

INAUGURATION OF THE WOLE SOYINKA INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL EXCHANGE GALLERY (WSICE Gallery TODAY). (Dr. 'Tunde Awosanmi).

Abeokuta has been known as one of Nigeria's deeply cultured and cultural cities. The cultural status of the city whose wealth and industriousness are penetratingly defined by the depth and elegance of the adire textile for which it is famous is also as aged as the Olumo rock and other granite outcrops, a collectively protuberant ecological presence that informed the name of the city. Historically, this is a city of battles and of warriors known for fighting many battles. The Egba people of Abeokuta were known to have contributed their own stupendous quota to the Yoruba internecine wars of the 19th century. Their neighbours would not forget them so easily for rising up each moment when their territorial integrity and humanity as a people was threatened.

Within Nigeria's contemporary history, the city has produced fighters and warriors whose weapons of combat deviated from the conventional instruments and designs. Warriors like Wole Soyinka and Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, within the context of that contemporary history, are veterans who have chosen the most unsuspecting tool, art, as the effective medium of waging their humanistic wars. It was, therefore, in honour of one of these justice advocates for the human race that Abeokuta witnessed, on the 13th July, 2023, the inauguration of an artistic and cultural institution which plans to play a major role as a center for engaging in battles that are related with the edification of the human spirit.

The event was the unveiling of the Wole Soyinka International Cultural Exchange Gallery of arts. The event was scheduled to commemorate the 89th birthday anniversary of Professor Wole Soyinka, the global cultural icon and humanist. This particular gallery comes with a remarkable distinction. It has been designed for showcasing art works produced essentially by children. This approach, however, is historically traceable to the strategy of engagement of WSCIE since 2009 when it came into being with the voluntary mandate to annually consummate the birthdate of Professor Wole Soyinka as a symbolic point of contact with the minds of children, not only on national scale but even on the international calendar. The cultural exchange project of WSCIE has been driven by a passion to mentor and groom, directly and indirectly, the age-group of people that falls within the category identifiable as children and youth drawn principally from primary and secondary levels of education.

In response to this objective, the WSICE Gallery distinctively targets the mind of children and early youth. This is why the opening on the 13th July, 2023, intentionally had on display 89 innocent but purposeful paintings carefully selected from hundreds of such that had been produced by children over the years at the WSICE "Do-Your-Own-Thing" programme – a major aspect of the organization's yearly activities designed for commemorating the birthday of the Nobel Laureate. Certainly, there is a reason for the choice of just 89 out of the multitudes of others that testify to the creative independence and assiduity of thousands of Nigerian children who had had the opportunity of being mentored on the platform of this annual Wole Soyinka birthday commemoration. The figure signifies an intended approach at numerical symbolization of the

number of new children which are born in that very year by Wole Soyinka by way of intellectual and ethical inspiration. Since 2009 when Wole Soyinka attained the age of 75, WSICE had deliberately devised the strategy to approach each ceremonial year through an iconographic lens by which 75 minds were structured to tally with the age of the sage. This number has since increased by one every fresh year, up until this current year 2023 which marks the writer's 89 years of prodigious existence.

Under the auspices of this strategy of yearly numerical signification by WSICE, since 2009, the number that is commensurate with Professor Soyinka's newly attained age, in this case 75, and which has grown by one each year, secondary school students annually drawn out of pools of hundreds of applicants from all states of the Nigerian federation have consistently participated in the final laps of essay writing competitions via which three prominent winners have usually emerged in first, second and third positions. This means that not less than 42 Nigerian children have so far been awarded prizes aside from the numerous certificates of involvement given to the multitudes of the balance of each set every year.

It was this spirit of strategic numbering in commensurate terms with the year attained by Wole Soyinka that also informed the selection of the 89 pieces of art works produced by children that graced the walls of the newly unveiled gallery. Further, in line with the tradition of WSICE which primes mentorship as a cardinal means of influencing the youth in thought and act, a few works of two professional artists were also featured as a way of instigating communication, influence and continuity between the minds of the children and the minds of these adult artists. Prominent at the opening are installation arts by Olanrewaju Tejuoso and paintings by Bali Audu. Gabriel Emmanuel, a guest artist and curator of the exhibition, in company of Bali Audu, served as chaperons to visitors at the gallery.

On the opening day, three schools visited the gallery. One, a secondary school, came from as far as Idi-Iroko while another secondary school attended the inauguration from Abeokuta. The third school is a primary school with very enthusiastic pupils. Many of the pupils were busy jotting down their experiences on the notepads provided by the organisers as the guest artists pilot them on a tour of the array of works on display. It is amazing how perceptive these children proved themselves to be through the answers that they provided to the questions on the interpretation and their comprehension of the various art works by the curators. This gallery is not only for exhibition of ready arts, it will champion the production of art in multiple dimensions and media through workshops, lectures and special holiday sessions with professional artists that are to be invited as mentors to numerous upcoming generations. Many of pioneering guests have pledged to be back as apprentices in future learning opportunities.

There is something significant about the location of the WSICE Gallery. This new arts institution is cited on the fourth and highest floor of the Omida Shopping Complex, thus overlooking the larger vicinity of the popular Omida market, a major commercial hub in Abeokuta where it is situated. Traditionally, markets in Yorubaland, are designed as cultural, spiritual and political

heart beats of villages, towns and cities. The Gallery's infusion within this market space will help harness the indigenous intellectual and cultural ethics of the Omidia environment, using that as a platform to further synthesize the larger cultural, moral and aesthetic capacities of the Abeokuta city, the Nigerian nation and the entire globe, through the eyes of the child. The WSICE Gallery, certainly, has come to exhale a new breathe into the productive energy of the Nigerian cultural sector.