

A Study of Selected Mixed Media Paintings by Jimoh Buraimoh

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Abstract

Jimoh Buraimoh's artworks make a meaningful statement in the development of mosaic bead painting in Nigeria. His art forms are symbolic and associated with themes derived from the culture and daily activities of the Yorubas and Edos. This paper will examine selected art works from Buraimoh's mosaic mixed media bead paintings, namely, "Obatala and Devil", "Installation of an Oba", "Romance of the Headload", "Endless World" and "Ere Ibeji". Buraimoh's works reflect the formalist approach which is largely evident in the styles and techniques of his painting. This study will focus on the description, interpretation and evaluation of his works against the backdrop of modern art in Nigeria.

Keywords: mixed media, beads, mosaic, art forms.

1.0 Introduction

The Oshogbo informal art school (Art Workshop) came into the lime-light in the early 1960s and metamorphosed into the Mbari-Mbayo Art Workshop. It was first organized by Ulli and Geogina Beier, both German nationals, and later, by Dennis Williams and Susanne Wenger in 1964 as a summer course. One of the most exciting aspects of the workshop was that the products of the participants were exhibited for the public to view and purchase if they so desired. This workshop led to the discovery of several talented artists such as Muraina Oyelami, Taiwo Olaniyi (alias Twins Seven-Seven), Adebisi Fabunni Akanji, Tijani Mayakiri, Rufus Ogundele and, Jimoh Buraimoh, whose works are the subject of this study.

Jimoh Buraimoh (born on April 3, 1943 in Oshogbo, Osun State, Nigeria) is a renowned contemporary Nigerian artist who was exposed to informal and formal art school, first, the Mbari Art Workshop in Oshogbo in 1964 and, later, the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria from 1973 to 1997. He served as an artist-in-residence while studying drawing, painting and graphic design which earned him a certificate in Arts and Design at the end of his studies. He excelled in batik, mixed media and mosaic art. Buraimoh became famous in Nigerian contemporary art circles for combining paint pigments, coloured beads and thread in producing his mixed media paintings. This unique style and techniques, began as an aesthetic experimentation, and has now become synonymous with Buraimoh.

Mosaic art has always had a special place in art history in relation to early Christian and Byzantine art in the Roman Empire. King (2010) revealed:

Once Christianity had been sanctioned officially by the emperor, this allowed artists to place greater emphasis on the grandeur of the Lord.

Working within the Byzantine tradition, the mosaics produced by the artists... were on a far grander scale than previous work. (p. 64)

The above statement confirms that Buraimoh must have been inspired by foreign European mosaic paintings which influenced his unique style and the choice of techniques in his mosaic artwork. Onyema Offoedu-Okeke attested to this by revealing that while in Amsterdam, Buraimoh stumbled on some mosaic work which had such a strong effect on him that, he was motivated to explore the different ways through which he could adapt mosaic to his art (2012, p. 170).

Most of Buraimoh's artworks are based on mythology, folktales, traditional dance, rituals, masquerade festivals and local deities. His themes emanate from the rich indigenous culture and traditional religions of the Edos and Yorubas of Nigeria. Most of his works depict modern trends consisting of semi-realities and abstractions in human form. Buraimoh also makes extensive use of shells, ready-made beads, porcelain tiles, potsherds, pebbles, cowries and other objects found within his environment which he combines with paint pigments for his compositions in mixed media painting, batik and linocut prints. Marshall Ward Mount (1973) noted:

[Among his contemporaries] Buraimoh's techniques are the most unusual and varied. Beginning as a painter, he soon began adding strings of beads to his painted surfaces. Early in his career he also worked in mosaic, inlaying numerous coffee tables with glass tesserae. (p. 149)

Buraimoh's style and techniques are highly imaginative and creative; this has led to his recognition as one of the pioneer artists in mosaic bead mixed media art. Recognizable, is his use of strong lines, busy spaces, circles, traditional motifs, curves, strokes and brilliant colours influenced by the formalist approach.

Buraimoh's first commissioned work was a mosaic painting for India Loom House, Lagos, in 1967; this was followed by "Installation of an Oba" in Ikoyi Hotel, Lagos, in 1968. From then on, other commissions

followed. Buraimoh is currently ranked as one of the best Oshogho artists. Mark Getlin (2002) asserted:

The mosaic artist “paints” by assembling small coloured stones, bits of glass, or coloured clay tiles into a pattern or pictorial image. Usually, mosaic works are set in a wall or ceiling - or even a floor, because the durability of the material allows it to be walked upon. (p 174)

Jimoh Olatunji Buraimoh was one of the first African artists to introduce beaded mixed media paintings as a medium of self expression in artworks; other indigenous artists such as Nike Okundaye, David Dale, and Onadipe Olumide emulated him by producing beaded mixed media paintings some of which were displayed in their galleries - Nike Art Gallery, Peat Pendulum Art Gallery and Art Heart Gallery respectively.

Buraimoh “traces the origin of his love for colours to his childhood when he watched his mother, Mrs. Abeke Buraimoh, weaving mats from dyed vegetable fibers” (Pat Oyelola, 2010, p. 16). However, on realizing he was technically inclined, he trained as an electrician at the end of his secondary school education in 1961. He was employed as a lighting and theatre manager at the Ladipo National Theatre between 1964 and 1968, and also served as an electrician for the Mbari Mbayo Theatre Company (Mount, 1973, p. 149). Buraimoh also worked with the Institute of African Studies, University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), and also at the University of Ife Museum. He was a member of the Ori Olukun Cultural Centre under the directorship of Michael Crowder and, later, Solomon Wangboje. He seized the opportunity to participate actively in the creative arts projects of the centre, alongside contemporaries such as Ademola Williams. He was later to serve, as earlier mentioned, as artist-in-residence in Ahamadu Bello University (1973-1974), as well as the University of Ife, Ile Ife (1975), and Kunst Academy University, Berlin (1976). An accomplished artist, Buraimoh’s practice is extensive. He has also, between 1967 and 2003, participated in numerous solo and group art exhibitions in various cities around the globe among them Lagos, Oshogbo, Dakar, London, Bayneuth, New Delhi, New York, Ohio, Boston, Washington DC, Berlin, and Havana. Buraimoh is the owner of African Heritage Gallery and Studio in Oshogbo, Osun State, Nigeria, and his works are widely collected by corporate bodies and individuals around the world.

This study of Buraimoh’s works is, therefore, relevant, and will focus on one of his early works titled, “Obatala and the Devil” (1969), “Installation of an Oba” (1968), “Romance of the Headload” (1992), “Endless World” (2008), and “Ere Ibeji” (1990). These works will be described, analyzed and interpreted through the identification of the forms used by the artist, the themes and symbolism inherent in the works, as well as the meanings of the compositions. The discussion will also discuss the possibility of adapting Buraimoh’s creative works as textile design.

1.1 Obatala and the Devil (Figure 1)

A mixed media bead painting and one of Buraimoh’s earliest works, this artwork is the result of inspiration drawn from the art workshop organized by Georgina Beier and Dennis Williams in Oshogbo in 1964. Buraimoh’s creative works are mostly based on Yoruba mythology, which is rooted in African traditional religion. “Obatala and the Devil” is a reflection of Obatala, “...the creator of human bodies which were supposedly brought to life by [the breath of God]” (“Obatala,” n.d.). The Yoruba tradition believes the human soul resides in the head and, Obatala (supposedly the second son of the omnipotent God), is regarded as the sole owner of the heads of all humans except those initiated into the priesthood. Obatala, who is always dressed in white, is referred to as the “King of White Cloth” (“Obatala in Yoruba,” 2014). Buraimoh’s “Obatala and the Devil” takes its form and essence from the above mentioned myth. However, Obatala, is clearly projected by the artist as being synonymous with the devil.

Buraimoh’s approach in this artwork is unique; it is an experimental, imaginative picture created with strings of beads around exaggerated forms, to differentiate the colours applied on the painting and to give the effect of a mixed media painting. The figure of Obatala, positioned on the left side of the work, has an oblong face with a strong facial expression, bright eyes in circular form, yellow eye balls, curved eyelids and white eyebrows. His nose is elongated and depicted in yellow ochre while the areas around the eyeballs are rendered in Prussian blue. The face of Obatala is resting on his “Agbada” cloth (textile regalia) which is depicted in primary and secondary colours. There is a movement of vertical forms downwards, with string beads separating the colours. The conventional contrast in the work is achieved through the distinctive nature of the beads and the colours used to outline the forms.

The Devil, on the other hand, is created with a head smaller than that of Obatala. His eyes are bigger and the facial expression looks devilish and fearful. The face of the Devil is fused together with the body of a scorpion which gives the Devil a more dangerous appearance, for scorpions are dangerous creatures whose sting can be fatal. The artist depicted the Devil and the scorpion in yellow, blue, white, black and brown. Both Obatala and the Devil are created by the artist on a sap green background which blends with the colours of the figures.

Buraimoh’s mixed media bead painting is very decorative. The space in his work is usually congested or busy, and often, there is an overlapping and interplay of forms in plane and depth. The context of this

particular artwork, “Obatala and the Devil”, is drawn from the realism of the Yoruba traditional religion and culture. It projects the symbolism associated with the formalist approach of the artists of Oshogbo, from where Buraimoh emerged as an artist.

1.2 Installation of an Oba (Figure 2)

Buraimoh created this work as a mosaic mural; it was commissioned by the Ikoyi Hotel, Lagos in 1968. The installation of an Oba or a King is an intriguing and exciting event in most Nigerian cultures. It is, therefore, the mode of dressing or the regalia, and cultural icons depicted in the painting that reveals the particular culture on which Buraimoh’s mosaic painting is based - that of the Edo Kingdom in Benin City.

This artwork reveals the artist’s impression of the installation of an Oba of Benin which involves the coronation; a very complex and colourful ceremony. At the death of a ruling king, his heir, the oldest son is elected by the Kingmakers to ascend the throne of his father after having performed the required rituals to seal his right to ascend the throne. According to Offoedu–Okeke (2012), “the actual coronation ceremony is marked by pomp and pageantry involving the town chiefs, lesser aristocrats, and the entire town as audience” (p. 170).

In Benin tradition, the “Edaiken” , the heir apparent to the throne of the Edo Kingdom, ascends the throne in not less than three months after the ruling King’s demise. Until then, he is groomed meticulously from childhood for the position. This practice came into existence during the reign of Oba Ewuare in 1440. The first Edaiken was Prince Kuoboyuwa who was groomed to oversee the administrative governance of Edo-Usehe people, and at the appropriate age, was presented by his father, the Oba of Benin (during a ceremony to which all members of the royal family, chiefs, important dignitaries and well-wishers were invited), as the bona fide heir to the throne in order to avoid any wrangling for the position. “When an old King passes away, the Edaiken remains in his position until the royal funeral ceremonies are over and he is proclaimed as king and crowned. The royal funeral rites of the departed, and the coronation ceremonies of the new Oba [that begins immediately after the King’s demise] last about three months” (“installation,” n.d.).

Evidently, Jimoh Buraimoh was inspired by the above, to create his bead painting, “Installation of an Oba”, for the Ikoyi Hotel, Lagos. Like the real life coronation, the painting is very captivating and colourful. The paint applied on the mural is combined with beads in various colours, showing lines of red, yellow, blue, brown, green orange, white and black. The centre of attraction in the painting is the figure of the Oba in full regalia, beaded crown in orange and yellow colours, oblong face and strong facial expression, with the eyes, nose and mouth depicted in lighter coloured beads bordered with black beaded lines. The background of the facial expression consists of beads in red and green. On the chest of the Oba are circular beads in different colours such as black, red, white, green and yellow. The beads around the King’s neck exude dignity befitting a King’s stature as a royal father. Attached to the bottom of the regalia are symbolic charms which are very heavy; these are responsible for the slow movement of the King as he dances, supported on both sides by his attendants. Also depicted on the right and left hand sides of the King are the King’s servants carrying what is known as the “Ada symbol of honour”, and the “Eben sword of dance”, both kingship paraphernalia invented during reign of Ogoiso Ere. (“installation,” n.d.)

These symbols, replicated and carried by the king’s servant in the painting, are outlined in white coloured beads. Apart from the King’s oblong face and facial expression, all other figures (such as the servants in the painting) have circular facial features which probably portray them as being less important figures in picture plane. Most of the figures created in beads are stylized and have frontal forms. The space within the artwork is also congested.

Tayo Adenaike (1995) observed the following about Buraimoh, in his article titled, “The Oshogbo Experiment”:

[He] used symbolism to suggest various elements from his cultural background. He...explores the use of space in creating very interesting works with strong use of colour and intermingling of dramatic lines accomplished by using beads on threads. (p. 205)

Clearly, Buraimoh is an artist whose themes, symbols and techniques have made strong aesthetic statements in the world of African art.

1.3 Romance of the Headload (Figure 3)

Buraimoh’s creative work was largely influenced by his cultural background and the environment in which he grew up and studied. In this bead painting, the artist combines Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba cultures to depict what he refers to as “Romance of the Headload” - a portrayal of a young maiden carrying a load on her head, rendered in abstract form.

Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone, and Clayton (2002) asserted:

Balance is so fundamental to unity that it is impossible to consider the principal of organization without it. At the simplest level, balance implies

the gravitational equilibrium of a single mark on a picture plane. (p. 55)

The above statement aptly sums up the essence of balance in Buraimoh's composition of abstraction, with forms rendered in strong lines, radiant and vibrant hues of red, brown, black and sap green interwoven with white. There are also circular and triangular shapes and intricate lines rendered in pointillism which the artist combines with multicoloured beads to enhance his subjects.

This pictorial composition gives the illusion of visual weight and balance at the top. The anatomical body structure of the maiden and her facial expression are frontally highlighted in strong lines by the artist. She has strong beaded eyes, pointed nose, and mouth. Under the neck are black and white lines of string beads in a v-shaped necklace. The bare body of the maiden is depicted in hues of red and orange combined with beads and, on her right hand, are two beaded bangles in black and tinted red. The maiden is wearing a wrapper depicted in brown and black vertical lines, with the top part of wrapper showing strings of beads in folds, which obviously hold the wrapper firmly to her body, rendered in white. In the background, beside the figure of the maiden, are white beads.

The illusion of a top-heavy composition illustrates the artist's understanding of abstract images or symbols and their effectiveness in enhancing the aesthetic quality of a work of art. There is also a similarity of forms and repetition of shapes in the "Romance of the Headload". The centre of attraction is the abstracted load on the head of the maiden and her facial expression, rendered in myriad colours. She has a beautiful hairdo which is prominent on both sides of her head and in her ears are big earrings. Oyelola (2010) aptly notes that "the composition is similar to a Gwari woman, carrying firewood on the shoulder and an undecorated gourd" (p. 16).

Also, evident in the topmost part of the composition are repeated patterns which can easily be incorporated into textile design. Clearly, the beaded paintings of Buraimoh are very functional in a holistic, creative way.

1.4 Endless World (Figure 4)

Jimoh Buraimoh's "Endless World", created in 2008, is a horizontal composition of six facial expressions in oblong, oval, cone and ball-like shapes rendered in multicolours and neatly arranged. Some of the facial expressions have the features of masks fused together in symmetry, with structural features expressed in a technique similar to that of expressionism.

The beauty of the art work is heightened by the radiant colours that emanate from the canvas.

The first figure in the bead painting is oblong and the facial expression is portrayed with light green, yellow and white beads toward the forehead, while the eyes are depicted in red and yellow beads combined with pigments. The nose is composed with blue beads while the mouth is a circle of red beads with the lips outlined in yellow and red beads. The elongated neck and the body of the figure are created with multicoloured beads. The second figure has an oval face with black eyes, and brown nose. The third has an elongated facial expression highlighted in multicoloured beads with circular eyes in white, red, green, and yellow and a greenish reddish rose. The facial expressions of the last three figures are depicted in caricature forms with elongated noses and roundish eyes. The bodies of these mask-like facial expressions are rendered in strong lines but are not very prominent. The facial expressions in the painting are all similar and reminiscent of the following observation of Ocvirk et al (2002):

Harmony may be thought of as a factor of cohesion – relating various picture parts. This "pulling together" of opposing forces on a picture surface is accomplished by giving them all some common element(s); colour, texture, value and forth the repetition or continued instruction of the same drive or element reconciles that opposition. Rhythm is also established when regulated visual units are repeated. (p. 33)

Obviously, the facial expressions of the figures in this painting are a reflection of those of the traditional mask. In between the figures, to left side of the composition, are some forms that look like legs, while on the right side are hands. Due to the application of the beads on the painting, the artwork is rough in texture. In terms of colour, the artist made use of bright colours. The lines bordering the individual figures are very strong and in dark Prussian blue. Extensively beaded, the painting also has variations of continuous curvilinear lines which bind all the facial figures together.

1.5 "Ere Ibeji" (Figure 5)

In Yoruba, the word "Ibeji" means twins. The painting "Ere Ibeji" depicts two carved wooden figures of the same height (about four to ten inches high) representing the soul of dead twins, kept within the family domain, being nurtured by their mother. There is the general belief among the Yorubas that, the more you care for the carved figures of the "Ibeji", the better the chances of the survival of several twins. This myth is also associated with a deity that represents twins known as Orisha Ibeji. ("Ibeji," n.d.)

Buraimoh captured the myth above in his work, “Ere Ibeji” (1990), a mosaic bead painting. According to Onyema Offoedu-Okeke (2012), “Ere Ibeji reworks an iconic Yoruba image of a mother with twins as a bead painting” (p. 170). The images of the twins (Ibeji) and their mother are depicted with beads in the expressive approach associated with formalism. The images on the picture plane are stylized abstractions and portray semi-reality. Within the bead painting, the mother of the twins (portrayed with a strong facial expression) is seated on a stool with the babies holding her breasts. The feet of the mother are placed on a round stand with a bird serving as a foot rest on it; the stand rests comfortably on what looks like three horns on the head of the devil (also depicted with a strong facial expression).

The painting is very busy and, like many of his other works has repeated patterns that would be suitable for textile design. The grayish beads used by the artist are spread in patterns of blue, green and brown lines on the upper part of the work while the right side of the painting is bordered with strong weaving lines from the top to the bottom in hues of blue. Next to that are thin white lines and whitish brown beads in the background.

Beside the twin on the left are brown horizontal lines and next to that are various beads in a blend of yellow, brown, and red. The stand on which the mother’s legs are resting are composed of white beaded weaving lines forming a plain surface around which the artist applied beads in orange. The head carrying the base of the stool is strongly depicted and has a big ear, bold black eyes with white pupils, brown eyelids, nose and lips, and white teeth.

The figures of the Ibeji and their mother are depicted by the artist in brownish, red, spotted black beads and lines. Adorning the head of the mother and the twins is the artist’s impression of sculptural male and female Yoruba hairstyles. The eyes of the mother are big and oval and the necks of the twins are slightly elongated. Spilling out of a black brassiere are the mother’s breasts which are very big and succulent, with the nipples portrayed with white beads.

The “Ere Ibeji” composition is very congested in terms of space, the artwork being very busy. However, the colours used are brilliant and the shapes attractive. This artwork could also pass for repeated patterns on textile clothing.

1.6 Conclusion

Jimoh Buraimoh’s bead paintings have similar characteristics in terms of the style and techniques used in rendering his creative works. The artist’s works are heavily textured with beads and threads, and the controlled application of vibrant colours. Despite the congested nature of his compositions, they are very intriguing and have great aesthetic value.

One of the pioneer artists in Nigeria, Buraimoh uses localized beads in creating his mixed media paintings. Some of his colours are, however, subdued within the picture plane and his hues are sometimes subtractive with the application of primary and secondary colours tending to be superficial in nature.

However, the artist’s style and techniques are often emulated by upcoming Nigerian artists, as well as artists in other parts of the world. He has mentored many young artists in his Oshogbo studio over the years and also through his numerous exhibitions within Nigeria and abroad.

Finally, the images in Jimoh Buraimoh’s bead paintings can be comfortably adapted as repeat patterns in textile design; his work “Romance of the Headload”, “Installation of an Oba” and “Endless World” are good examples of paintings that can be incorporated into textile design, photo animation and 3D motion pictures. In other words, Buraimoh’s artistic works are beyond mere paintings and installations.

Buraimoh has also contributed towards the development of modern art in Nigeria and to the promotion of the Nigerian culture: the art forms and symbols in his works are often associated with themes that are derived from events of daily life from the Yoruba and Edo cultures of Nigeria.

List of Figures



Fig. 1: Jimoh Buraimoh, Obatala and The Devil



Fig. 2: Installation of an Oba, date unknown
Mosaic mural with beadwork dimensions unknown.
Private Collection

FIGURES

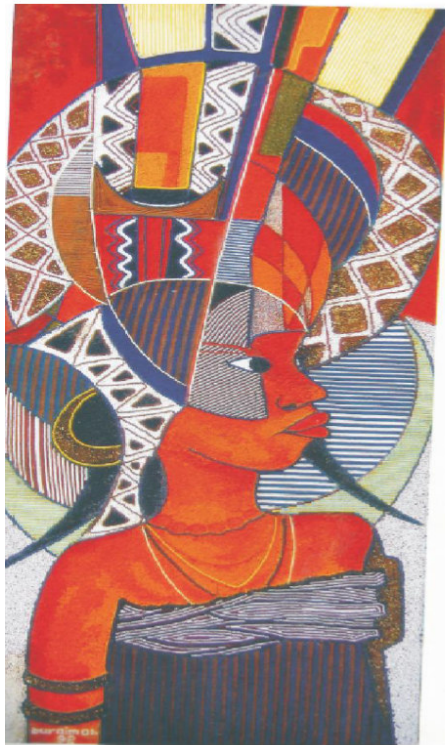


Fig. 3: Romance of the Headload, 1992
Beads, oil paints on board,
124x62cm
Collection of the Hourglass
Gallery



Fig. 4: Endless World 2008
Beads, oil paints on board, 88x160cm
Collection of the Hourglass
Gallery

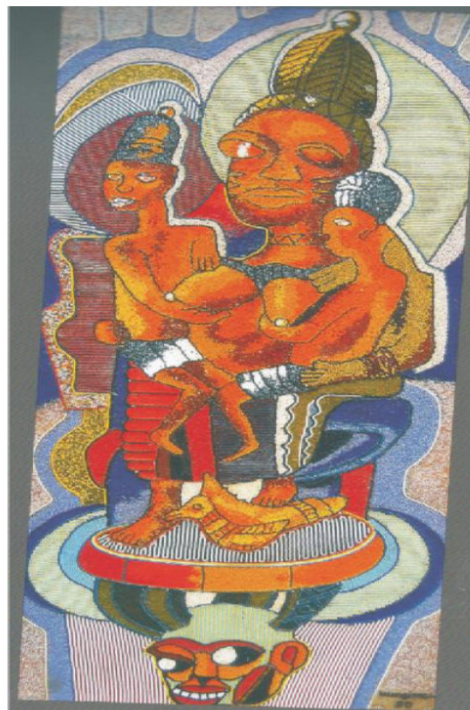


Fig. 5: Ere Ibeji 1990
Beads, oil paints on board,
dimension unknown
Collection of the Hourglass
Gallery

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