



**COLLECTION AND
RECOLLECTIONS
OF AN ARTIST**

Jacob Jat Jari

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Catalogue of an Exhibition

Curator: Talatu Onkala Adiwu (PhD)

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***CONVERSATION WITH
PROF. JACOB JAT JARI***

With Questions from: Blaise Gundu Gbaden, PhD

Preamble:

As the amiable Professor Jacob Jat Jari clocks the enviable age of sixty, it really gives me much pleasure to have had the rare privilege to interview him. The excerpts of the conversations are to be found below in this exclusive exposition of an artistic enigma, imbued with knowledge enough to fill up a room, as inadequate as the analogy might be. One can only liken him to other intellectual giants such as the erudite Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah, Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, who incidentally emanates from the very cultural milieu Professor Jari grew up in. And so Jari's erudition is so profound that in encountering him you are sure to get answers to all the questions you are asking him. This fecundity which is manifestly evident in this interview at times throws you off balance and sometimes comforts you. He is made in the mould of the classical professor who always has answers to any question posed about any topic on the face of the earth. This gives you confidence that the Nigerian university system is still producing scholars who can fit into the shoes of the very best the system has ever produced, that is if we look back at the pedigree posterity has endowed on us. Coming from the stable of the prestigious Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, this is indeed quite comforting. One would think that being a premier university the intellectual content can be taken for granted; but he makes us understand that standing on the footfalls of an institution that has produced the soundest of scholars, he is worth his own mettle. And it does not matter if he is an artist; but being one has made it easier for him to pass across snippets of his knowledge unto us, garbed in a language that is quite accessible. For this we are grateful.

1) Who is Jacob Jat Jari? Tell us about your origins. Take us through some of your indigenous, ethnic, social, geo-political and educational backgrounds. How have these ancestral and contemporaneous planes shaped who and what you are today?

JJ: Years before I was born, my father, Paul Jari Jat, a Ngas, had begun to work for Fr. Carroll, an Irish Catholic priest of the Society of African Missions (SMA). My birth and growth were pretty much influenced by this factor. We were a family of four: father, mother (Angelina), sister (Lucy) and I. The Jos Diocese, where Fr. Carroll was a priest, spanned a large area to include parts

of several States. We therefore, stayed in places like Jos, Bauchi and Gombe before ending up in Kagoro. Kagoro was the northern Nigerian headquarters of the SMA priests, majority of who were Irish. I grew up at the Mission house seeing these priests arrive yearly from Europe and getting dispersed to other parts of the North. I played football with them and served Mass for them at the parish church and at several outstations like Manchok. I actually became the sacristan of the parish church at the age of 10 years for which I was paid a weekly allowance. The primary and secondary schools I attended (St Joseph's School, Kagoro and St Murumba College, Jos respectively) were Catholic. My father was fully committed to working at the Mission house as the gardener. We therefore, did not keep a farm to work at as other families did. This meant that I had a lot of time to play, which is why my memory of Kagoro is nostalgic. It is possible that this vast time I had to play unconsciously inclined me towards developing a creative mind.

2) You bestride two major strands of artistic training: painting and art history. Do you consider yourself a painter or an art historian? Which side of you is more fulfilled? The practicing artist or the theorist? Are you both?

JJ: I am a little of both and everything in between. I deliberately opted to read Painting during my undergraduate years. I ended up reading Art History as well because I was highly disappointed with the class of degree I ended up with. Having read the two, I find that one complements the other. I enjoy reading books and viewing great works of art. I feel extremely fulfilled when I listen to or read complimentary comments on my writings or my paintings.

3) Years back, when you wrote an introductory essay in an exhibition catalogue celebrating forty years of the artistic career of Professor Jerry Buhari, you referred to him as being more of a teacher than an artist. Do you think you are first and foremost a teacher before assuming the role of an artist? How would you want posterity to remember you?

JJ: I made this statement reechoing what Jerry declared of himself at a preceding interview. His

declaration actually made me to think that he could be right, that most, if not all of us who are teaching art, are more of teachers than artists. We teach almost every working day for at least 3 months in a semester, two semesters a year at undergraduate and postgraduate levels under unsynchronized timetables thus hardly going on leave. I am not sure that we put the same time creating art works. It is probably funkier however, to introduce oneself as an artist than a teacher at social gatherings.

4) *You are a Professor of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; it is here too that you gained all your degrees. Do you sometimes feel as if you should have gone elsewhere? Surely you do not think this environment is a limiting factor to your gaining a clearer understanding of life outside the borders of Zaria, do you?*

JJ: I hope it would not be inappropriate to ask, "Where else would I have gone to?" I schooled in the premier university art department and arguably, the most grounded art school in the country and became a Professor in the same highbrow institution! Many projects, conferences and exhibitions have taken me to almost all university art departments and other art centres in the country. I spent one year at the University of Maiduguri and another year at the University of Lafia. I have been on accreditation visit to a few universities. I have visited Europe more than 10 times to participate at art events. Apart from this, I spent three months at the University of London as a visiting scholar; I curated an exhibition at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, London; and I was an artist in residence for three months at the Phoenix Art Studio in Brighton. I have visited several galleries and museums like the British Museum, the Tate, the Tate Modern, the British National Gallery, the Kenwood House, and the Whitechapel Gallery. I have also visited Ghana three times, Uganda three times, Kenya two times, South Africa, Senegal, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and India to participate at art events and visit their art centres. All of these trips were funded by different organizations. The only time I had to fund my trip was when I visited my friend and took the opportunity to visit the Philadelphia Museum and to see the Statue of Liberty in the United States of America. I also have access to the Internet, own a television and a few books on art theory and practice. I do not consider myself limited in any way.

5) *How can you quantify, if I may use this mathematical terminology, the magnitude of place names or institutions to the acceptability of an artist on the global art space? If you had studied elsewhere would you have gained the same kind of acclaim that Zaria has offered you?*

JJ: I think to be visible requires more than just being at a given location. You will agree that there are people at any location who would draw blank if you were to google their names. Some people work towards being visible while others become visible unconsciously. If I was accepted on the global art space, it is probably because I am notorious for thinking differently.

6) *You were one of the propelling forces in documenting the art and life of Gani Odutokun. For some years we waited eagerly to see the outcome of that project in the form of a book. Yes the hugely successful Accident and Design exhibition came and went. But what happened to the book project? Can it be revived? We need histories to be relayed from close proximity; first hand, by people who know it; we advocate experiential dialogues and not the projection of antiquated historical methodologies.*

JJ: It was actually a project on contemporary Nigerian art, which was conceived when Gani was still alive. It was sponsored by Universal Jet Trading Company, which was headed by Usman Muazu. When Gani died, the Company was still willing to go ahead with the project. We had carried out several field trips when suddenly, Usman passed away and the project had to be abandoned. Our story in Zaria is a sad one where sponsorship of projects is concerned. We usually come up with brilliant ideas but whenever we are unable to foot the projects ourselves, they suffer. It is a shame.

7) *Can one venture to postulate that since Gani Odutokun's Accident and Design ideology had great influence on the Zaria artists he trained, that you hugely fall under that influence? Which of your paintings or ideas can you directly point to that influence?*

JJ: There is a lot I owe to Gani, not just in the manner I create my paintings but in the person I have eventually become. I work on my stubbornness because

Gani was humble. I try to befriend my students because Gani befriended me. I take the theory and practice of art seriously because Gani did. I learnt how to type because Gani could type. Gani declared the easel a trap and so I have not used the easel for about 30 years. I might not have called my works "accident and design" as Gani called his but they are based on the same principle, particularly my cornstalk series. He said, "The medium should flow and live with the dynamism of a flowing river" so I literally splash water on my support to begin any cornstalk work.

8) *If we did not paint like our masters or mentors, or followed their artistic bent would we be said to be faithful to their tutelage? How can we distinguish those traits that essentially point us out to be students of say Gani Odutokun or some other personality? Define true mentorship in the context of artists.*

JJ: I think mentorship is defined by the age. In traditional African art for instance, apprentices copied what their masters did to the extent that one could hardly tell the difference. The Renaissance period in Europe experienced the same situation. Presently, art historians are unsure about the authenticity of some Michelangelos since he rarely signed his works. Gani was different. He did not encourage me to do what he did. I need to put on record that apart from sitting at a few drawing sessions with him, I had rarely seen Gani at work! Anytime I visited him and he was at work, he suspended it and sat with me until I left. I do not think that Gani considered himself a mentor because he treated me as his equal. He knew the peculiar strengths of each person he engaged with and set out quietly to develop those strengths without the person knowing. When an artist who I consider to be my mentor teaches me to be free and I manifest that freedom including freedom from his influence, then I am his successful mentee.

9) *Your Bullet Hole paintings seem to me a most intriguing series of social engagements with the conscience of a nation on the verge of moral collapse. While it is true that those holes puncture wounds into the collective psyche of our political will or its fractures, you are still able to depict the paintings with a high sense of aesthetic predilection. Why is this important to you? Why not just depict decay in its banal form; why garb it up in*

high quality composition? Why bother about prodding a nation that never seems to learn from its own misfortunes?

JJ: I do not remember where I heard this story: Two people fell ill and were taken to hospital. They were kept in the same private ward, one by the window and the other against the wall. Both of them could not walk. Every morning the one against the wall would ask the one by the window what he saw. The one by the window would look out and describe a beautiful scenery of birds, lush lawns, green trees and beautiful flowers, a blissful and tranquil landscape. One day, the one against the wall influenced the nurses to swap them. When he was brought to the window and it was his turn to look out, he was shocked to find a tall wall blocking the view to the outside world. He realized that the other person was only trying to give both of them hope. Shortly after, both of them died.

10) *What would you consider your most inspiring motivations to paint, to produce art of any form or to write? Are the motivations to paint different from those that prod you to write? Do you create in quiet, solitary environments or just about anywhere that the muse traps you? What are your eccentricities, if any?*

JJ: Painting and writing are both forms of art. The motivation to do both to me is the same. The desire to create seizes me while in solitary confinement so I prefer to create in solitude. I feel motivated to create when people I love give me the opportunity to express my affection to them and when I temporarily forget about the self-destruct tendencies of our country. I also feel motivated to create when my favourite football teams perform well and when I achieve a perfect taste after brewing a cup of tea. My nirvana is when I sit under a shade all alone by myself in a countryside in the dry season listening to a soft Koffi Olomide song playing, intermittently interrupted by the chirping of birds while I watch the breeze rustling dry grass right into the horizon.

11) *In the delivery of your Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Fine Art on Wednesday, 11th June 2014, Professor Abashiya Magaji Ahuwan took a centre stage. Can you explain this interest in a ceramic artist who, even though has spent all his academic career teaching in Zaria, did not train in Zaria?*

JJ: Ahuwan did not train in Zaria but, as you observed, he has been teaching in Zaria since 1972 (for almost half a century). I have seen a few ceramic forms but hardly any compares to his. There is a lot of similarity between his works and those of Magdalene Odundo, the present Chancellor of the University of the Creative Arts Farnham, England. She is a ceramic artist as well. She attended the same schools in England and Nigeria as Ahuwan and she employs the same finishing as him. My dream is to one day be able to exhibit them together. My interest in his work, apart from how they appeal to me, stems from the fact that he is an unsung hero.

12) Sex-for-grades and other sundry student-teacher relationship scandals have recently thrown the limelight on University scholarship in Nigeria. Tell us how you have been able to circumnavigate this tribulation. Is the integrity of the male professor to be called to question? Are they to run and hide?

JJ: The reason why horror films do not do well in Nigeria is because their producers and directors are yet to conceive situations more horrible than what we witness day to day, which have become part of us. A few years ago, to be labeled an examination cheat was as dreadful as to be labeled a murderer but no more. These scandals are symptoms of a degenerating system. I do not doubt that there are a few morally upright academics but many who are morally bankrupt clog the universities. They are products of this rot, having earned their degrees and employment dubiously, which is why they expect that their services, for which they earn a salary, should still be negotiated not with their employers but with those poor students. Sex to them conjures a primordial imagery of a hunter and his game. I have been able to cope because the idea of dishing out grades for sex or taking advantage of a vulnerable lady is as disgusting to me as the idea of becoming a pedophile.

13) Your paintings are widely collected. What has been your experience with collectors? Do you think the monetary value appended to your art is worth it?

JJ: These are extremely tricky questions. I have to admit that I have sold a few works but I do not have much experience with collectors. Initially, one collector

was obsessed with my work or so I thought, so he bought anything of mine, which he could find at the price I offered. I however, later found out why he bought the works. He passed away at the turn of the century. I have subsequently sold works at exhibitions and through auctions. Can an artist truly gauge his or her worth? A typical painting of mine is composed of the support, which is usually not up to half a ceiling board. A full size board is about N3, 000. The cornstalk I use is discarded. The artist colours I use in dyeing the cornstalk for one painting are not up to N500. The glue is less than N100. A day's labour in Nigeria is about N2, 000. I could take a month to complete a work so labour comes to about N60, 000. Add these up and you have about N65, 500. So when a collector pays far more than this for my work, what is the collector paying for? That is where the issue becomes tricky because we are not all in agreement as to why some works should be more expensive than others. There are artists who deliberately produce kitsch because there are collectors who deliberately collect kitsch. We should not begrudge a collector his fancies. So, do I think that the monetary value appended to my art is worth it? "Wetin man go do?"

14) Is being collected a premium for judging how successful an artist is? What sorts of criteria, if any, do such collectors like Engr. Yemisi Shyllon or Jess Castellote use to determine what art is worth collecting?

JJ: Being collected is a criterion for having a fat bank account, which pays bills. You cannot argue with that; but being collected does not necessarily make an artist a subject for art historical discourse. If I were a rich man, I would buy anything I fancy. Some buy exotic snakes while others party in the skies. I have had the privilege of being given a guided tour of Prince Shyllon's collection by the Prince himself. I have not seen too many collections but of the few I have seen, his ranks at the top in terms of variety and volume. I wonder if Castellote helps him to collect because I recently saw that Castellote is the director of his museum. Castellote has knowledge of Nigerian contemporary art because he has been around Nigerian art for a long time. Still, his choices must certainly be guided by his boss's taste.

15) React to the proliferation of non-college trained artists on the contemporary Nigerian art scene.