

Growth and Development of Styles of Painting in Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examines the growth and development of styles in Nigeria paintings. It describes the development of painting from the traditional Nigerian society to the developments of new forms and modern techniques in Painting in Modern Nigeria. The contact with colonial masters brought new developments in the educational training and curriculum of Art education in Nigeria. This trend facilitated the training and incorporations of diverse African forms and elements among Nigerian painters. Successive painters in Nigeria developed their own style from the philosophy of Onobolu and Kenneth Murray, thereby creating multidimensional approach in style of painting in contemporary Nigeria.

Key Words: Growth, Development, Styles, Painting, Nigeria

Introduction

Painting is a branch of the visual arts in which colour, derived from numerous organic or synthetic substances, is applied to various surfaces to create a representational or abstract picture or design has been explored over the years (Encarta Britannica: 2008). The surface on which the pigments are applied varies from stone (used in Paleolithic Age) to paper, wood, cloth, board and canvas. As the surfaces of paintings differ, so do the materials used to create the pigments. During the Paleolithic Age, earth's colours were used, followed by plant extracts and more recently synthetic colours (Encarta Britannica: 2008).

Painting, as an aspect of visual art, is one form of art which expresses messages, codifies them and allows the spectator or viewer to decode and interpret the hidden messages or its meaning. Therefore, painting is not only a tool of recording human history, but also a tool of conveying a wide range of the stories, emotions, feelings, inner world symbolically or didactically or in a hidden mode (Abodunrin, 2014: 7).

The subject of representation could be in form of landscape, still-life, portraits, mural decoration, figural and non-figural composition which might conform to a particular style, associated with an individual or group of artists. The style is therefore the product of constant, recurring or coherent visual or conceptual traits in the work of an artist. A style might include characteristic of materials, brush strokes, colour combinations, subject matter, and technique of representation among several other reasons (Getlein, 2002: 36). In Nigeria, there are different forms of painting, but the well-known among painters includes oil, acrylic, pastel, and water colour. Other forms include the style of rendition in the broad style of cubism, expressionism, realism, naturalism, symbolism among others.

Pre-Colonial Painting in Nigeria

Painting during the pre-colonial period was a very unique tradition and cultural practice among the various Nigerian ethnic groups. In the Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri and Igbo culture, body painting is the most conspicuous forms of painting that is noticeable found among women during ceremonial occasions like wedding and religious festivities.

Body painting is a style of painting that is as old as tradition of the culture of the Nigerian people. It has different names to different Nigerian groups. It is known in Hausa, Fulani and Yoruba as the laili and Igbo as ulli. Liali or Ulli as it is commonly called is a plant/ flower or bark extract of trees which is mixed with some other ingredients like lemon and cloves used to beautify the skin and fingers in artistically wrought patterns, this form of painting is ephemeral in nature and it is done on women during marriage ceremony.

In addition, (Campbell 2007: 24) observes that shrine painting is also an observable feature of painting practice in Yoruba religious activities. The surface used for this kind of painting is the wall. It gives an elaborate expression on the symbols and meaning of religious images as exemplified in the cultural beliefs of the tradition of the people. Furthermore, a colour which is the primary manifests of all painting is also used for embellishment of most traditional arts forms such as calabash decorations, wood carving and textile embroidery.

The names and pioneers of the various forms of painting in the pre-colonial Nigerian society were unknown. Perhaps, this is because their works and memories of their painting were not documented by modern African Art Historians. However, it is generally believed that the practice of painting is generally domiciled in the vocation of the craftsmen among the Yoruba.

Advent of painting in colonial Nigeria

Colonialism both in Nigeria and other parts of Africa aim to acculturate the conquered people. It thrives on the delusional belief system that one's culture is superior to another and that the superior culture owe it as a duty to influence the other culture. There was great influence in the practice and the development of art forms during this period. The development of painting in colonial Nigeria is a turning point in the history of art in Nigeria. This period marked a shift in the cultural techniques of painting from religious and decorative purpose to new forms in techniques, materials and style of painting. Unlike the pre-colonial forms of painting that is applied on wall surface and the human body. The colonial period witnessed the application of synthetic substances to create a representational, abstract picture or design on surfaces such as canvas, board, paper, wall and host of others. Synthetics colours were also used which often time are imported.

The artistic development during this period was bold and tedious but steady in the face of numerous constraints created by colonial influence with European contact with Nigeria. The contact with British colonial authorities greatly influenced the art of painting in pre-colonial Nigeria. This practice manifests with the introduction of formal and non-formal art training with the effort of Aina Onabolu who initiated this transition into the practice of painting. Aina Onabolu was one of the foremost Nigerian artists that recognize the importance of teaching the society through arts. Despite British colonial indifference to the development of arts, he openly lobbied the colonial authorities for the establishment of schools in Lagos. Although the arts and culture in Nigeria during this period did not assume the proportion of the Renaissance that swept through 14th-17th century Europe, it was still an awakening in Nigerian context.

Onabolu acquired his skills through self training and through direct or indirect schooling in European Art institutions. Onabolu introduced the rule of measure, anatomical accuracy, and perspective through photographic representation in painting.

In the 1940s Kenneth Murray, a British national who was invited by the colonial government to modified the art curriculum in the newly established Nigerian Art School. He is described by Art historians as the pioneer of modernist movement of Art in Nigeria (Oloidi, 2008). He stimulated the appetite for traditionalism in art as opposed to Western influence or convention. He believed that the forms of representation of art generally and painting in particular should be more of African than European. He therefore encouraged the adaptation of indigenous elements and forms which greatly influenced the style of painting in Nigeria.

By 1950's, Nigeria had developed two different and divergent styles been championed by the pioneer Aina Onabolu, the other by Kenneth Murray. Onabolu's style of painting is credited for his philosophical belief that painting should be a universal language of expression which can be seen in his realistic and naturalistic tendency. Kenneth Murray's style of painting is more of cultural forms and adaptations of African elements which metamorphosis into individual identity.

Aina Onabolu started developing styles in painting by copying pictures from magazines and books, and perhaps buoyed by the need to disagree with the belief that Africans were incapable of depictions in anatomic realism (Irivwieri, 2007). Onabolu's tradition of representational art characterized by naturalistic images and technical competence in-terms of conscious realism re-emphasized by the laws of perspective and anatomical accuracy. Examples of such works are Onabolu's portraits of The Right Rev.O. Oluwole, and Mrs. Spencer Savage, and that of Chief (Dr.) Sapara (Plate 1) published in the Nucleus (1981:8). Onabolu's best known works are portraits rendered in a naturalistic style.

The major concern of Onabolu during this period was to capture true appearances of whatever picture he represented. Two of Onabolu's dearest ideals are as relevant today as they were during his life-time. He believed that African art was a living and developing phenomenon, not an activity which had come to an end with the achievement of the sculptors of those days. But perhaps Onabolu's most important conviction was that art is a universal human language which transcends national barrier and reaches out to all people wherever they may be.

Others who followed Onabolu's footsteps include Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972) who became famous as a cartoonist for the West African Pilot a newspaper published by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who later became the first president of Nigeria. Others were Eke Okebolu (1916-1958) and J.D. Akeredolu. (Nnadozie, 2008:49). Akinola Lasekan who is a self-taught painter, continued to pursue academic realism and painted portraits of highly accomplished Nigerians in traditional costume as well as scenes from rural life. He presents an idealized picture of humanity where people glowing with health and beauty are enhanced even further by dignified richly coloured costume (Fosu, 1986: 8). Charles Shainumi also, though a self-taught painter, aimed at a naturalistic style, choosing as his subject's picturesque people and places in Nigeria. Chuks Anyanwu also created colourful

landscapes and portraits, choosing subjects which are picturesque and rendering them in a naturalistic style (Ikpakronyi, 1998: 70 - 71).

Ben Enwonwu, P.L.K Nnachi, Uthman Ibrahim, C.C. Ibeto and A.E Umana got their formal training in painting through the effort of Kenneth Murray. Ben Enwonwu (1921-1994), became a foremost Nigerian painter among his peers. His works on painting expresses African naturalism. During his time, it was a common practice in painting to express political and philosophical themes, as well as propagating the theme that are peculiar to Africa. This can be seen in Enwonwu's paintings like *Negritude* (Plate 4), *Olokun* (Plate 5) and *Dance forms*.

Other artists in this group included Etso Ugbodaga-Ugu and Udo-Ema respectively were pioneer staff at Ahmadu Bello University and the University of Benin respectively, and a founder of the Arts Department at the College of Education, Uyo. The period shortly after independence features the establishment of art Schools coupled with Osogbo School which was established through the efforts of three expatriate: Giorgina Beir, Ulli Beier and Suzanne Wenger (Oloidi, 1995:66). There were other new art departments at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

The styles of painting in Nigeria have continued to grow, striving to be more and more relevant to the people who now use it as a potential instrument of change. The Nigerian government, the elites and the ordinary people appreciate it as a means of passing on folklore, culture and values; creating identity, effective cultural diplomacy, a source of renewable wealth, a potent tool for creating awareness and the development of communities.

Post-Colonial Development of Painting in Nigeria

Post-Colonial development in artistic practice in Nigeria started immediately after independence from Colonial rule. There were agitations for freedom in all facets of life which include the freedom of expression in art practices. Artists during this period produced a painting that seems to be individualistic in style. After 1960, artists like Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko and Jimoh Akolo also produced abstracted forms. However, the works of artists like Yusuf Grillo are more of stylization, abstraction and naturalism is unique pattern of elongation of form which brings the work clearer to the audience. Jimoh Akolo chooses subjects which appear to be straight-forward representations of human activity, e.g. *Dye pit* (plate 6), *Dreaming* (plate 7). However, he uses colours which do not belong to the figures in the natural world and thereby creates an abstract pattern. Also, Simon Okeke used water-colour in an unusual way to create the illusion of solid forms. Instead of pale colours applied thinly, we find dark, rich colours used in the building up of form to produce an almost sculptural effect (Irivwieri: 2010:176).

Erhabor Emokpae and Abayomi Barber oscillate between naturalism and stylization that tends towards abstraction, as well as surrealism. Some of Uche Okeke's works seem to have derived a lot from the traditional life of his people, the Igbo (plates 8 and 9) and with a penchant for the use of lines to bring out details of forms and surface textures (Mount, 1973:139).

Coming after the generation of the 1960s is the generation of Kolade Oshinowo, Sina Yusuf, Dele Jegede and Gani Odutokun. Most of the artists in this group also paint naturalistic images but occasionally oscillate between abstraction and naturalism. Kolade Oshinowo's work: *Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther* (Plate 10) is a typical example of his naturalistic painting. His other works such as *Ensemble and Ritual Dance* (Plates 11 and 12) combine naturalism and abstraction while his *Owode Onirin* published in Adepegba's (1995): *Nigerian Art: Its Tradition and Modern Tendencies*, is a completely abstract work. Sina Yusuf's work *Nana of Itsekiri Koko* (Nucleus, 1981) is an example of his naturalism while his *Kano Dye-pits* (Nucleus, 1981) combine naturalism and abstraction. His *Animal Kingdom* (Nucleus, 1981) is, however, one of his completely abstract works. Dele Jegede's *Sallah Day* (Plate 13) and *Samaru* (Nucleus, 1981) (Plate 14) also combine naturalism with abstraction while his *Transfer of Technology* (Dele Jegede, 1986) is a completely abstract work. Gani Odutokun's *Durbar-The Race* (Nucleus, 1981:88) (Plate 15) is typical of his early works that combine naturalism with abstraction while his *King and Queen*, published in the "1st Master" Art Exhibition Catalogue, is a later abstraction. The 1960's represented a sober reflection when Nigerian artists began to question themselves on the role they ought to be playing in modern Nigeria. Their attitude towards Art was such that the conflict between traditional forms and Western techniques was of little significance to them (Beier, 1961:31). According to Bruce Onobrakpeya, they were "...rising against the secondary role or position assigned to contemporary artists, who were placed below the traditional artists in Africa..." This group formed the nucleus of what came to be known as the Zaria Arts Society and the forerunner of the Society of Nigerian Artists. They introduced new ideas hinged on the concept of natural synthesis which was essentially a fusion of African motifs, concepts and techniques with Western ideas. Explaining further the aims of the society of which he was an active member, Onobrakpeya emphasized that "... apart from the things we learnt in the class we retired to our cubicles to discuss what African art is..." (Onobrakpeya, 1985:22).

The members of the Zaria Art Society produced works that were characterized to a large extent by individualism in various styles and techniques, which in most cases constituted a complete break with the Nigerian contemporary art of the earlier period, thereby creating a new trend in the development of Art in Nigeria (Fosu, 1986). Also, various schools, individuals and groups also developed various styles and techniques to achieve different degrees of art forms which are peculiar to them.

Between 1970 and 1979, the flourishing of the artistic styles, movement and expansion, naturalism was significant but detailed features, which were initially expressed, were not too pronounced. Compositions in painting moved from copying from specific reference to more complex motifs and themes that reflected both folk-historical and issues of their times. There was also a degree of abstraction in an attempt to appreciate the products of this stylistic stream as seen in Yusuf Grillo's work titled Mother and Child. He is known to combine various styles, which presupposes various influences. His Figures are usually simplified without descriptive details. The painting looks flattened, exaggerated and elongated in a mannerist tendency. His designs are cubistic and when his subjects are viewed critically, such naturalistic elements are evident. The artists of this period also imbibed the creative philosophy and ideas of the artists of the previous period. Their dynamism had great impact on their works. They skillfully advanced their creative abilities, making their works unique in form and content. For example, Uche Okeke of first generation influenced Obiora Udechukwu, while Yusuf Grillo passes on to Kolade Oshinlowo and so on. They were highly influenced by their masters but propagated their own ideas through Schools, exhibitions, seminars, and lectures where most of them teach. The group had a strong influence on the emergence of the post independence development of various new art forms called Ulli, Mbari Mbayo experiment, Ori-Olokun experiment, and Ona experiment.

Artists from 1980s started developing experimentation with local materials and forms, thus defying the harsh economic realities of the times to produce artworks which are quite unique and distinct. Their interest was to produce artworks that would be more of African in content. Naturalism continued to be expressed using isolated materials that were initially not considered appropriate in artistic expressions to create forms, which have that aesthetic value. The preponderance of materials gave rise to stylization and modification of forms to create themes, which are essentially imbued with naturalistic characteristic. For example, the Ona concept of artistic expression, which evolved towards the end of the 1980s, is pre-occupied with the recreation of Yoruba ideas and cultural identities in contemporary arts. There is a wide range of themes and subjects executed with a balance of traditional forms and Western arts styles and techniques. The artists of this era include Tayo Adenaike, Kunle Filani, Tola Wewe and Moyo Okediji

With the creative awareness of artistic styles globally, artists of the 1980s combined their academic heritage with their home grown ideas to create essentially art forms that are unique, thus carving an identity for contemporary Nigerian art. In the quest for innovations, there is a rigorous manipulation of media thus bringing about the expressive potentials of the artists.

The last two decades of this study (1990-2010) witnessed larger percentage of artists from different backgrounds with diverse and robust styles and techniques. During this period, artists began to enjoy maximum freedom which led to individual experimentations and innovations such as installation works of Jerry Buhari, Dele Jegede, Victorian Udoangan, Alex Nwokolo, Kilani Abass and some other new generation of artists. There is exploration of a wide range of materials, which were improvised from traditional sources such as myths, religious activities and philosophical views as manifested in proverbs, maxims, allusions and aphorism. The human Figure is often treated in a stylized or expressionistic manner but it is at times recognizable. Sometimes, the artists enter the realm of gods, spirits, and their fantastic semi-abstract forms appear with brilliant colours and elaborate surface decoration with forceful brush strokes.

Within this period till present, artists refute what they were thought in their various institutions to embark on independent explorations and techniques which often make the communicative expression difficult in their painting. The independence enjoyed by Nigerian artists through their expressiveness gave room to the effervescence of styles.

Conclusion

It has been established from the foregoing that painting as a genre in Artistic development in Nigeria moved from the traditional methods to the emergence of new forms, styles and techniques from the pre-colonial period till date. The contact with formal training in Art institutions by European influence created new directions into the adaptation of indigenous art themes into painting in Nigeria. The creation of new universities, polytechnics and colleges of education enhanced the formal training of Artists to becoming well professionally inclined with the integration of rule of measure, diverse incorporations of forms and elements and other individual identity. The activity of the emerging painters in Nigeria indicates a remarkable growth in styles of art

practice in both the formal and informal sector. Successive painters in Nigeria developed their own style from the philosophy of Onabolu and Kenneth Murray, thereby creating multidimensional approach in style of painting in Nigeria.

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Plate 1

Aina Onabolu, Portrait of Chief (Dr.) Sapara, Oil,
(Nucleus 1981:8)

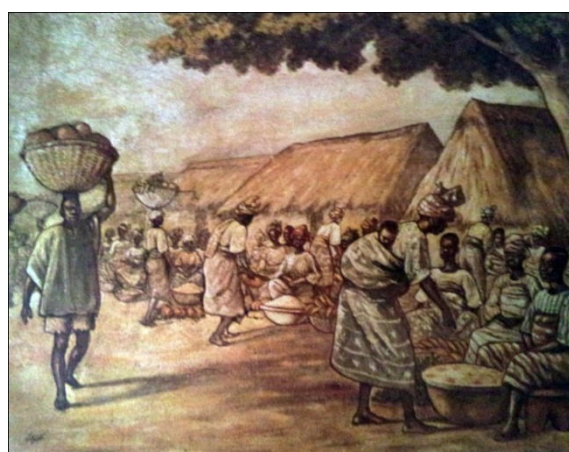


Plate 2

Akinola Lasekan, Market Scene
Oil
(Nucleus 1981:80)



Plate 3

Akinola Lasekan, Self-portrait,
Oil

(Nucleus 1981:79)



Plate 4

Ben Enwonwu, Negritude
Oil

(Nucleus 1981:64)

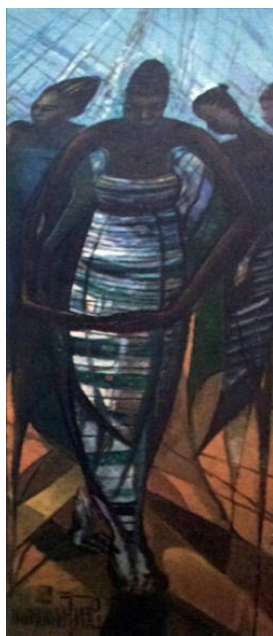


Plate 5

Ben Enwonwu, *Olokun*, Oil
(Nucleus 1981:64)



Plate 6

Jimoh Akolo, *Dye pit*, Oil
(Nucleus 1981:37)



Plate 7

Jimoh Akolo, Dreaming, 1973
Oil on Canvas.

(<http://www.artvalue.com/>)



Plate 8

Uche Okeke, Primeval forest, 1970

Oil on Board

(The Artist's Archive, 2009)



Plate 9

Uche Okeke, Untitled, 1973

Ink and brush on paper.

(Art Fact, 2010).

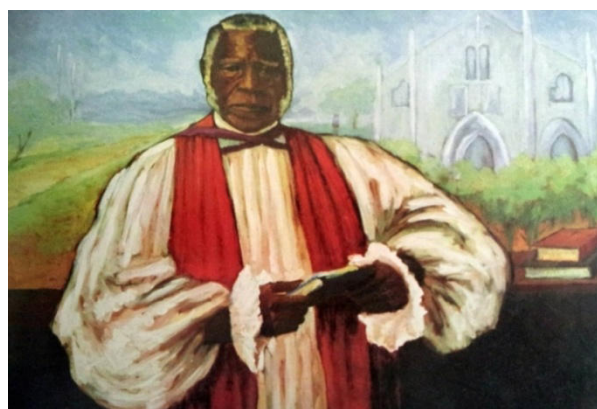


Plate 10

Kolade Oshinowo, Bishop Ajayi Crowder, 2009

Oil on Canvas

(Nucleus 1981:98)



Plate 11
Kolade Oshinowo, Ensemble, 2009
Oil
(Nucleus 1981:99)



Plate 12
Kolade Oshinowo, Ritual Dance, 2010
Oil
(Nucleus 1981:97)



Plate 13
Dele Jegede, Sallah Day, 2007
Oil
Source: Nucleus 1981:75

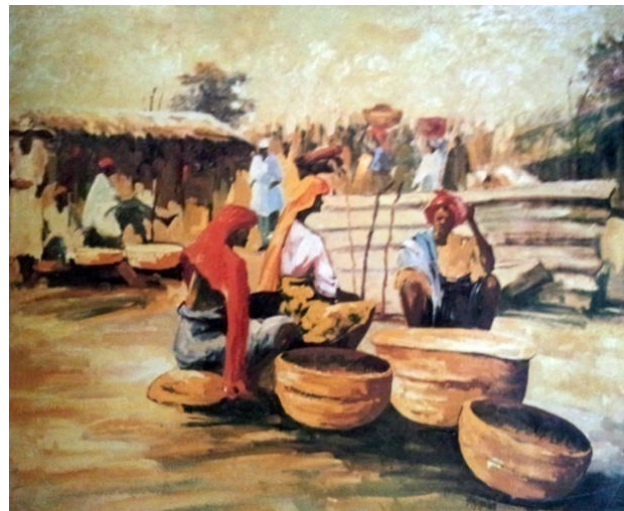


Plate 14
Dele Jegede, Samaru, 2009
Oil
Source: Nucleus 1981:76



Plate 15

Gani Odutokun, Durbar-The Race, 1993

Oil

Source: Nucleus 1981:88

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