

CHALLENGES OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIAN ART PAINTING

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Abstract

Visual image is one of the most vital ways that people utilize to communicate and share information. Communicative rudiments in painting have not been given scholarly attention in Nigerian artistic landscape. This study examines the various communicative elements and the challenges in artistic expression in Nigerian painting. Direct observation was used to capture information on some attributes of selected paintings in varying styles, techniques and media within various galleries, museums, private collections and exhibition venues. Simple random sampling technique was used in selecting a total of two hundred and twenty paintings (220 paintings) in Lagos state. The challenges associated with the use of media, subjects, and styles of visual communication were categorized into technical and semantics. It was discovered that inappropriate use of painting elements, materials and techniques were the main technical challenges to visual communication while inadequate understanding of pre-supposed subject matter and individualism in the usage of styles were the major semantic challenges. A communication model was developed to show the relationship between the source of information (artist) and the receiver (audience) for effective communication of emotions and feelings. The paper concludes that the audience must have Shared Cultural Knowledge (SCK) of the iconic presentation of the artist to decode the message of a painting.

Keywords: Communication, Painting, Challenges, Models, Nigeria

Introduction

Visual image is one of the most important ways that people use to communicate and share information. It is the transmission of information and ideas using symbols and imagery. It is also one of three types of communication, along with verbal communication (speaking) and non-verbal communication (semiotic). The history of visual communication can be traced to cave painting which attests to its antiquity. (Hillyer and Huey; 1967). The paintings on the cave walls and ceiling include representation of, animals, landscapes, and sacred spaces, and act as a kind of prehistoric documentations. The animal forms were used for magical and religious purposes.

However, communication through painting consists of a sender (artist), a receiver (audience) and channel of communication (artwork). Leo Tolstoy (1989) is of the opinion that art establishes a bond between the psychological states of the artists and audience, and this, in turn, creates a bond among the audience. This implies that communication exists between the artist and the audience which brings them together for interaction. In the process of transmitting messages between the artist and the audience, clarity of the message may be interfered with or distorted by what is often referred to as challenges. The challenges are constraints that do not allow communication to take place. The challenge as an artist is not merely to communicate to an observer, but to communicate effectively. Added to this, however, is the element of feedback to ensure that the message sent was received exactly as intended.

Painting as an aspect of visual art also expresses emotional communication through the adequate use of certain communicative elements. These elements are the properties that make expression possible in

painting. Communication becomes effective when messages get to intended audience as expected, but ineffective when there are constraints from either the artists or the audience. Painting remains ineffective when an expression is not direct, ambiguous, informative and meaningful to the audience, irrespective of their social or cultural background. The language of painting across cultures, therefore, expresses the patterns and structures of culture, and consequently influences human thinking, manners and judgment. Painting as an artistic production process in Nigeria is rich and its interpretation has become complex in the use of various communicative elements.

Nonetheless, Nigerian paintings are those expressions which depict Nigerian scenes of socio-cultural and political life of people irrespective of the geographical location of the artists. The subject, media, and style also constitute what makes Nigerian painting. It draws inspiration from style and technique originating from traditional art forms found in textiles, sculpture, weaving and architecture embedded in Nigerian society which is expressed through painting. A Nigerian painting does not represent paintings done by Nigerian artist alone but those that expresses the patterns and structures of the culture of people in Nigeria. Nigerian painting differs from Asian art due to its iconographic features of religions, form, theme and technique, while western painting are recognized with representational and classical mode of production, abstract and conceptual forms and religious context of the dearly Christian and Medieval world (Henri et al, nd). This explains the difference between Nigerian painting and that of Asian or Western culture.

Scholars who have worked on visual communication give attention majorly in the area of drawing (Hill, 1966; Kalilu, 1999; Davidson, 2003; Woods, 2011), graphic design (Cleaver, 1966; Folorunso, 2001) and photography (Manzella, 1957; Deluca, 2006; Gleason, 2008; Draper, 2013). They assume communication to be a matter of causing the audience or observer actually to experience the emotion, feeling or mood exposed through the artwork concerned. Painting as an instrument of visual communication has not been given a scholarly attention, a gap in which this study has filled.

The study on communication in Nigerian painting, examines the challenges associated with communication and suggests a model usable for the understanding of painting. The study is limited to paintings in Nigeria by Nigerian artists and it covers paintings in various media, subjects, and styles. Through a careful observation and examination of some paintings in various galleries, museums, exhibition venues, and catalogues of exhibitions, it was observed that there are technical and semantic problems which over time hindered expressive communication in painting. The technical problem is on how accurately the message can be transmitted through manipulation of materials and techniques in the usage of certain communicative elements. The semantic problem expresses how precisely the symbolic meaning is conveyed in a painting. All these posed challenges to effective communication in painting.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Lagos State, Nigeria. Lagos is the major commercial hub for art activities where most of paintings are found. Direct observation was used to capture certain information on some attributes of selected paintings from which the challenges of visual communication in the paintings were drawn. Simple random sampling technique was used in selecting two hundred and twenty paintings (220) in varying styles, techniques and media from various galleries, museums, private collections and exhibition venues. The collected data were subjected to descriptive and content analysis technique indicating the observed challenges.

Communicative Elements in Painting

There are certain elements which make an expression possible in painting. These elements bring the message closer to the audience by way of justifying its effectiveness. Elements such as line, shape, form, space, colour, texture are very vital to effective expression in painting. All these elements form the basis for the effective presentation of painting which in turn enhance communication potentiality. A line is an identifiable path created by a point moving in space. It can vary in width, direction, and length. Lines are often used to define the edges of a form. It can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal, straight or curved, thick or thin. In painting, lines are expressed through the use of brush stroke in different directions to actualize sense of height, stability, solidity, movement and energy (www.getty.edu).

Shape and form define objects in space. Shapes have two dimensions and are usually defined by lines. Form exists in three dimensions, with height, width, and depth. In painting, various shapes are juxtaposed to make a recognizable form in a composition. The form in any representation suggests depth as well as width and height. A three-dimensional form is achieved in painting through the interplay of light and shade with appropriate use of colour tonality (www.getty.edu).

Space in a work of art and specifically in painting refers to a feeling of depth or three dimensions. It can also refer to the artist's use of the area within the picture plane. The area around the primary objects in a painting is known as negative space; while the space occupied by the primary objects is positive space (www.getty.edu). The relationship of positive to negative space can greatly affect the expressive quality of a painting.

Colour in the painting is the product of light. Light reflected off objects. Colour has three main characteristics such as hue (red, green, blue), value (light or dark), and intensity (bright or dull). Colour can be described as warm or cool depending on which end of the colour spectrum they fall. Colour enables communication in its power to symbolize expression either objectively or subjectively. A painting that reflects objective colour has the capacity to evoke communication tendencies. Colours are often associated with positive energy and thereby heightened emotions. Dull colours create a sedate or serious mood (www.getty.edu).

The texture in relation to communication in painting suggests that the surface quality that is sensed through touching and feeling. All objects represented in any painting have a physical texture that can be identified. Artists can also convey texture visually in a painting by introducing surface quality through different techniques. However, the ability to convincingly utilize various visual elements to achieve a different degree of technical skills and decoding the semantic features in painting enables communication in painting.

Challenges of Visual Communication in Painting

There are observed challenges in visual communication which have been categorized in this study as a technical and semantic problem. Technical challenges associated with communication in painting could be attributed to inappropriate usage of the elements of a painting by either the artists or the audience. Painting involves a diverse range of human activities and the products of those activities, usually involving imaginative or technical skill. In their most general form, these activities include the production of the painting as regards to the media, subject, and style of representation. All these, if properly utilized can assist communication in painting.

Media techniques are the vehicle or channel used by artists to make an expression possible in painting. It can be the materials used in painting which require adequate competence for its usage. The media that are common in Nigerian painting include oil paint, watercolour, gouache, acrylic, mixed media and ink. Each medium is used differently to convey different expression in painting through colour. Appropriate use of colour symbols to convey emotional feelings is paramount to communication in painting. There are various challenges posed by each medium which do not allow for effective communication. Each has its peculiar method or technique of application and if not used appropriately can complicate effectiveness of expression in painting.

A better understanding of pre-supposed subject matter can help in both expression and comprehension of the intention of the artist and audience. Subject matter in artistic presentation describe the focus and the purpose of an artist. The physical content that is visually represented in a painting is the subject. The subject of painting could be landscape, still-life, portraits, mural decoration, figural and non-figural composition. The iconographic usage is very important to the understanding of any subject matter in a painting. If the iconic representation in a painting is unclear, definitely the content will be confusing and the message will be ambiguous. For communication to take place, artists need to be conversant with the subject of representation irrespective of the styles. Many challenges occur when artists interpret a particular subject out of contexts, without making adequate visual reference. Paintings that are represented without adequate knowledge of the subject, portend complexity in understanding the message for communication.

Individualism in the practice of style also brings complication in the understanding of the content of the painting. Artists develop a style and stick to it while others develop several styles within a particular time. Challenges associated with the usage of the individual style of painting for communication in Nigeria are enormous and boarder on self-expression, ambiguity, complexity which can result in multiple interpretations in painting. Style refers to characteristics that we can recognize as constant, recurring or coherent (Getlein, 2002:36). Artistic style is the product of constant, recurring or coherent visual or conceptual traits which are done through manipulation of media techniques to form an identity. This issue of identity brings diverse interpretations which often time complicate understanding of the meaning or content of the painting. Some stylistic representations are easy while others are complex for the audience to decipher. The styles in Nigeria painting varies that the patterns are no longer comprehensible in the identification of content or meaning of the expression (Plates, 1-13).

Semantics is the study of meaning as it relates to words, phrases, sign and symbols. The concept is more related to linguistic study as it complements the syntactic and pragmatic analysis of communication. This is a sub-type of the relay, and unlike illustrations, the visuals in pictorial exemplification retain a higher degree of information autonomy in relation to the verbal message they exemplify visually. One of the good things about painting is that it gives room for multiple interpretations regardless of the artist's original intent. However, an individual appreciation of a particular painting can also grow upon learning the original intent and messaging the artist was trying to convey. One of the most effective ways to decipher this original intent is to look at the symbolism and codification of form and colour used within the painting. The use of codifying sign and symbols for expressive communication in art and in painting, varies from one person to the other. This invariably brings challenge as the expression of cultural values and interpretation differs from one place to the other. Paintings in Nigeria as all over the world portray various symbolic images to the admiration of the perceiving audience. These symbolic images portend various meanings which can be misinterpreted if not properly shared between the artist and the audience. The effectiveness of communication in painting is about how the technical and the semantic challenges are being resolved. This can only be resolved when the three components of communication (artist, audience, and channel of communication) are able to come into agreement of understanding for effectiveness. However, this study designs a workable solution to challenges of visual communication in painting.

Models for Visual Communication in Painting

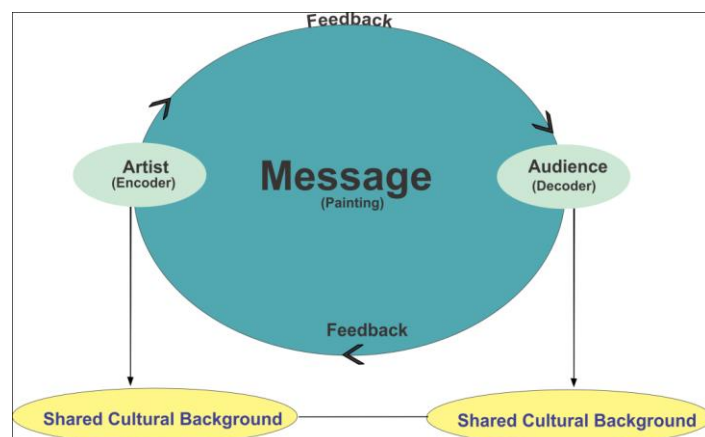
Modelling in any representation is the graphical, mathematical (symbolic), physical, or verbal representation or simplified version of a concept, phenomenon, relationship, structure, system, or an aspect of the real word (Krippendorff, 1990). Over the years models have been used to simplify various concepts in different areas of specialization to achieve different aims and objectives. A model for communication refers to the conceptual model used to explain the human communication process. The first major model

for communication was developed by Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver in 1949 for Bell Laboratories (Krippendorff, 1990), and was used to simplify the communication process for effective expression. Following the basic concept of communication, which is the process of sending and receiving messages or transferring information from one part (sender) to another (receiver) for effective communication, there is a need for a communication model in modern Nigeria painting because there are always factors interfering with the decoding of messages sent over a channel by an encoder. Interpretation of the content or message of painting in modern Nigeria has become complex, as an individual artist paints in isolation without bridging the gap that exists between the artist and the intended audience for effective communication. This invariably brings misinterpretations to the content of painting as most audience and artists are not in agreement about understanding the message of painting.

In the non-figural painting style that was developed alongside many styles of modern art in Nigeria, the employment of form and colour to create “two elements, the inner and outer” (Read, 1961:171) is essentially paramount. Kandinsky (Read, 1961:171) observes that these elements express “the inner...emotion in the soul of the artist. This emotion has the capacity to evoke a similar emotion in the observer”, which is the outer element. “The sequence is emotion (in the artist)

The sensed → the artwork → the sensed → emotion (in the observer).). “The two emotions,” he further notes, “...will be like and equivalent to the extent that the work of art is successful...” This, Kandinsky said, is communication in painting (Read, 1961:171). Thus is illustrated in the communication model below:

Model of Communication in Painting



Authors Model: 2015

Step 1, Artist. An emotion in the custody of the artists is expected to be experienced in the same manner by the audience before communication can take place. The emotion is conceived by the artist and expressed through a painting which in turn waits for the audience to experience. All artistic expressions originate in the mind of the artists, in their reactions to the world rather than in the visible world itself, and

it is precise because all art is ‘conceptual’ and representations are recognizable through their styles. Conceptual art represents the intention of the artist towards the production of the art.

Step 2, Painting. The message being passed by the artist through painting is expected to be understood by the audience. Expression in the painting is an intellectual work which requires the artist to be intellectually sound about the content or message being expressed. An artist should know what he or she meant to portray. He should also know how individuals react to both the intended and actual messages in a painting.

Step 3, Audience. The audience is expected to experience the message through a particular painting by artist, who enables the audience to put himself in the position of the artist in order to understand the message effectively and this is the essence of shared cultural knowledge. This involves emotion in the artist being experienced in the same manner as the emotion or feelings in the perception of the audience. This can be explained in the sense that emotive expression is culture specific. At the same time, emotive expression allows cultural universality; it enables cross –cultural interpretations of the message of the painting. Nevertheless, interpretation of work of art and specifically painting requires investigation into the forms and iconographic content which each painting contains.

Step 4, Effective Communication. For better and effective communication to take place, there is a need for a ‘concordant communication model in painting’ which enables the audience to come into agreement with the artists so as to have the same mind in the expression of feelings and emotions (Abodunrin, 2014). All images in the painting are both encoded and decoded; they are encoded in the production process by artist and in the placement with a certain cultural setting, while they are decoded by the viewer or audience. All images are both encoded and decoded. They are encoded in the production process and in the placement within a certain cultural setting. They are decoded by the viewers through three processes namely, identification of the iconographic content, share cultural background and negotiated interpretation.

Iconographic content as it relates to communication in painting enables the observer to know what constitutes the subject matter and the theme of discussion in a painting; what is happening in the painting; who are the people in the scene of the painting (if it is a narrative). Iconographic content enables the observer to also know how the artist has interpreted the stories; what he includes or leaves out in the story. Scrutinizing the character in the painting and describing their actions and attitudes are all products of the iconographic description of the painting. A story in the painting is the ability to convey a narrative experience that could portray social and cultural potentials in pictures which are expected to be understood. Some paintings do not tell stories all because they are abstract or non-representational but remember that subject matter can be anything from a place to an emotion.

For effective decoding of a painting, there must be a Shared Cultural Background (SCK) between the artist and the observer, as Odebunmi (2006) rightly observed in his pragmatic reading of Yerima’s proverbs in *Yemoja Attahiru* and *Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees*. Unlike intra-cultural communication where message

senders and receivers share the same ground rules, intercultural communication is associated with a host of additional social and psychological issues. There is uncertainty or ambiguity concerning the ground rules by which the interaction should occur. Given the pervasive influence of culture, it is always difficult to figure out the rules being employed by two people from different cultures. This uncertainty is inherent in verbal as well as non-verbal communication, in both encoding and decoding modes. Once we engage in intercultural communication in painting, some conflicts and misunderstandings are inevitable.

Negotiated interpretation in visual art communication is a mixture of accepting or rejecting the messages of artworks. It occurs when the audience is acknowledging the dominant message, but are not willing to completely accept it the way the artist has intended. The audience to a certain extent, shares the iconographic content and generally accepts the preferred meaning, but is simultaneously resisting and modifying the meaning in a way which reflects his or her own experiences and interests, then we have multiple interpretations to such painting or the painting not being effectively communicated.

Conclusion

By and large, the study has shown that challenges occur in visual communication and exists in the use of various elements of art, which are attributable to the technical and semantic presentation of paintings. The study also investigated the challenges to effective communication in Nigerian paintings and suggested a model usable for effective understanding of painting in Nigeria. It was observed that most of the challenges highlighted potent barriers which militate against effective communication in painting, but when all these barriers are removed, the effectiveness of such come into place. It was also noted that the model simplified and enhanced the understanding of how communication takes place in the painting. Language of art is therefore established as one vital instrument explored over the years to relay the cultural spheres of a group of people. It is therefore recommended that the audience of a particular painting must share a similar cultural experience or put him or herself in the position of the artist to enhance better communication in painting.

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Plate 1, Dele Jegede, Abuja Masquerade, 2010, Latex/canvas. (Peregrination A solo exhibition of drawing and paintings, 2011:41)



Plate 2, Akin Onipede, Reflection, 2002, Mixed Media. (Artwithtaj.com)



Plate 3, Sam Ebohon, *Motherhood*, 2010, Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2012)



Plate 4, Sam Ebohon, *Temptation*, 2008, Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2012)



Plate 5, Duke Asidere, *Untitled*, 2010, Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2013)



Plate 6, Duke Asidere, *Redlight*, 2009, Oil on board



Plate 7, Kelani Abass, *man and machine Synergy*, 2010, Acrylic and oil on canvas. (African Colours, 2010)

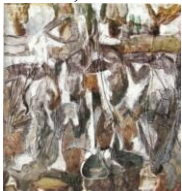


Plate 8, Alex Nwokolo, *Untitled*, 2008, Oil on Canvas. (Musing an exhibition of recent painting exhibition catalogue, 2009:4)



Plate 9, Chike Aniakor, *Maiden*, 2004, Oil on canvas, (Nucleus 1981:40)



Plate 10, Duke Asidere, Faces, 2008, Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2012)



Plate 11, Tayo Adenaike, Untitled, 1973, Water colour. (Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 12, Joshua Nmesirionye, Men of Honour, 2008, Oil on Canvas. (Artist Archive, 2013)



Plate 13, Olu Oguibe, Martyr, 2002, Acrylic on Canvas, (The Artist's Archive, 1995)