

Taxonomy of Painting Styles in Contemporary Nigeria

by

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Abstract

This study intends to unearth the classification of style of paintings in Nigeria with a view of codifying the pattern of forms in some selected paintings. Painting samples were drawn from those rendered in varied techniques, style, and media of differing geographical and institutional background in Nigeria. The selection covers those produced between 1980 and 2000, a period of twenty years. Each of the styles identified in Nigeria paintings were discussed to know the prevailing tendencies. Through field survey, a total of 350 paintings were randomly collected from various artists, while the sample size of 20% percent of the total was analyzed. Seventy (70) of these paintings were used for analysis and interpretation for this study as the scope of paintings in Nigeria is large. Styles used in Nigeria paintings were classified into eight (8) different categories such as expressionism (34.3%), naturalism (17.1%), abstraction (14.3%), symbolism (11.4%), stylization (11.4%), cubism (5.7%), realism (5.7%) and impressionism (5.7%). The paper concludes that painting in Nigeria falls into the category of different styles with the variation of patterns with expressionism as the most prevalent.

Keywords: taxonomy, style, painting, contemporary, Nigeria

Introduction

Taxonomy generally refers to sorting of things into groups or categories on a single basis of division, while style is used as a parameter for classification of paintings. Style is a distinctive manner which permits the grouping of a particular art image into related categories. It is the visual appearance of an art work that relates it to other works by the same artist or one from the same period, training, location, school or art movement (Getlin 2002:36). Style in painting refers to a characteristic or group of characteristics that can be recognized as constant, recurring or coherent (Getlin 2002:36). In other words, it includes that characteristic of materials, brush strokes, color combinations, subject matter, and technique of representation among several other reasons.

Style may be associated with an entire culture within a particular time and place, a group of artists, an individual, or a particular institution over a period of time (Getlin, 2002). Stylistic expressions in Nigeria painting are those expressions which illustrate the scene of socio-cultural and political life of people irrespective of the location of the artists, with diverse manipulation of subject matter, media and technique. Nigerian paintings are those that portray issues relating to the environment and draws inspiration of style and technique from traditional art forms found in textiles, sculpture, weaving and architecture embedded in Nigerian society. It also represented the use of symbols, themes and subject matter that is related to Nigerian scene. A recent survey of the painting in Nigeria shows that figural expressions are very common with diverse styles, especially among the professional artists (Kalilu et al, 2015). Although, the paintings are predominantly figural compositions, still-life, landscape, nature and abstract.

However, Asian paintings depict Oriental theme, motifs, including Buddha figures, village scenes, animals and Oriental landscapes, and make for exquisite decoration anywhere they are seen while Western painting represents a continuous, though disrupted, the tradition from antiquity until the present time. Until the mid-19th century, it was primarily concerned with representational and classical modes of production, after which time more modern, abstract and conceptual forms gain favor. This explains the difference of Nigerian painting with that of Asian or Western cultures. In Nigeria and all over the world, some artists develop the style and stick to it; while others have several styles, either simultaneously or sequentially. The terrain of painting is robust and very rich, with diverse image representation which enables a good platform for the classification of stylistic contents of painting.

Styles of Painting in Nigeria: A Reflection

Nigeria painting styles were developed through the ideals and philosophy of art schools, through informal and workshop training and self-developed styles. Among the schools that over the years have distinguished themselves in terms of styles are: Amodu Bello University, Zaria; Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife; University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Yaba College of Technology, Lagos; Auchu Polytechnic, Auchu. They portrayed different ideologies that reflect the philosophy of their founding fathers which are passed from one generation to the other. These stylistic tendencies are reflected in the training of other art institutions who are offspring of these early institutions. In most schools in Nigeria, the new ideas and theories created a groundswell of a variety of art styles and expressions that are now prevalent.

Techniques of styles are also evolved through various art workshops and other training centers, such as Mbari Mbayo group, Ori-Olokun group, Abayomi Baber group and Ara group of artist. These are art locations where artists are informally trained without following rigid rules of the formal syllabus. The training is acquired through apprenticeship system or workshop experience. Some of the groups do not obey the rules of accurate proportion and perspective. They created forms that are original, spontaneous and naively created with utter disregard for the depth, space or any expected relationship of motif themes are most times derived from folktales, myths, and religious stories.

In addition, many artists developed style within the framework of general style and stick to it for personal identity. In most cases, these are achieved through the divergent use of materials, techniques, and media manipulation to create a personal effect in art. These groups of artists are those who do not follow the strict ideas and philosophy of the formal and informal training. They have self-developed styles through manipulation of material and subject matter. These independent artists must have acquired one form of training either from formal institutions or attended the workshop, but they can be seen with one independent style. They are consistent with the style and techniques which make them outstanding among their peers. However, for a better understanding of the genesis of the creation of styles in Nigeria Arts, there is a need for classification of styles.

Methodology

The study examined stylistic classification in Nigerian painting with a view to codify the pattern of forms in the selected paintings. The painting samples were drawn from those rendered in varied techniques, style, and media from different geographical and institutional background in Nigeria. The selection covers those produced between 1980 and 2000, a period of twenty years. This period witness increase in the number of art school, artists, and diversity of styles, techniques as well as media usage.

Each of the styles identified in Nigeria paintings were discussed to know the prevailing tendencies. Through field survey, a total of 350 paintings were randomly collected from various artists in this study, while the sample size of 20% percent of the total was analyzed. Seventy (70) of these paintings were used for analysis and interpretation as the scope of paintings in Nigeria is large and cannot be fully exhausted in this study.

Taxonomy of Painting Styles in Nigeria

Many scholars have classified contemporary Nigerian art into plausible compartments from where intelligent interrogation could be done. Dele Jegede (1983) gave a broad framework based on two major forms of training methods namely the 'formal school' and informal school' i.e training that occurred in the school system and the training done at workshop centers. Filani (2002) had also proposed classification by chronology where artistic practices were interrogated based on historical sequence. Fosu (1986) is based on a historical sequence without reference to form. Bascom (1975) and Adepegba (1995) in different studies classified African art with particular reference to painting into periodic, local, individual, naturalism, abstraction, abstract and expressive styles while Aremu (1998), Osegi (1990), Folaranmi and Oparinde (2005) classified painting into naturalistic, ideal-naturalism, semi-naturalism, abstract, semi-abstract, stylized and expressive styles. However, most of these studies are not directly focused on painting and where attempt were made, they are not as inclusive as the focus of this study.

This study classifies modern Nigerian paintings based on style and is categorize as follows: symbolism, abstraction, realism, naturalism, expressionism, impressionism, cubism and stylization (Abodunrin, 2014). For example, symbolism is the art of using sign to represent things, ideas and emotions. It also refers to totemic symbols that stand on their own (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2014). Artists of different cultural background identified themselves with this style with distinctive variations in subject matter and theme. In Nigeria, few paintings are found in this direction for the purposes of aesthetic, cultural heritage and resuscitations of dying traditions. In the painting titled *March of the masquerade* (plate, 1), the artist uses Igbo cultural materials in a positive, forward-looking manner rather than a nostalgic way. He seems to be able to utilize his universal cultural exposure to recast his Igbo tradition in a symbolic manner. Also in *Iya Ilu* (plate, 3), the painting is symbolically represented with the Yoruba talking drum as the main subject while embroidery pattern was used to balance the painting to satisfy the style of the painting. However, some other paintings are found to be cubistic in style. Cubism deals with the reduction and fragmentation of objects into geometric forms such as *The conspiracy and Mask 1* (plates, 5 and 6). The two paintings are rendered with the limited color scheme and were done amidst shapes painted flat with precise colour.

Some paintings are also been rendered in a stylized manner in Nigeria context. Stylization in the painting is the decorative generalization of figure and objects by means of various conventional techniques which include the simplification of line, form, and relations of space and color has been exemplified in *Mother and Child* and *Mother's day* (plates, 7 and 8). Nevertheless, naturalistic style is also usable in Nigeria painting to describe a true-to-life representation or depiction of nature with the least possible distortion or interpretation. Many artists engaged in this with distinctive characteristics of techniques in the naturalistic style. Six paintings are identified in this category in this study. Examples of such paintings are *Aso Ebi* (plate 9); *Jelesinmi* (plate 10), *Untitled* (plate 12), *Ngozi Schommers* (plate 11), *Untitled* (plate 13) and *Untitled* (plate 14) are the mastery of expressionistic imagery to achieve a visual prodigy. The works attempt to portray figurative expressions in varied techniques which give the works supernatural feeling to the admiration of the audience.

In abstract paintings, the ideas, emotions, and visual sensations are communicated solely through lines, shapes, color, and textures that have no representational significance. The subject representation of this style painting creates a departure from accurate depiction that can be slight, partial or complete. Paintings such as *Man and Machine Series* (plate 15), *Faces* (plate 16), *Goodevil* (plate 19), *Lovers* (plate 18), and *Untitled* (plate 17) are a mixture of abstract illustrations with superimposed figurative elements and applied objects. In these paintings, ideas are conceived and been represented in color and form which are on many occasions are the non-objective representation of subject matter.

However, some paintings are distorted, exaggerated through the vivid, jarring, violent or dynamic application of formal elements in a painting. This kind of painting evolved highly personal styles used to express possibilities of color and line. This approach and style are been classified as expressionism. Expressionism in painting also explores dramatic and emotion-laden themes, to convey the qualities of fear, horror and the grotesque in paintings such as *Niger Delta: Militancy III* (plate 20), *Behind Every Successful Man* (plate, 21), *Adam and Eve* (plate, 22), *Red Blanket* (plate, 23), *Untitled* (plate, 24), *Equestrian Spirit* (plate 33), *Untitled* (plate 35) and the host of others. In this style of painting in Nigeria, artists draw upon their knowledge, experience, or memories of feeling to create expressive paintings.

Realistic paintings are also practiced in Nigeria. It is a painting that represents subject matter without artificiality and avoiding artistic conventions, implausible, exotic and supernatural elements (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2014). It is also a style that features pictorial naturalism, magical symbolism, and ethereal conceptualization. In Nigeria paintings such as *Yemoja*, (plate 30), *Abe Olumo* (plate 29) [not included in this paper], *Tete-a-tete* (plate 29) and *Creative Dialogue* (plate 32) [not included in this paper] show hyper-realistic expressions which are represented in different subjects and strive their way through many obstacles to justify their existence. These styles of painting look like a copy of the original life experience which may be difficult to separate from a picture.

Impressionism as a stylistic convention uses the effect of light to depict strong shadow quality in their painting. It also employs pure, prismatic color fresh from the tube unmixed in the pallet and laid directly on the canvas. In Nigeria, such paintings create a visual language of bright, rapidly applied color to capture light and atmosphere using broken brushstrokes in varying sizes. Examples of such are expressed in the *living and dying series* (plate, 31) and *Transition* (plate, 32). The subject matter is often casual, everyday life, captured with an immediacy enhanced by transient effects of light and atmosphere. However, paintings in Nigeria has been categorized into various styles as shown in figure, 1 and 2 below:

Styles	Frequency	Percentage
Expressionism	24	34.3
Naturalism	12	17.1
Abstraction	10	14.3
Symbolism	8	11.4
Stylization	4	5.7
Cubism	4	5.7
Realism	4	5.7
Impressionism	4	5.7
TOTAL	70	100

Table 1: Analysis of contemporary painting styles

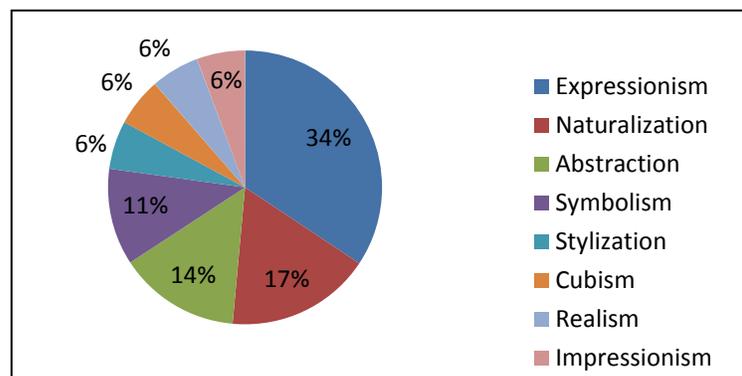


Figure 1: Analyses contemporary painting styles

Conclusion

It has been established in this study that styles are usable in Nigerian paintings, and that most of the styles emanated from philosophy and ideology of various art institutions in Nigeria, art workshops, and the independent styles from the individual artist. The stylistic classification is also necessary for continuum practice of painting in Nigeria. Individual artists tend to distinguish themselves within the frame of the existing style. The search for freedom fueled the spirit of individualism and also infused the practice with national consciousness and cultural pride culminating in a synthesis of indigenous and Western ideas. It has also been instituted that expressionism is the major style of painting in Nigeria. The study has enhanced our understanding of the applicable method of addressing the visual complexity that characterizes the identification of style of the 20th-century contemporary Nigerian painting.



Plate 1:

UcheOkeke, *March of the masquerade*, 1980
Ink and brush on paper.
(Art Fact, 2010)



Plate 2

MoyoOkediji, *Kuti*, 2007
Oil on board.
(The Artist's Archive, 2008)



Plate 3

KunleAdeyemi, *Iya Ilu*, 2010
Oil on board.
(The Artist's Archive, 2013)



Plate 4

TolaWewe, *Race, Gender and Sexuality in*
Oil on board.
(Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 5
Jimoh Akolo, *The Conspiracy*, 1981
Oil on Canvas
(Artist Archive 2000)



Plate 6
Joe Musa *Mask I*, 2001
Oil on Canvas
(Joe Musa Recent Works, Exhibition
Catalogue, 2008:9)



Plate 7
Yusuf Grillo, *Mother and child*, 1981
Oil on board
(Nucleus 1981:69.)



Plate 8
Ogakwu Chinedu, *Women's day*, 2009
Mixed Media.
(Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 9
Kolade Oshinowo *Aso Ebi*, 2010
Oil on Canvas.
(Artist Archive 2012)

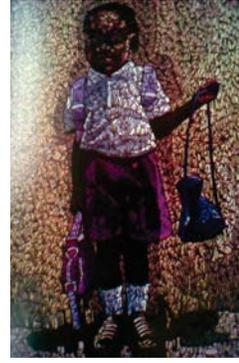


Plate 10
Mufu Onifade, *Jesinmi*, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
Whisper Araism, Exhibition Catalogue 2010



Plate 11
Ibe Ananaba, *Ngozi Schommers*, 2008
Water Colour
(Ibeananaba.blogspot.com 2011)



Plate 12
Olumide Oresegun, *Untitled*. 2008
Oil on board.
(Artist Archive, 2010)

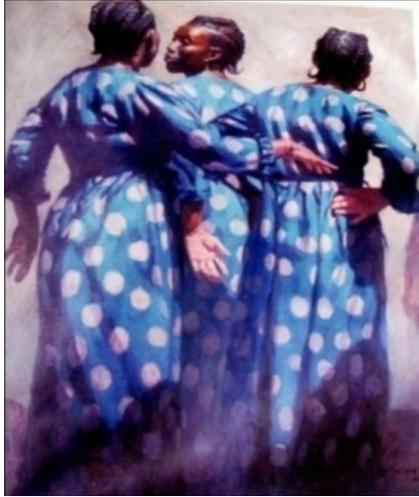


Plate 13
Samuel Ajobiewe, *Untitled*, 2007
Oil on Canvas.
(Ajobiewe exhibition catalogue, 2009: 8-9)



Plate 14
Ebenezer Akinola, *Untitled*, 2009
Oil on canvas.
(Lasting impressions exhibition catalogue, (2009)



Plate 15
Kelani Abass, *man and machine baba ijebu*, 2010
Oil on board.
(Artist Archive, 2013)

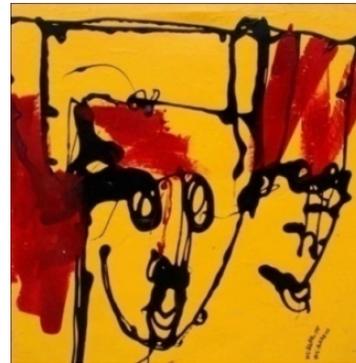


Plate 16
Duke Asidere, *Faces*, 2008
Acrylic and oil on canvas.
(Artist Archive, 2012)



Plate 17
Tayo Adenaike, *Untitled*, 1973
Water colour.
(Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 18
Olu Oguibe, *Lovers*, 1983
Acrylic on Canvas
(Artist Archive, 1995)



Plate 19
Jerry Buhari, *Goodevil*, 2008
Oil on canvas
(Artist Archive)



Plate 20
Dele Jegede, *Niger Delta: Militancy III*, 2010
Oil on board.
(Peregrinations a solo exhibition of drawings
and exhibition catalogue, 2010:33)



Plate 21
Emmanuel Dudu, *Behind Every Successful Man*, 2005
Oil on Canvas.
(Mydrim Gallery collection 2010)



Plate 22
Sam Ebohon, *Adam and Eve*, 2009
Oil on board.
(Artist Archive, 2012)



Plate 23
Pita Ohiwerei, *Red blanket*, 2007
Oil on canvas
(Artist Archive 2010)



Plate 24
Godwin Adesoye, *untitled*, 2010
Oil on board.
(Artist Archive 2010)



Plate 25
Ben Osaghae, *fish propaganda*, 1997
Acrylic on Canvas
(Artist Archive)



Plate 26
Sam Ovraili, *Untitled*, 2004
Oil on Canvas
(Artist Archive)



Plate 27
Edosa Oguigo, *Dance Series*, 2008
Oil on board.
(Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 28
Gani Odutokun, *Durbar-The Race*, 1993
Oil
Nucleus 1981:88



Plate 29
Titus Agbara, *Tete-a-tete*, 2010
Oil on canvas
(Artist Archive 2011)



Plate 30
Abayomi Barber, *Yemoja*, 1993
Oil on barber board.
(Dance of the Mind exhibition catalogue 2008: 22)



Plate 31
Steve Folaranmi, *living and dying Series*, 2007
Oil on board .
(Artist Archive, 2008)



Plate 32
Abiodun Olaku, *Transition*, 1999
Oil on Canvas.
(arcadja.com 2013)



Plate 33
EdosaOguigo, *equestrian spirit*
Oil on Canvas
(Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 34
.Alex Nwokolo, *Tropicano*.
Oil on Canvas.
(Musing an exhibition of recent painting
exhibition catalog 2009:6)



Plate 35
Joshua Nmesirionye, *untitled*.
Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2013)

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