

Thematic Concerns in 21st Century Paintings in Nigeria Art Schools

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Abstract: The paper discusses theme as related to various art Schools in Nigeria. Themes in painting are associated with the training acquired in various art schools in Nigeria. Through careful observation of paintings by their themes in some art schools in Nigeria, there are those that represent cultural or mythology, nature, day to day activities and almost everything in life and other imagination which become theme for a painting. However, there are some painting themes which have enticed the artists and admirers for ages. Five schools were selected across different geographical location in Nigeria. They are: Zaria School, Yaba School, Nsukka School, Ife School and Auchu School. A total of 500 paintings were randomly selected from graduates of the schools, out of which 50 paintings which constitutes ten percent (10%) were examined to know the uniqueness of their themes as associated with the philosophy inherent in the selected schools. However, the themes of painting in Nigeria art school focuses on issues relating to cultural issues or mythology, nature and day to day activities of the people. It was observed that most of the themes in Nigeria paintings are of daily activities of the people (76%). It was also discovered that many students of various art school follows the trend of curriculum in their school for development of themes in their painting.

Keywords: Theme, Art School, Painting, Modern Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

In art, a theme is a broad idea or a message conveyed by a work of art. This message is usually about general happening in life, society or human nature. Themes are also the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a work of art, some of such ideas or concepts are intentionally discussed, portrayed or promoted by the artist; others may be unintentionally implied. However, identifying thematic concerns requires analysis and consideration of the subject of representation in a painting. Many prospective artists attend various art institutions to acquire different degree of artistic knowledge in Nigeria. Painting as one of the forms of art is also taught through various representations of subject matter in different techniques and styles. Through careful observation of paintings by their themes in some art schools in Nigeria, there are those that represent cultural or mythology, nature, day to day activities and almost everything in life and other imagination which become theme for a painting. However, there are some painting themes which have enticed the artists and admirers for ages. Themes and motifs in paintings are products of historical process and change, so also icons make all sorts of statements which can be narrative and commentatorial[1]. This is because art generally reproduces life and passes judgments on its phenomena.

The scholarship in painting is very robust and interesting. The extant studies have largely concentrated on themes, biography of painters and styles among a few other scholastic concerns. Adenaike [2] examined the cultural influence of Ulli on the painting practices in the contemporary Nsukka art school. Moyo Okediji [3] and Campbell [4] in separate studies discussed and highlighted the peculiarities of the mural paintings in some Yoruba palaces and shrines. Chukueggu [5] in his classification of Nigerian art made references to paintings among other art forms. Abodunrin's [6] study in non-verbal communication was premised on colour symbolism among the Yoruba as paradigm for Nigerian painters while Olusegun and David's study [12] focused largely on themes and the influence of the Lagos city in Nigerian landscape painters. Kalilu [7] made special reference to painting in his discussion on vocational education and the challenges of the Nigeria economy. He made allusions to themes in his analysis. However, thematic concern as associated with schools in Nigeria has apparently not been of concern in scholarship. This may, perhaps, be due to the erroneous belief that the themes in schools may not be necessary in the study of painting in Nigeria.

In most of the art schools in Nigeria students are sometimes given freedom to determine themes or may be directed on what constitutes the direction of the

themes of their painting which can be largely interpreted in various ways. The study is aimed at knowing the thematic direction of paintings in Nigeria art schools with a view to determine the general, peculiar and cross-currents tendency of each of the theme identified. Out of so many art schools in Nigeria, only few formal schools that have distinguished themselves with unique characteristics in style and theme were study. Five schools were selected across different geographical location in Nigeria. They include Zaria School, Yaba School, Nsukka School, Ife School and Auchi School. A total 500 paintings were randomly selected from students and graduates of the schools, out of which 50 paintings which constitute 10% were examined with 10 paintings from each school graduates.

Themes of painting in Nigerian Art Schools

Schools were built to accommodate the teeming population of the eligible students in the country with the establishment of different courses. Fine art was also introduced through the efforts of the earlier pioneers who fought for the inclusion of the course in the curriculum of Nigerian schools with the assistance of Kenneth Murray, a British officer [8]. In most of the schools, the curriculum was based on the philosophy and ideology of each school with almost attention to skill development in art. Painting was also introduced as part of the courses in fine art. In painting courses, subjects such as still-life, landscape, figure and non-figural composition were taught in most of the Art schools in Nigeria which enable students to develop further in their thematic growth. Landscape painting depicts the physical world that surrounds us which includes features such as mountain, valleys, vegetation and bodies of water. The sky is another important element shaping the mood of landscape paintings. Various themes in Landscape art ranges from highly detailed and realistic to impressionistic, expressionistic and idealized. As in western culture, landscape painting became established in Nigeria contemporary art scene as an independent genre. In Nigeria, landscape painting has been greatly explored using the basic parameters of linear and aerial perspective. This can be expressed in varied media and technique of painting.

Nonetheless, still-life painting is another subject of representation in Nigerian painting which has been greatly explored among student and professional artists. A still-life painting is the study of inanimate objects which include natural objects. These objects are typical of those of the everyday life and it's including plants, fruits, vegetables, dishes, automobile parts, bottles and others. The elements that make up a still-life can be arranged or composed by the artist at will. In Nigeria, still-life has been expressed using different genres of style and media to achieve various thematic compositions.

A figure painting has also been greatly explored in Nigerian painting to achieve various themes in any of the painting media. The subject of the human figure, whether clothed or unclothed is the act or art of depicting human figure either in life posture or through imagination with due attention to proportion, anatomical details and moods. Figural composition can as well be achieved through addition of other elements to achieve photographic representation in painting in naturalism, realism, abstraction or even non-figural abstraction normally devoid of recognizable elements of realistic and naturalistic forms. In this non-figural composition, the artist uses visual language of shapes, forms, line and colour to interpret a subject matter, without necessarily providing the audience with a recognizable visual reference point. Most artists developed various themes through different subjects introduced to them in schools.

However, subject and theme are two concepts in arts that are often confused when it comes to their usage and connotations. Subject is used to describe a branch of knowledge while theme focuses on the central point of a subject, however, there could be several themes developed from a particular subject. All art schools in Nigeria concentrated on the teaching of the subject above as it relates to their curriculum. However, the themes of painting in Nigeria art school focuses on issues relating to cultural issues or mythology, nature and social life of the people.

Cultural themes exist because of our passion for promoting and preserving our tradition and cultural heritage. It examines the records and narrative descriptions of past knowledge, customs, and arts of a group of people. The art and culture of Nigeria represents the intensity of Nigerian lifestyle coupled with a glorious history of the past to bank upon. One of the major aspects of Nigerian painting and culture lies in the fact that they draw inspiration from traditional folk heritage. A large number of Nigeria painters from different art schools gained prominence both at home and abroad in the use of cultural iconology to propagate their individual styles and techniques (16%). Though cultural themes are few in number but highly articulate in presentation of cultural ideas and commentaries. These cultural themes are in the range of traditional dancers, drummers, mythology, goddesses, folklore and almost everything associated with cultural imagery of the society. In Nigeria for example, paintings such as *Eyo Adimu* (plate, 8), *Mask I* (plate, 21), *Durbar* (plate, 25), *Abuja Masquerade* (plate, 28), *Iroke* (plate, 36), *Ibeji* (plate, 37) and the host of others represent one form of cultural related themes or the other.

Furthermore, social themes are those that focus on everyday life activities of the people within their locality which are rendered in different styles and techniques. Artists in various schools worked on themes

that are narrative, descriptive which are mostly done in accurate photographic realism. These daily life activities involve the use of figural expressions to convey the true representation of colours and forms in painting. Artists paint daily activities that individuals normally do, unassisted, to take care of themselves. Large numbers of paintings representing this are found in Nigeria artistic landscape (76%). These activities include: Market scenes, City lives, dignity of labour, social functions and other daily happenings within the society. Paintings such as *Dance series* (plate, 6), *Men of honour* (plate, 13), *Give us today* (plate, 16), *The Quest* (plate, 17), *Successful man* (plate, 18), *Faces* (plate, 20), *Celebrating womanhood* (plate, 22), *Hair do* (plate, 23), *Good and evil* (plate, 29), *Kuti* (plate, 31), *The way we are* (plate, 33), *Thinker* (plate, 34), *Homesick* (plate, 35), *Love me tender* (plate, 40), *Mother's joy* (plate,43), *Martyr* (plate, 47) and the host of others, represent issues relating to people and their daily happening within the environment. Nigeria has been rich in various socio-political and socio-cultural themes across different eras. Numerous themes abound in private and public collections. These sub-themes are not limited to a particular school all because they share similar curriculum content which enable similarities in their paintings.

Nonetheless, nature study is equivalent to the natural, physical, or material world or universe. It is also refers to the phenomena of the physical world, and also to life in general. Nature in artistic practice potent themes that are associated with beauty of nature in the representation of living plants and animal, and in some

cases to the processes associated with inanimate objects. It is often taken to mean the natural environment or wilderness. Few paintings in Nigeria are seen representing this (8%). Example of such include: animals, rock, forest, beaches, and in general those things that have not been substantially altered by human intervention. In Nigeria, paintings such as *Equestrian spirit* (plate, 5), *Tropicano* (plate, 11), *Untitled* (plate, 14), and *Living and dying series* (plate, 38) represented various level natural studies which are depicted in different styles and techniques.

Table 1: Thematic Analyses of Paintings in Nigeria Art Schools

S/N		Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Social	38	76%
2	Cultural	8	16%
3	Nature	4	8%

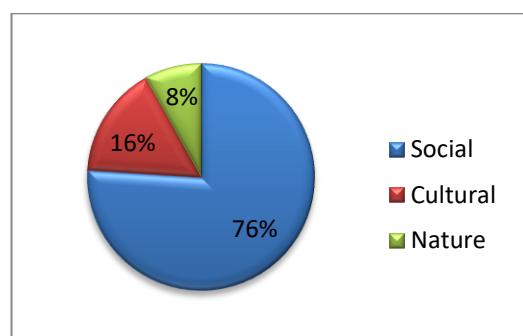


Chart 1: Thematic Analyses of Paintings in Nigeria Art Schools

YABA ART SCHOOL GRADUATES



Plate 1
Godwin Adesoye, *untitled*.
Oil on board. (Collection of the Artist, 2013)



Plate 2
Godwin Adesoye, *untitled*.
Oil on board. (Collection of the Artist, 2013)

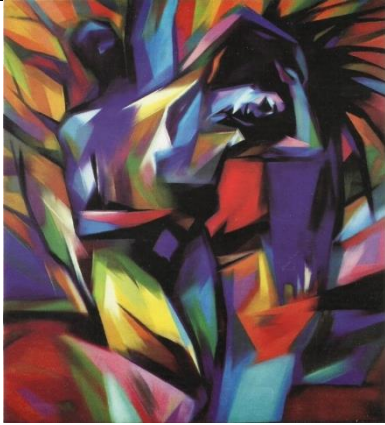


Plate 3
Sam Ebohon. *Adam and Eve*
Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2012)



Plate 4
Sam Ebohon, *Confrontation*
Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2012)



Plate 5
Edosa Oguigo, *equestrian spirit*.
Oil on Canvas (Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 6
Edosa Oguigo, *dance Series*. Oil on board.
(Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 7
Abiodun Olaku, *Misty Morning*.
Oil on tex-Canvas. (<http://www.arcadja.com>)



Plate 8
Abiodun Olaku, *Eyo Adimu*.
Oil on Canvas. (<http://www.artfact.com>)



Plate 9
Samuel Ajobiewe, *Imoran agba*.
Oil on canvas. (Ajobiewe exhibition catalogue, 2009[9])



Plate 10
Samuel Ajobiewe, *Commerce*.
Oil on canvas. (Ajobiewe exhibition catalogue, 2009: 8)[9]

AUCHI ART SCHOOL GRADUATES



Plate 11
Alex Nwokolo, *Tropicano*.
Oil on Canvas. (Musing an exhibition of recent painting exhibition catalogue, 2009:6)



Plate 12
Alex Nwokolo, *Untitled*.
Oil on Canvas. (Musing an exhibition of recent painting exhibition catalogue, 2009:4)



Plate 13
Joshua Nmesirionye, *Men of Honour*.
Oil on Canvas. (Artist Archive, 2013)



Plate 14
Joshua Nmesirionye, *untitled*.
Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2013)



Plate 15
Titus Agbara, *Tete-a-tete*
Oil on canvas (Artist Archive 2011)

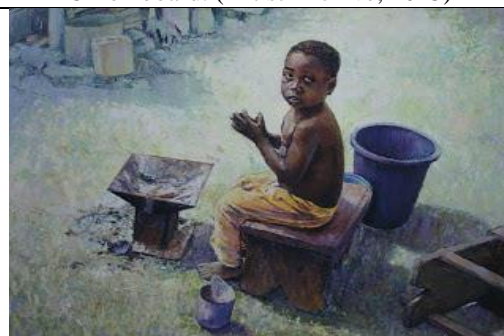


Plate 16
Titus Agbara, *Give us today*
Oil on canvas (Artist Archive 2010)

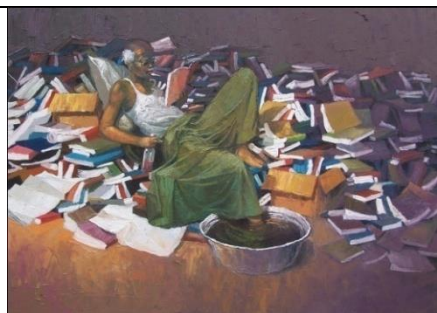


Plate 17
Emmanuel Dudu, *The Quest 2*, 2006
Oil on Canvas. (Mydrim Gallery collection 2010)



Plate 18
Emmanuel Dudu, *Behind Every Successful Man*, 2005
Oil on Canvas. (Mydrim Gallery collection 2010)

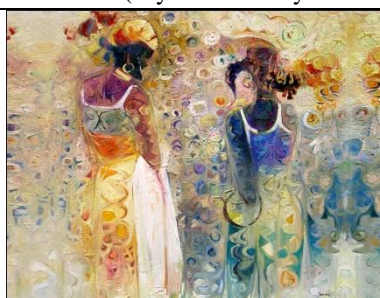


Plate 19
Sam Ovralti, *untitled*
Oil on Canvas (Cultural rebirth exhibition catalogue, 2008: 28)



Plate 20
Sam Ovralti *faces*.
Oil on Canvas. (Cultural rebirth exhibition

ABU ZARIA ART SCHOOL GRADUATES



Plate 21
Mask I.
Oil on Canvas. (Joe Musa Recent Works, Exhibition Catalogue, 2008:9)[13]



Plate 22
Joe Musa *Celebrating Womanhood*.
Oil on Canvas. (Joe Musa recent works Exhibition Catalogue, 2008:79)[13]



Plate 23
Duke Asidere, *Hair Do*.
Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2010) catalogue, 2008: 28



Plate 24
Duke Asidere, *untitled*.
Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2013)



Plate 25
Gani Odutokun, *Durbar-The Race*,
Oil, Source: Nucleus 1981:88



Plate 26
Gani Odutokun *the king shares a joke with his generals*
Oil on Canvas. (Artist SOAS, University of London
2000)



Plate 27
Dele Jegede, *Niger Delta: Militancy iii.*
Oil on Canvas. (Peregrinations a solo exhibition of
drawings and paintings exhibition catalogue, 2010:33)



Plate 28
Dele Jegede, *Abuja Masquerade.*
Latex/canvas. (Peregrination A solo exhibition of
drawing and paintings, 2011:41)



Plate 29
Jerry Buhari, *goodevil.*
Oil on board. (Artist Archive)



Plate 30
Jerry Buhari, *Desolation.*
Acrylic on Canvas. (Omenka Gallery Lagos 2000)

IFE ART SCHOOL GRADUATES

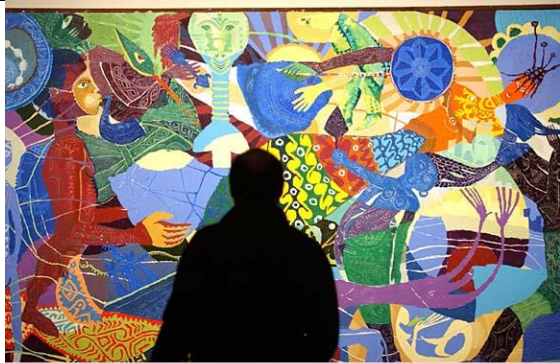


Plate 31
Moyo Okediji, *kuti.*
Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2008)



Plate 32
Moyo Okediji, *dutchman.*
Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2008)



Plate 33
Kunle Osundina, *The Way We Are*.
Oil on Canvas. (Symphony of Inspirations exhibition
catalogue, 2009:13)



Plate 34
Kunle Osundina, *Thinker*.
Oil on Canvas. (Cultural rebirth exhibition catalogue,
2008: 28)

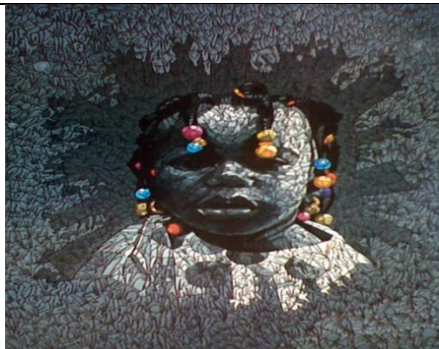


Plate 35
Mufu Onifade, *Homesick*
Acrylic on canvas Whisper Araism, Exhibition Catalogue
2010



Plate 36
Mufu Onifade, *Iroke (Companion)*,
Acrylic on canvas, Whisper Araism, Exhibition Catalogue
2010

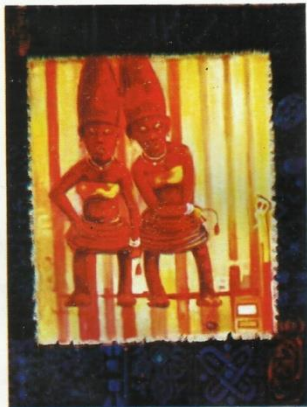


Plate 37
Steve Folaranmi, *Ibeji*.
Mixed Media. (Ife Art School in Retrospect exhibition
catalogue, 2005: 20)



Plate 38
Steve Folaranmi, *living and dying Series*)
Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2008)



Plate 39

Kunle Filani *More Is Less*.
Pen and Ink. (Kunle Filani in Retrospect exhibition catalogue, 2007: 49) [10]

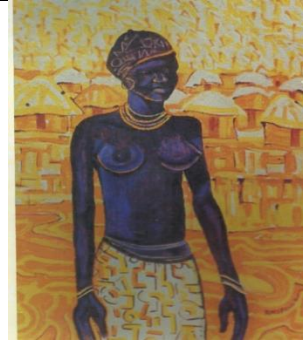


Plate 40

Kunle Filani *love Me Tender*.
Mixed Media. (Kunle Filani in Retrospect Exhibition Catalogue, 2007:52)[10]

NSUKKA ART SCHOOL GRADUATES



Plate 41

Tayo Adenaike, *Untitled*.
Watercolour. (Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 42

Tayo Adenaike, *When next what next*.
Watercolour. (Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 43

Chike Aniakor, *mother's joy*.
Oil on canvas. (Chike Aniakor Nsoforanthony's Blog, 2012)



Plate 44

Chike Aniakor, *mourners*.
Mixed media. (Chike Aniakor Nsoforanthony's Blog, 2012)



Plate 45
Ndidi Dike, *Untitled*.
Oil on board. (Artist Archive, 2010)



Plate 46
Ndidi Dike, *Competition V*,
Acrylic on Canvas (<http://ndididike.blogspot.com>, 2010)



Plate 47
Olu Oguibe, *martyr*.
Acrylic on Canvas (Artist Archive, 1995)



Plate 48
Olu Oguibe, *Lovers*.
Acrylic on Canvas (Artist Archive, 1995)



Plate 49
Abolore Awojobi, *untitled*
Acrylic. (Artist Archive 2012)



Plate 50
Abolore Awojobi, *Untitled*.
Acrylic. (Artist Archive 2012)

CONCLUSION

It has been observed that there is hybridization of themes among various graduate of different art schools in Nigeria. Artists paint different themes at different times across different art school in Nigeria. Zaria art school graduates in their themes representation present elongation of forms, with elegant architecture and human figures. Their study of nature includes images of horses and landscapes that most times reflect the grassland and savannah vegetation of the North. Also, Yaba art school graduates adopt themes in realistic

manner that is done in narrative, and descriptive way mostly in accurate realism of images of daily activities within the environment. The adaptation of 'Uli' art body painting sometimes influenced the trend of themes of Nsukka art school graduates while cultural orientations of Ife graduates also determine the trend of themes they portrayed. Auchu use of vibrant and sweet colour contributed to the kind of figurative and non-figurative themes they represented.

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