuel Ekefrey, Ndem Kingsley, Umana Nnochiti, Jerry Unimke, Blessy Bassy, Erasmus Onyichi, Peju Layiwola, and John Nje. Running from December 1 to January 1, the exhibition attracted high-profile guests, including government officials and art collectors. Despite extensive media coverage and invitations sent across the country, only 40 percent of the artworks were sold. Although the audience admired the works and some promised to return to make purchases, they did not follow through. The exhibition highlighted the need for better promotion and support for the arts in the state. In response, the state governor, Prince Bassey Otu, has pledged to enhance the promotion of art in Cross River State in hopes of improving patronage.

Galleries and Museums in Calabar

The state is home to a few galleries, though they hold little to no exhibitions. These include the Bronze Art Gallery, Etudoh Arts Gallery, Blooms Arts Gallery, Alotex Arts Gallery, and Gallery 08, among others. The presence of these galleries is crucial for fostering a local art culture, yet their limited activity underscores the challenge of art promotion in the region.



Fig.10 Display at Gallery 08 et'all



Fig.11 Display at Gallery 08 et'all.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, incorporating both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were gathered through interviews with key stakeholders, including artists, art collectors, and exhibition organizers. Secondary data were sourced from academic journals, exhibition records, and art catalogues. The combination of these data sources provided a comprehensive view of the arts and marketing challenges in Calabar.

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, AND CONCLUSION

The study focused on the art and marketing challenges within the Calabar metropolis, with particular attention given to exhibitions organized by renowned Calabar art schools, galleries, and professional exhibition groups. The findings indicate that the artworks produced by studio artists in the Calabar metropolis meet contemporary standards, particularly in terms of creative innovation, visual improvisation, experimentation, and the technical manipulation of various media. These qualities were further affirmed through feedback and responses from art audiences during exhibitions and art shows.

A significant observation revealed that the primary challenge faced by studio artists in Calabar is not related to the creative process or the quality of artworks produced. Rather, the core issue lies in the purchasing of these artworks. Approximately 97% of art audiences in Calabar, based on the study's findings, appear unable to afford the artworks on display. This financial barrier severely limits the market potential for local artists, preventing them from achieving fair compensation for their work.

In conclusion, the study highlights the urgent need to address the marketing and sales challenges faced by Calabar's artists. To overcome these obstacles, the study recommends establishing stronger links with both governmental and non-governmental organizations, from local to international levels. Additionally, concerted efforts should be made to educate the public on the significance of original art, promote the works of local artists, and improve the overall perception of Calabar's art community. By fostering a deeper understanding of the value of authentic art, it is hoped that the local art market can be strengthened, benefiting both artists and the broader community.

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