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PAINTING AND SOCIETY IN MODERN NIGERIA

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This study explored the robust interface between painting as an art form and society, with a focus on the Nigerian society from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial eras. The study established that painting in Nigeria has always been the product of the socio-cultural and environmental realities of the Nigerian society, right from the body paintings that characterized the pre-colonial era to the multiple styles of the post-colonial era painting. It was observed that whereas the early paintings of the Nigerian society derived exclusively from indigenous influences, the colonial and post-colonial eras paintings were heavily influenced by European cultures and philosophies. The study concluded that painting in modern Nigerian society is still largely utilitarian and that it reflects the dual influences of the traditional culture on the one hand, and Western culture characterized by the customization of the art by the individual on the other hand.

Keywords: painting, society, modern Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The interface between painting (and indeed all art) and society is arguably as old as both phenomena-art and society. One had always influenced the other and vice versa. All art is inspired by life and society on the one hand. On the other hand, throughout human history, art and artists have made significant contributions to the development of the societies in which they have existed. Villon (1952), expressed this view when he said that artists have always been the chroniclers of the society in and by which they have lived: "They represented society and knew that they did. Their art has been used occasionally for championing protests or claims and also for giving expression to the lofty spiritual and cultural aspirations of their societies. Artists have always taken it for granted that they should form part of society. All artists, great and small, answered the needs of anyone requiring their services. Theirs was a practical trade, and they would turn their hand to the task of the moment, undertaking to paint anything from portraits to wall panels, from decorative figures to imitation marble". According to Vye (2015), not only do the visual arts provide pleasure and creative inspiration, but they also help foster dialogue and bring important issues to the public eye. Vye states further that among other things, the roles of art in the society include:

1. Cross-Cultural Understanding: Art can have amazing power to foster collaboration between different societies. For example, cooperation between artists from conflicting peoples or touring art shows that bring real-world issues to distant populations are essential to raising levels of understanding between cultures. For example, famous Colombian artist Fernando Botero's paintings have depicted reported abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison during the recent Iraq War, bringing more attention to the plight of the Iraqi people. Art is powerful in its simplicity; it can convey ideas across classes and cultures due to its lack of reliance on language or written language. This makes it one of the most powerful tools of communication.
2. Enhancing Community Engagement: Art can be a powerful way to bring communities together. In fact, research from the University of Pennsylvania proves that a greater focus on the arts in a city creates social cohesion, better civic engagement and improved child welfare, and it also decreases poverty. Creation of community art helps citizens to work together to create shared visions of their ideals, values and hopes for the future. Teams can work together to create murals that celebrate the area's history or achievements, with help from a muralist. In Baltimore, teams created maps using

paint and GPS to explore their experience of living in the city, which helped build community knowledge and foster connectivity. The sky's the limit when it comes to how citizens can come together using the medium of art of foster greater involvement with society.

3. Documenting History: Art is an important way to document our collective present so that future generations may have greater understanding of our ways of thinking, values and more. For example, the Community Construction Movement initiated by the Taiwanese government in 1995, is a long-term project that aims to invigorate local communities by establishing 25 museums that focus on Taiwan's indigenous groups. These centers are seen as crucial to building a collective Taiwanese memory of these important minorities. Reaching further back into time, the cave paintings of prehistoric paintings provide one of the last few glimpses into how these people lived and their religious and moral values. Art is thus a simple way to access cultures that might otherwise be forgotten.

4. Finding Creative Solutions to Social Issues: Art has long been a tool of protest and an inciter of social change. For example, popular street artist Banksy has tirelessly plastered his images in many of the world's major cities in an effort to draw attention to environmental issues and poverty. He even painted a series of whimsical images on Israel's Western Wall, the division intended to keep out suicide bombers, provoking a discussion on Israeli/Palestinian politics. Art also has the capacity to heal, as therapeutic art is now commonly used to alleviate psychological trauma.

5. As a Source of Pleasure or Delight: Art has long served to tickle the fantasies of man, providing entertainment offering him an escape route (albeit temporally) from the harsh realities of his work-a-day life. This is the thrust of the Emotionalist theories of Western aesthetics (Anderson, 1989).

Through the ages, the art form painting, which is the focus of this study, has faithfully fulfilled these objectives. The advent of modern technologies and practices like the camera/photography and the Internet, have however presented a formidable challenge to the survival painting. This is because these faster media of expression have the capacity to perform the functions of painting even at cheaper cost. This study examines the place of painting in the Nigerian society from the ancient to the contemporary age.

Conceptual Clarification

The issue of what constitutes a truly Nigerian art has been robustly debated by scholars. With particular reference to literature which equally applies to the arts in general- Okhakhu (2001) notes those opinions are divided. Whereas some scholars hold the view that so long as the thematic concern of such works explores the Nigerian worldview, such works can be classified as

Nigerian literature, others contend that such works must not only be products of Nigerian polity, but also works of Nigerians. In an earlier argument as to the term "Nigerian art" Ikwuemesi (1996) in an article titled "Nigerian Art and the Politics of Identity" and cited by Iriwieri (2010) states that there is a Nigerian art in the geo-political sense, but in a practically stylistic sense, such an art does not exist, since most of the art being practiced since colonial times are done with tools and based on standard which are essentially Euro-American. This writer aligns with the second school of thought cited by Okhakhu. Thus, the term Nigerian painting as deployed in the study subsumes not only the products of Nigerian polity, but also works of Nigerians.

Painting and Society in History

Painting is the practice of applying paint, pigment, color or other medium to a surface (support base). In art, the term *painting* describes both the act and the result of the action. A painting always describes something. Many factors have influenced the history of painting. Geography, religion, national characteristics, historic events, the development of new materials—all help to shape the artist's vision (Landau, 2015). Throughout history, painting has mirrored the changing world and our ideas about it. In turn, artists have provided some of the best records of the development of civilization, sometimes revealing more than the written word. Landau's succeeding chronicle of painting through time and space in human society is instructive:

Prehistoric Painting: Cave dwellers were the earliest artists. Colored drawings of animals, dating from about 30,000 to 10,000 B.C., have been found on the walls of caves in southern France and in Spain. Early people drew the wild animals that they saw all around them. Very crude human figures, drawn in lifelike positions, have been found in Africa and eastern Spain. Landau posits that the cave artists filled the cave walls with drawings in rich, bright colors. Some of the most beautiful paintings are in the Cave of Altamira, in Spain. As far back as 30,000 years ago, people had invented the basic tools and materials for painting. Techniques and materials were refined and improved in the centuries following. But the discoveries of the cave dweller remain basic to painting.

Egyptian and Mesopotamian Painting (3400-332 B.C.): Much Egyptian art was created for the pyramids and tombs of kings and other important people. They also recorded scenes from the person's life in wall paintings in the burial chambers. Egyptian techniques of painting remained the same for centuries. In one method watercolor paint was put on mud-plaster or limestone walls. In another process outlines were cut into stone walls, and the designs were painted with watercolor washes.

The Mesopotamian civilization, which lasted from about 3200 to 332 B.C., was located in the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the Near East. What have been preserved of this civilization are the decorated ceramics (painted and fired pottery) and colorful mosaics.

The Aegean Civilization (3000-1100 B.C.): The third great early culture was the Aegean civilization, on the islands off the shores of Greece and in the peninsula of Asia Minor. Their kind of painting was later called fresco, an Italian word meaning "fresh" or "new" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2015). Fresco is method of painting water-based pigments on freshly applied plaster, usually on wall surfaces (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014).

Greek and Roman Classical Painting (1100 B.C.-A.D. 400): The ancient Greeks decorated their temples and palaces with mural (wall) paintings. We can tell from ancient literary sources and from Roman copies of Greek art that the Greeks painted small pictures and made mosaics.

Painted vases are about all that remains of Greek painting. Pottery making was a large industry in Greece, especially in Athens. Containers were in great demand for exports, such as oil and honey, and for household purposes. The earliest style of vase painting was known as the geometric style (1100-700 B.C.). The red-figured style eventually replaced the black. It is just the opposite; the figures are red and the background black. Roman mural paintings were found chiefly in the villas (country homes) of Pompeii and Herculaneum. In A.D. 79 these two cities were completely buried by an eruption of the volcano Vesuvius. Archeologists who have excavated the area have been able to learn much about ancient Roman life from these cities. Almost every house and villa in Pompeii had paintings on its walls.

Early Christian and Byzantine Painting (A.D. 300-1300): In A.D. 313 the Roman Emperor Constantine gave the Christian religion official recognition and became a Christian himself. The rise of Christianity greatly affected the arts. Artists were commissioned to decorate the walls of churches with frescoes and mosaics. They made panel paintings in the church chapel and illustrated and decorated the books of the Church. Under the authority of the Church, artists had to communicate the teachings of Christianity as clearly as possible. Early Christians and Byzantine artists continued the technique of mosaic that they had learned from the Greeks.

Medieval Painting (500-1400): The first part of the Middle Ages, from about the 6th to the 11th centuries A.D., is commonly called the Dark Ages. In this time of unrest, art was kept alive mainly in the monasteries. In the 5th century A.D. barbarian tribes from northern and central Europe roamed over the continent. These people produced an art that has a strong emphasis on pattern. They were especially fond of designs of intertwining dragons and birds. The best of Celtic and Saxon art is

found in manuscripts of the 7th and 8th centuries. Book illumination and miniature painting, practiced since late Roman times, increased in the Middle Ages. Illumination is decoration of the text, the capital letters, and the margins. Gold, silver, and bright colors were used. A miniature is a small picture, often a portrait. Originally the term was used to describe the decorative block around the initial letters in a manuscript.

Very little wall painting survives from the Middle Ages. There were several great series of frescoes painted in churches built during the Romanesque period (11th-13th centuries), but most of them have disappeared. Churches of the Gothic period (12th-16th centuries) did not have enough wall space for mural paintings. Book illustration was the main job of the Gothic painter.

Renaissance Italy: this is arguably one of the most significant epochs in the evolution and development of the arts. Landau (2015), notes that Italian painters at the close of the 13th century were still working in the Byzantine style. Human figures were made to appear flat and decorative. Faces rarely had any expression. Bodies were weightless and seemed to float rather than stand firmly on the ground. In Florence the painter Cimabue (1240-1302) tried to modernize some of the old Byzantine methods. The angels in his *Madonna Enthroned* are more active than is usual in paintings of that time. Their gestures and faces show a little more human feeling. Cimabue added a new sense of monumentality, or largeness, to his paintings. However, he continued to follow many Byzantine traditions, such as the gold background and pattern-like arrangement of objects and figures. Florentine painter Giotto (1267-1337) eventually broke with the Byzantine tradition. His fresco series in the Arena Chapel in Padua leaves Byzantine art far behind. Early in the 15th century, painters in northern Europe were working in a style quite different from Italian painting. Northern artists achieved realism by adding countless details to their pictures. Every hair was delicately outlined, and each detail of drapery or floor pattern was faithfully set down. The invention of oil painting made it easier to paint details.

The Flemish artist Jan van Eyck (1370-1441) contributed to the development of oil painting. When tempera is used, the colors have to be put on separately. They cannot shade into one another very well because the paint dries quickly. With oil, which dries slowly, an artist can achieve more intricate effects. *The Moneylender and His Wife* by Quentin Massys (1466-1530) was done in the Flemish oil technique. All details, and even the mirror reflection, are clear and precise. The color is strong and has a hard, enamel-like surface. The wood panel on which the painting was done was prepared in much the same way that Giotto prepared his panels for tempera. Van Eyck built up the painting in layers of thin color, called glazes. Tempera was probably used in the original under-painting and for highlights.

Giotto's accomplishments in the early 14th century laid the foundation of the Renaissance. Fifteenth-century Italian artists continued the movement. Masaccio (1401-28) was one of the leaders of the first generation of Renaissance artists. He lived in Florence, the wealthy merchant city where Renaissance art began. By the time of his death in his late twenties, he had revolutionized painting. In his famous fresco *The Tribute Money* he puts solid sculptural figures into a landscape that seems to go far back into the distance. Masaccio may have learned perspective from the Florentine architect and sculptor Brunelleschi (1377-1446).

The famous artist Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) studied painting in Florence. He is known for his scientific studies and inventions, as well as for his paintings. Very few of his pictures have survived, partly because he often experimented with different ways of making and applying paint, rather than using tried and true methods. *The Last Supper* (painted between 1495 and 1498) was done in oil, but unfortunately Leonardo painted it on a damp wall, which caused the paint to crack. Even in its poor condition the painting has the power to stir emotions in all who see it.

The climax of Renaissance painting came in the 16th century. Some of the most ambitious projects of the period were begun during the papacy of Julius II. Julius commissioned the great sculptor and painter Michelangelo (1475-1564) to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and to carve sculpture for the Pope's tomb. Michelangelo, a Florentine by birth, developed a monumental style of painting. The figures in his painting are so solid and three-dimensional that they look like sculpture. The Sistine ceiling, which took Michelangelo 4 years to complete, is composed of hundreds of human figures from the Old Testament. Venice was the chief northern Italian city of the Renaissance. Giovanni Bellini (1430?-1516) was the greatest Venetian painter of the 15th century. He was also one of the first Italian painters to use oil on canvas.

Baroque Painting: The 17th century is generally known as the baroque period in art. In Italy the painters Caravaggio (1571-1610) and Annibale Carracci (1560-1609) represented two contrasting viewpoints. Caravaggio (whose real name was Michelangelo Merisi) always painted directly from life. One of his main concerns was to copy nature as faithfully as possible without glorifying it in any way. Carracci, on the other hand, followed the Renaissance ideal of beauty. He studied ancient sculpture and the works of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian.

18th- 19th Century Painting: In the 18th century, Venice produced several fine painters. The most famous was Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770). He decorated the interiors of palaces and other buildings with tremendous, colorful frescoes representing scenes of wealth and pageantry. Francesco Guardi (1712-93) and Antonio Canaletto (1697-1768) painted scenic views, many of

them recalling the past glories of Venice. Other 18th-century painters portrayed scenes of ordinary, middle-class life. Like the Dutch Vermeer, Jean Baptiste Simeon Chardin (1699-1779) valued simple domestic scenes and still-life arrangements. His colors are sober and calm compared to Watteau's.

The 19th century is sometimes regarded as the period during which modern art began to take shape. One important reason for the so-called revolution in the arts at this time was the invention of the camera, which forced artists to re-examine the purpose of painting.

A more important development resulted partly from the widespread use of manufactured paints. Before the 19th century, most artists or their assistants made their own paints by grinding pigment. Early commercial paints were inferior to handmade paints. Artists late in the 19th century found that the dark blues and browns of earlier paintings were turning black or gray within a few years. They began to use pure colors again. These artists used pure colors in order to preserve their work and sometimes because they were trying to capture the effects of sunlight in outdoor scenes more accurately.

20th-Century Painting: A number of artists soon became dissatisfied with impressionism. Artists such as Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) felt that impressionism did not describe the solidity of forms in nature. Cézanne liked to paint still lifes because they allowed him to concentrate on the shapes of fruits or other objects and their arrangements. Objects in his still lifes look solid because he reduced their forms to simple geometric shapes. His technique of placing patches of paint and short brushstrokes of rich color side by side shows that he learned much from the impressionists. Other important painters of this era include Vincent Van Gogh (1853-90) and Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) opposed the realism of the impressionists. Gauguin did not care for the spotty color of the impressionists. He applied color smoothly in large flat areas, which he separated from one another by lines or dark edges. The colorful civilizations of the tropics provided much of his subject matter.

Painting in Nigeria

Nigeria's history is divided into three major epochs: Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-colonial. Long before the advent of the European colonization of Africa, the geographical space presently called Nigeria comprised of several kingdoms, nationalities and communities, each characterized by its unique traditions, customs, art and crafts. These included the Hausa/Fulani, Igbo, Yoruba, Benin, Efik, etc, societies. Painting in Nigeria has its roots in the ancient painting traditions of these societies. Abodunrin and Oladiti (2015) state that body painting, a style of painting, is as old as tradition of the cultures of the Nigerian people and remains the most

popular form and conspicuous forms of painting found among women during ceremonial occasions like wedding and religious festivities especially in the Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri and Igbo cultures. Its main objective is to enhance beauty.

Still on painting in pre-colonial societies in Nigeria, Campbell (2007: 24) observes that shrine painting is also an observable feature of painting practice in Yoruba religious activities, stating that the surface used for this kind of painting is the wall. It gives an elaborate expression on the symbols and meaning of religious images as exemplified in the cultural beliefs of the tradition of the people. In essence these paintings were graphic explanations of the phenomena they represented. It is instructive to note that in traditional Nigerian societies, all art was considered communal property; hence, the origination of these paintings could not be attributed to any individual. Abodunrin and Oladiti (2015) reinforce this view when they state that the names and pioneers of the various forms of painting in the pre-colonial Nigerian society were unknown. Perhaps, this is because their works and memories of their painting were not documented by modern African Art Historians. However, it is generally believed that the practice of painting is generally domiciled in the vocation of the craftsmen among the Yoruba.

Nigeria's interface with Western (European) civilization and culture from the 15th century brought about a gradual influence of the latter on the former, an influence that would eventually give rise to new forms of Nigerian arts in the period of colonialism- mid 19th to mid 20th centuries. The impact of colonialism on painting in Nigeria is captured thus by Abodunrin and Oladiti (2015): *The development of painting in colonial Nigeria is a turning point in the history of art in Nigeria. This period marked a shift in the cultural techniques of painting from religious and decorative purpose to new forms in techniques, materials and style of painting. Unlike the pre-colonial forms of painting that is applied on wall surface and the human body. The colonial period witnessed the application of synthetic substances to create a representational, abstract picture or design on surfaces such as canvas, board, paper, wall and host of others. Synthetics colours were also used which often time are imported. The artistic development during this period was bold and tedious but steady in the face of numerous constraints created by colonial influence with European contact with Nigeria...*

The contact with British colonial authorities greatly influenced the art of painting in pre-colonial Nigeria. Iriwieri (2010) specifically refers to the period between 1900 and 1938 as the Period of Sowing the Seed of Formal Art Training in Nigeria. This manifests with the introduction of formal and non-formal art training with the effort of Aina Onabolu who initiated this transition into the practice of painting. Aina Onabolu was one of the

foremost Nigerian artists that recognize the importance of teaching the society through arts. Despite British colonial indifference to the development of arts, he openly lobbied the colonial authorities for the establishment of schools in Lagos. Although the arts and culture in Nigeria during this period did not assume the proportion of the Renaissance that swept through 14th-17th century Europe, it was still an awakening in Nigerian context.

Another major contributor to the development of painting in colonial Nigeria was Kenneth Murray, a British national who was invited by the colonial government to modify the art curriculum in the newly established Nigerian Art School. Murray stimulated the appetite for traditionalism in art as opposed to Western influence or convention, believing that the forms of representation of art generally and painting in particular should be more of African than European orientation. To this end, he encouraged the adaptation of indigenous elements and forms which tremendously influenced the style of painting in Nigeria. For these efforts, Murray is described by Art historians as the pioneer of modernist movement of Art in Nigeria (Olodi, 2008).

By the twilight of the colonial era, Nigeria had developed two different painting styles championed by the pioneers- Onabolu and Murray. Whereas Onabolu's style was characterized by the dominance of Western influences and motifs, Murray's was defined by the predominance of Nigerian traditional and indigenous influences. In validation of this point, Abodunrin and Oladiti (2015) write that: "By 1950's, Nigeria had developed two different and divergent styles been championed by the pioneer Aina Onabolu, the other by Kenneth Murray. Onabolu's style of painting is credited for his philosophical belief that painting should be a universal language of expression which can be seen in his realistic and naturalistic tendency. Kenneth Murray's style of painting is more of cultural forms and adaptations of African elements which metamorphose into individual identity."

Other painters and artists who followed Onabolu's footsteps include Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972), Eke Okebolu (1916-1958) and J.D. Akeredolu, among others. On the hand, the likes of

Ben Enwonwu (1921-1994), P.L.K Nnachi, Uthman Ibrahim, C.C. Ibeto and A.E Umana got their formal training in painting through the effort of Kenneth Murray.

The 1960 independence of Nigeria marked the beginning of the development of painting in Post-colonial Nigeria. It saw the establishment of art Schools such as the new art departments at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

These were in addition to the already existing art department in the University of Ibadan and the Osogbo School which was established through the efforts of

three expatriate: Giorgina Beir, Ulli Beier and Suzanne Wenger (Oloidi, 1995:66).

With political independence came agitations for freedom in virtually all facets of life which include the expression in art practices. Arts and paintings produced during this period appeared to be characterized by individualism of style. Abodunrin and Oladiti (2015) write that after 1960, artists like Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko and Jimoh Akolo also produced abstracted forms; however, the works of artists like Yusuf Grillo were more of stylization, abstraction and naturalism were therefore unique with a pattern of elongation of form which brings the work clearer to the audience. Other major players in the 1960s include Erhabor Emakpae, Abayomi Barber, among others.

Following the generation of the 1960s is the generation of Kolade Oshinowo, Sina Yusuf, Dele Jegede and Gani Odutokun. Most of the artists in this group also paint naturalistic images but occasionally oscillate between abstraction and naturalism. The 1960's and the succeeding decade represented a sober reflection when Nigerian artists began to question themselves on the role they ought to be playing in modern Nigeria. Osofisan (2001) posits that what occupied the front burner of artistic discourses in Nigeria at this immediate post-independence era was a fierce and unsparing controversy between a school of thought which held that Art was a self-contained autonomous entity that is ideologically innocent, and another school which contended that Art by its very nature was socio-telic, that its significance was predicated on the extent to which it is in the society. The latter school of thought was however, more dominant. Thus, the attitude of most of the artists towards Art was such that the conflict between traditional forms and Western techniques was of little significance to them (Beier, 1961:31). This temperament has continued to dominate the painting landscape in Nigeria, even till date. This is however, not implying that there is a total absence of the disciples of the "Art for Art sake" school. The point being made is that art is still largely utilitarian in the contemporary Nigerian society. One of the leading lights of painting in contemporary Nigeria is Bruce Onobakpreya, a pioneer member of the Zaria Art Society that produced works that were characterized to a large extent by individualism in various styles and techniques.

CONCLUSION

We have to a large extent established in this study that painting as an art form has always been an integral part of the Nigerian society from the pre-colonial through the colonial to the post colonial eras. By the same token, it was established that that painting in Nigeria has always been socio-telic, striving to influence society to change for the better. The contact with formal training in Art institutions by European influence opened new vistas

into the adaptation of indigenous art themes into painting in Nigeria. The establishment of new institutions of formal training in the arts further enhanced the formal training of Nigerian Artists, helping them to become professionals. Another major impact of Western civilization on Nigerian painting is the emergence of the individual as owner of an art work, where in the past all art belonged to the community. The activity of the emerging painters in Nigeria indicates a remarkable growth in styles of art practice in both the formal and informal sector; styles that were nurtured by the pioneering works of Aina Onabolu and Kenneth Murray. Nigerian painting today is a fusion of tradition and modernity.

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