

Paradigm Shift: Local Pots and Earth Pigments as Supports, Grounds and Media for Painting in Nsukka Art School, Nigeria

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Abstract

It has been noted that the creative ideology of Nsukka Art School lays much emphasis on the exploration of the environment as potent creative sources of ideas, materials and forms, which has in no small measures contributed and also resulted in the appropriation of culture based art forms as viable creative resources. It is this exploration that permeates the various areas of art in the school. For instance, in the area of painting, the use of clay, other earth pigments and local pots for media, ground and supports are clearly the resultant effects and the gain of this restless search for down - to - earth materials for painting. Therefore, this paper sets to review the conventional paradigm and then underscore the paradigm shift to ascertain what gave rise to their usage, origin, as well as their advantages and disadvantages over the conventional ground, supports and media. Examples of works rendered in this manner will be used as visuals for easier comprehension. However, it has been found that the use of earth pigments and clay pots for supports, ground and media is aesthetically appealing, highly innovative and far cheaper to acquire than conventional painting materials.

Keywords: Earth pigments, Local pots, Grounds, Supports and Media and Nsukka Art School.

1. Introduction

In art production, most especially ceramic and sculpture clay is extensively used as an artistic medium in the execution of cups, mugs, bursts and so on.

To support the above assertion, Zubairu (2008:1) agrees thus: clay is the most important material needed for ceramic production, whether traditional or modern.

There is one aspect of painting that earth pigments including clay soil and local pots are being used as media, as grounds, and as supports. This aspect is known as, and called “Exploration of Indigenous Ideas, Forms and Materials in Painting” as contained in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria curriculum (Oloidi & Akwanya, eds., 2004– 2006:328). It reflected a creative ideology that has been consistently driven by the exploration and appropriation of culture-based art forms as viable creative resource. It also emphasized exploration on the environment as potent sources of ideas, materials and forms which offered a creative pathway that energized the creative spirit of the staff and students in Nsukka Art School.

Clay is used to make local pots. And these locally made clay pots have come to serve as support bases for painting. Clay is also used alongside other earth pigments for painting. How possible is it that locally made fragile clay pots and clay as a pigment could serve as both support bases and as grounds for painting? And how possible again, is it that clay could serve as a medium for painting? The answers to these thought provoking questions can be provided using the works produced by some Nsukka Art School painters and that of the *Uli* women painters of eastern Nigeria.

At this juncture, therefore, it is of importance that some common place definitions of the key terms that are central to this topic are given for a better understanding of our subject matter. These are grounds, supports, and media. **Grounds** are substances that are used by a painter for preparing and priming the painting surfaces before the actual painting is executed. They are the underlying surfaces that have been prepared for the execution of painting proper. They therefore, mean suitable surfaces that have been prepared to receive colours. **Media** describe the types of painting materials used by a painter to produce his/her paintings. Examples are tube oil colour, watercolour, gouache, and oil and chalk pastel, and others. Media is the plural of medium. **Supports** refer to the different surfaces or materials for painting that include, canvas, masonite, board, paper, wall, and so on.

So, given the above definitions, we can now proceed to discuss how grounds, media and supports have come to bear on our subject matter. For the benefit of doubt, in *Uli* wall painting the pigments *Aja Oto* (mud slip) is used to cover the cracks and crevices created by age, insect and atmospheric factors. *Aja nwa Mmuo*, a reddish brown earth pigments is used in the manner of primer or size to produce layer of ground on which the initial

layer design, is established (Ikwuemesi, 2005:8). What is deducible here is that the earth pigments known as *Aja oto* and *Aja nwa mmou* serve as grounds for *uli* wall painting respectively.

2. The Paradigm Shift

The Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka is known as “Nsukka Art School” for its crusading influences and contributions to art and national development. It is an art school known for *Uli* – body and wall paintings of delightful aesthetic qualities. Nsukka Art School is a movement with global manifestations. (For more clarifications on Nsukka Art School, see Simon Ottenberg, 1997, *New Traditions from Nigeria, Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press).

According to the brief history of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, (as contained in the revised undergraduate academic programme, 2011), after the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), students and faculty members reassembled and resolved that the art programme of the department had to be reconstructed to meet the demand of the new Nigerian society and it is from this period that a new culture of exploration and experimentation of the local environment in teaching and learning dominated art activities of the school. Staff and students searched deeply into the nature and purpose of art and design in their communities as well as applying the proceeds of these intellectual and artistic endeavours into social and technological development. The content of the art programme made room for the incorporation of indigenous ideas, motifs, designs and styles into art learning and production.

In the discourse of modern Nigerian art, the Nsukka Art School clearly typifies the conscious and radical transformation of conventional ways of art production. The creative antecedents of Nsukka Art School reveal a radical transformation of common place materials to create works that are stylistic and highly conceptual. On these notes, it has been noted that the creative philosophy of the Art School laid emphasis on experimentation, and intellectualization and also gave added impetus to exploration and experimentation (Odoh, 2011:29).

The artists from Nsukka Art School have embraced this creative spirit in the areas of painting, sculpture, ceramics and textiles. They have as matter of search for appropriate mediums with which to make art that would be engaging and most telling, “waded into the thick forest of conceptualization, exploration, experimentation and daring improvisation” (Onuzulike, 2001:8).

There is this aspect in Nsukka Art School known as exploration of indigenous ideas, forms and material that reflect a creative ideology that has been consistently driven by the exploration and appropriation of culture – based art form as a viable creative resource. This aspect also emphasizes exploration on the environment as a potent source of ideas, materials and forms which offered a creative pathway that energizes the creative spirit of the Nsukka artists (Odoh, 2011:29). It is this apparent shift in the grounding of the content of this aspect, particularly, that radically changed the direction of the Nsukka artists. They have cultivated a highly conceptual approach that took its base on the powerful influence of Professor El Antsui supported firmly by the intellectual art tutelage of Professors Chike Aniakor and Ola Oloidi. It is this extent that the boundaries of painting, sculpture, ceramics and textiles in Nsukka Art School have “increasing thinned out living, where they exists at all, only a lean thread of demarcation” (Onuzulike, 2001:17).

It is interesting to note that “a good number of artists of Nsukka Art School have transgressed all known boundaries and frontiers associated with art through a vehement questioning of a long held notion about them” (Onuzulike, 2001: 8). It is this intense creative experiments and the restless search for down-to-earth materials that provoked the high powered conceptualization and articulation of thoughts and ideas.

Aniakor (1991:8) recalling what transpired in early 70s when he took up teaching appointment at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka says:

One begins to remember, recall, to reflect – the intense creative experiments in the studios (especially painting) and classroom – the discussions and debates in African arts, the restless search for ideas and materials in mixed media, the reappraisal of the ‘laws’ of painting composition.

From the foregoing, it is clear that it is the spirit of “experimentation and intellectualization that gave rise to exploration, experimentation and interrogation and synthesis of this creative resource” (Odoh, 2011:29). It is again the radical and potent appropriation of a traditional language in creative resource to create works that are stylistically and conceptually different. It is this creative shift in the consciousness of Nsukka artists in search of down – to – earth materials which the living environment provides for the execution of their art that the use of local pots and other earth pigments became a potent creative resource.

For the Nsukka artists, the use of unconventional media and materials for creating works that are both

stylistically and conceptually quite unique in modern Nigerian art and beyond looms very large. In this regard Ikwuemesi (1998:13) supports that “art should be made and propagated on our own terms, that is, on African terms...” So to rely on local pots and earth pigments as grounds, supports and media for painting is ideal especially now that the politics of identity is on.

One of the painting courses “Exploration of Indigenous Ideas, Forms and Materials offered in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka has in no small measures contributed to making the students, and lecturers alike to use (and are still using) earth pigments including clay to produce paintings. These students and their lecturers seem to be asking this thought provoking question: Do colours reside only in tubes and tins? They have come to the know that earth pigments can be used in the places of oil colours and so on and therefore, have incorporated and skillfully used these earth pigments for their paintings.

Traditional clay pots which have undergone born firing stage are being in use for several purposes to the Nsukka artists. For example, they serve as support bases for painting. Other earth pigments serve as painting media. Through exploring the clay medium, and pushing its possibilities and frontiers the ceramists and sculptors have manipulated (and are still doing so) it to create different forms that range from cups, mugs, jugs, pots, and bursts to marquette.

In the traditional settings like Nrobo, Inyi and some other places in southeastern Nigeria, traditional potters rely heavily on the use of clay soil to make earthen pots. The *Uli* woman painters of eastern Nigeria have also used clay particles and other earth pigments colours to produce breath-taking wall paintings for which a good example is the *Iyi Azi* shrine wall located at Nri in Anambra state of Nigeria (see plate one).



Plate 1 *Uli* wall painting of *Iyi Azi* shrine. Photo: C. Krydz Ikwuemesi.

In paintings executed on canvas and board, clay and other earth pigments are used in the places of oil and acrylic colours (see plate two).¹ This painting was rendered in earth pigments colours of brown (mud), ash (clay), white (ground chalk) and black (charcoal) by a young third year student-painter who was undergoing artistic tendering at the professional altar of creative tutelage in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 2005, for the requirement of the painting course known then as “Exploration of Indigenous, Idea, Forms and Materials” mentioned above.

Another good example is the work done by Ikechukwu Onyekwe for the same purpose in 2004 (see plate three).

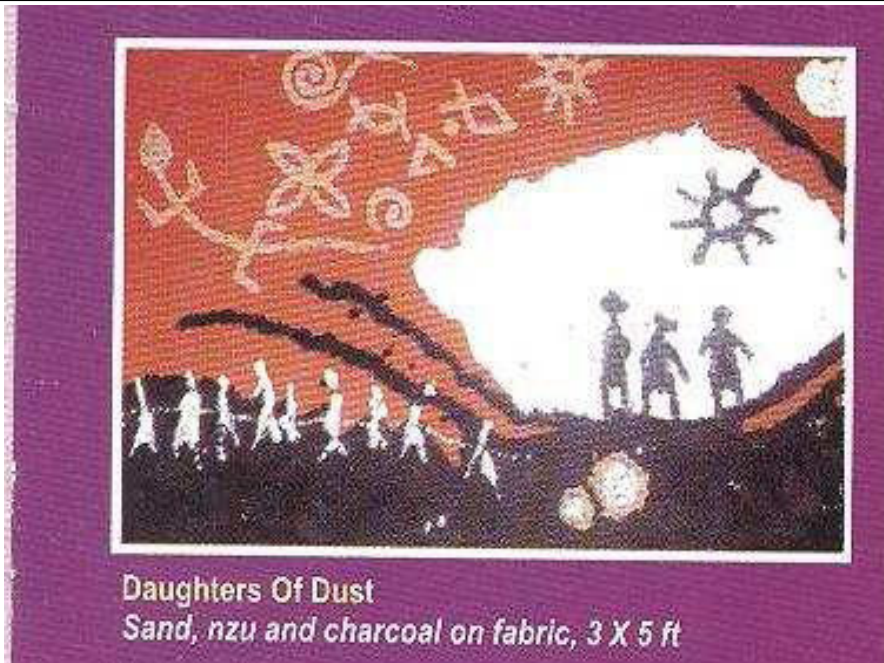


Plate Photo from *Footprint 5* catalogue



Plate 3 Photo: Itiav Vershima

Locally made clay pots and earth pigments, in the last two decades found their creative manifestations in the works of Nsukka artists and have been serving as support bases, as media and as grounds for painting in Nsukka Art School, and some painters that have explored and exploited these locally made pots and earth pigments for painting are Chukwuemeka Okpara, Krydz Ikwuemesi, Obinna Amoke, Ifeanyi Ezugwu, Martins Okoro, Stanley Ezeh to mention a few. For Aniakor (2011: 85), “this is like a creative return to the archaeology of knowledge”.

To buttress our points very succinctly, we will use some of the works of some of these painters mentioned above.

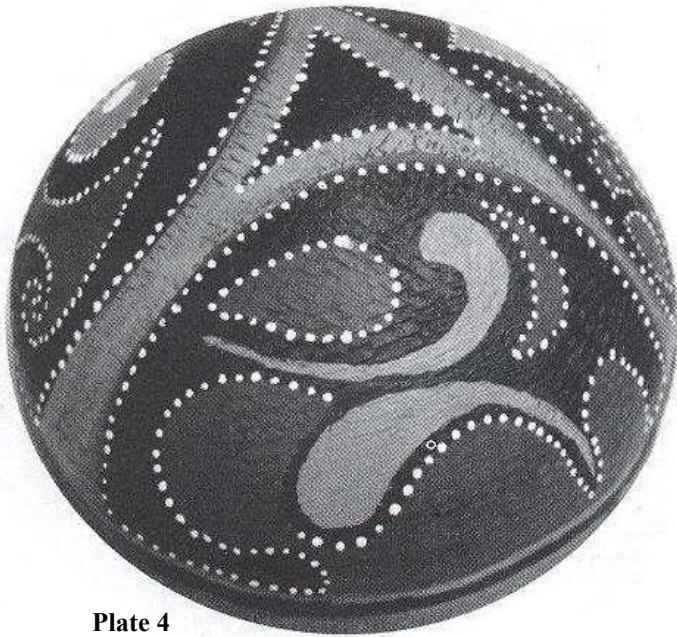


Plate 4

Photo: C. Krydz Ikwuemesi

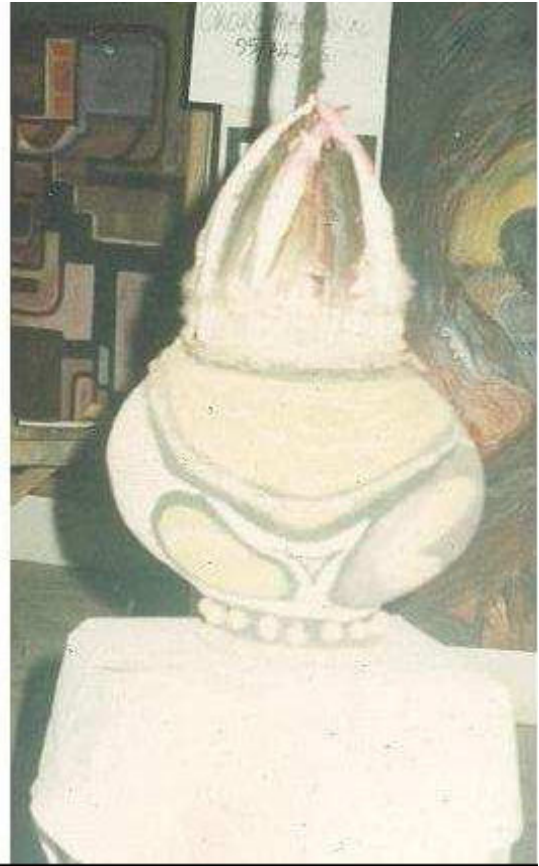


Plate 5 Photo: Martins Okoro



Plate 6 Photo: Chukwuemeka Okpara



Plate 7 Photo: Itiav Vershima

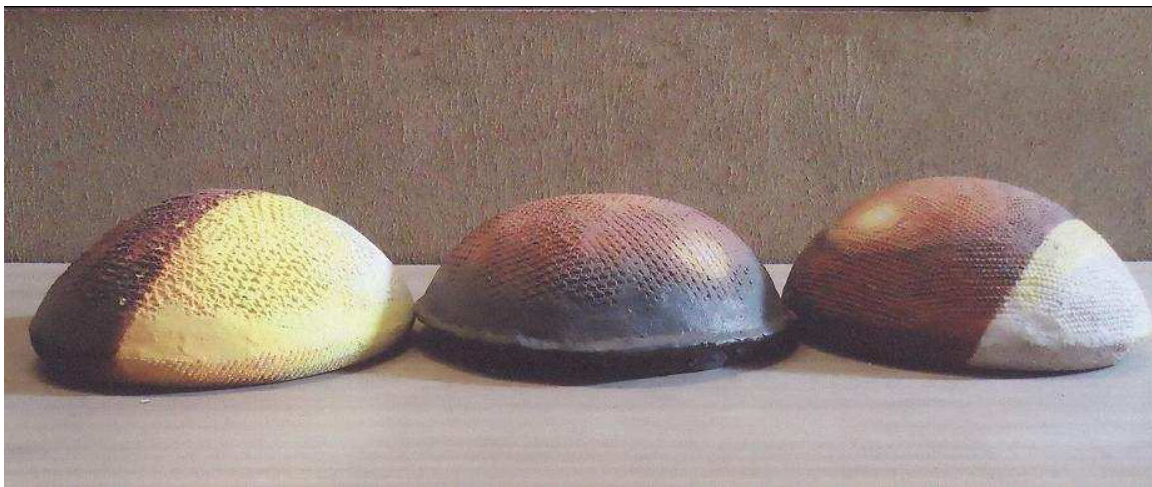


Plate 8 Photo: Itiav Vershima

C. Krydz Ikwemesi's "Pot with *Uli* patterns," is a painting done on a locally made pot as a support base (see plate four). Martins Okoro's work titled "*Ite Ike*" - hard pot is also rendered with some earth pigments colours combined with gouache, feathers, rope and seeds on a pot as support base. In this work, he segmented the surface of the pot to form colour zones to reflect *Uli* patterns (see plate five). Plate six, contains painting titled "Africa story 1" and "Decorative pots" done by Chukwuemeka Okpara while he was demonstrating and exploring into African painting forms, design motifs and symbols on traditional clay pots as support bases. Stanly Ezeh's work came about through "Abstract and Conceptual" painting course in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. In this work, he used big and small sizes of local pots to skillfully show that painting support bases can be local pots instead of the conventional canvas. On the surface of the pots are brown, black, yellow ochre and white zones of *uli* patterns (see plate seven). Plate eight is triplets local pots turned upside down and painted on, as support

bases with colour contrasts between brown and yellow with sharp lines demarcating the first and the third pots at the center respectively, while the center pot itself is rendered in blends of black and brown colours.

There are of course other works produced by Nsukka Art School painters on local pots which would have been used to buttress more our points, but for the reason that on the course of writing this paper, these works were not readily available.

3. Conclusion

Conclusively, therefore, this concise paper has proven that there are ceramic elements in painting and that such elements have in no small measures been helping painters of Nsukka Art School to providing answer to the question on whether colours reside only in tubes and tins; that unusual and fragile traditionally locally made pots can serve as painting support bases, which in the words of Okpara (2010:74) is therefore an encouragement to contemporary African painters to explore similar African traditional objects in making visual statements.

Note

1. See Nnaemeka Asogwa (2005). "Daughters of dust", in *Footprints 5: New Painters from the University of Nigeria* exhibition catalogue, Enugu: Alliance Francaise.

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