

# Use of Media by Contemporary Nigerian Artists to Develop Metaphoric Concept in Painting

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## Abstract

This paper is intended to arouse a discourse in the use of media in developing metaphoric concept in painting in the Nigerian contemporary art space. The question pertinent to scholars include; which are the most used media and why? Is the acceptance and patronage by collectors and buyers what determine the use of media of expression? Other reasons could be the art curriculum in higher institution of learning, individual and public perception and resourcefulness and a host of other personal preferences. Artists' oil colour is the most popular medium of expression from available resource materials. It is envisioned that other media like watercolour, mixed media, pastel, enamels, charcoal, tempera, acrylic, ink and pen, would become a focus for artists. Artists within and outside Nigeria were reviewed and their works. It is expected that artists would take up the challenge to start exploiting other media of expression in painting.

**Key Words:** Media, Contemporary, Artists, Metaphoric, Painting

## Introduction

Artist over time have used different media in developing metaphoric concepts in painting. The ideas they communicate are not easily or directly interpreted by mere view of the work. Most often the symbols are embedded with meaning beyond the surface expression. One basic question would be to know what media is most appropriate for expression for metaphoric concepts in paintings. Could it be that our institutions of art are not tailored towards Postmodernist inclination? Perceptions of relationship in the flow of space by artists create a plurality of understanding. The early use of oil paint as a medium is relatively as far back as the 8<sup>th</sup> century which became popular by the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Jan van Eyck is believed to have invented this medium in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Kleiner and Mamiya (2005), claims that, artist like Leonardo da Vinci preferred oil paint because of its gradual drying process and its consistency permitted him to blend the pigments, thereby creating the impressive sfumato (smoky effect) that contributed to his fame. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists of the post-modernist period began to experiment with new media, creating a new dimension to the view of art. The artists of New York School were associated with abstract expressionism, free flow in usage of media to create metaphoric images. The handling of their media is a display of freedom to express their inner sensibility in a way that results into creating new possibilities. Majority of these artists confronted their history and social concern with dexterity. In Nigeria, the commonly used media is artist's oil colour in tubes; though it is not certain when artist's oil colours was first used in Nigeria for artistic expressions. This media has fast become a main medium except for few elite artists who are making acrylic popular.

## School System

The structure of the school education/ curriculum of art is possibly not designed with the consciousness of an outcome of practice or geared towards artist's expression with other media other than artist's oil colour. Exposure to varieties of new media can open up discourse. Without prejudice to courses that accommodate the use of mixed-media, there is the assumption that water colour is a difficult media to handle. Very many students are not encouraged to take up the challenge. Perhaps graduate of these art schools do not see a career in the field of study. Most often than not, the graduates especially of Nigerian universities do not practice after their training. Therefore exploring and experimenting with different media is not common. It is obvious that works (paintings) by artists represented in galleries are done mostly in artist's oil colours.

## Societal Acceptability/Tolerability

The society contributes to the direction of artist's expression, especially when it comes to the business of art. Many buy for the purpose of decoration on their walls; others see it as an investment, some because of ego, the influence of their friends as belonging to the same class. In view of these, the societies' structure stands to

determine majorly the theme and use of media by artists. The level of patronage is often associated with the public perception of art works. These in turn affect the practice of art in a particular environment.

### **Resourcefulness**

It is important to note that creativity/originality seems to be lacking in works of art. Many works on display in an exhibition and in galleries may not reflect varieties in the use of media but seems to portray the use of only artist's oil colours. Lack of resourcefulness on the part of many artists could be as a result of dearth of ideas. Individual artist's perceptual understanding in the use of media is another reason for use of certain media. Artists' oil colour is fast becoming more of a traditional media due to its flexibility and seems to be easier to handle for most Nigerian artists. Although works done with other media are beginning to challenge the established concepts in themes and renderings. Technological advancement has enhanced the trend of practice around the globe/world. Artists use digital manipulations to create works of art (pop) material.

Exploring and experimenting with new media may not be attractive to many younger artists. Reasons could be the quest for quick attempt at showing out works and monetary returns.

### **Elitism**

This is fast dominating the art space in Nigeria on the part of the artists, art connoisseur, collectors and gallery owners. Artistic practice over time could also inform this cultural trend. One organization that is elitist in nature is Guilds of Professional Artists which have carved a niche for themselves and have inspired other Nigerian artists. They are admired because of their proficiencies in handling of media. These Professional artists adapted varieties of working process in their works. The works of Alex Nwokolo, EdosaUguigo, Phidelis Odogwu, Olu Ajayi, Abiodun Olaku, Tantua Diseye, Segun Aiyesan and many others show how media is manipulated in different form to create imageries of intellectual understanding.

### **Alex Nwokolo (b.1963)**

Nwokolo is one artist who metamorphosed from one use of media to another. He earned respect for his ingenuity and great skill in handling of media. For 22years now and counting, his passion for practice has not dwindled, but rather on the increase. His works never ceases to intrigue the beholder offering different interpretations. Sowole (2013), states that, in the last 6-7 years, Nigerian artist have been sharply divided over art content, making observers, particularly critics take another look at the rising penchant for contemporary art-against the strong and well-rooted tradition expression. He sees Nwokolo among the generation of Nigerian artists who grew through the traditional art era still making strong impacts. His radical rendition in his exhibition 'Authenticity of thoughts', Sowole quotes Nwokolo,

The desire for change and the need to have global perspective in my art instigated a stimulus for this current direction in the evolution of my work. The new experiment on materials offered me yet another opening to contribute to an existing international calligraphy, which is a pictorial language-not necessarily figurative –of symbols and media derived from everyday socio-cultural signs and symbolism, where elements are assembled and dissected onto a surface resulting in a hybrid painting and sculpture.

The new look of his are offered an opportunity to contribute to the search for Nigerian leadership question.

### **Social Commentary**

Delving into everyday condition/situation (political, socio-cultural and economic, injustices against humanity). The social cultural climate of Nigeria is going through escalation of challenges, inconsistent policies, political instability and many other areas. Artists are apt to comment on current important issues in negative or positive manner. They borrow from different cultures as a frame of work to express themselves. Their works therefore becomes product of condensed ideas. This is because diverse cultures are characterized by different usage of media.



Alex Nwokolo| Social Networking| 2012| 115.6 cm x 122 cm  
Mixed medial

Source: <http://www.energynet.co.uk/page/artsenergy-partnership>.

### **Influence of Abstract Expressionism**

This movement has over time imparted on practice and artists in Nigeria. The courage for free flow of expression using different media have propelled generational avant-gardes artists. According to Polcari (1991), Abstract Expressionism is defined by critics as a style of the postwar themes such as existentialism, alienation, individuality, freedom and universality. This movement is associated with freedom and universality. They replaced cultural and symbolic forms with new pictorial metaphors. Their formal expression emerged as a result of complex of ideas. Artist like Jerry Buhari exemplified himself in this category.

### **Jerry Buhari (b.1959)**

Jerry Buhari is a social and political commentator, and an environmental artist. He is known for his experimental works in various media. He sees his art as a medium of commentary and critique. His works demonstrate high level of proficiency in handling of media. In his experimentation with round and curvilinear support, he used a limited palette that sought to depict a complex visual order without aiming at reproducing natural appearances. The expressions are not a formal component of a particular scene but of abstract expressionist trends. This could also be seen as a reminiscence of Jackson Pollock's 'Reflection of Bigger Dipper' (1947), but without gestural spontaneous drips that characterized the work. The inspiration of Buhari's paintings came from instability, chaos, economic and social effects in the society. His works are indication of a paradigm shift in our life style to meet up with the modern/advanced societies of the West resulting into greed.

Increasingly in his works, Buhari decries alienation, oppression and environmental rape. He uses expressions that could best represent his emotions; an archetype of inner search by the artist to reflect on man's actions on his environment. From a religious perspective, he interprets the situation of the environment from Genesis chapter 1:11-12, which states that "God said, let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so. And the earth brought forth grass and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, after his kind: and God saw that it was good". Humans degrade the environment and thereby destroying its purpose. Greed, materialism, oppression, injustice pervade all the fabric of the society. All these vices are locked up and represented in a round plate in a few colours with each looking like a palette of an artist.

His work provides insights into the issues of the environment and organic relationships affected by activities of humans who are a strand in the eco-system. In his quest for exploration, he developed a limited palette that pushes the limits of perception to a more delicate sensibility towards our futile actions to handle social problems. The ripple effect is deeper and complex in the context of our collective effort.

Buhari's palette is predominantly black, sparsely grey with drops of primary colours which he says are symbolic. He employs enamel pigments to experiment with relationships in a field of muted, low-colour painting, clothe with non-recognizable symbols that carry messages. Each work expresses the sensibility of the artist as he reacts to a particular issue. The pigments of enamel are poured on board and allowed to fuse into each other and are controlled in some instance by the artist. The direction of movement of paint looks like molten lava from a Volcano (Danjuma, 2010). Rather than running with buckets of paints, Buhari poured paint out almost in a controlled manner to achieve his desired goal. He integrated colours into grey, fused together to produce a tactile quality with great sensuous appeal, shimmering surface and unsteady appearance. There is no agitation to suggest details of an object but occasionally the viewer notices a myriad of dots. These paintings are like the works of the Surrealist that presents us with a world of indecipherable visual riddles. (Sayre, 2007).

Buhari achieved dark effects on a rounded shape support which became a quintessential of his rendering of subject matter, basically of postmodernist artist. He asserts that, 'I found a direct link of the motif in nature, like the sun and moon...the circular shaped formats appropriate surfaces of the subject'. The shape became planet earth, the cosmos and life amongst others.



Jerry Buhari, Crude Oil with oil motif, 2012. oil on Board. diameter 60cm

### **Pablo Picasso (b.1881-1973)**

Pablo Picasso is arguably one of the most prolific, very proficient artists in modern art history. Picasso has gone through a period of experimentation in different media in articulating his expression and feelings. Picasso's proficiency in handling media was well noticed as early as 1894, a display of unusual talent at his age. His concept development started with copying the old masters, imitating their style and this resulted in formulating a personal idiom.

By 1906 Picasso's search for new ways to depict form evolved and developed through practice. His approach and experimentation with Cubism challenges the understanding of visual realities. Every part of a work is fragmented to create an illusion of reality of form in space. His quest for innovation led him from one style to another expressed in a wide range of visual expressions. He was also influenced by ancient Iberian, African sculpture and by the paintings of Paul Cezanne. This birthed a new move and a point of departure from careful

presentation of illusionary space. In the 1900, Picasso's break from classicism was evident especially after the death of one of his close friends Casagemas in 1901. In the biography of Pablo Picasso, Moffat (2010) quotes Picasso thus, "I began to paint blue, when I realized that Casagemas had died". This shows how a given situation could affect the emotion of artists and reflect in their works. At this period, he was said to depict his feeling about restlessness and loneliness, isolation, unhappiness, despair, misery of physical weakness, old age and poverty; all of it in shades of blue. Picasso's Blue Period lasted 1901-1904, the 'Blue' paintings depict a mood or state of mind. He emphasized the sombre quality in "The old Guitarist" (1903). Guernica 1937, is one of Picasso's popular and great mural paintings. It is seen as a symbolic painting that represents war. This allegorical work is rendered in flat patterns with clearly outlined cut-off shapes from newsprint. It describes a terrible agonizing situation of war over a nation. The artist was said to be moved when he read about Guernica in the newspaper. He depicted a woman to the left with her dead baby in her arms. Mutilated corpses and bodies of dying figures are superimposed in a stampede at the foreground. These seem to represent the torment of innocent civilians massacred during the bombing of Guernica. A dying soldier is shown lying on the ground screaming in pains, rigid arms, and wide open eyes in agony probably because of the ordeal inflicted on his body. He clinches to the broken sword from which sprouts a flower, symbolizing life after the war. A wounded horse is ripped open and a spear is thrust into its back to represent the collapse of the Spanish people brought to their knees by the Fascists. A woman desperately tries to flee from the bombing, with her twisted body, running in the midst of ensuing calamity. This illustrates how the innocent society is affected by things like war. A figure holds a lamp, the head and arm protrudes out of a window that opens out to form part of the narrative. The image is a symbol of what will draw attention of the world to the violent incident of the war. The bull with a ferocious look, most likely represents the violence of the Fascists responsible for the massacre of the people. A Screaming figure is shown moving toward a tiny window of her burning house. With outstretched arms in helpless horror she looks up with an open wide mouth in a scream of pain and resignation to the anguish.

The anguish was so terrifying that Picasso presented a horrifying situation. Koppelman (1999) affirms that "the greatest discontinuity of life is that of the sudden change from life to Death". This composition portrays brokenness of peaceful atmosphere and love for life above death. The colour scheme of restricted palette was inspired by the black and white newspaper photographs that conveyed the cruel reality, agonies and atrocities of war. He used grey, white, and black in this painting to represent a black day. Picasso's painting spoke out against the war and injustice perpetrated against many defenseless people. Koppelman further states that, "death in the symbol of light is to give continuity to discontinuity". He portrayed a bulb made by human and imprinted into the sun to signify that light is needed in this dark situation over the stricken horse. What does this work portend to us? Every part of this work is full of philosophical significance that unveils the heart of humans against one another.



Pablo Picasso, Guernica 1937, Oil on Canvas, 138x308"  
Source: Art in our times, A Pictorial History, 1890-1980

## Conclusion

The use of media in concept development is continually bringing new dimension to understanding of how works (painting) could depict metaphor of the society. Nigerian artists have need for exposure, use, exploration and experimenting with media that are found in and around us. The three artists reviewed use of media differs in approach and belong to different genre. The link between them is the use of media to develop metaphoric

concept in painting. They were able to manipulate these media proficiently to speak about societal issues. There is therefore the need to have understanding and use of new media other than artist's oil colours to students of higher learning. This will enhance experimentation and free expressions in media the individual artist is most comfortable with.

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