

Calabashes and Gourds as Avant-Garde Materials in Painting

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Abstract— The materials and techniques used in production of art works are expanding daily as there appears no more restrictions in what artists could apply. So much so that discarded items recovered from dumpsites or in nature such as the calabash are utilised inart, particularly in creating paintings. It is worth to note that the calabash has had a long tradition in Africa, especially in Nigeria where it is applied for diverse purposes. However, this paper seeks to highlight the calabash as avant-garde material in art with particular focus on painting. In this paper, the author analyses Twelve (12) acrylic paintings on calabashes and gourds by of Bisalla Aliyu Mohammed. This paper concludes and recommends artist to explore uncommon materials in creating unique works of art for the world to experience their point of view.

Keywords— Calabash, Painting, Avant-garde, Material, Art, Innovation, Creativity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nigerian artists, like their counterparts in other part of the world, mostly use imported art materials in creating works of art. While this practice is wide spread, it is, however, not due to the absence of “local” materials to do same. Currently, a lot of Nigerian artists who are into improvisation are creating works of art that are innovative using unconventional materials. Onuzulike (2001) cited in Ukwa and Mbauike (2017) believes that this approach of creating works of art is due “to new knowledge, ideas and materiality that abound in the environment.” Some notable Nigerian art scholars such as Egonwa (2017) opines that a lot of Nigerian artists’ are now creating works of art with materials that were previously considered to be unsuitable for creating works of art. The reasons are not farfetched, considering that in the avant-garde art, the “primacy of idea” is considered more and above the materials that were used in creating the work.

For these reasons, it is daunting for most artists to just pick out what anyone would have thought were the most appropriate materials used in creating a work of art. Indeed, whether at the pre-production, production and post-production stages, Muscato (2015) in Ukwa and Mbauike (2017) believe that it is difficult to ascertain at the beginning “whatever a piece of art” would be finally “made of”. This process, perhaps, led O’Brien (1998), and Egonwa (2017) to submit that artists are always mindful of their intentions, especially at the pre-production-stage where the work to be created is been crystalised in sketches either on paper, canvas and so on. To further illustrate this case in point, Egonwa (2017) observes that the post-production-stage is that point in which the artists’ has portrayed his/her ‘ways of seeing’ which literarily consist the things that were perceived and interpreted for the

viewersto “see” throughthe artwork.As a result, Egonwa (2017)citing Edward de Bono (1967) agrees with the view that artist are lateral thinkers who expounds or “solveproblems using direct, creative step-by-step approach/logic.”He concludes that what differentiates the artists’ from non-artists’ are in the waysartists perceive the world. Gray and Malins (20204) made this point even clearer that “unlike other disciplines, where formal logic and serial thinking are predominant, artists and designers are usually visual, lateral thinkers”. The authors further expound that,

“in art and design, there are no certainties, no ‘right’ answers, no simple solutions, no absolute objectivity. All views are admissible, many interpretations are possible, different ‘ways of seeing’ are encouraged – indeed, one might say that the ambiguity of visual language is its strength and fascination, and one reason for the persistence of visual practices”.

The above submissions led the author of this paper to take a criticallook atBisalla Aliyu Mohammed’sCalabashes and gourdsartworks asavant-garde materials in art, particularly as“supports or grounds” in painting.

2. BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE ARTIST



Bisalla Aliyu Mohammed was born in November 1972 at Kaiama in Kwara State, North Central Nigeria. While is home town is Wawa in Borgu Local Government Area of Niger State. Bisalla holds a B.A (Hons) Degree, a Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) of the Nasarawa State University, Keffi and Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree and, the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 2002, 2007 and 2014 respectively. In 2008, he had his National Youth Service at the Fine and Applied Arts Department of the Federal College of Education, Okene, Kogi State. At the end of his National Service, he got a “Recommendation Award” of the Kogi State Government for dedication to service. Thereafter, he taught ‘Art’ at the Federal Government College, Keffi from 2005 to 2008. Currently, he teaches drawing and painting at the Federal Polytechnic, Nasarawa where he has held the position of Head of Fine and Applied Arts Department and Deputy Dean of the School of Environment Studies.

3. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CALABASH AND GOURDS AS TOOLS IN SERVICE OF MAN

In Nigeria, Africa and other parts of the world, the calabash and gourd thrive on fertile soils. The Calabash is a ball-shaped fruit of a tree that belongs to the Crescentia cujete family of plants which is noted to have originated in tropical America. Similar to the calabash are Gourds (Curcubita, Lagenaria). The history of the calabash would not be exhaustively discussed without mentioning its use as a utilitarian object in several African societies. Ajayi and Adekoya (2019) quoting Oyegun (2013) submits that the fruit of the calabash tree also referred to as “calabash” and the “gourd” which is a leguminous plant come in varieties of shapes, sizes and colours are deplored

into several uses. For instance, the calabash as well as the edible fleshy inside of gourds can be hollowed out and made into different utilitarian objects such as bowls, cups and so on. Akprara (2003) citing Oyelola (?) points out that in ancient Kanem Borno Empire (9th–19th BC), Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Battuta (1304-1377), a 14th century Arab scholar and traveler, eat food in a half cut out calabash shaped in the form of a bowl.

According to Ajayi and Adekoya (2019) calabashes are used as bowls for washing clothes, storing water, milk, medicine, soap dish and so on. Carved, painted and decorative calabashes functions in different ways in Nigeria. It function as a saucer on which Kola-nut, money and other items are placed in it while entertaining visitors. Small calabashes and gourds are used as containers in preparing charms after which incarnations are cast on them to assume magical powers. It is also used in keeping rite and ritual items during the worshipping of the gods and deities. Calabashes and gourds are vital items when chieftaincy titles are being conferred on distinguished members of society. It is an important accoutrement in masquerades costumes.

Unprocessed as well as non-carved calabashes and gourds are also used as fishing “flouts” and containers in keeping fishes during fishing expeditions by fishermen (Ajayi and Adekoya 2019, Bisalla 2023). Carved and decorated calabashes and gourds serve aesthetic purposes when they are hung on walls in living rooms, hotel, bar, restaurants, offices and so on. And as part of innovations and depending on the consumer’s choice, beautifully carved calabashes with different inscriptions, quotes and phrases such as “Jesus Never Fails, The Lord is My Shepherd, ‘Happy Home’ and so on are produced as souvenirs (Ogumor, 2003: 140).

4. ANALYSIS OF BISALLA ALIYU MOHAMMED CALABASH PAINTINGS

All artists are the same, but the perspicacity of their vision and the power of their works may depend on the degree of their attachment to various elements and principles of design and on their relation to the exigencies and realities of their time and environment....

The above excerpt by Afuba (2003) cited in Ikwuemesi (2003) underscore how both budding and professional artists in Nigeria founds different ways of engaging the calabash and gourds in creating works of art. Bisalla (2023) claims that he explores different sizes and shapes of calabashes and gourds as viable avant-garde support for painting. He philosophises that the varied shapes and sizes - ovals, spheres and cylinders –of calabash and gourds can be used in defining the human life cycle, such as “beginning” and “terminal.” He asserts that the end of one’s life marks the beginning of another. As one dies another is being born and so goes the cyclical nature of life. Accordingly, Bisalla applied “Bokobaru’s” patterns and motifs in creating some realistic and abstract paintings. In this sense, the “Bokobaru’s” patterns are categorized into four series namely; Plee, Keeree, Gunboo and Zeere. Each of the series is consist of over twenty (20) paintings.

SERIES I: Plee (Flat Calabash)

According to Bisalla, ‘Plee’ which in his native language refers to the “flat-shaped” calabashes comes first in this series. He submits that these flat-shaped calabashes are used by the Hausas, Yoruba’s, Igbos, Bokobaru’s and several ethnic groups in West Africa. Whilst seemingly appearing flat, it is their bowl-shaped nature that inspires

their adaption as support/ground for his avant-gardes-painting-voyage. The artist appears to have employed the services of the calabash to portray diverse humans' activities (struggles and survival) that poses a threat in sustainable environmental practices.



Plate I, "Untitled", Acrylic on Calabash, 2023



Plate II 'Untitled', Acrylic on Calabash, 2023

Despite the cultural activities in Plate 'I' and 'II', the viewer would notice the non-vegetative state of the painting as it directs the viewers' to note the effects of felling of trees due to human activities. In spite of government efforts at combing try felling, this phenomenon is common to Northern Nigeria's rural and semi-urban areas where desertification has remained nightmarish.



Plate III, "At our Comfort", Acrylic on Calabash, 2023



Plate IV 'Our Daily Bread', Acrylic on Calabash, 2023

The effects of desertification been caused by humans' activities in Plates 'I' and 'II' appear to have reversed in Plates 'III' and 'IV'. In both paintings, the artist portrays a warming up-temperate environment with some blooming vegetation. Specifically, in Plate 'III', the artist portrays a sunset environment in which three figures can be seen walking, perhaps, homeward bound towards the hazy distance. While in Plate 'IV', the painting depicts a figure, probably a Fulani herder on fishing activity under the comfort of the shade provided by the tree, showing governments' efforts at reforestation is yielding positive results.

SERIES II: kere'e

The adaption of different shapes of calabashes as a support/ground for creating his paintings, the artist opines that those produced under the "kere'e" series are very significant in the portrayal of certain activities in the environment. According to him, the paintings created depicts some of the diverse human activities in the artist's environment - politics, economy and so on. The exploration of various natural resources in Nigeria and the negative effects they have on the environment - oil spillage on fauna/aquatic forms, desertification and so on cannot be overstated. In this series, the artist apply colours in moving strokes as a technique in depicting the extent of damage that the environment has been subjected over the years. The artist believes that these paintings represent his voice in calling those responsible to desist in deference to safe and sustainable environmental practices.



Plate V, 'Spillage I' Acrylic on Calabash, 2023



Plate VI, "Spillage II', Acrylic on Calabash, 2023

It would be observe that the scenery depicted in Plate 'V' shares a lot of similarities with the painting in Plate 'VI' in terms of lushness and isolation. In both paintings, however, the artist portray a seemingly flooded environment inundated, perhaps by heavy rainfall. In Plate V, the artist presents the viewer with a picture of a house with either thatched or corrugated roofing. It is flanked on each side by blossoming trees. In both paintings, though, the viewer may possibly notice the blossoming trees and withered vestiges of what have once stood as trees in the environment. A further observation of these paintings show that this houses façades cannot be not clearly marked out having been fused to the surrounding elements in the largely flooded space owing, perhaps, to aftermath of a rain storm.



Plate VII, 'Purple City I', Acrylic on Calabash, 2023



Plate VIII, 'Untitled' Acrylic on Calabash, 2023

Also similar to the two previously analysed paintings in Plates 'V and VI', is the painting titled "Purple City" in Plate 'VII' in which the artist presented the viewer a picture of what appears to be a temperate, inaccessible environment. This view appears to be markedly different from the warmth atmosphere presented in Plates 'V' and 'VI'. The painting presents a dreary, freezing planet with a dying-reddish Sun. This painting remind humans us of issues of climate change - global warming and the others. The artists uses this painting in calling humans to act urgently in saving the earth from greenhouse gas pollution. In Plate 'VIII', the artist presents the viewer with a picture consisting three persons in a seeming conversation, perhaps, in regards to all the issues been discussed thus far.

SERIES III: Gomboo

In this series, the artist applies the long-shaped, fatty-headed-spoon-shaped calabashes in creating the paintings. He claims that the Hausas' the Bokobaru's and other surrounding ethnic groups - Kambari, Boko, Batunou, Busan and so on –uses them for drinking water, Pap, Fura, kunu, Nunu and a range of other foods (Bisalla, 2023).



Plate IX, 'Mai Nunu', Acrylic on Calabash, 2023



Plate X, 'Symbiosis, II', Acrylic on Calabash, 2023

In Plate 'IX', the artist (Bisalla) applied his knowledge of Borgu's traditional forms, patterns and motifs in depicting this semi-abstracted painting of the Fulani milk maid traditional referred as 'Mai Nunu.' Set on a yellow background, the artist portrays the 'Mai-Nunu' on the calabash surface in its near natural orange/carton colour. While the figure is draped in white and blue which choicest apparel of the Fulani's, he applied black in accentuating the eyes, nose, and ears, the hands and so on. The artist also highlighted the Borgu's traditional forms, patterns and motifs in creating the painting in Plate 'X'. Serving as the ground for this painting, the artist laid the red-hue brush-strokes in varying degrees on this long-shaped, bowl-headed calabash. The composition is held together by the black and white on the yellow coloured background. The viewer is made to observe the seemingly lyrical circles, semicircles, diagonal and horizontal lines that are heighten by the yellow background.

SERIES IV: Zeere

According to Bisalla (2023), "Zeere" is made up of gouges in different sizes that are used in storing grains, water/liquids, food and traditional medicines. Cut into halves, they also serve as floaters for fishermen.



Plate XI, 'An Elder', Acrylic on Calabash, 2023



Plate XII, 'For the Ancestors' Acrylic on Calabash, 2023

The motifs used in this series in Plate 'XI' and Plate 'XII' are of the Bokobaru's ethnic groups mostly found in Kwara, Niger and Kebbi States of Nigeria (Bisalla, 2023). The artist avers that the philosophy behind these paintings resulted from the destructive nature of man's avarice for wealth that leads to committing of evil. Red, black and blues are the dominant colours in this composition.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the foregoing, we have seen that diverse media can be applied in creating works of art, the process entails that the artist at all times chooses the media most suitable in transforming the idea in to art. Even as this issue remains what it is, artist are mostly unsure of what medium to apply for creating a work of art, especially at the contemplative stage. While artists create their works, it is the end product often referred to as the "artwork" that the viewer sees the artist's ways of seeing and objectifying the world from start to finishing." This is what Bisalla (2023) did in those Twelve (12) pieces selected from over fifty (50) pieces of calabash paintings. This paper recommends that artists should endeavour to create works that are dictated not only by the primacy of ideas but also the physicality of the materials as been demonstrated in Bisalla's calabash paintings.

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