

ADAPTING *DAMBE* AS A CREATIVE RESOURCE IN PAINTING

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Introduction

Background of the Study

This painting research draws from the artist's cultural background leading to a focus on one of the many cultural activities that is popular in northern Nigeria, commonly called "*Dambe*". *Dambe* is a traditional form of boxing and a source of entertainment within communities that practice it Green (2005). It can also be a means of testing virility and strength amongst youth of such a community and in some cases as a suitable and less bloody means of settling a dispute or in acceptance of a challenge. *Dambe* can be between members of the same community, amongst neighboring communities, or even between rival peer groups. The movements observed in the muscles of the human form are artistically fascinating to the creatively intuitive mind. Such intricate actions between two human figures advance considerable images and forms for a suitable amount of creative work to be produced for research purposes in painting. The study also takes into consideration the unique nature of the subject matter to its surrounding and participating communities as well as its importance to existing cultures. All works created are directed towards self-expression, the challenging of one's emotions; by laying emphasis on the function of art as a tool for effective communication that in turn enhances understanding and heightens society's capacity for art appreciation.

Documented explorations in the arts have succeeded in bringing about modern movements that are founded on articulated manifestoes and agendas. Such movements began with the renaissance where the said "rebirth" of art as is currently known began. Other movements overtime include Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Pop Art, Modernism, Realism, Romanticism, Art Nouveau, Contemporary Art, Surrealism, Fauvism, Dadaism and a host of others. One thing that remains apparent and consistent is the continuous emergence of newer movements that transcend cultures globally; which arises either as a result of a merger or as a result of dissatisfaction with its present status quo.

Therefore, the brand of artistic foundation conceived for this research shares its interest closely with the painting exploration of the human body, its environment, identity, complexity, city life and beliefs all tangled in culture which is deeply rooted in expressionism. Significant to the artistic movements that flourished during the 1900s until early post world war it period around 1950s captured essentially various cultural transformations. Figura (2011) indicates that Expressionism, gathered momentum in the year 1910 in Berlin before the first world war which resulted in the collapse of the art market as a result of its transition into modernity. The way and manner bodily gestures, postures, and facial expressions were exaggerated could communicate essential states of being. Somehow, the collective effort of the Expressionist employed print-making technology amongst other conventions, possibly to disseminate their messages faster and stronger. Stressing their points in bold aggressive colors, dark tones and tints using woodcuts, lithographs, etching, and dry point; they also achieved aesthetics in water colour, oil paint, acrylics and charcoal.

On depicting actions, moods and emotions of their subjects in daily life scenes, the embodiment of the imagined the ideal of a simple life which were structured around the rhythms of nature were central themes found on their paintings. To fortify themselves in these struggles, the

Expressionists turned to action and conceptual performance in painting. In Nigeria, Aina Onabolu (1882-1963) a nationalist who was to change the face of Art in Nigeria through the appropriation of forms found in western culture. Who was an agent of change identified “European academism” and also the visual agitator of African post-colonial identity.

Reverse appropriation to Onabolu as observed by Emeni (2015), was to “hack into the exclusive space in order to possess the contested terrain of modern art in *Africa* through understanding the forms and techniques of western artistic expression”. Ben Enwonwu (1918-1994) enabled through his practice; an analysis of the constitution of artistic identity by contemporary African artists who locate their practice in the spaces of culture engendered by Africa’s colonial encounter (Agulu, 2015). The practice of using indigenous aspects of culture and traditions succeeds in immortalizing such aspects of culture thus, projecting the essential life-styles of a people: like the trends in modern societies. The period of restrictions encouraging only some selected media specification and a strict attainment of mastery in technical or natural skills to convey information are not just sufficient anymore. Contemporary artists in Nigeria today, adopt a hybrid of artistic disciplines with newer media and forms of expressions, “one where the conceptual threads of their message are articulated, debated, and made paramount Eze, Francis, et al.

Statement of Research Problem

As there seem to be no painterly documentation of “*Dambe*” in contemporary Nigerian painting, the problem of this research, is therefore, to create exploratory paintings of *Dambe*: a traditional mode of boxing using expressionist styles and techniques. This research makes use of the expressionist techniques of painting to visually preserve an aspect of tradition/culture that is synonymous to the northern region of Nigeria. It is a way for modern Nigerian society to benefit from their culture through visual artworks which in turn enhance the education and enrichment of the conscience and well-being of the society. Odufu (2012) confirms this through his statement, “the ultimate goal of education offered through arts is cultural identity”.

Justification of the Study

Modern painting is geared towards inspiring young artists and students to explore their culture using the elements of arts and that are available in techniques and styles of expression. This study is therefore justified in its exploration of an aspect of traditional culture using modern styles and techniques to manipulate *Dambe* in painting.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study is to:

1. Examines through preliminary sketches and drawings the inherent dynamic forms of *Dambe* for exploration in naturalistic representation in painting.
2. Explores the elements of colour, form and space in developmental state as they relate to the human form in *Dambe*.
3. Disperses the human forms into positive and negative spaces using the emotive role of colour as it relates to space and form.

Scope of the Study

The study is concerned with the use of certain elements of art such as form, shape, space and colour to create paintings of traditional boxing also known as *Dambe*. Compositions will be made from studies of traditional boxers and boxing scenes captured at Zaria/Sabo fight club and on a two dimensional surface.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research is founded upon the fundamental characteristics of Expressionism. The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary (1976, Ed.) explains Expressionism, “as a broad artistic style in which the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse within such a person”. The artist accomplishes this aim most effectively through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, and fantasy through vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic/ malleable application of formal elements of art such as line, shapes, colour, form, space and texture. For the purpose of this research, the elements of Expressionism such as its style of figurative exploration in a somewhat abstract state is adopted and emphasized by modifications in palette and the use of elements. Abstractions of the figures in accordance with the method of modernist artists like Vasily Kandinsky (Date) among other Expressionist painters whose exploits are important and innovative approach for creating expressionist abstract paintings. The expressionists’ main subject of interest was the human figure either in singular formations or in compositions. They mostly represented human activities such as dances, bar scenes, swimming or bathing scenes etc. Their creative drive seemed to be rooted in personal feelings and individualized visual reportage of what they felt, experienced or participated in as individual artists.

The paintings are created solely on the grounds of the researcher’s physical understanding and awareness of the subject matter as well as on the experiences and interactions had in and around the *Dambe* arena.

Expressionism

It’s typical traits were to present the world solely from a subjective perspective, distorting it radically for emotional effect in order to evoke moods or ideas (Tejera, 1966). Thompson (2010) reviews the term as being “suggestive of angst”. However, in its general sense, expressionism lays more emphasis on individual perspectives as it is characterized as a reaction to positivism and other artistic styles such as Naturalism and impressionism.. The expressionists according to Matejcek (1910), sought only to express inner life, often via the painting of harsh and realistic subject matter. What is crucial to this research however is that, the groups focus on depicting raw emotion through the representation of provocative imaging of the modern world? Expressionists depicted scenes of city dwellers and dancers in the city’s streets and nightclubs, this presenting to the viewer the “decadent underbelly of German society”.

Dambe

Dambe is traditionally practiced as a way for men to get ready for war. Many of its techniques and terminologies allude to warfare. Today, companies of boxers’ travel, performing outdoor matches accompanied by much pump and ceremony which include rhythmic drumming throughout traditional homelands of northern Nigeria, southern Niger and southwestern Chad (Walker and Afolabi, 2008).

The compendium of Hausa/English words explains that the word “*Dambe*” derives from the Hausa word for “box”, and appears in languages such as Bole as “*Dembe*”. Participating boxers are called by the Hausa word “*daaemaaenga*”. Although there no specific definitions to the sizes as in modern styles of boxing and wrestling, *Dambe* fighters/competitors are fairly matched in

size. Matches mainly last for three rounds with no definite time limit for each of the rounds. A round ends when one or two of the following happens:

1. There is no activity;
 2. One of the participants or an official calls a halt to the round or;
 3. A participant's hand or knee or body touches the ground "killing the opponent"
- The primary weapon in the fight is the strong side fist. The *strong-side* fist, also known as the "spear" is usually wrapped in a piece of cloth and tightly knotted cords.

Nakasissa (2006) indicates that, traditionally contests take place between men in the butcher's guild, who also challenge men from their communities, forming boxing teams from their ranks called "armies". Their bouts takes place at festivals marking the end of the harvest seasons, as clans of butchers would travel to slaughter animals for farming communities. Harvest also mark a time when rural communities are flush with money; so gambling on feats of strength became closely associated with these celebrations.

The Pakistani Daily Times (2002) reports that, today's participants of *Dambe* are often urban youths who train in local gyms or backyards, competing all year round for cash prizes. While no longer the sole practice of the Hausa speaking people of West Africa, and the preserve of the butcher caste, the confraternity aspect of *Dambe* as a sport still exists as youths who join the professional ranks also become members of the professional community which travel to perform such bouts at carnivals and festivals all over the country. Side betting amongst the spectators and prize money for the competitors is very common and remains an important aspect of the event (Simpson, 2008: VOA).

The entertaining nature of the sport has made it famous. This has earned some interest and its promotions through organizations such as Kogi State Traditional Wrestling *association* (Akinemi, 2008).

Related Artworks

This section reviews art that appear related in one way or the other with the works created in this research.

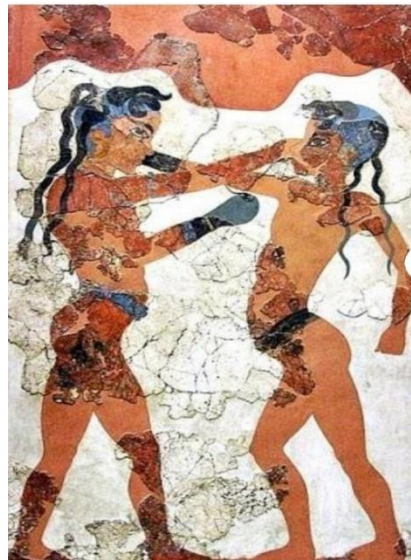


Figure 4. "The Boxing Boys", fresco from Thera (modern-day Santorini, Greece), 1600 B.C.E. Source: The Thera Foundation at [www.therafoundation.org/akrotiri/building beta/boxing boys room beta1 south wall/view "Boxing Boys"](http://www.therafoundation.org/akrotiri/building%20beta/boxing%20boys%20room%20beta1%20south%20wall/view%20Boxing%20Boys).

Figure 4 two boys are shown boxing. Interestingly, both are wearing only one glove on the right hand. There is no way of knowing if the glove had open fingers, as one gloved hand is too damaged (but a small section of the fresco suggests that the glove may have been enclosed), and the other one seems to be blowing opponents head (Ross, 2010). The fresco however establishes that stances and single wrapped fist of Hausa boxers bear visual resemblance to illustrations of Ancient Egyptian, Minoans, and Hellenistic boxers. This has caused speculations that Hausa boxing is directly related to Ancient Egyptian boxing (Edward, 1994). The boxers are rendered in a simplistic style reminiscent of ancient Egyptian art and hieroglyphics. The dominant colour is earth toned brown or red, hints of blue are seen in the loin cloth of the boxer on the left and in areas of both boxers' hairstyles. The boxers both are depicted with long black locks of hair tied in sections with one boxer having more locks than the other. Both figures are depicted in a standing position what is referred to in *Dambe* as the "strike Pose".

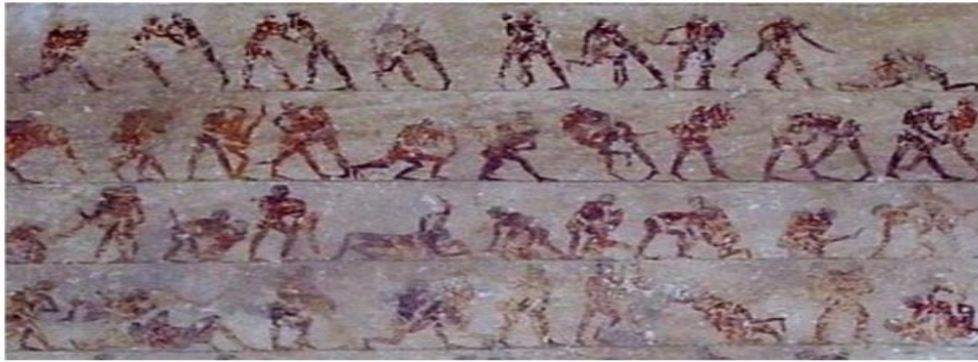


Figure 5, "Wrestling", Tomb Painting in tomb 15 of Benxi Hassan, Egypt CA. 20th century BC, Wikimedia commons, I.A. Jennings

In the "Wrestling" image in figure 5, a tomb painting/fresco depicting sequential or a step by step visual documentation of the art of wrestling. The sequences bear a strong resemblance to those practiced by the Hausa people in their own variation of the sport called *Kokuwa* and *Dambe*. The fresco appears to be a guide for the novice on the styles and techniques to be employed in gaining victory over one's opponent. The works in figure 4 and 5 appear more to be illustrations meant for the purposes of training, guidance, or as instructional materials used by coaches or for other purposes.



Figure 6. "Boxer Vase" from Hagia Triada and drawing, Greece c. 1500 B.C.E. Source: Flickr at www.flickr.com/photos/pankration/: Pankration Research Institutes photo stream.

The Minoans seem to be amongst the first civilizations to employ the use of boxing gloves. The relief on what appears to be a drinking vessel called the "Boxer Vase" from Hagia Triada, c. 1500 B.C.E.,

depicts several scenes of combative or ceremonial activities (Figure 6). The conical *rhyton*, made of black soapstone, is decorated with four sections of reliefs. The artist's depiction of the boxers wearing helmets and arm guards speaks to the potential brutality of the activity being portrayed, and it reinforces the idea that these boxing "gloves" are primarily an offensive weapon designed to inflict physical damage through blunt force, as there is no sign that a sharpened edge is being employed (Frost, 1906). There is no evident means of knowing the rules of this activity, and it cannot be definitively determined if these men are fighting *mano a mano* or on teams. Nevertheless, it is clear that these men are engaged in some kind of contest or ceremony.



Figure 7. **"Dancing Around the Golden Calf"**, Emil Nolde, 1910, 68 X101 cm, Oil on Canvas, Taatsgalerie Moderner Kunst, Munich, Germany

Dance around the Golden Calf is one of the most important religious works of the German expressionist painter Emil Nolde. Expressionist accent is put on the feelings of the human, beings presented in the painting therefore we can easily spot another characteristic of the expressionist trend the exaggeration of the feelings and facial expression. Consequently, to that, the general atmosphere is dominated, by a general state of joy and, somehow madness provoked, by the loss of the real faith.



Figure 8, **"Composition VI"**, Vasily Kandinsky 1913. Oil on canvas 76.8 x 118.1' (195.0 300cm) Saint Petersburg, Russia. Hermitage Museum

Kandinsky took abstraction to another level or a step further than his counterparts. While artists like Constable, Renoir and Boccioni used recognizable figures and scenes, but with new and often

abstract techniques to express perception, feelings and ideas; Kandinsky took it to the next level, dropping recognizable things/objects completely and trying to express his ideas and feelings entirely through pure colors, shapes, lines, marks within a single spatial composition. Not only did he want to express his ideas in non-representational art, he felt that was the only way to do it. Kandinsky felt colors and other qualities not only affected the emotions and aesthetic experience but resonated with the soul. He aspired to have a communion between art, artist and audience, and the act of painting was an emotional and spiritual experience for him.



Figure 9, "Dynamic Suprematism", Kazimir Malevich, 1915/16 730x723 Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery

Dynamic Suprematism is an abstract oil painting, square in its proportions, by the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich. Pictured against an off-white background, the canvas features at its centre a large pale blue triangle that is tilted at a slight angle towards the left of the composition. Painted on top of the central triangle and congregated around its three points is a sequence of geometric forms in a range of colours that are positioned at varying angles. Particularly prominent are a small triangle in deep blue towards the top of the work, a bright yellow rectangle to the right of centre and a larger cream rectangle just below it (see R Alley, *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery „s Collection of Modern Art Other than Works by British Artists*, London 1981, p.471). The above review has looked at some selected works that fall within different periods of artistic developments. It has looked at the historical elements of *Dambe* as a traditional boxing sport. *Dambe* origin, styles, techniques and development into an urban sport had been reviewed whilst retaining its traditional elements. Discussing the impact of expressionism as an art movement and how it has helped in guiding and shaping the painting explorations of this study. Artworks reviewed consisted of works that depicted variations of boxing and wrestling throughout time. Others were reviewed in tandem with the principles and concepts of expressionism that encouraged the loss of recognizable forms and the dependence on art elements such as colour, shape, line, form, texture and space as effective tools for communication between art work, artist and audience.

Methodology

The outlay of this study is based on the creation of paintings of traditional boxing scenes using expressionist modalities.

Instruments and tools

The instruments for collecting data for the purpose of study were as follows:

- I. **Camera:** a digital camera and a phone camera were used in collecting views and poses of the boxers before, during and after fights. Other aspects of interest to the artist included the

spectators, architecture and vegetation's surrounding the arenas used for the *Dambe* matches.

- II. **Sketch pads, papers, pencils and ink and pen:** papers of different sizes used as visual note collecting tools. This provided suitable surfaces for the artist to record instantly the formations and scenes of the subject that proved captivating for further explorations in the studio. These were selected for their portability in transport and storage. Visual notes were collected either using any variations of B pencils, pens and ink pens available.
- III. **Archived Photos:** constituted a significant part of collecting information and as visual aid during studio practice.

Data collection

Data was collected through two main sources: the primary and secondary sources.

Primary Source: pictures that were taken and collected from the archives of *Dambe* enthusiast and photo studios which still had uncollected pictures printed out constituted the primary data for this study. This approach used other aspects of the primary data including the sketches created during on site exploration of the *Dambe* are within Zaria metropolis. Such sketches served to familiarize the artist with the physical formations and proportions of the environment and human figures while in action.

Archived Photographs, Primary and Secondary Data Sources

Photographs constitute samples of archived data collected from photo studios in Zaria. These form a significant aspect of the primary data used for the studio exploration in this research. Secondary Data: these included Internet materials, books, newspapers, texts and journals.

Stages of paintings produced

Works produced highlight a dependence on the emotive functions of colour, form, shape and texture. The artist relies on the visual images of the actual boxers whilst giving a subjective interpretation of his observation in painting; hence completed images begin as representational figures and gradually dissolve into shapes that bear figurative formations and end as large blotches of colour with a rhythmic flow.

Data analysis

The paintings are categorized into the representational, developmental and abstraction seeking to examine the followings objectives, producing paintings and drawings using the man body, traditional boxing, the environments with jitters from the crowd and the arena depicting players in action. This study has successfully established *Dambe* paintings and its aesthetic representation on the Map of contemporary Nigeria painting. The results proved to be a worthy contribution to contemporary Nigerian painting.

Analysis of Painting Representational Stage



Plate XV; *Damben Hausa*, 254x304.8 cm, Oil paint on canvas, Ali Mohammed Habib, 2017

The scene is depicted naturalism representing a section of the boxing arena. At the centre, in action are two boxers and a referee, the spectators, the fence of the arena, further in the background are neighboring structures visible are roofing tops. Amidst all these elements are specks of tree foliage which appear to fade into the dark grey sky. The crowd is depicted using broken and muddled brush works with significant difference, the lack of detail especially around the spectators' indicative that the artist worked from a relative distance to the fight arena. From the roofs of the compounds beside the arena enthusiastic and excited youngsters watch the *Dambe*. The artist depicted reality in tonal values, effects assured that background figures are within the laws of perspective.

Developmental Stage



Plate XVI; Defeated, 254x254 cm, Acrylics on canvas, Ali Mohammed Habib, 2017

This painting is a systematic arrangement of two different fights scenes. The painting introduces the developing stages of the study. It shows the artist reluctance to lose the details of the subjects judging the near accuracy in portraying the combatant's physique. Attention is given to muscle, building and stance of the figures. The spectators are completely eliminated from this study and replaced by the freaky brush strokes that dissolve all notions of force, amid and on the background colours that used to blend into each other making distinct identification difficult. This is meant to induce the feeling of frantic action within the picture space. The absence of limbs on all figures indicates the contemplation of the artist as to ways of dispersing the recognizable human forms into pure abstract elements.

Abstraction



Plate XX; *Dambe Geometric Project*, Digital media and ballpoint on paper, Ali Mohammed Habib, 2016

This painting is a complete abstract composition. Depicting parts of the human figure as relegated and transformed into shapes of triangles, cycles and hatches of brushes. Using digital tools and paint in gradation achieved with an aesthetic appeal. This composition is titled “Dambe Geometric project”.

Summary

In an attempt to create painting explorations of using the expressionist techniques, the researcher selected out of (36) works produced during studio explorations twenty seven (27) paintings were selected for this study. Eight (8) at the first stage which is the representational stage; depicting in real situations, human body, environment the crowd, the arena, colour and the use of space were articulated on canvas. At the developmental stage a gradual loss of forms led to the dispersal and aesthetic arrangements of forms in transformation. Further explorations dissolved the natural and developmental forms into a total abstract state producing eight (8) works at the final stage.

Findings

The study provided the artist through the series of illustrations produced a contemporary painting inspiration derived from Dambe traditional boxing are found suitable for contemporary studio exploration and can provide the painter with a systematic and creative means of levitating the artist mind towards producing conceptual paintings structured around the combat game of Dambe. At the end of this research, artist found that it is expensive to preserve works done as it is also time consuming. Therefore captured works using camera provided an alternative through printing subsequent copies for mass reproduction, exhibition and easily disseminated. Expressionism is seen as an alternative concept for exploration in contemporary, Nigerian painting, especially in studio explorations starting from the representational stage, developmental stage into abstract stage.

Contributions

1. Discovering dynamic forms of traditional boxing () as occupied by this research has found an essential place in contemporary painting which is exclusively contested. The development of modern/contemporary painting analysis of *dambe* through subjective visual interpretation was explored as it relates to the artistic identity of human forms, .which also covers up for its absence in modern painting. 2. Constituting a visual means of promoting cultural forms, *Dambe* unique characteristics can be explored into positive aesthetic spaces within