

THE SYMBOLISM OF SHOEPRINTS IN PAINTING

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Introduction

Shoeprints are the common impressions left behind by shoe soles as people walk about. They are the marks created by shoe soles. These so-called mere impressions are nonetheless iconic and symbolic. Wordnik (2023) describes shoeprint as the impression left by a shoe. The Free Dictionary (2023) further describes shoeprint as an indentation or outline of the foot of a person or animal on a surface (in a general sense). A mark of a foot or shoe on a surface, Shoeprints are common impressions in our environment and are sometimes passed unnoticed. Most people rarely give them attention and do not seem to realize that they are aesthetic and symbolic. On the other hand, forensic scientists have studied and classified shoeprints into three: patent shoeprints occur when a shoe picks up oil, paint or blood leaving behind impressions. Plastic shoeprints are created whenever a shoe sinks into the mud, while latent shoeprints occur on hard surfaces like glass or cement which may not be visible (Encyclopdeia.com, 2019). This study is geared towards extracting the symbolism of these shoeprints in painting. This is because the shoeprints found in our environment are either bold and clear or faint and weak. The attributes of these shoeprints in terms of whether they are bold and clear or faint and weak share a similitude to the existential experience of humans (the periods of strength and weakness or decline in human lifespan). The bold and clear shoeprint is compared to the period of youth, strength, and agility in human life, while the faint and worn-out shoeprint is in tandem with the period of old age and weakness.

The objectives of this paper are to explore the shapes and patterns of shoeprints for the creation of symbolic paintings. This exploration was carried out in stages that synchronized with the stages of growth and decline in humans. Jaffe in Jung (1989) observed that anything can assume symbolic significance: natural objects like stones, plants, animals, men, mountains and valleys, sun and moon, wind, water, and fire, or man-made things like houses, boats, pots or even abstract forms like numbers, triangles, squares, and circles. Human Beings according to Jaffe, with their symbols-making propensity transforms objects or forms into symbols, thereby endowing them with great psychological importance. Meyer (2022) opined that artists who use symbolism convey concepts through symbols and stress the significance underlying the shapes, lines, patterns and tones. This type of visual expression employs abstracts techniques to portray cognitive truth and the belief that there is a spiritual existence beyond the physical world. Meyer concludes that many symbolist art examples contain personal information and communicate their philosophies, notably the artist's confidence to expose the truth. The supernatural, the macabre, the realm of dreams, sadness, wickedness, and mortality are common themes among artists who use symbolism.

Symbolism in painting is an invaluable channel for conveying and revealing aspects of life (human existence) that are difficult to show in painting using familiar objects such as have been demonstrated by this study. Some of the existential issues this study has tackled that are difficult to show in the painting are strength, weakness, health, responsibility, and pressure of life among others. To corroborate the fact that ordinary objects or impressions in the environment could be harnessed to express these difficult concepts and the fact that such existential phenomena could be symbolized in painting. Olumide, Bako and Kolawole (2021) affirmed that some symbols relate to childhood and

the transition to adolescence, others to maturity, and others again to the experience of old age when a person is preparing for their inevitable death.

In visual metaphors or symbolism, the various objects and their properties are often combined in unexpected ways, to create a new meaning. Although humans and shoeprints are different subjects, they are projected by this study to share common properties as a form of visual metaphor. The state of a shoeprint as explained earlier tends to mirror or reflect the strength or weakness of humans as the aging process sets in. This is a psychological projection within the connotative space of reality. The key ideas employed for this study are discussed in the following subheads below.

The Concept of Symbolism

Any symbolic artwork expresses the idea or the belief shared by the artist and the viewer. According to Ogumor (2007), symbolism is the representation of a material object by not merely showing its beauty but also an expression of an abstract idea. Symbolism has been explained by different individuals as the act of imbuing objects with deep-seated meanings and interpretations. Most objects tend to represent something in the human experience. Our surroundings are full of visual symbols and statements which only the keen observer can detect. And it is these hidden meanings and messages that symbolists desire to share with their audience. According to Petrenko and Korotchenko (2019), the function of metaphor or symbolism is to transform the sense of the image from a psychological point of view. The authors stressed that “we start interpreting hidden emblems and symbols in every daily life”. Furthermore, they opined that artists have to consistently invent new ways of conveying their perception, interpretation and understanding of the world. Graham (2005) explained that what is distinctive about great art is the challenge it presents to the viewer to discern a meaning within it. This is not a meaning that can be conceptualized or exploited in language but is rather symbolic. Akprara (2015) insists that humans are capable of perceiving and making sense of both familiar and unfamiliar things in the environment. The object in the environment, whether familiar or unfamiliar must be perceived symbolically. Interestingly, Awogbade and Ibenero (2010) remark that, all over Africa, visual images and ordinary objects are used symbolically to communicate knowledge, feelings, and values. This is because symbols are believed to play an important role in the African conception of reality. This explains Frutiger’s (1989) submission that, while looking at pictures, sculptures, architecture, and all kinds of ornamentation, including objects of daily use, from whatever period, individuals are constantly faced with the question: that does it mean? What is hidden in this thing? These objects according to Frutiger are seldom unequivocal in their visual statements. The viewer then infers an underlying meaning and looks for an interpretation. This undeniable capacity of a representation to make a statement is also denoted by the term “Symbolic content”. The symbolic element in pictures is an implied value. Objects (shoeprints inclusive) landscapes, elements of nature, and everyday objects seldom have an independent symbolic content. Frutiger argues that object symbols are provided by items connected with outstanding events of life such as birth, marriage, and death.

Ali (1999) observes and strengthens the argument for symbolism by stating that, symbols are created to unravel the mysteries of life. They are used to educate the people about the nature of the forces around them. Therefore, traits and attributes of forms within human’s environment have been formulated and confided into symbols. Ali defines symbol as the representation of an idea or concrete object by shapes incorporated in the design or painting, it can also mean something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else (not by exact resemblance, but by suggestion or some accidental or conventional relation). An object is termed to be symbolic once its quality is considered valuable and important for indispensable human existence in both physical and spiritual realism. Their essence is in their ability to communicate specific meanings. Symbols represent abstract ideas, visually or verbally, involving the use of imagery. They reveal essence instead of outward appearances. Symbols thus, represent the concepts of the mind rather than the concept of the eyes.

Historically, Davis (2021) contends that a symbol is usually a solid, recognizable thing, an animal, a plant, or an object that stands for something that would be difficult to show in a painting or a sculpture, a force of nature, for example, or an idea. A symbol is one of the most important elements in giving depth to an artwork. Symbols can be very broad, like a storm that symbolizes danger, or a crow that symbolizes death. Ochigbo (2006) and Scott (2019) narrate that a symbol is a form or image implying or representing something beyond its obvious and immediate meaning, and that symbolism was a late 19th-century movement whose artists communicated ideas through symbols instead of depicting reality. It was a reaction to art movements like Impressionism, Realism, and Naturalism. According to the narration, Jean Moreas in 1886 published his famous Symbolist Manifesto. That every person, natural element, and object should be used to represent a symbol of a deeper idea or emotion. Moreas believed that rather than replicating reality, artists should suggest it with symbols. Emphasis was laid on imagination and emotions.

Semiotics

Semiotics is a specialized branch of knowledge in which signs and symbols are studied. The need for studying and understanding signs and symbols in the human environment is vital to our survival. We live in a world that is full of symbols, and hidden meanings. Sporre (2006) corroborates this assertion by stating that, the fundamental characteristic that makes us human is our ability to intuit and symbolize things. These according to Sporre are necessary because people examine, communicate, and respond to the world around them. Understanding signs and symbols in our environment will enhance our chances of survival. Almost everything around humans is coded, therefore, people must decode those varied objects or items. In lending their voice to this important subject, Adewumi and Samuel (2017) stress that the use of signs and symbols is inevitable in human existence, because all objects, images, and gestures (even human behaviours) have connotative essence, no matter how relatively trivial (shoeprints inclusive) they may seem. Anything that represents another thing by virtue of customary association due to conceptual connection or perceived resemblance. According to Okachi (2015), semiotics is the theory of the production of interpretation and meaning. Meaning is said to be made by the development of acts and objects which function as “signs” about other signs. Semiotics is not only concerned with communication but also with ascription of significance to anything in the world. Okachi notes that Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913) and Charles Sander Pierce (1839 - 1914) are among the pathfinders in the field of semiotics. These pioneers among others were engaged in a search for deep structures underlying the surface features of semiotics. Whilst for Saussure, ‘semiology’ was a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life, for Pierce, ‘semiotics’ was the formal doctrine of signs which was closely related to logic. For him ‘a sign’ is something which stands for somebody or something in some respect or capacity.

Examples of Symbolic Paintings

Many symbolic paintings are coded expressions of the artist’s, idea, feeling or emotion. What is shown usually conceals the actual meaning and interpretation of the artwork. Symbolism has to do with how objects are perceived to be the representation or illustration of certain events, situations, and experiences in a very personal or general way. It is thus, not difficult to establish that a particular object could be associated with some other object or event of life. This has to do with the training

and ability to see that a particular object represents another phenomenon based on certain identifiable characteristics, even if the two are not identical.



**Fig.1 The Scream, Edvard Munch, Oil, Tempera, and Pastel on board 91 x 74cm, 1893.
Courtesy, Munch Museum, National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design Oslo**

Symbols are important features of art and have been used by artists to express themselves across the centuries. Sporre (2006) speculates that the major concerns of artists are creativity, aesthetic communication, and symbols. Among artists who have used symbols to communicate through their paintings are Edvard Munch (1863 - 1944), James Ensor (1860 - 1949), Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903), Erchabor Ogieva Emokpae (1934 - 1984). For example, Suzzane Gibbs reckons at a point in time that, she was taking time to reflect, analyse and focus on the psychological, emotional, and mental health of individuals with her painting. Her interest lies in capturing the fear, vulnerability, and confusion of the sick. Gibbs produced a portrait of her sister undergoing chemotherapy for cancer. Her paintings focused on exploring the psychological more than the physical state of the human condition. Gibbs aims to create a body of works that engages the viewer to question, consider and empathize. This is similar to the symbolic painting by Edvard Munch, titled, *The Scream* (1893) Fig.1. This painting of a lone grotesque-looking figure standing on a bridge while holding his extra-large head and screaming depicts the state of human despair, fear, and love, disease, jealousy, and death. Munch used his pictures as a vehicle to express the inner anguish of humankind, which is not obvious in the painting unless the viewer gives serious thought to the image and imagery in the painting.

James Ensor produced a symbolic painting which he titled "*The Intrigue* (1980)". This painting is expressive as well as symbolic in its pictorial language, referring beyond the figurative to mystical, religious, and psychological contexts of meaning. Ensor created an absurd, alienated world in his bizarre pictures of people by strange, masked creatures. Mask and human merge into one, leaving the viewer in doubt about the correct interpretation of this metamorphosis because it is impossible to tell whether a real face is turning into a mask, or a mask is turning into a real face. Beyond what is seen in this painting (the human figures and the masks), Ensor's primary concerns symbolically are the issues of human existence, of death, but also that of religion, painters of symbolism give concrete form to their feelings, states of mind, subjective fears, fantasies, and dreams. Symbolists can use anything to convey their feelings as well as make social and political comments.

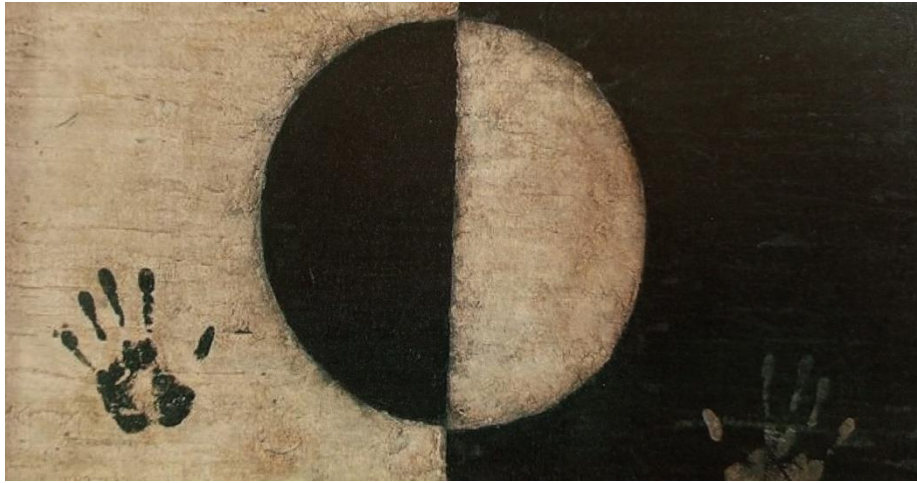


Fig. 2: Struggle between Life and Death, (1963), Erhabor Ogiewa Emokpae, oil on canvas, 61x121cm, Source:<https://guardian.ng/art/erhabor-ogiewa-emokpae-unforgettable-master-of-african-art/>. The Guardian. Retrieved February 18, 2023.

Another artist who has expressed himself in the realm of symbolism is Erhabor Emokpae. Erhabor's painting titled "Struggle Between Life and Death" (1963) Fig.2, shows a canvas divided into two sections of black and white squares. A circle in the middle is also divided into equal halves to reveal arch shapes of opposing black and white. Erhabor imprinted his left palm in black on the white square to the left, while his right palm is imprinted in white on the right black square. On the surface, a viewer sees only black and white circles and handprints only. However, going beyond what is projected to the viewer is a hidden meaning that is coded. The opposing black and white used in the painting coupled with the handprints symbolize the struggle between life and death which is an existential phenomenon.

Why Shoeprints Symbolism

Having examined a few symbolist artworks, this article is geared towards unlocking the hidden symbols in shoeprints. As established from the statements of the authors quoted in this article, the human environment is saturated with a variety of visual statements which can be detected only by the keen and inquisitive observer. It is such that, impressions and objects which appear ordinary in our environment are probed and deconstructed by the inquisitive minds, and their hidden meanings are deciphered. To buttress this assertion, Nadama (2019) confirms that, the creative mind of an artist is conscious and thoughtful of its environment, and that appreciation of nature extends to the mundane things that non-artists consider rubbish. In the same light, there appears to be a dearth of records on the symbolism of shoeprints by painters. Not much attention is paid to shoeprints by painters. This article is, therefore, oriented towards drawing out the symbolism in bold and clear shoeprints that are created by brand-new shoe soles. This article also focuses on exploring the symbolism of weak and fading shoeprints created by old, weak, and worn shoe soles. Shoeprints are impressions that are abundant in our environment. These impressions are explored in this painting series symbolically. The impressions shadow every step people take. The shoeprints created are in varying degrees of degeneration (either bold and clear or faint and weak), depending on several factors among which is the age of the shoe sole. New shoe sole produces bold and clear impressions, while old and worn shoe sole produces fading and weak impressions. These impressions reflect the transition of life, how individuals grow, become strong, and eventually become old.



Fig. 3, Childhood, Abafras Abednego, 2021, Acrylic on Canvas, 100 x 66cm

Childhood is a painting executed with acrylic colours on canvas. The shoeprints shown in Fig. 3 are those of a toddler, they reveal bold and clear organic shapes and patterns which mimic the leaf motif. Usually, a toddler doesn't have enough weight to cause the shoe sole to suffer wear and tear, nor do toddlers use a particular pair of shoes long enough for the pair to experience any depreciation that could lead to the generation of fading and distorted impressions. In most cases, their shoes are either changed or outgrown, without suffering any exaction of the pressure that will warrant immediate intervention. This composition is symbolic in its colours. The dominant cerulean blue background colour of the canvas shows through the shoeprints like the network of veins found in a leaf. The imprints are bold, and visible, revealing the track and trajectory of a child. Aesthetic shapes and patterns run the full length of the canvas, from the lower left corner through the centre (middle) to the topmost portion. The symbolism in this composition tends toward revealing the life and vibrancy of a little child. The background blue colour suggests the baby's comfort zone (affection and pampering).

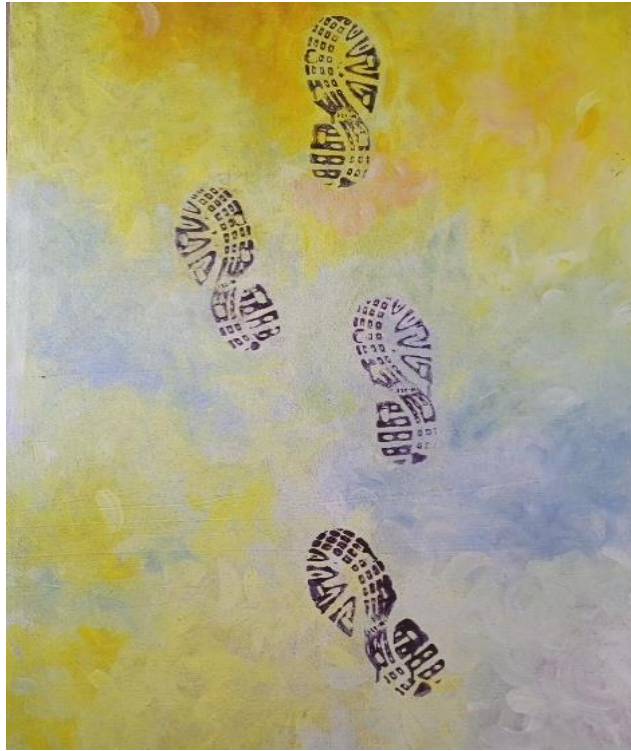


Fig. 4, Adolescence, Abafras Abednego, 2021, Acrylic on Canvas, 111 X 80cm

Fig.4, Adolescence is a painting composition executed with the shoe soles of a youth. The shoeprints are bold and clear geometric shapes and patterns, comprising triangles, squares, rectangles, and little circles. These are patent, considering the boldness and clarity of the prints. The shapes and patterns are sharp and distinct. The intricate geometric shapes and patterns are twisted, giving the appearance of figure eight (8). Four shoeprints appear in a manner that suggests movement. The imprints are sharp, and the colour is French ultramarine blue; while the background colours of yellow and blue tend to harmonize and symbolize the temperamental nature of adolescents. The boldness and sharpness of the prints mimic the animated state of the life of adolescents which is full of energy and dreams. The colours in this composition symbolize hope and seemingly bright prospects with little or no struggle. The shoeprints are not faded, indicating confidence and little or no pressure on the adolescents.

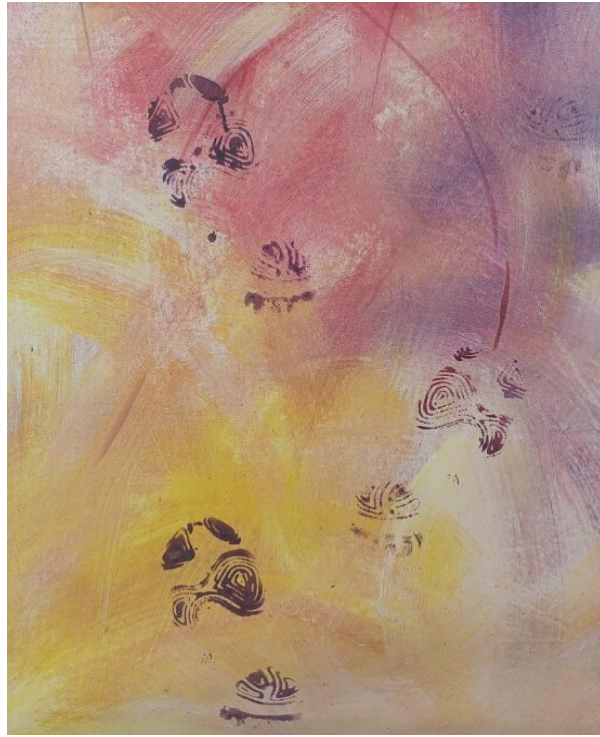


Fig. 5, Early Adulthood, Abafras Abednego, 2021, Acrylic on Canvas, 180 x 100cm

“Early Adulthood” displayed in Fig.5 is a symbolic shoeprint painting which reveals organic shapes and patterns of shoeprints that are faint. The shoeprints are butterfly-like organic shapes and patterns of loops and swirls. Each unit of the design in the shoeprints appears not to be connected to the others. The lines range from bold to weak, thick, and thin and they recoil and twist in loops. The shoeprints are bold at the bottom or lower portion of the painting, but gradually fade away towards the topmost corner of the canvas (from patent to latent prints). A scrutiny of the background colours shows a range of yellow, red, and pink. Treatment of the ground or surface upon which the shoeprints float and drowns. This was achieved with dry sweeping brush stroke effects to simulate the natural floor on which latent shoeprints are stamped. The shoeprints appear faint and weak because, in adulthood, energy levels tend to drop as people get older and weaker under the vicissitudes of life. This represents the age of full responsibility in carrying family burdens which tend to weigh people down.



Fig. 6, Adulthood, Abafras Abednego, 2021, Acrylic on Canvas, 150 x 120cm

Adulthood in Fig. 6 signifies the deterioration that is experienced when people advance in age. In this painting composition, old and worn-out shoe soles were employed to create shoeprints. The shoeprints which are geometric in shapes and patterns expose outlines or the outer fringes of the worn-out shoe soles. They appear as traces of long and short rectangles which at some points metamorphosed into squares because of the wear and tear. The shoeprints are executed in red colour, denoting that they have become endangered elements. The worn shapes and patterns appear to be imprisoned in a web of delicate lines of dripped colours crisscrossing the surface of the canvas. The drip technique was exploited to achieve this effect. A variety of squares and rectangles were created around the shoeprints to mimic and reminiscence of the original rectangles of the shoe soles before they became worn. Red and yellow colours dominate the composition. Generally, these worn shapes and patterns of shoeprints remind humanity of the transiency of life and the pitiable state of old age. This is usually characterized by diminishing strength, deteriorating health, neglect, and poor welfare conditions.



Fig. 7, Old Age, Abafras Abednego, 2021, Acrylic on Canvas, 180 x 100cm

Fig. 7, Old Age, is another symbolic and conceptual expression of shoeprints painting. The worn shoeprints used in the painting titled “Adulthood” Fig.4 were explored within this symbolic painting composition. In this painting, the worn organic shoeprints appear vague; and the shapes and patterns gravitate towards what appears like amorphous shapes in varying hues of red-brown, grey and a blue spot at the centre of the painting. The weak and faint shoeprints get absolved in the convolution of coiling, twisting, and winding mysterious-looking shapes and forms. Deliberate scrutiny is required to identify the apparently digested shoeprints. The allegory of these fading prints can be connected to the understanding that human body parts exist in the form of simple repeat patterns: eyes, ears, hands, set of teeth, nostrils, legs, breasts, buttocks, and fingers to mention a few. The motifs which are repeated in the design of shoe soles and prints remind people that humans exist in the vehicle of anatomical shapes and patterns. This is a divine design concept that should be aesthetically appreciated. It is however true, that the time comes when people begin to lose their beauty, shape, and energy. People do remember fondly, how young, strong, beautiful, or handsome; and how youthful and shapely they used to be (like the bold and clear shoeprints of a new shoe); and how presently they are rapidly degenerating toward meeting the ultimate end. This trend in human transition is the same as moving from realism to abstraction in the visual arts. One takes wobbling steps as a result of diminishing energy; once radiant and glowing skin gets covered with wrinkles; one then sprouts strands of white hair; cheeks sink in, and succulent lips get sucked and tucked in; eyebrows droop and sights begin to fail; darkness and gloom swallow the individual, and one arrives at the stage where one no longer enjoys life or derives pleasure (like the fading and weak prints of an old and worn shoe).



Fig. 8, Advanced Old Age, Abafras Abednego, 2021, Acrylic on Canvas, 120 x 66cm

Advanced Old Age compliments 'Old Age' in Fig.7, being a continuation of the aesthetic symbolic shoeprint series. The painting is an advanced version of the exploration of the worn shoeprints, possessing distorted shapes and patterns of rectangles which lean towards abstraction. In this painting, it becomes a bit difficult to identify the worn shoeprints as the background colours of red, grey, brown, and pink with traces of yellow and white appear to further subdue the vaguely revealed distorted shapes and patterns of rectangles. The grey-coloured shapes and patterns of shoeprints orient themselves toward what looks like concentric rings with a blob of white at the centre. It will take a keen observer to recognize the bleary distorted shapes. This again indicates the stage when an individual in advanced old age is completely drained of strength and deflated. It represents the point at which people take their exit. Any shoe with worn and broken soles like this is usually discarded. The red, grey and dark colours used in this composition symbolize death and decay.

Findings, Summary and Conclusion

No aspect of human life is not adequately expressed in the visual arts. Artists have and will continue to use painting to express different concepts. Symbolism in painting remains a potent channel for representing phenomena of life that are not easy to capture in painting. It gives a great depth of meaning to issues that are conceptual and psychological in nature.

This study revealed that any object can be used to symbolize an abstract idea or that which is not physical, as it has been demonstrated by this exploration in which shoeprints in different stages of degeneration have been used to symbolize the stages of growth and decline (transition) in human life span. Jerome in Adewumi and Samuel (2017) argued that symbolism is about the deliberate effort of the artist to pass a coded message to all intended audiences. All props, motifs and forms are signifiers of deeper, and sometimes, greater entities. In conclusion, Destras (2013) stated that "we are ephemeral and like the articles of nature, our life is all about change". This exploration illustrates the fact that the fading of shoeprints is a mimicry of the diminishing strength in humans, in addition to perceiving them as designs. According to Barrett (2003), Donald Kuspit, a contemporary art critic and aesthetician submits that "artist is not exempt from life. There is no way out from seeing art as a

reflection or meditation or a comment on life". The art he stresses reflects life issues or existential issues with which we are all involved.

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