

## A LINEAR EXPLORATION OF ERODED LAND SURFACES IN PAINTING

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### Abstract

This paper entitled, *A Linear Exploration of Eroded Land surfaces in Painting*, is a studio based research with the aim of creating a visual dialogue between the design elements line, colour and form (eroded structure). Form in representational art covers a diversity of things which include for instance the human figure, landscape, still-life and animals. Form however exists pictorially or physically, as a result of line which is a primary element of art and design that assists the artists in diverse modes of expression. These diversities have led to the delimitation of form to that of the eroded structure and the transformation of the rigid eroded structure through the use of line thus, creating paintings with ephemeral propensities. However, despite the said diversities; and the considerable amount of work done on erosion by artists of oriental origin, there is still a paucity of literature and works concentrated on erosion studies related to geometric shapes as has been addressed in this article. Therefore, a review of literature was undertaken to show and to appreciate the contributions made by painters to the study of the elements of design such as line, colour, form and the dynamics of erosion. A methodology was adapted in collecting needed information for this study which included sketches, photographs, and drawings based on personal on the spot observations and direct visual study of selected landscapes of eroded land formations. Findings within the course of this study show that the creative and systematic manipulation of the eroded structure can give birth to aesthetic designs worthy of public display and appreciation.

**Keywords:** Erosion, Line, Dynamics, Aesthetics, Painting, Exploration

### Introduction

Art functions on multiple levels thereby making it an important aspect of our environment. It is usually a three or two dimensional work/something that is pleasing to the eye (aesthetic), but also something that portrays an important message. Although each art work contains its own unique message, the general fabric of art usually, possesses an underlying message for reconnecting with nature or any other idiom.

By creating art using nature as a source of inspiration, one is almost forced into a much deeper level of connection with his/her immediate environment. Just as an artist continually uses paints, brushes, knives, palettes and canvas and forms a close attachment to some specific material or tool, so does the artist become attached to the use of natural objects such as leaves, pinecones, wood, trees, plants, mountains, rocks, water, land formations ice, etc. as objects or subject matter for his/her expression and inspiration thus, reintroducing the long lost connection with nature that the human species once had many years ago. Consequently, the viewer/audience is presented with an avenue to form a deeper connection with the inherent beauty that exists in nature.

“Like in mastering a new language, artistic expressions open up new worlds of experience that were once in comprehensible” (Sen, 2014, p.1). Busser (2006) in Sen (2014) also argues that understanding the

language of art means comprehending other ways of looking that come from different places and different times. Therefore, training in the art elements and principles becomes a necessary tool for the artist. This is because it sharpens the artist's perceptions of the world around us. Sen is of the opinion that:

Most times we have given occasional attention to ways in which artists of various periods have translated reality into artworks, but have not paid attention to the guidelines or factors that make up all the forms of visual art, which are called elements of art. The visual elements of art are fundamental without which, there wouldn't be any imagery in existence that could be termed as art (p. 1).

Sen continues the above line of argument by citing from the Encyclopedia Britannica (2009) which states:

The various visual elements, known as elements of design, formal elements, or elements of art, are the vocabulary with which the artist composes. These elements in the overall design usually relate to each other and to the whole art work. The visual elements are line, form, space, texture and colour (p.1).

Beeson in Sen (2014), agrees,

Line is a formal element of art that appears in most two-dimensional artworks. Line can be used in different ways within a work of art. Understanding how to use lines can aid an artist in constructing a visually-effective composition" (P. 1).

Olaniyan (1989) on the other hand, posits that, line in the visual arts and especially in painting has remained a basic element of expression. Achugwo (2000) reaffirms the aforementioned submission by describing line as a fundamental element of art which will always lend itself to diverse studies because of its central position in visual arts. Going by the above arguments, the author posits that the importance of line in visual arts cannot be over emphasised. Line is a central tool/element for the interpretation of whatever subject matter an artist chooses to explore in art. Due to its dynamic physical characteristics, line permits the artist to bring to visual reality, his/her thoughts.

### **Background**

Artists all over the world have created diverse art works from the nature with significant specification given to the earth's surface. Objects within the earth's surface may include all or some of the following elements; sky, plants, shrubs and trees and in some cases, human and animal lives. Although these are not static as they continue to move and change location.

Stockstad (2008) names artists like Brueghel and Palmer, as artists that have at one or more times painted eroded land formations. Even though, it appears that their intention might not have been to paint such formations specifically, but to paint a landscape which contained such land forms as part of their painting subject matter.

A look at Asian artists however, shows that they, on the other hand have done considerable work on erosion. Some of the works date as far back as 1279, with some of such large wall paintings still decorating palaces, temples, and tombs in present time. Most Asian paintings are made in ink and water based colours on silk fabric or paper. Finished works are generally mounted and used as hand fans or hanging scrolls or as leaves of picture albums. Artists like Ni Zan, Dai Jan, Dong Qichang, Shen Zhou, and Wang Hui were the pioneers of Chinese ink painting. At the centre of Chinese ink painting is the idea that a painting is not created to capture a likeness or to satisfy others but is executed freely and carelessly for the artist's amusement. This is a philosophy closely adopted by the artist/author for the creation of works inspired by eroded land surfaces as is the main thrust for this paper.

Works produced for discussion within the body of this paper are entirely in black ink with spatters of watercolour in shades of blues, reds, greens etc., depicting large masses of eroded formations which resemble, mountains, sharp cliffs, disembodied rocks, trees, traditional architecture and at times grotesque human faces all represented in simple, repetitive lines. All these were made with as much detail using different types and sizes of pen and ink on selected and prepared paper. The pen and ink technique was used continually; a technique in which not all parts of the surface were fully flooded with ink but rather sparingly as if the ink is about to run out, so that the white or clear nature of the paper 'breathes' out through the ragged strokes. The result is a two dimensional artwork with a light touch and a sense of simplicity and purity.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this paper are to:

1. observe and paint eroded landforms from an aesthetic point of view.
2. develop a form of expression that draws exclusively from the exploitation of the dynamism of line as explored through the study of eroded landscapes.
3. create two dimensional works of the eroded landforms through repetition and symbolic representation.
4. minimize the elemental role of colour.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Erosion**

Bunnett (2003) believes that, earth movements cause rocks to fold and fault, and give rise to earthquakes and volcanic activity. Major features such as mountains, plateaus, and plains have been formed by these earth movements, both *lateral* and *vertical*. These movements exert great forces of tension and compression which, though they take place slowly, produce very fascinating features. These processes can collectively be termed as erosion which Kearey (1996) explains thus:

Erosion is a process that refers to the breaking up and wearing away of exposed rocks by moving water (rivers, and waves), the wind and moving ice. The broadest application of the term erosion embraces the general wearing down and molding of all landforms on the earth's surface, including the weathering of rocks in their original position, and the transport action of the weathered materials. Erosion can be caused by wind action, fluvial processes, and glacial processes. This very broad definition is more correctly called denudation or degradation which includes mass movement (New Penguin Dictionary of Geology).

A narrow and somewhat limited definition as posited in Blackie's Dictionary of Geography (1926), would exclude the transportation processes of such materials by natural agents, but the exclusion of the transport phenomenon makes the distinction between erosion and weathering very vague. Erosion therefore, ultimately includes the transportation of degraded materials from the original point of occurrence, but not the disposition of materials at the new site. The complimentary actions of erosion are disposition and sedimentation which all operate through geomorphic processes of wind, moving water and ice to alter existing landforms and to create new ones on the earth's surface.

Tarbuck (2000) in *'The Earth: An Introduction to Physical Geology'*, explains:

The shapes of continents are continuously sculpted as waves, water movements, and tides cut into old landforms while silt from rivers builds up new land. All these agents or weather forces cut deep channels and gullies which become ravines and the ravines in turn become valleys. For instance, the Grand Canyon in north-western Arizona, 446km (227mi) long, up to 29km (18mi) wide and more than 1,500m (5,000ft) deep, is said to have been produced by river action cutting through the soft sedimentary rock formations probably within a five million year period. The overall effect of such land degeneration should be that of leveling the earth's surface. The tendency however, is toward the reduction of all land surfaces to sea level. For example, in each 7000-to 9000 year period, the entire area drained by the Mississippi river in North America loses an average of 30cm (12 inches) of altitude (Pp. 640-642).

Tarbuck and Lutgens (2009) further opined that:

Weather conditions and environmental hazards which initiate erosion of rocks on the earth's surface also cause alterations in surface patterns. In dry climates, the top layer of a rock may expand from the heat of the sun and crack off from the lower layers, if the rock consists of several minerals. The minerals may expand at different rates and break up the rock. In cold climates, frost breaks up rocks because of rain water which seeps through cracks and pores, and expands when it freezes. Rainfall in damp climates acts chemically as well as mechanically in the erosion and transportation of rocks, earth particles, soils etc. As rain passes through the atmosphere it absorbs

carbon dioxide, forming carbonic acid, which dissolves some minerals and decomposes others. Feldspar, a common family of minerals found in granite is changed into clays which are used in sculptural, architectural, and ceramic fields. Some materials in basalt combine with oxygen and water to form iron oxides such as limonite which also accelerate the process of erosion. Plants also play an important role in the process of erosion as roots can grow deep into the earth's crust and split rocks to extract much needed soluble nutrients (Pp.700-740).

Roberts, Jepson, Lucero and Chapin (2001), continue the above line of argument by stating:

The primary activity that accelerates the process of erosion is caused by humans. Without human activities, loss of soil through erosion would in most areas probably be balanced by the formation of new soil. On virgin land, a mantle of vegetation protects the soil when rain falls on a surface of grass or on the leaves of trees, some of the moisture evaporates before it can reach the ground: trees and grass serve as windbreakers and with their network of roots they help to hold the soil in place against the action of both rain and wind. Agriculture and lumbering, as well as housing, industrial development, and highway constructions, partially or wholly destroy the protective canopy of vegetation and greatly speed up the abrasion of some types of soil (Pp.346-357).

Erosion is a worldwide problem affecting different areas in varying degrees. This problem is more widely felt within the African continent where preventive measures are difficult to start or to maintain. In explaining the state of erosion in Nigeria, Caruthers and Clinton (1998) state:

In Nigeria, immediately north of the forest is the first wave of the savannah: the guinea or the moist savannah, a region of tall trees and grasses. The southern margins of the guinea savannah which have been altered by humans such that they are also called the 'derived savannah' were created by repeated burning of the forest until only open forest and grassland were left. Bush burnings have destroyed important fire sensitive plant species and contributed to the erosion of the soil by the removal of the ground cover. Tropical forests are giving way to the guinea savannahs at such a rate that the only forests that are expected to survive to the next generation are the ones in reserves. Beyond the guinea savannah region, lies the drier Sudan savannah a region of shorter grasses and more scattered, drought resistant trees such as the baobab, tamarind, and the acacia. In Nigeria's very dry north-eastern corner, the semi deserts, the Sahel savannahs, persist. Throughout these drier savannahs drought and overgrazing have led to the continuous degradation of vegetation and soil resources (P.890).

Redmond (2009) continues:

About two thirds of Nigeria lies in the watershed of the Niger Delta area and its major tributaries, the Benue in the North Central, the Kaduna in the North West, Sokoto in the North East, and

Anambra in the South East. The rural economy that supports most of Nigeria is based on the productivity of the land, 33 percent of which is being cultivated. Soil fertility varies considerably but in general, stands to be poor. Fertility of the soil is caused by alluvial dispositions in river valleys. The soil in many parts of Nigeria is however, overused and eroded. Trees which help to prevent erosion are often used as fuel, lumber, materials for tools, fodder for animals, and herbal medicines. As a result, the landscape is decaying and becoming increasingly barren of trees, especially in densely populated areas and near large cities (p. 891).

Petroleum and natural gas, the source of most of Nigeria's export earnings, are concentrated in large amounts in the Niger Delta region and offshore. Smaller deposits are scattered elsewhere in the coastal region. The industries that mine them, with their oil spills, burning off of natural gas, and clearings of vegetation and water ways in the Niger Delta are major determinants in the abrasion of soil.

McNeil, Taylor and Lick (1996) further explain:

Erosion is a major problem in Nigeria, made worse by massive water impoundment and irrigation schemes, uncontrolled grazing, and livestock migration which put tremendous pressure on the land in some areas. Other environmental threats that accelerate the process of erosion in Nigeria include, poaching, settlement within protected areas, bush fires, increasing demand for fuel wood and timber, road expansion and oil extraction activities. Several Nigerian groups have campaigned actively but with little success, to compel the government and major oil companies to introduce environmental safe guards. In 1988 the government formed the 'Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA)' to address problems of environmental degradation and other such related phenomena; but the FEPA has had only a minor impact in the country. In many parts of the country, farmers have practiced environmental protection strategies for centuries. Their techniques involve shifting cultivation, a system where different crops are cultivated at different farming seasons to retain soil nutrients. Other techniques include planting several crops in a single field at once to cover the ground more evenly and thereby reducing soil erosion and increasing fertility, planting and maintaining farmland trees and hedgerows, applying manure to farmlands to maintain soil fertility and in some areas like the Jos Plateau, terracing steep slopes (Pp. 376-324).

Whilst exploring eroded land sites, which abound in Nigeria, the author observed and describes the physical appearance of such land forms created by the processes of erosion to be reminiscent of remarkable, ruined, mud architecture or skyscrapers. They are generally of a deep red hue or in various shades and tones of browns. Other observed and identified natural pigments include ochre's, sienna's, umbers with liner and pattern variations in reds and whites across some surfaces. It is also noted that, the irregular and sometimes amoebic shapes of such forms grow and form long pillars of about 3ft to 4ft or

more. The exterior of these formations possesses an array of beautiful textures, usually rough to the touch. Surfaces may also be jagged, sharp, meandering, smooth, rough and deep.

Erosion, despite its hazards, can inspire different feats of creative expressions especially in painting which is the focus of this paper.

#### **Review of Related Works**



**Figure 1, 'Dwelling in the Fu-Chan Mountains', Huang Gung Wang (1269 – 1354), Paper, AD 1347 – 50, 13”high, Gardeners’ Art through the Ages, 12<sup>th</sup> Edition**

The above work shows various cliffs and mountains in liner perspective, with the ones at the foreground appearing larger and bearing more detail than the ones at the far end of the picture which grow increasingly blurry as they recede into the distance. Through the use of line in a singular direction, the cliffs are depicted as starting from one side moving to the other side in form of an arc and subsequently ending in the pool of water surrounding the cliffs in a graceful manner. The brush used does not appear to leave the surface till it runs out of ink, forming the subtle ripples that indicate the presence of water covering the foot of the cliffs. This was probably done to avoid sudden sharp breaks in the linear flow of brushwork and also to achieve the still graceful character of an undisturbed natural environment. There is a scattering of meager trees and shrubs at the foreground and in light sprinkles on the cliffs. These are rendered in much heavier, darker strokes but still maintaining the fluid quality attached to the entire mood of the work. The vegetation suggests the action or presence of a light breeze. The figures in the painting are rendered in such an infinitesimal and almost insignificant style, that they are barely visible within the whole composition. The figures are in what seems to be a canoe portrayed by a single sharp swipe of the brush. The figure in the canoe is rendered in much the same manner though in this case the brush strokes are shorter but nonetheless rigid. Line is used throughout the entire composition of Gung Wang’s work to represent and project form, moods and structures. It is also used to highlight the inner structure and momentum of the landscape through the rhythmic play of brush and ink, giving life and character to the landscape.



**Figure 2, 'Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains', Albert Bierstadt, (1830-1902), 1868. Oil on Canvas, 6''x10'', Gardeners' Art through the Ages, 12<sup>th</sup> edition**

Figure 2 presents breathtaking scenery of natural beauty. It is a panoramic view of deer's and water fowls which appear at the edge of the placid lake, while the steep and rugged mountains soar skyward on the left side of the canvas. The mountains depicted at the distance are in various stages of undulation as a result of weather conditions or just nature taking its course, and appearing to have gradually melted into the lake below. Also within the same picture plane, in the distance, is a stand of trees in untilled and uncultivated land framing the lake on the right. The sunrays are depicted breaking through the clouds overhead. So bright is the sun that the clouds are barely visible which suggests in an almost transcendental nature, some sought of communication between two paramount elements of nature. The work appears to have been achieved through the use of chiaroscuro. It is also portrayed in realistic manner representing each object of nature as it appears to be in reality i.e. there is no attempt by the artist to alter the original appearance of the components in the composition. The effective use of light gives the picture a feeling of tranquility heightened by the stillness of all involved in the composition.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

Information for this article was gathered through various methods which include the following:

**Participant Observation Method (POM):** This involved painting and sketching of the sceneries observed in the early stages. It was done to familiarize the author with the physical features of the eroded land surfaces such as its contours, textures, and forms. All of which were used at different stages of the studio exploration.

**Photographs:** Pictures of certain landscapes that contain eroded formations were taken forming the supplementary information for sketches and drawings produced. Such images were also used as visual notes made at the scene of the study.

**Internet:** The internet served as one of the most important sources of information for this research. The vastness and absolute freedom of usage provided the opportunity to view online images of eroded sites and



also what other artists and individuals are doing with such forms. This served as a great impetus for the creative power of the artist as some of the interesting features observed from such online images were later fused into the body of works created.

**Contemplations:** Images were also generated through intensive contemplative exercises which involved thinking deeply after every onsite exploration of such forms. These contemplative exercises were translated into sketches and drawings which served either as preliminaries or as works in their own rights in the tradition of drawing.

**Live Studies:** Live studies were undertaken primarily to compare the effects that could be achieved through outdoor painting as opposed to studio works. This however, was not exhaustively pursued. Importance was placed on reducing the expressive power/role of colour in relation to form than on detail.

### **Equipment Used In Data Collection**

Some equipment were used to gather the required data for this paper.

**Camera:** Though not extensively used by the artist/author as an integral part of collecting data, the camera served as both a major provider and store of information. It was used as a supplement for research notes. The digital camera was used to capture images of the eroded forms in their sites.

**Supports:** Preferred surfaces used for the works included all sorts of drawing paper such as cardboards, watercolour paper, packing paper, glossy paper and canvas for making preliminary as well as detailed studies that form the bulk of the works produced. Choice paper was used primarily for ink, wash and watercolour media making them the preferred and most convenient source of data collection in the field. The various surfaces of the chosen paper was found to be rough, smooth and convenient enough to produce the desired effects both in pen, ink and wash.

**Media:** The primary medium used is the pen and ink; others included oil colours, biros, enamel paint, ink and pencils. Pigments were manipulated when necessary with the brush and at times with fingers to achieve diverse effects. The pen and ink medium unlike others allowed the researcher to isolate, duplicate and control lines extensively during the process of creating the works.

### **The Place of Colour**

The dominant colours of an eroded form consists of a palette that sits shades and tints of browns and reds. This with a combination of other complimentary colours could provide an artist with an array of interesting hues to work with. However, the author's decision to work mainly in black ink against a generally white background is first, due to the sharp contrast that the two pigments present when used side by side and the strength they both give to any represented subject or object; secondly, to lay more credence to the school of thought that advocates that any substance or pigment that changes the original appearance of a surface

should be referred to as a colour as against the referral of black and white as not being colours but as being neutral substances that exist as natural entities.

### **Analysis of Works**

In analysing the primary subject for this paper, formal consideration of the pictorial structure was given due attention before modifications of both form, shape and line were made. This was deliberately used for expressive and familiarization purposes. The selection of certain features of the primary structure under study, either in full or in part, was solely motivated by the artist's delimitation. Wooton (1968) states:

what distinguishes a painting is the selection and organization. Then a painting becomes a work of art less by its approximation to the objects, but rather more by what the painter selects to use and give emphasis to and also by the same process, what the painter chooses to leave out (p.81).

The works presented here, represent the studio exploration which was closely guided by the above principles. Not all parts of the primary subject (eroded form) observed, were used or represented. A variety of motifs and some specific type of lines were used in a reoccurring fashion. The zig-zag, spiral and contour (fluid long line) are prominently used.



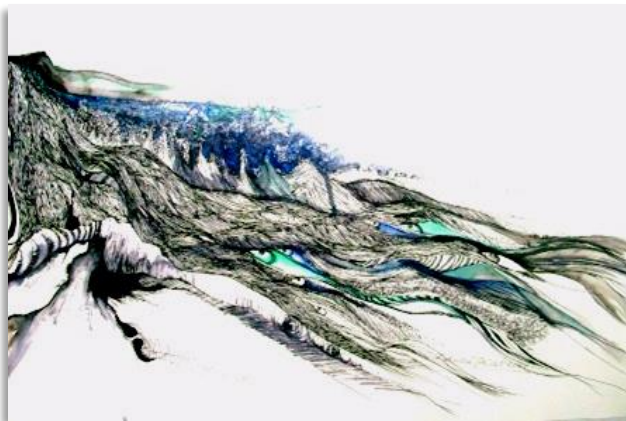
**Plate I, 'Embroidery I', 2009, Pen and ink on watercolour paper, 32 x 25cm**

Plate I shows a small piece of earth which appears to have had its front chopped off by some great force of nature leaving behind a small chunk. It is a careful study that gives attention to both line and texture. There are exaggerations at desired areas achieved through either pulling, stretching or filling up. This is done in almost all the physical features of the eroded form which in turn transforms it into a design fit for a sewn fabric. Texture is achieved by the constant scribbling of the pen on the surface. There is also a manipulation in shape to represent what may be termed celestial figures as well as designs reminiscent of the skin of a zebra. The background to the work is blank to enhance the complex activity taking place in the foreground.



**Plate II, 'Embroidery II', 2009, Pen and ink on watercolour paper, 32 x 42cm**

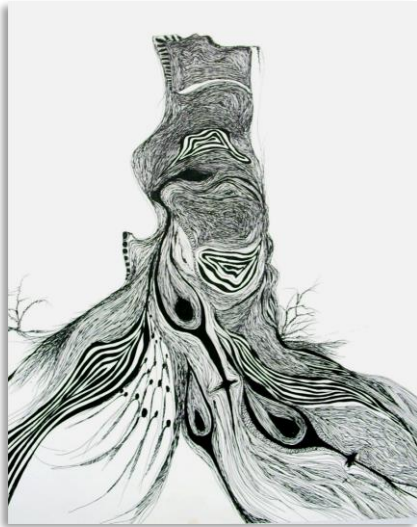
Plate II is an offshoot of plate I but with more attention to detail given to it. However, all linear activity in this work is directed downwards. It is an exploration of line in relation to the eroded form. The stylizations or modifications done in this work appear to be more advanced than in the previous works. Except for periodic undulating activity that takes place at certain calculated intervals, it is difficult to associate the finished work with its subject matter. Considerable areas have been filled with black ink to suggest depth, other areas are filled with delicate lines, while texture is achieved through rapid and successive movements of the pen on the surface. The upper portion of the picture plane is void. There is the total eradication of features suggestive of the eroded form, turning it into a design concerned more with aesthetics than on form and shape. This is done in an attempt to transform the usually derisive formations into appealing creative workmanship. There is a complete absence of colour.



**Plate III, 'Six Earthen Fish', 2008, Pen, ink and watercolour on paper, 38 x 25cm**

Plate III shows what could be termed as a complete transformation of a solid eroded form into long delicate and sinuous lines which intertwine at regular and close intervals. Despite the alterations, at the left

side in the corner in the foreground, it is a segment of the structure which is realistically portrayed. It is a mound of earth with a deep hole in the middle with several cracks running in different directions from the centre of the hole moving downwards and disappearing. There are six simplified forms resembling fish within the mesh of delicate undulating and meandering lines. The presence of pigment is not lost here, as tints of blues and greens have been used in this work. The colours are used to highlight the fish within the stream of lines as well as to denote the presence of both sky and vegetation though not physically shown. The mesh of lines seem to be flowing down stream as in the case of a waterfall while, the fishes within appear to be breaking the flow as they are all shown swimming upstream. It also shows a reduction in the variety of lines selected to be used and also a reduction in the complex nature of the composition. All elements apparent in the finished work including the presence of colour are symbolic in the sense that they assist in registering the presence of objects not portrayed.



**Plate IV, 'Untitled II', 2008, Pen and ink on paper, 25 x 38cm**

Plate IV shows a pillar of eroded earth that is in form of a tree trunk. The pillar is represented in a manner that suggests that it has been halved revealing what maybe a cross section of the insides of the pillar. Each amoebic or organic shape is filled up with contour lines while areas of depth or depression are filled with black ink. At the bases of the pillar, forms reminiscent of celestial figures are shown wrapped around the pillar in an undulating manner which appears to disappear as they recede upwards into a black hole. Two skeletal shrubs are depicted in both the left and right sides of the work. The background is left blank deliberately to enhance the posture of the pillar.

### **Conclusion**

Adapting line as an element of design to study eroded land surfaces can be a challenging as well as an exciting creative experience for the artist and the audience. Apart from its geological and ecological significance, erosion can present the artist with a variety of forms with which successful as well as creative

transformations can be made to represent various aesthetic designs worthy of public and individual patronage and appreciation. Within the course of the studio exploration embarked upon for the successful completion of this article, line was used to dissolve the rigid and somewhat unmoving nature of erosion into fluid designs and pictures of unrecognizable images. In some cases, such images created, took up the resemblance of animals (fishes), while others were ephemeral, conceptual or simply 'beautiful' in appearance thus the absence of similarity in the produced works to their source of inspiration. It is also worthy to note that the lines inherent in the eroded landforms have provided the artist with enough material to build up a variety of forms and gestures that have greatly influenced the body of works created for this paper.

The explorations of the eroded land surfaces were embarked upon for the sole purpose of finding a means of personal expression in painting and drawing through a study that involves the adaptation of the dynamics of line in relation to eroded forms. A visual dialogue between line and form was looked at and practical ways were found for achieving a fusion and creating a feeling of equivalence in the two. All works presented in this paper derive their inspirations and concepts from the eroded forms as well as the element of art; line.

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## EXPLORING INDIGENOUS MATERIALS AS ALTERNATIVE MEDIA FOR PAINTING: A FOCUS ON IGBO CULTURAL IDIOMS

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### Abstract

Beyond the use of conventional materials and a combination of conventional and unconventional materials (mixed media), the availability of indigenous materials within the environment present the artist with inexhaustible media for artistic expression. The contemporary artistic freedom, creative quest for new ideas, and materials and the urgency, if not the immediacy, for the redefinition of identity informed the artist's return to the ancestral root for inspiration. In the Igbo cultural environment, certain trees like Palm, Ofo, Iroko, Ogirisi, Akpu, Oji, certain objects, animals and birds are sacred and held in high esteem. The attached myths on them therefore, can be explored and interpreted in artistic expressions. Also in the same environment, there are abundance of local materials such as gravels, stones, wood shaves, and tree barks, materials from palm tree, local fowl feathers, and local crafts and so on. The artist is then confronted with the responsibility of converting these materials, reinterpreting them and then composing them in a new form thereby attaching new meaning to them. On this premise, certain questions beg for answers. What are the materials in the Igbo cultural setting that have significant meanings, economic importance or attached myths? How can the artist employ the meanings of these materials in his or her artistic practice? What cultural, social, political, economic and aesthetic functions and issues will such works draw attention to? This paper uses two selected works which comprise of indigenous materials combined with conventional material (mixed media) and pure indigenous materials to respond to these interrogations. Finally, the paper recommends amongst other things, the use of purely accustomed materials in the Igbo cultural environment in depicting forms, ideas and thoughts that point to her roots instead of conventional materials. The exposure of younger generation to the meanings of these materials in their cultural artistic discourse, it concludes will discourage loss of identity.

**Keywords:** Indigenous materials, Materiality, Visual Metaphor, Igbo Idioms, Alternative Media

### Introduction

Over the years, artists have been bringing into visual reality their thoughts, hopes and ideas. To realize this dream, two factors come to play; the concept to be interpreted and the materiality. While concept entails among other things ideas, thoughts of the artist, materiality is concerned with the medium or the avenue and outlet in form of tangible materials that reveal or convey the artist's inner feelings, and ideas to the outside world. Muscato (2015) simply puts it that, whatever a piece of art is made out of; is its medium. The traditional media for the different forms of visual arts are as varied as its sections.

Before now, there appears to have been an over reliance on western or conventional materials for artistic expression despite the high cost of such materials. This tendency by artist has had somewhat negative impact on the traditional make-up of the artist environment thus, leading to a decline in the cultural discourse of the works artist produce. This is as a result of the rigid approach to materiality. The apparent rigid use and preference for conventional / western media for art expression; has resulted as the authors noted; to a creative restriction in the type of materials used by traditional, indigenous artists. However, with the new knowledge of novel ideas and materials that can be found and effectively used in place of the

costly conventional materials; some innovations have begun to emerge using the provided alternatives. Onuzulike (2001) posits that the radical change of direction of Nsukka art media has increasingly thinned out-leaving only a thin thread of demarcation between the unconventional and conventional/western media. Onuzulike further states that, the degree exhibition of 1999/2000 at Nsukka art school graduating set was at that moment, a major showcase of large harvest of new materials, fresh ideas and new creative modes. He continued that, from the sculptural mixed media paintings of Eze (1999), Okore (1999), Ayalogu (1999) George (1999), Martins (1999) and Ezenyirioha (1999) to the mixed media sculpture of Aneke (1999) and Nnadi (1999), a good number of student artists have transgressed all known boundaries associated with painting and sculpture, thus, extending the frontiers of art through the questioning of long held rigid notion about the materiality of art.

Dewey's (1932) notion on art in general as expressed in *Art is Experience*, is that art has its own medium specially fitted for a one of a kind of communication. Each medium says something that cannot be uttered completely in any other language. The interchange of materials in the contemporary art scene has been closing the existing gap with media experiments and explorations thereby creating a hallmark in contemporary art practices within indigenous environments.

Mixed media in visual arts refer to a work that combines various traditionally distinct media in artistic expression. It is an artwork which more than one medium has been employed and many effects can be achieved in attaining a wide range of self-expression through it. Contemporary artists nullified the age-long held traditions of the Renaissance artists in support of new materials, and techniques for artistic expression. They equally introduced new theories on how art should reflect the perceived world and their positions as artists. Igboamazu (2014) admits that modern artists do not adhere to the classical canons and one can also view them as those set out to challenge the status quo and also reflect on the current situation of the society. This as a result has welcomed unconventional indigenous materials into the fold without restriction.

### **Statement of the problem**

The problem of this research arises as a result of the neglect of abundant indigenous materials and certain objects with significant meanings and attached myths in artistic cultural communication especially in the Igbo community.

### **Aim of the study**

This study is engaged with the mindset that reading and translating the meanings inherent in indigenous materials in artworks will give room for the younger generation to understand, propagate and promote Igbo culture.



### Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were too:

1. reassess the artists' creative base and reach out for new artistic concerns in materiality, style and content of works that will point to their roots
2. bring art to the level where young pupils can express themselves whilst, taking advantage of the raw materials that nature has bestowed them with.
3. interpret the myths attached to certain objects in Igbo cultural setting in painting.

### Indigenous Materials as Visual Metaphor

A giant stride has been taken by this innovative move in the presentation of indigenous materials as visual metaphor in artistic expression. In other words, materials with economic importance and attached myths are assembled with each contributing to the success of an objective discourse. The conceptual choices an artist makes are determined by the characteristics of the materials used. Muscato (2015) concurs with this view when he asserts that different materials carry different significance. For example, if a certain wood is considered sacred, then using it indicates that this piece of art is very special. He further affirms that, on the other hand if the artist uses an uncommon medium, it helps that artist to make a statement- he concludes. However, Ezike (2015) opines that understanding the symbolic significance of a material sometimes requires the philosophical understanding of the material's context and environment in which the artist is working. This equally interprets that both the significance of each material in a work of art and the concept or idea the artist intends to bring to the fore, work in harmony for a holistic view of the art piece. Considering the fact that there is always in man a religious instinct which inspires him to seek the divine, among the Igbos, in order to mediate and satisfy their desires, they create some visible religious objects to serve as medium of communication with the gods, spirits, ancestors and divinities. Among these sacred objects, Ofo is the most popular and most effective medium (Uniprojects 2015). Commenting on the significance of some certain trees, Okigbo in Obindigbo (2015) explains that in every community in Igbo land, one is not surprised to see certain trees that are marked with either red or white cloth warning the members of the community to stay clear of such trees as they are sacred. He further explains that the kinds of trees to expect in such scenery could either be *Ogirisi*, *Ofo*, *Oji*, *Udara* and *Akpu*. These trees to him, have huge significance in Igbo traditional religion and culture. He continues to explain that, *Ogirisi* and *Ofo* are highly respected as sacred because they are used for spiritual purposes such as taming insanity, offering sacrifices to the gods, sealing judicial decisions, blessing and cursing people. Sharing this view, Njaka (1974) asserts that Ofo is the central symbol of the Igbo religion. In addition to being a staff of authority, it is an emblem symbolizing the link between *chukwu* and man, the dead and the living, the living and the unborn. The Ofo he concludes also symbolizes justice, righteousness and truth. Also

adjudged sacred in certain occasions are the white cock, white ram, feathers of certain birds such as the eagle, vulture among others.

Metaphorically, the attributes of certain solid objects like stones, rocks, hard wood and the strength and sizes of animals such as tigers, lions, elephants, crocodiles, eagles are directly linked to human beings with similar features abound in the Igbo cultural setting. These are noticed when human beings are addressed with such Igbo expressions as *Oke Osisi*, (mighty tree), *Osisi ka Nkwu*, (The tree that is greater than Palm tree), *Agu n'eché mba*, (The Lion that protects the land), and sometimes likened to such trees as *Oji*, *Iroko* on the significance of some materials, Okafor and Okigbo in Falconer (1990) posit that, Palm wine and kola nuts are of paramount importance to the Igbo at most social functions. While Palm wine is used in pouring libation, offering prayers and heralding events, Kola nuts are regarded as important symbol of welcome and hospitality. To them all discussions, prayers and ceremonies begin with the breaking of Kola nuts and without it these occasions are not regarded as serious. In seeing certain objects in the light of cultural idiom in the Igbo artistic communication, Nwafor (2015) in the foreword of an art exhibition catalogue in honour of El Anatsui and Obiora Udechukwu, explains that, in the Igbo traditional society, Ugo symbolizes a rare bird. It is seen on rare occasions. That was why the Igbo crafted the saying *Anyá fulu Ugo jaa ya ike na adighi afu Ugo kwadaa* translating as “Anyone who beholds the Eagle must praise it because the Eagle is rarely seen”. These expressions befit the two icons of Nsukka art school that are being heralded at their home coming.

#### **Analysis of mixed media works/ paintings**

Painting can be compared to language, because it communicates through symbols. However, unlike language it also communicates through material and optical presence. This medium isn't permanent; it is dynamic. This development is brought about by changes in materials and in the contexts they are used. Colour is the basic feature in painting. In other words, the tonal arrangements of materials whether soft or hard with the intention of producing pictorial composition is painting. In our local environment, colours from indigenous materials abound and offer themselves as powerful alternative media for artist's exploration.



**Plate 1. Resource to Glory, (2010) Ukwa Job Nworie U. Mixed Media 96x77cm**

In the work *Resource to Glory* (Plate 1) three woven baskets were strategically fastened on a flat stretched jute fabric using rope before infusing a bent female figure who is weaving one of the baskets. Considering the economic importance of palm tree in the Igbo culture, the artist demonstrates how one can earn a living by utilizing the ingredients gotten from the palm tree. The Painting represents a woman concentrating on tapping from available resources in her environment to make a living. While the flattened basket on the upper left side spreads out its strands to represent the sun, the symbol of light or glory, the bent female figure at the centre is shown focused on weaving the baskets; a known local craft in the south eastern part of Nigeria. The availability of the raw material (palm tree fronds) is informed by the fact that there is a presence of heavy rainfall, swamps and rainforest as indicated by rich dark colours significant of the thick forest where such abundant resources are mostly found. The artist enhanced the look of the pictorial representation with oil colours. The art piece therefore is an avenue to promote local craft as well as an advocacy for self-reliance in both concept and materiality.

The artist's ideology has been the quest to bring art to the level where young pupils can express themselves whilst, taking advantage of the raw materials that nature has bestowed them with. This aim of the study, necessitated the drive to use virtually any material found in creating the works for this research. In its drive to combine indigenous materials found in the Igbo cultural environment for depicting Igbo cultural forms, ideas and thoughts instead of pure conventional materials, the artist engaged in the production of works that present the audience with avenues for Igbo cultural discourse. This was done with the mindset that reading and translating the meanings inherent in indigenous materials in artworks will give room for the younger generation to understand, propagate and promote Igbo culture.



**Plate II, Igwe Achebe: The custodian of Culture, Ukwa Job Nworie (2016) Mixed media, 101cm x 66 cm**

Plate II is *Igwe Achebe: The Custodian of Culture*. It is a pure painting exploration without conventional material. The painting centers its visual discussion on the post of His Majesty, Igwe Alfred Nnaemeka Achebe, Agbogidi, the 21st Obi of Onitsha. The office of Obi is the traditional leader of Onitsha, Anambra State, Southeast Nigeria, the post of Obi of Onitsha is recognized by the State and Federal Government of Nigeria and the Obi himself is seen as a representative of the people of Onitsha to the State and Federal levels of Government, (Nigeria Sun online, 2006). Unlike other Igbo chiefs that are warrant chiefs, he is the only Igbo ruler with absolute monarchical ancestry stemming from Obi Eze Chima the first. According to the Harding Report of 1963 and ground work of the history and culture of Onitsha people as, this Igbo dynasty has thrived for more than four hundred years (Egbunike, 2014).

The work is a composition of natural and indigenous coloured materials sourced from the Igbo community. The major materials for the execution were from the culturally valued palm tree, stones, tree barks, feathers, wood shavings, bamboo, twisted raffia ropes, except all-purpose white glue that is a synthetic material that was used as an adhesive. A rectangular woven mat made from palm fronds of 101cm x 66cm was used as the surface for the painting. The drawing of the subject in his ceremonial Ofala headdress regalia was made and glued to the base before the technical building of the forms. The dried dead fronds of a palm tree with its natural colour varieties and shapes were majorly used on the face to achieve tonal gradation at the upper part of the headdress and the background. The milkfish white tree bark of gmelaina tree was used for the base of the headdress. Coloured stones such as granite, chippings and gravels were used as the beads and were placed underneath of the headdress to show depth and contrast. Local fowl feathers were equally used at the soft and woolly part of the Igwe's headdress. The lower right side of the background was covered with scraps of wood with contrasting tones for the face.

#### **Visual Interpretation of Igwe Nnaemeka Achebe using Local Materials**

In order to effectively convey and translate the meaning and significance of the post of the subject, the researchers sought the assistance of a befitting visual metaphor. These they found in the above mentioned

materials. To visually represent the rich and flamboyant culture of Onitsha people, the economic importance of palm tree was considered. Also, the greater use of palm tree ingredients is informed by the fact that sacred space in Igbo thought is regarded as *Ebe di nso* in some communities and is usually symbolized with *Omu nkwu* tender palm fronds tied around to demarcate such space. There is an assumption that every member of the culture understands the language of the *Omu nkwu* and would therefore respect the space as sacred (Oha, 2012). Just like with Igwe Achebe, trees serve both practical and symbolic judicial roles. Falconer further explains that symbolically, trees represent mediators or decision makers. Practically, they are physical boundary makers that define property and provide evidence of rights in judicial disputes. This therefore justifies the use of different tones of tree barks in the execution of the work. These tree barks and stones equally represent experience and authority of Agbogidi as the only Igbo ruler from an absolute monarchical ancestry. Man's friendliness with undiluted nature also informed the use of stones and gravels in its natural state. To equally add to the traditional aura of the office of the subject, local fowl feathers were used to enhance the paraphernalia and colours of the head gear section of the costume. The interwoven background stands for the cordial relationships that exist among the indigenes and outsiders. Finally dried palm frond stakes were used for the framing tied on the four corners using twisted raffia ropes which signifies the sacredness of the post.

### **Conclusion**

The inexhaustible indigenous materials made available by our natural immediate environment provide the artist with not only alternatives to conventional materials but also a suitable media that will add to the cultural artistic interpretations. The ingenuity of this work lies with the materiality survey in achieving aesthetic art pieces that are embodied with meanings. It is another avenue for artistic exploration for younger artists to try out new media that has not been used. This is equally an alternative to the high cost of conventional materials in the face of this present economic downturn in the country. Finally, the strength of this paper also lies on the use of purely African material in depicting African forms, ideas and thoughts instead of conventional materials. This offers an alternative suggestion to the “Natural synthesis” philosophy which sought the marriage of the best indigenous art practices and ideas with the best from outside in terms of media.

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