

TECHNOLOGY AND PAINTING IN THE SERVICE OF CULTURE

Aondover Gabriel Gyegwe
Department of Visual and Performing Arts,
Faculty of Arts
University of Maiduguri, Borno State
gabrielgyegwe@gmail.com

Abstract

The subject of the computer in painting does not generate much excitement in contemporary Nigerian painting. This is largely due to doubts about its authenticity and a lack of adequate understanding by most academic leaders in art, as well as those in the industry. In an investigation of its engagement by artists in Nigeria, and comparison drawn with the traditional modes of painting, a disadvantage or limitation in the transportation of traditional paintings came to fore, therefore, becoming a barrier to faster transmission of cultural ideas. Through the use of instruments like questionnaires, face to face interview in an extensive field work in Nigeria, qualitative and quantitative analysis of data, a judgmental sampling of paintings was made. Analysis of the sampled painting was qualitatively and subjectively approached. In the final analysis, the capability and advantage of the computer painting to speedily transmit cultural ideas was found, and highlighted. In the light of its rare practice in Nigeria as a result of a perceived apathy by painters to the medium in painting as well as its absence in the artist's training programme, it is recommended as a component of the painter's training. Furthermore, its ability to speedily transmit cultures will immensely contribute in creating awareness about Nigerian and other cultures and bring about appreciation and respect for computer painting.

Key Words: Painting, Computer, Culture, Service

Introduction

The subject of culture is one with wide and far reaching understanding and interpretations. It is considered in terms of a people's principles and elements that define their peculiarity, and have the capability of being learned or transmitted as well as getting adulterated by way of acculturation and also by time in space. However, various definitions of the term culture exist and mostly point to the unique set of ideas and ways of life that sets one culture apart from the other. An example of such definition is the one by Bodley (2008) which states that;

Culture, in anthropology, the patterns of behaviour and thinking that people living in social groups learn, create, and share. Culture distinguishes one human group from others. It also distinguishes humans from other animals. A people's culture includes their beliefs, rules of behaviour, language, rituals, art, and technology, styles of dress, ways of producing and cooking food, religion, and political and economic systems.

Culture is the most important concept in anthropology (the study of all aspects of human life, past and present). Anthropologists commonly use the term *culture* to refer to a society or group in which many or all people live and think in the same ways. Likewise, any group of people who share a common culture—and in particular, common rules of behaviour and a basic form of social organization—constitutes a society. Thus, the terms *culture* and *society* are somewhat interchangeable. However, while many animals live in societies, such as herds of elk or packs of wild dogs, only humans have culture.

The problematic in this study is the possible ignorance of the Nigerian culture to other worlds; when misconstrued, possible tensions could generate. Bodley (2008) posits that; "Self-identity usually depends on culture to such a great extent that immersion in a very different culture—with which a person does not share common ways of life or beliefs—can cause a feeling of confusion and disorientation. Anthropologists refer to this phenomenon as culture shock".

One important aspect of culture which is universally practiced is art. Art stems from material and ideological culture which produce tangible objects like paintings, sculptures, textiles, pottery, music and dance among others. Through paintings, cultures are better appreciated and understood because of their visual tangibility. However, the traditional modes of rendering paintings by way of oil on canvas, does not allow for easy sharing of culture. This is due to the challenge of transportation. Globalisation, with the aid of the computer has increased the awareness of other cultures through the internet. Sharing of paintings and other works of art has become easier and faster through the social media platforms like email, Facebook, Instagram, satellite, and WhatsApp among others. As a result, the challenge of transportation

has been ameliorated. In addition to the platforms for sharing, the computer has equally added to the several media used by painters to create paintings.

The focus of this study is to examine the strength of modern technology in cultural propagation through computer created paintings. It is in that sense, that the service or aid of the computer can be appreciated. While the examination will identify paintings created with the computer, it will particularly pick on the ones with cultural elements and themes, and carry out a content and contextual analysis of them. The artists who created these paintings will be briefly mentioned in association with their paintings. In the final analysis, the capability of the paintings to propagate culture will be highlighted.

Method

Paintings in this study were sourced through a fieldwork, as already broached in Gyegwe (2015). Eyo (1977) views classification as an important tool for analyzing artworks. It is on the basis of such that the paintings discussed in this study are culturally dedicated computer paintings. In that sense paintings were subjectively analysed based on a prescribed format by Stokstad (2008) which includes basic facts, subject matter, formal qualities, style, patronage, historical context, critical judgment and interpretation.

Discussion

The paintings catalogued and analysed below all exhibit traits of Nigerian culture. The powers of the painting which are software based to propagate Nigerian culture are quantitatively captured from responses by groups from whom opinions were elicited. The table below shows the level of approval of the computer medium and painting and by extension its implication in propagating its thematic content.

Table 1: Comment on Computer Paintings in Nigerian Art

Variations		Frequency	Percent
Valid	FASTER	8	5.8
	GOOD	6	4.3
	INNOVATION	55	39.6
	NO COMMENT	38	27.3
	NO COMPARISON	6	4.3
	NOT GOOD	2	1.4
	REDUCE CREATIVITY	24	17.3
	Total	139	100.0

The comments of 193 respondents from the north and south of the nation show the varied implications which are seen in innovation, speed among other ramifications. However, the speed with which the digital or computer platform produces is directly related to the speed with which the results in paintings are shared across the world. For instance, (Kalilu, 2014) corroborates this advantage as he philosophically, sees the possibility of this medium's capability to help develop Nigeria. He said that because the medium is electronic based, it has the possibility of projecting or transmitting Nigeria's cultural elements faster than the traditional painting. For example, someone in America can easily print out and frame the painting being sent by the internet. That way the cultural elements of Nigeria can be easily and quickly projected.



Plate: 1, Title: Anita, Artist: Ibe Ananaba, Medium: Computer – generated (Wacom Cintiq), Dimension: A4, Date: 2013

The work in plate 1, is titled 'Anita'. It is a portrait drawing of a young woman who is actually the artist's sister and was a gift to her. 'Anita' is positioned about three quarter view. It captures a smile by the young woman with bun hairstyle, which is reminiscent of a Nigerian female from the Igbo extraction. Similarly, one can see also, that the bun hairstyle has an affinity with the Nok terra cotta female figures (Willet, 1993), that displayed such hairstyle, a view corroborated by Lamp (2011) thus: "Characteristic features of the Nok style are outlined, semi-circular, pierced eyes; open mouths; and elaborate braided and bunned coiffure for both male and female figures".

The style is no doubt peculiar to the African woman owing to her hair character that is unlike the Western or Asian women. The hair style is a testimony of the peculiarity of the Nigerian woman which needs to be preserved, promoted and enjoyed.

The smile on the lady's face and the focus of her eyes on the onlooker tends to say welcome to an intruder. The history of smiling ladies in painting can be traced back to Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa which in comparison is an oil painting on canvass, while Ibe's 'Anita' is a digital medium aided by the computer software.



Plate: 2, Title: My Father's hat, Artist: Victor Ehikhamenor, Medium: Computer (Mixed media), Size: A4, Date: 2013

"My Father's Hat" in plate 2 above, is a computer-generated painting depicting a young boy with an oversized hat with motifs reminiscent of the northern Nigeria embroidered caps. The motifs are seen in triangular shapes, zig-zag lines, rectangular shapes and bright colours of blue, red, green and others. The bust is also shown wearing a red striped shirt. The high point of the painting is the face which wears a delightful grin. (Gyegwe, 2015)

Gyegwe (2015) further notes that;

The artist did not make a conscious effort to use lines in this painting as the lines seen here appear to have come into play by chance even though the horizontal red strips create an interesting balance with the vertical shapes in this background. However, the

shapes in the background appear as patches of orange, yellow and blue against a dark coloured background. Colour usage is warm, creating a harmony of red, yellow, orange and brown while blue plays around to complement. Victor is able to create an interesting balance of the subject in the midst of texture and good proportion.

The style in this painting is peculiar to Victor. He combines photographs and painted surfaces. Both are usually original creation of his, which he downloads into the computer and uses the computer to create a collage or merger of the two, as well as computer additions. In the end, the result is a combination of traditional media like acrylic on paper, photography and the computer. The painting under analysis is a result of such digital mixed media. The boy is photographed with a delightful grin which is then downloaded into the computer and a painting of acrylic on canvas is made with a manipulation that creates a harmonious interface. Victor did not state if the painting was paid for or commissioned. However, most of his paintings are borne out of experiments which are still in his personal collection. The cultural interest in this painting is the hat which is traditional as well as a cultural statement in Nigerian fashion. While preference for Western styled fashion appears to be growing among the majority of Nigerians, this painting elevates the traditional woven cap in northern Nigeria to prevent it from dimming under the light of Western fashion.



Plate: 3, Title: Totem, Artist: John Ogene, Size: A4, Medium: Computer, Year: 2009

Ogene's totem in plate 3, is an abstract reptile which may be a lizard or gecko. According to Onwuakpa and Ononeme (2016),

“In the traditional culture of the Igbo, Uli art according to Willis (1986) was an art of the women folk. The motifs and symbols or patterns employed in Uli body and wall decoration were derived from different aspects of the people environment and world view. Some Uli were abstract with zigzag patterns and concentric circles, while others stood for house hold objects such as bowls, stools, pots, farm tools etc. Many represented animals and birds such as python, lizard, leopard, alligator, lion, monkey, eagle, owl, and kite, etc. or celestial bodies, the crescent moon and star”. It is from such inspirational sources that Ogene derived his idea”.

The painting is rendered using green, blue, and black on a white surface. The head and neck are simple squares that are positioned to look like a diamond shape. Lines are continuously drawn to create the form. Circular shapes like dots are used to embellish the surface around the form which creates a visual texture. In a nutshell, the entire painting is rendered with definitive coloured lines. It is yet another dynamic possibility with the computer as rendered by Ogene. The painting is reminiscent of renditions of African forms and motifs which are now a rarity.



Plate:4, Title: All fingers are not equal, Artist: Victor Ekpuk, Medium: Computer, Year: 2009

‘All fingers are not equal’ in plate 4, is a representation of what can be described as a grotesque human hand with fingers that seem to be equal but slightly vary in height, proportion and size. The entire surface of black is embellished with Nsibidi graphical symbols. In the middle is a circular composition of red, orange and white dots against the black background of the hand or palm. The forefinger is particularly embellished with a spiral motif that dominates the tip of the finger.

“All fingers are not equal” is a sad, but true reminder of the inequality that exists in the society. Due to inequality that is sometimes a direct consequence of injustice, society revolts. The use of red dots in the middle may be an indication of violence or revolt as a result of inequality. The lavish use of the traditional motifs or writing system by Ekpuk Victor is a way of projecting the cultural value of the Nigerian people. Nsibidi may not have received much publicity as the Egyptian hieroglyphics, Chinese and Japanese writing systems, but it shares a commonality of value with them. Through the aid of the computer painting the art form has assumed an entirely new life in the hand of a contemporary Nigerian painter at an international stage.

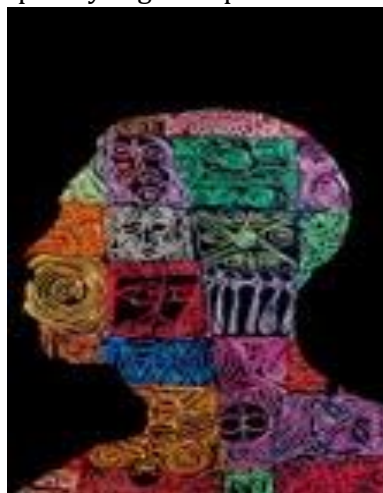


Plate: 5, Title: Kingsley Okigbo –Labyrinth of an arrival, Artist: Victor Ehikhamenor, Medium: Computer, Size: A4, Date: 2013

Although this painting is a profile, it does artificially describe Kingsley Okigbo, a foremost Nigerian poet. Motifs like these are a common feature of some contemporary Nigerian artists who have explored it on oil on canvas, acrylic and even water colour. Its use with the computer, historically, points to the possibility of bringing traditional motifs to painting via technology of the time. Technology, here again, elevates itself as a powerful medium for cultural propaganda.

“Labyrinth of an arrival”, therefore, succeeds in presenting a maze or complicated elements where the eye attempts to find its way out.



Plate: 6, Title: Aso Ebi, Artist: David Osagie, Medium: Computer, Size: unknown, Date: 2013

The cultural dimension of fashion is hereby expressed in “Aso Ebi” in plate 6, by David Osagie. It is a figural composition of gaily dressed Yoruba women in a group. The composition of the “women stretch from one end of the rectangular space to the other, displaying brightly coloured headgears of blue, pink, orange, purple, red and yellow. (Gyegwe, 2015). The author further notes that;

Their dark faces and skin stand out of their white uniformed dresses as they hold similar hand bags to complement their dresses. David appears to have worked from a scanned photograph, using Photoshop to create the painting. Again, his style of rendition is evident in this painting with energetic use of brush to apply his colours, create textures that set his work apart from others.

‘Aso Ebi’ is a Yoruba term that describes uniformed dressing for occasions like weddings and similar ones. Usually people who dress like this to occasions tend to communicate the message of support, friendship, or even to assert their peculiarity. The use of ‘Aso Ebi’ or uniform or ‘Anco’ [And co] is a common sight at weddings or occasions not only among the Yoruba from where the slang originates, but all over Nigeria, even among the various ethnic groups. The painting therefore is a record of the social and cultural expressions of the present Nigeria society. The painting again, was not a commissioned one. David painted it to satisfy his artistic craving, and to record the social life of the Nigerian people. The painting succeeds in that it communicates in the same way; a conventional painting would, using the same artistic elements, principles and methods.

It is noteworthy that the philosophical perspectives of this painting are affine to that of plate 2- “My Father’s Hat”.



Plate: 7, Title: Untitled, Artist: Ben Atanu, Medium: Computer, Size: A4, Date: 2012

The untitled drawing above is a 'Photoshoped' drawing by Ben Atanu; the work is a landscape representation of two huts, depicting the sky, foreground and trees. The huts are reminiscent of the village architecture as seen in most Nigerian villages.

Ben's style of using the computer is consistent with the use of scribbles to render his forms. Here, he has employed a variety of scribbles to express a naturalistic landscape of a Nigerian village scene. The challenge of the African architecture has always been the material which makes some of them less durable. As a consequence, they are going extinct while the European styled architecture that is more in tune with their culture is taking over. With modern researches in African architecture, materials have been improved upon to maintain the cultural forms, but sadly, the Nigerian environment is becoming more and more Westernized. This image with the aid of the internet and the computer has the capacity of making an impression on foreign societies about Nigeria.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study titled; Technology and Painting in the Service of Culture, has considered the subject of culture as a unique set of ideals of a peculiar people, with art as a material component. The subject of painting and the use of computer to render paintings is elevated as a means of propagating culture or ideas of a people which are hitherto unknown to other exotic cultures. Through an already broached investigation in this direction, the study through a fieldwork identified and subjectively and quantitatively analysed seven computer software paintings which are culturally biased. In the final analysis, the study which that the speed at which a computer painting can travel is faster than the traditional oil on canvas or any other traditional mode of created paintings, which will need a permit from the National Museum at a fee, freighting charge among other challenges, unlike the software based paintings that only need a click on an internet enabled gadget to send to any country or destination within minutes or seconds. From the foregoing, technology has rendered service to culture through aiding its sharing and consequent understanding of hitherto unknown cultures.

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