

DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM TRADITIONAL ARTS FOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN MODERN NIGERIAN ART AND CRAFT

By

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ABSTRACT

The success of a good work of art is the skillful manipulation of lines and forms and the positive and lasting effect it has on the viewer. In this technologically advanced world, there is the need for continual improvement in the skills of art and craft. Sadly, many have abandoned the traditional Nigerian art and have adopted the European style so as to meet the demands of the modern art world. Thus, erasing the Nigerian cultural heritage from the minds of modern generations. This paper thus, examines the skills involved by both artist and viewer in art and crafts. It also discusses the possibilities of drawing inspirations from selected traditional arts to develop skills in modern Nigerian art and crafts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past centuries, art has shaped cultures and affected the everyday lives of many. The heritage and legacies of arts have been preserved for coming generations. The significance and value of art works are thus better appreciated by securing and preserving the precious heritage.

In this modern world, many have abandoned the invaluable traditional heritage for foreign styles of art. This type of art is "devoid of any of the serious norms that characterize traditional art" (The Nucleus, 1981).

Not many are aware that the works of some European artists were greatly influenced by our traditional arts. Great artists like Picasso, Derain and Van Gogh probably experimented with African art, precisely Nigerian art. Symbols, lines and raw bright colours were generously used in painting and drawings.

These artists and many others defiantly rejected the western styles and sought inspiration from different art of Africa. As Gilbert (1998), says of a well known artist, "in breaking with western art conventions..., Picasso looked for inspiration from the other ancient traditions"

Such artists saw that there was no style in the world that did not find expression somewhere in African art. African art was seen as art full of relevant theories about techniques, perspectives and anatomy (Shyllon, 2002). This is why a British art teacher in the mid-nineteen thirties, Kenneth Murray preached the Nigerian contemporary art must source itself from its traditional

art and crafts. Thus, freeing themselves from being "enslaved to the Academy of the west" (Oloidi's study as cited by Jide, 2002).

The quest for Nigerian artists to be part of the technology aspect of modern art has led to less practice of Nigerian traditional arts. Many artists are into installation, constructivism, splashes, photomontage and so on. If these well celebrated European artists made their success by adopting the motifs and styles of our traditional art into their modern art, Nigerian contemporary artists should do even more.

This paper thus, examines possibilities of developing skills from selected Nigerian traditional art, precisely, Igbo traditional art to produce modern art and craft.

SKILLS IN ART AND CRAFTS

To a layman, art may be just drawing and application of colours, but art is much more than that. Like other practical disciplines, art requires skills.

Encarta Dictionary (2008), defines skill as "the ability to do something well, usually gained through training or experience". Uzoagba (2000), sees art as a "human conception made manifest by the skillful use of a medium". There are varieties of arts and crafts. Usually, art is divided into visual and non-visual arts. The visual arts are the ones that can be seen and felt physically. Under the visual art is, Fine and Applied arts. These arts under visual art could either be functional or for aesthetic purpose or both. The non-visual arts involve performing arts like music, dance, drama, poetry, songs and so on.

Since there are varieties of arts, varieties of skills are needed for each group. In visual arts like painting, drawing, sculpture, crafts and so on, the main skills required according to Hobbs & Salome (1991) are:

- The skills of seeing.
- The skills of describing.
- The skills of recording.
- The skills of enjoying art.

Usually, the world is so full of images that one may just glance through them and not really looking at them. It is good to take time to look at an image or an art work. After looking, one should be able to describe important details - namely, the various lines, shapes, colours and textures.

Recording is also an important aspect of skills in art and craft. One does not need to be forgetful looker. Whatever is seen should be recorded in memory. A good artist records images

and events as he sees them. At a convenient time, he produces them in his studio as imaginative art.

According to Hobbs & Salome (1991), "the purpose of an art work is to provide an aesthetic experience to the viewer". For a viewer to enjoy an art work, he must learn to enjoy art. The skill involved in enjoying art gives the viewer an aesthetic experience.

The skills involved in visual art and crafts are required of both the artist and the viewer. If an artist acquires the skills and the viewer does not, the art work will definitely not be successful.

The traditional artists exhibit the skills mentioned above in their works. This apparently led to the success of the traditional art works.

SELECTED TRADITIONAL ARTS

The artist can look for inspiration from a variety of traditional arts to develop his skills in modern art. This study highlights some selected traditional drawings from the eastern part of Nigeria. These drawings are called *uli*. Human bodies and murals are used as ground. It can also be found on potteries, woven clothes and wooden doors. Nature is used as an aesthetic guide for the artist. *Uli* designs come in different patterns, Zigzag, round, concentric circles, dots and so on. Animal representations like python, lizards and tortoise are not uncommon. There are also representations of natural vegetation like plants, grasses and trees, and heavenly bodies like sun, stars, full and half moon.

The main aim of *uli* art is for aesthetics. Through imitation of things in nature, *uli* artists beautify the body, walls and objects around them. Okeke (1982), states that " *uli* drawing is an attempt to enhance beauty of the human body or wall in the same way as *Eke*, (python) or *Ogini* (Rodent) is attractively striped". These beautiful and elegantly drawn motifs as Willis (1997), puts it, "represent things of physical importance, aesthetic appeal and reverence to traditional belief".

However, the materials are always available and affordable to all class of people. Even the less privileged can afford the decorations. All that is needed is skill, ability to manipulate lines, observe natural designs around and form beautiful patterns with the aid of these natural designs.

Colours are mostly red-orange, indigo, red, yellow, black, and white and are obtained from nature. Priming is done by liberally treating the skin with red camwood or yellow colour gotten from a special kind of vegetable. The actual drawing and design is applied with indigo and other darker colours.

Women are objects of physical beauty and aesthetics in Igbo culture, thus the work of *uli* is specifically left for them alone. It is used for beauty enhancement and attracting the male sex. It sometimes has medicinal value. It is believed to prevent some kind of eye ailment on babies and prevent chicken pox or measles from affecting the eyes. Sometimes they are used to prevent one from seeing the spirit of the dead. The main function of *uli* drawing is for decoration and aesthetics

SOME *ULI* SYMBOLS

According to Dunu (2005), these symbols are got from various sources such as numerical units, animal sources, plant life, man-made objects, cosmic elements and from artist's intuition.

MOTIFS FROM NUMERICAL SYMBOLS

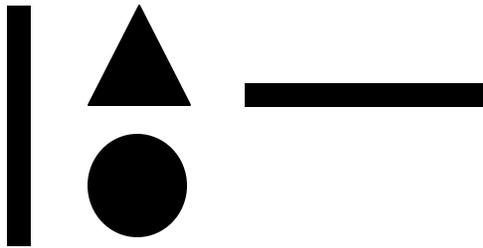


Fig 1: *Otu Mkpulu* (One Unit)

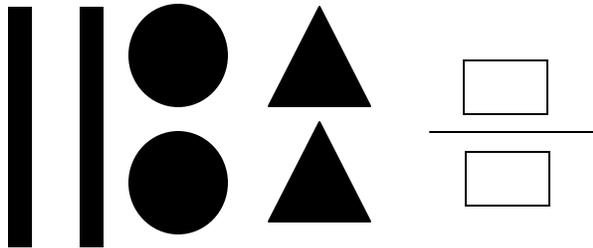


Fig 2: *Mkpulu Abuo* (Two Units)

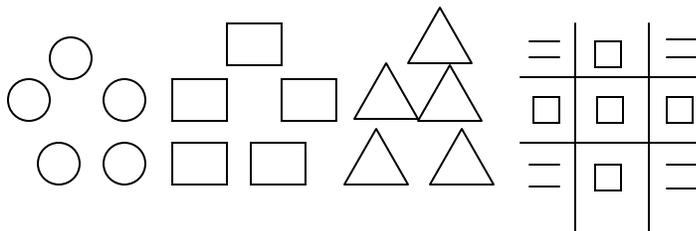


Fig 3: *Mkpulu Ise* (Five Units)

MOTIFS FROM ANIMAL SOURCES

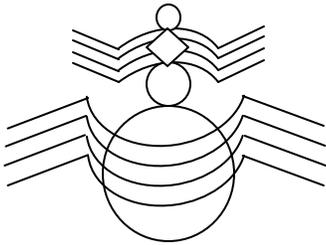


Fig 4: *Ududo* (Spider)

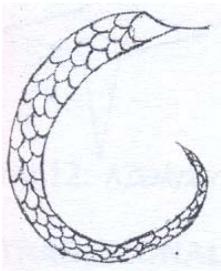


Fig 5: *Eke* (Python)



Fig 6: *Ejune* (Snail)

MOTIFS FROM PLANT LIFE

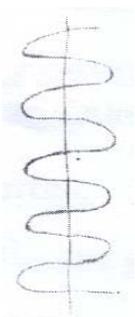


Fig 7: *Ukwu Ji* (Yam Stem)

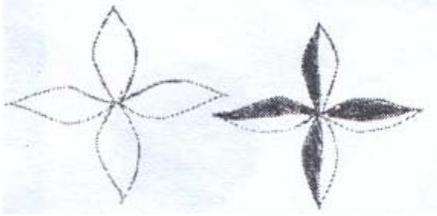


Fig 8: *Akwukwo Akpu* (cassava Leaf)

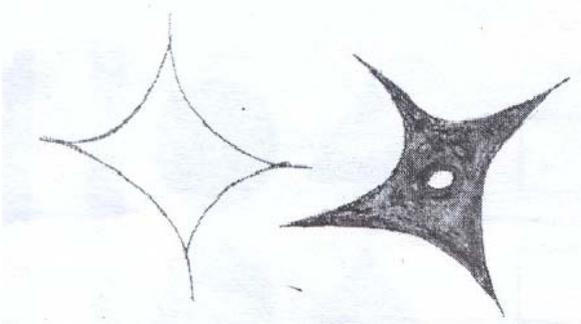


Fig 9: *Ogbe Oji* (Kola-nut pod)

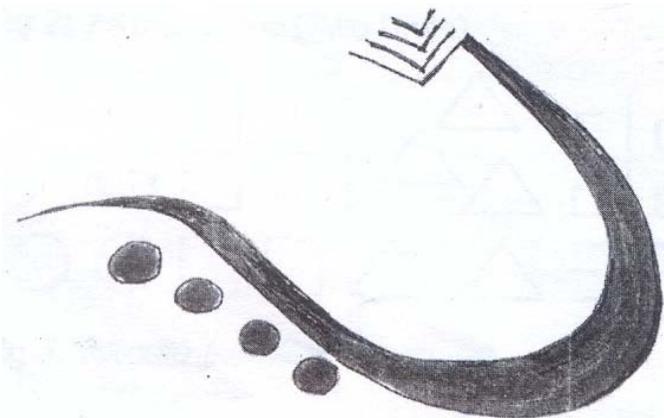


Fig 10: *Omu Nkwu* (Palm Frond)

MOTIFS FROM COSMIC ELEMENTS

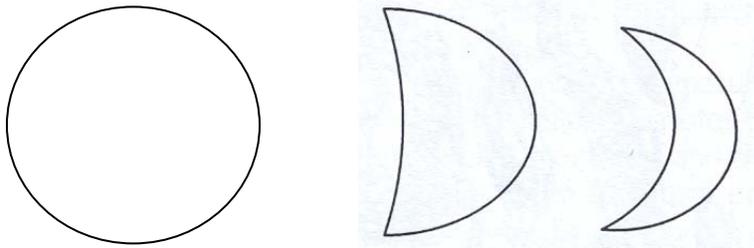


Fig 11: *Onwa* (Moon)

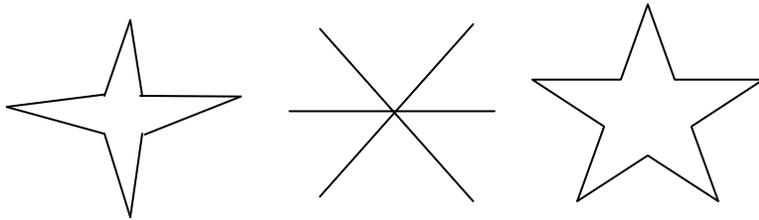


Fig 12: *Kpakpando* (Star)

TRADITIONAL ART AND MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Millennium Development Goals are geared towards positive changes in all aspects of life including art. In order to meet up with the global development, it will be unwise to abandon our ever cherished traditional values and art. It is thus possible to infuse these traditional values into modern Nigerian art, or draw inspiration from them while achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The works below are examples of modern art that drew inspirations from the traditional *uli* art and motifs.

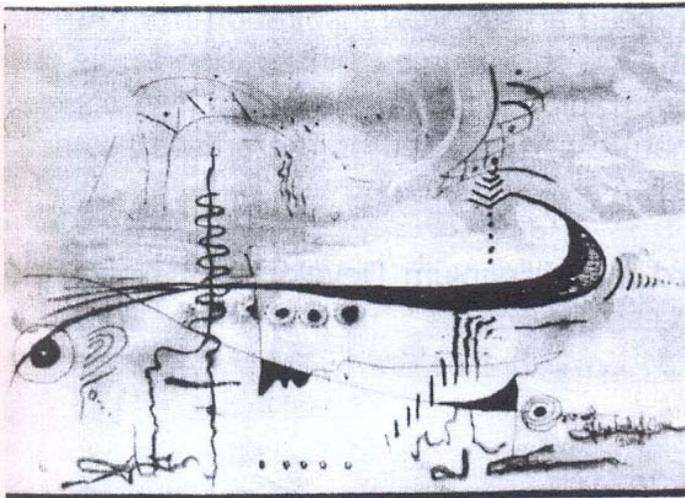


Plate 1: Onu Uche Bella. *Yam and Palm*. Pen and Ink, 18 X 28cm



Plate 2: Onu Uche Bella. *The Untouchables*. Pen and Ink, 18 X 24cm

The work in plate 1 is an abstract landscape drawing in pen and ink. *Uli* lines and symbols of yam stem, its tendrils and palms are carefully drawn with delicate flowing and graceful lines.

In plate 2, the pen and ink drawing of the untouchables portrays a tree dedicated to a traditional deity which stands in the heart of a virgin forest. Usually, such trees are not cut down. Even during construction of major roads some of such trees are left untouched. Instead, the road is usually diverted so as to spare the forest and trees. Line drawings of continuous *uli* are used to draw the trees, grasses, twisted and creeping plants. The intensity of the dense virgin area of the forest is shown with bold coiling lines of dark hue.

CONCLUSION

There is indeed the possibility of - drawing inspiration from traditional *uli* drawings. Since some well known European artists drew inspiration from Africa traditional art, African artists need not allow this source of inspiration to die out. A good artist can draw inspiration from traditional art and develop it in his own unique way. Just like the *uli* artists, nature can be used as the artist's aesthetic guide, and inspiration got from everything around him.

As an artist develops his skills toward the Millennium Development Goals, the traditional art and motifs can be a successful guide.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusion made in this paper, the following recommendations have been made:

- The use of *uli* designs should be encouraged in children's art and crafts.
- Artists should lift *uli* motifs and transfer them into modern ceramics wares, textiles, paintings, relief sculptures and murals.
- Awareness should be given to artists undergoing training of the need to develop their artistic skills by drawing inspiration from traditional art.
- Body decorations with these designs during festivals and marriage ceremonies among young maidens should be encouraged. When elaborately and skillfully done, will not only make the occasion likely but also help to preserve our rich cultural heritage.

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