

## Creative Welded Metal Art: A Means to Financial Sustainability

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**Abstract.** Creative welded metal art is a global profession from the ancient to contemporary time. Exposure to working metal creatively in modern time started in Europe in 1930 and later spread to other parts of the world. This act, since its emergence in Nigeria has not been explored as it was the case with the traditional metal approach particularly among the academically trained artists (sculptors). This paper aimed at bringing to fore importance of formerly trained artist in the act of creative welded metal art (work) particularly as it regards utilitarian objects (such as chairs, console, curtain poles and tie-back etc). Data for the study was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. It was observed that creative welded metal art is highly accepted in the society and many academically trained sculptors are found wanting in the trade. Therefore, the paper concluded by encouraging art schools and their products in the act of creative welded metal art as a means to self-financial sustainability.

**Keywords:** Creative, Metal, Welded, Economy, Self-Sustenance

### 1. Introduction

Ever since man discovers metal, its usage has helped human to develop and become more civilized as well as being sophisticated as metal explorations were used for various purposes. Globally, from ancient to modern era metal has been used for various means of which Africa/Nigeria is not left out in the creative possibilities of metal exploration. Metal is a type of chemical element that is malleable and ductile, usually solid, and has luster characteristics. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000) defines metal as a type of solid mineral substance that is usually hard and shiny, through which heat and electricity can travel. Examples of such elements are tin, gold and iron. Metal is a generic term for family

of mineral substances such as iron, aluminum, gold, brass, bronze, and copper. These substances have been explored in a variety of forms over time for making machinery, tools and in modern time for utilitarian objects and figurative art works.

Jefferson (1974:128) asserts that the Iron Age began on the African continent and also iron was smelted in Africa long before the Arabs and Indians imported it from Europe. She observes that Africans were known to be great artisans in iron as early as 400 B.C. African traditional metal works vary according to their production techniques. Most of the ancient metal works in Africa are either cast or forged. Cast metal works in traditional Africa are either in bronze or brass (known as *ide* or *bàbà* among the Yoruba speaking); they come in either solid or hollow cast technique which is known as lost wax process or *cire perdue*. It is a method of metal casting in which a molten metal is poured into a mould that has been created by means of a wax model.

*Repoussé* is another technique of working metal creatively using non-ferrous metals such as copper and aluminum. It is a metal working manner in which a malleable metal is ornamented or shaped by hammering from the reverse side to create a design in low relief. Working a ferrous metal artistically in the ancient era was through forging, which the Yoruba refer to as *Isè Àgbèdè*. *Àgbèdè* (Forging) is a process of heating a rod or metal sheet in the furnace and then painstakingly hammering it to a desired shape. It was through this means that many communities in Africa/Nigeria were able to produce their war and farm implements (such as spear, hoe, knife, cutlass etc). Musical instruments (such as *Aro* in plate 1) and some objects of status and prestige (such as *òpá Òsanyín*) are also produced using the techniques. This ancient act is still practiced to this day.

The working of metal creatively in Nigeria became better refined with the introduction of electric arc welding machine in the mid twentieth century. Folarin (2010) in an interview reveals that the introduction of wrought welded metal in art in the mid twentieth century changed the face of metal-working in Nigeria. This modern approach (the use of welding machine) of working metal artistically in execution of figurative images originated from a Spanish artist (Julio Gonzalex) in 1930 and later spread to other part of the world, while in Nigeria according to Folarin (2010) the technique was introduced by the returnee slaves. The introduction has since continued to evolve in giving room to lot of creative experiments that changes the face of creative welded metal work from the ancient technique to what it is today. Wrought iron is a highly refined form of iron that is though strong but easy to shape and fairly resistant to rust. Wrought iron, could be described as a metal that had been worked on, formed and shaped by some means such as beating, annealing, twisting, bending, and welding (Ijisakin 2003:46). Folarin (2010) further stated that modern welded metal was used as decorative purpose in the Afro-Brazilian style of architectural design in Nigeria. He also reveals that the returnees were probably the first set of people in Nigeria to use wrought metal as part of their architectural design for burglar bars and fence railings in the country years before the country attain independence.

The earliest form of wrought iron works in Nigeria were imported in units for easy shipping into the country and then coupled together using bolts and nuts in screwing all the units together before being erected for the purpose they were meant to serve. An example of these is a small metal gate (in plate 2) found at the old Olótù palace in Otà, Ògùn State fashioned in a similar form of the Yoruba ùgánràndì or ẹran-òjẹ (goat gate) which then made of wood. The acceptability of this heralded the contemporary use of creative welded metal work which began to gain ground in Nigeria and thus, adding to the existing cottage art in the country.

By the 1980s, the use of welded metal art had become pronounced in the embellishment and fortifications of our architecture in which iron rods and plates were used as window and door burglaries in buildings and as fence railings and fabricated doors and gates. Domestic objects such as stool, chair and table are also fabricated using modern welding technique. Today, welding workshops are seen all over major towns and cities particularly in Lagos metropolis. Despite its variant creative tendency, acceptability and one of the cortege money making

art in Nigeria that is of high demand, academically trained artists are found wanting in the act.

The few early contemporary Nigerian artists who involved in the exploration of metal for creative means to their financial self-sustainability known are the like of Agbo Folarin (1936 – 2010) and Olu Amoda whose through their efforts have being able to influence the upcoming ones. These two though gainfully employed in the academics, they probably understand the need to impact positively on their student artist by leaving by example. Aside their class strict schedule, they still spare some of their leisure time working in their private student fabricating some utilitarian house hold objects for clients. Hence, through this, some of their students have the privileges of adding more skill to what has already being thought in class.

The method involved is basically direct construction which involves building up form using metal plates, rods and pipes or any other applicable materials. For the purpose and better understanding of this paper, the nature of the welded metal art is classified into two types: Architecture related and household objects. Works produced in relations to this classification is acceptable and are in high demand by the people. Hence, creative welded metal art (utilitarian object) is very much lucrative, acceptable and have come to stay as a means of financial self-sustainability.

## 2. Architecture Related

Creative welded metal art in the study is classified into two categories: architecture and household object. The classification is necessary for better appreciation and understanding. Creative welded metal art of architecture related were gate, burglary, door, rails etc., while those of household object refers to are chairs, table, mirror frame, among others. It is of note that all form of art are sure way to a means of financial sustainability. Nonetheless, artist engaging themselves in the execution of utilitarian welded metal work will save themselves from the syndrome comments of many clients fond of saying “they wanted to help” (making most young artist to believe their art works is not a basic need) and eventually giving token for a work worth more their offer under the disguise of poor economy in the Nigeria. According to Folorunsho (2009) the visual art is basically a skilled profession which touches every aspect of human life, such as the simplest items used in home to the most sophisticated technological devices in use every day. In all this, the application of visual aesthetic is not in doubt.

Art as defined by Oxford English Dictionary is the expression of what is beautiful, appealing or more than ordinary significance based on aesthetic principles. This principle is nowhere better found than in African art where consciousness to aesthetic appeal in their creative work is taken in high value. Corroborating this, Sieber (1980) notes that African household objects were executed with skill, dexterity and purpose as well as the objects revealed an imaginative use of materials and are highly inventive in form, often embellished with motifs. While Bastin (1991) asserts that the executors of African utilitarian objects seek to achieve utility, efficiency and beauty all at the same time. In the same view, Firth (1951) refers to the implements and utensils used by ordinary people in traditional Africa that are adorned by aesthetic elements, are usually art objects and that such ornaments make the objects outstanding to people and so elevate them beyond mere utility.

The impact of academically trained artists in the art of creative welded metal art is of no small measure. Their aesthetic rendition on the welded utilitarian objects reveals strong affinity with those of their traditional background and as such, the synthesis associated with contemporary Nigerian art works is vivid in the metal works. Hence, their works show evidence of borrowing, adaptation, adoption and synthetic idioms within and beyond the producer's culture as observed by Otonye (2004) in her study on "Synthesis and impact of traditional and modern artistic idioms on Nigerian Arts". Corroborating this, Stanley (1989) notes that modern artists in Africa through their works have a way of identification with their past, and as such, the artists' training background propels them to have a great quest and link their current executions to that of the artists in the ancient time in support of Otonye (2004) that modern artists seek for cultural affinity and mediate between ancient African art traditions and contemporary international art form outside the shore of their soil without slavishly embracing either.

The metal gate in plate 3 is in line with Stanley and Otonye's view, as the work borrows so much from the African face mask. It is a welded metal executed in 1977 by Agbo Folarin (1936-2010), it was mounted at the conference centre of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife where it has added to the aesthetic of the environment. Of its kind is a metal door in plate 4 executed by Adeola Balogun (a sculptor) who teaches at the Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos. He has been involved in the execution of creative welded metal utilitarian works alongside with making figurative sculpture. The door is one of the welded metal doors mounted

at his residence. This piece was painstakingly executed mostly with the use of found objects in which the oval shape at the upper part of the door being the focal point is closely related to the Ghanaian Akwaba doll which is out of the artist Yoruba cultural background. According to Balogun (2015) in an interview, revealed that he has been getting constant commission for such work which is enough to be a sole source of income to feed a family, hence, the financial readiness attached to executing such products stands as a means of propelling him in doing such works.

Burglar which has been slammed an artisan (welder) work and usually executed in a simple design for window protection was fashioned in an unusual manner in the hands of academically trained artists. As such, the form may appear in a semi-abstract linear form like the one in plate 5 which was fashioned to make a flying bird suggestive of a dove (Àdùbà). While the one in plate 6 depicted more reflection of the artist's affinity to his cultural background in which an icon like a wooden comb (Òdùyà) is used as a dominant motif that gives the work a complete African identity. It was done by Evbodaghe Tony, a product of Auchu Art School. The work was commissioned by Barrister Andy Akporugo and was installed at the stair vent window at his chamber located at the G.R.A., Ikeja, Lagos. Also produced by Evbodaghe is the wall decorated welded metal art (see plate 7) that carries the paraphernalia of the law professions. This piece was also installed at the reception of the same building with the burglary bar. Both the burglar and the wall decoration are serving dual purposes; protection (of the window) and aesthetic pleasure to the interior of the place. The most recent being the creative welded metal in plate 8 used in constructing the name of an art gallery, Thought Pyramid Art Centre-Lagos.

The durability of metal and its ease of manipulation led to the choice of the medium as most of such executed using neon sign which is a plastic medium or other materials worn out within a short frame of time. The letters in this piece were carefully embellished to fascinate people's attention without obstructing the reading of the letters / words as well as Africanizing the work in relation to the socio-cultural background of the artist, the client and the targeted audience around. Creative welded metal works, like in wood and cast alloy work have processes which need to be considered during execution.

In plate 9, the metal gate was creatively welded with a combination of discarded auto mobile parts such as rims, variant sizes of spanner etc. It is of note that the

act of using junk creative is synonymous with academic trained artist in Nigeria. My informant (who pleaded anonymity) revealed that the owner of the building is an Engineer and as such requested the artist to incorporate motifs that is associated with his profession. Contemporary creative welded metal art is not limited to architectural related but also include creative execution of household objects as enumerated below.

### 3. Household Utensils

Traditionally, wood has been known to be the foremost and most widely used materials for making indoor furniture. Availability of wood in abundance pave way for its use couple with the ease with which it can be shaped using simple tools. These qualities in addition to the aesthetic appeal of the furniture product are responsible for the construction of furniture (Makanju 2007). Encarta (2006) defines furniture as “the equipment in a room such as beds, chairs, table and chests, that usually gives a room a particular function, such as that of bedroom, dining room, or kitchen”. Due to the nature of wood to weather, the early works in wood have not survived. Hence, over the years, every culture in response to demand of their climatic condition, durability, strength and function for which the furniture is to serve introduced new materials and styles. In Nigeria, deforestation have led to scarcity of good wood which probably of the strong reason that led to the introduction of new materials among which is iron / metal in making household furniture.

The earliest form of furniture made of wrought iron is the cast type imported to the country prior Nigerian Independence such as the one in plate 10. Later some welders began to make simple design form by using hollow pipe and flat bars in making chairs and table which is devoid of ornamentation. The poor economic situation in Nigeria accumulated to poor patronage of creative art generally led some academic trained artists to venture into making welded metal furniture and some household utensils as a means to financial sustainability. Their academic training background aided the form of their produced objects as they were able to introduced motif that elevates their works beyond mere furniture. Corroborating this effort, Folorunsho (2009) states that, African artist bear in mind when making their functional products, application of visual aesthetics.

According Iyorah (2015) a sculptor and graduate of Auchi polytechnic and incidentally being the person who influenced one of the writer of this paper into making of welded utilitarian objects (when they met

in the year 2000) such as the centre table in plate 11 and the single sitter chair in plate 12 that has simplify design formed like the horn of a Bull (Eḡḡn). Iyorah reveals that most of his early works were design copy from foreign magazine brought by customers who requested for a copy of what they brought. The high demand of the product and quest to make something new led him to do sketches which afford him to put his own quota by ornamenting the works with African motifs and thereby give the welded work a Nigerian look (see the three sitter sofa sit in plate 13), an efforts that distinct his product from the common welder products who share the same venue as studio / workshop in the then wrought iron village at Alausa Secretariat-Ikeja.

The lavishly embellished table and chair in plates 14 was executed by Fidelix Odogwu (a sculptor graduate of Auchi Polytechnic) also carries strong affinity with traditional African art. Also in the same affinity is the lamp holder in plate 15 with a stylized geometric image of a water bearer (mai ruwa in Hausa and aṣọṣọ mi tà among the Yoruba people of western Nigeria) at the centre as focal point. The head of the abstracted and stylized figure was formed in a similar structure synonymous with the Ghanaian Akwaba doll while the half conical stand as the lamp cover was embellished in simple linear triangular shape embedded with perforated metal to enhance the beauty of the object.

In traditional Yoruba community, high profile is given to mirror and as such, carvers are usually commissioned a special case to house the cherished object. The taste for change however has resulted in the use of modern materials and technique the execution of the mirror frame using metal (see plate 16). It was executed using a circular shape as the frame in which other motifs in linear decoration was used to form two birds (that probably suggest couple) facing each other in a friendly mood on a tree branch. Despite the embellishment incorporated on the mirror frame, it still gives way for clarity of the user without any obstacle.

### 4. The Creative Processes of Welded Metal Art

Prior to the involvement of artist with academic background in Nigeria, welders are the prominent people who are into metal works, and like every other traditional craft professions, it is dominated by illiterate / semi-illiterate (people who can hardly read and write). The chronic economic situation from the mid 80s is one of the factors that forced many academically trained artists (sculptors) who see venturing into making domestic art object an adopted

and accepted means of rescuing themselves from the economic hardship. It is worthy to note that, their involvement has contributed immensely to the act of creative metal utilitarian objects and as such, has helped in the upgrading the aesthetics taste of their produce out of the usual motif free level of the local welder. Hence they were able to inject some notable achievement in the procedural stages that gives their products quality that can stand side by side with any of its kind from developed nations.

In creative welded metal object, forming of shape is through cutting, bending (where necessary), and joining which is achieved primarily by welding the needed points together after which an angle grinder will be use in grinding off the excess mark of the welding points. With the coming of sculptors in the act of making creative welded metal art, they were able to put in their quota in achieving a well deserving aesthetic quality in the work. Hence, ornamentation of object their metal objects is considered a necessity. Though, the painstaking bending of rod in some part of the work do add to the beauty, yet they go further by incorporating and adopting finfin stage involved in Yoruba wood carving technique by ornamenting some part using tinning rods to give the work a beautiful appearance. Finfin in creative welded metal object is the process of welding tinning rod, and perforated sheet in emphasizing on the pattern. Hence, finfin like in wood carving makes welded objects to look very beautiful (léwà) and appealing (fanimóra) to the eyes. Èwà (beauty) among the Yoruba is associated with iwa (good character) which is related to being good (dára), and useful (wúlò), as such, when a beautiful object poses a functional quality, it will be refers to as good and useful.

In achieving impression of no welding points after smoothing with the use of hand grinding machine then followed the application of car body filler (polygard). When this get dry, it will required the use of sand paper to be manually rob on its surface to give it a smooth finishing that will help to eradicate totally the traces of the welding points on the object. This stage, will give a feeling of luminosity (dídùn) of surface in readiness for the next stage which is painting (kíkùn). This is in essence to give good presentation and to get rid of any possible of crudeness in the work.

Painting (kíkùn) of the creative welded metal art now also wear new look as it took after the manner in which figurative welded metal art is being painted. This, therefore depend on the nature and essence in which the object is meant to serve. Firstly, it will be

given an undercoat by applying anti-rust (red-oxide) paint (òdà májěódípètà) after which comes the final colour (áwò) like those in plates 2 to 9. The surrounding in which the work will be use in most cases determined the type of finishing, thus, the nature of finishing the items in plates 10,11 and 15, require adding of particles on the surface of the wet undercoat paint (òdà) after welding has been completely done. These can be achieve either with the use of saw dust or sand which requires some high level of ifarabalè (patience) and iwòntúnwònsì (mean) to achieve an even velvet looking texturized surface effects. This technique is as a result of a successful experimentation and innovation into welded metal art in Nigeria by Fidelix Odogwu in the early 2000 as mentioned by Denedo in Sobowale (2015). The effect makes the work to look cool as well as giving impression of antique appearance.

### **5. Financial Sustainability of Creative Welded Metal Art.**

Each Government in Nigeria has been coming up with variant policies which are yet to generate expected results particularly in the areas of job creation and youth empowerment in relations to self sustainability. They failed to realize the development and sustenance of the visual art (cottage art) industry as a prerequisite for economic empowerment towards self financial sustainability and as such no investment in the visual profession. The economic resection in Nigeria of today is due to the fact that larger percentage of those who are at their prime age kept increasing year in year out from the college without government being able to absorb the teaming population into white collar job. This is as a result of poor orientation embedded in peoples mind.

People in the higher institution of learning particularly those in the visual section should put in their quota in saving their products the situation of being jobless. They should look inward beyond the curriculum and tailored it into what will make those who pass through such to be able to sustain themselves financially after leaving school. The art of making utilitarian art is not new in Africa / Nigeria, as such contemporary artist should not lack in this bountiful act.

Venturing into making creative welded metal art (non figurative art works) is a good way to being self sustain economically due to the fact that, client in most cases paid about 65-70% of their charges before work commence on their demand. This therefore, relieved the artist the stress of being short of income and give them the needed strength and creativity

required when commencing the production of the work are requested by their client. This therefore often relief artist in this line of the usual struggling to conceptualize and seek for capital in getting materials and at the same time seeking for prospective buyer which is scarce to come by. Engaging in making domestic metal objects saves those in the practice from the few available art patrons who capitalized on the poor economy to pay in bits, thereby frustrating the hands that produced the art in their procession by paying in bits.

Conclusively, experience and finding from those in the act of creative welded metal art has revealed that, it is very lucrative, acceptable. Hence, it's a good source of money making in the visual practice. If Government can do their quota in sustaining those who are in this act, by providing constant power supply, aid in creating working space, give loan at no interest or low as well as patronizing the creative welded metal works, it will attract more hands into the profession and reduce the level of unemployment particularly among the teeming youth who are wasting around looking for white cola's job.



Plate 1. *Aro*, metal (forge Traditional Yoruba musical instrument) Photographs: Sobowale, T. August, 2012.



Plate 2. *Aganrandi*, (metal fabrication and coupled with bolts and nuts), at the open entrance of old Ota palace. (Photograph by Sobowale T.O., 2014

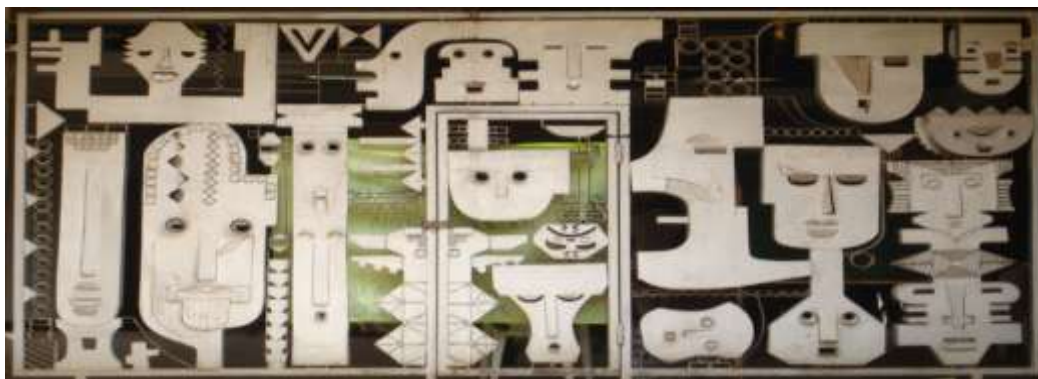


Plate 3: Agbo Folarin, "Faces at Conference". 15ft by 9ft, 1977. Welded metal, sculpture, Photograph by Tolulope Sobowale, December 15, 2013



Plate 4: Balogun Adeola "Sentry Door", 1998  
(8 ft x 3ft), Assemblage welded sculpture,  
(Photograph : Sobowale, T., 2010)



Plate 5: Gate, Created with some discarded auto parts.  
(Photograph: Sobowale T. O. 2017)



Plate 6: Tree sitter Wrought Iron Chair (Probably imported about 60 years ago  
Photograph: Oladesu Johnson, 2017)



Plate 7: Sobowale Tolulope, Centre Table, 2009.  
(Personal Collection) 2009.  
Photograph: Oladesu Johnson, 2017



Plate 8: Sobowale Tolulope, Single harm Chair,  
(Personal collection)  
Photograph: Oladesu Johnson, 2017



Plate 9: Iyora Luke, Three setter sofas, 2012. (Photograph: Sobowale T. O., 2012)



Plate 10: Odogwu Fidelix, Reading Table and a Chair, 2014  
Photograph: Sobowale T. O.



Plate 11: Odogwu Fidelix,  
Lamp Holder, 2013.  
(Source: Odogwu Fedelix)



Plate 12: Wall looking Mirror. (Collection of Peter Ighodaro) Photograph: Oladesu Johnson, 2017



Plate 13, Window Burglar, (of an eatery)  
Photograph: Oladesu Johnson, 2017



Plate 14: Evbodaghe Tony, 2013  
Source: The artist



Plate 15: Evbodaghe Tony, 2013  
Source: The artist.



Plate 16: Evbodaghe Tony, Thought Pyramid art centre-Lagos 2017  
Source: The artist

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