

A Curatorial Reflection

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This presentation brings together works by members of the Zaria Art Society, later known as the “Zaria Rebels”, for Adegbola Gallery’s debut international art fair presentation at Expo Chicago 2026.

In 1958, a group of young artists at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in Zaria began questioning the assumptions of colonial art education. Confronted with a curriculum that privileged European artistic traditions while giving limited attention to the visual languages of their own cultural environment, they formed what became known as the Zaria Art Society. Through discussion, debate and experimentation, these artists sought to redefine how artistic practice might respond to the cultural realities of a society on the threshold of independence.

Like many influential artistic movements of the twentieth century, the Zaria Art Society emerged from artists working within a shared educational environment who sought to rethink the role of art in a rapidly changing society. Although the Society existed for only four years, it has come to be recognised as a defining movement in Nigerian art history. Its members went on to inspire generations of Nigerian artists, educators and cultural thinkers whose work continues to shape the country’s artistic landscape today.

The ideas that emerged from their discussions were later articulated most clearly by Uche Okeke as Natural Synthesis. At its core, Natural Synthesis proposed that modern Nigerian art could emerge from a creative dialogue between inherited cultural traditions and contemporary artistic practice. Rather than rejecting their academic training, the artists reinterpreted it through indigenous visual systems, drawing inspiration from traditions such as Uli, Nsibidi, and the sculptural legacies of Benin and Ife. In this sense, their approach may also be understood as one of the earliest articulations of decolonial aesthetics within modern African art, anticipating conversations that continue to shape global art history today.

The philosophy of Natural Synthesis did not prescribe a single style. Instead, it provided a conceptual framework within which each artist developed an individual approach to artistic practice.

Each member of the Society therefore pursued a distinct artistic path. Bruce Onobrakpeya pioneered innovative approaches to printmaking and relief that would become among the most technically distinctive contributions of the Zaria generation, drawing deeply from Urhobo cosmology. As he once explained, his artistic philosophy was guided by a deliberate desire to reach as many people as possible. “It is my policy and target to reach as many people as I can,” he noted, developing techniques that allowed him to multiply his works so that they could circulate widely and be encountered by broader audiences. Other artists worked according to different rhythms and temperaments. Yusuf Grillo, for example, approached painting with great deliberation, often spending long periods refining a work before considering it complete.

The idea of the “Zaria Rebels” has sometimes suggested confrontation. Yet, as Demas Nwoko later observed, the movement was not conceived as a rebellion but rather as an attempt to address gaps in the curriculum of the institution at that time. Their aim was to broaden artistic training through closer engagement with observation, environment and everyday experience.

Equally important was the sense of fraternity shared among the artists. They recognised that artistic transformation rarely occurs in isolation but grows through dialogue and collective effort. As Uche

Okeke later reflected, artists working around shared ideals are able to extend their reach far beyond what any individual might achieve alone. One tree, he remarked memorably, cannot form a forest.

The significance of the Zaria Art Society extends far beyond its original historical period. Works by members of the movement are today held in important public collections including the British Museum, the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, and the National Gallery of Art Nigeria, among others. Their presence within international collections reflects the broader reassessment of twentieth-century modernism and recognition that important artistic movements likewise emerged beyond its traditional Euro-American centres.

Encounters with the work of the Zaria artists are not new. Important exhibitions organised over several decades by institutions and galleries have played a crucial role in sustaining engagement with their legacy and ensuring that their contributions remain visible within Nigerian art history. Opportunities to encounter works by members of the Zaria generation together remain relatively rare. Presentations such as this therefore offer an occasion to reconsider the philosophical foundations and artistic diversity that defined the movement.

The legacy of the Zaria Art Society can be seen not only in the individual careers of its members but also in the institutions and artistic movements that followed. The founding of the Society of Nigerian Artists, the development of the Uli inspired artistic discourse at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and later the Ona art movement at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, all reflect the enduring influence of the ideas first articulated in Zaria. As Bruce Onobrakpeya has also observed, the impact of the movement extended into broader Nigerian society, where parents increasingly began to feel confident about allowing their children to study art as a legitimate field of intellectual and professional pursuit.

The questions first posed by the artists in Zaria remain strikingly relevant today. How can artists engage global artistic languages while remaining rooted in their own cultural histories? How can artistic practice participate in broader conversations about identity, society and cultural transformation? The members of the Zaria Art Society approached these questions with remarkable clarity and conviction.

Almost seven decades later, the intellectual legacy of the Zaria Art Society continues to shape the evolution of Nigerian art.