

# Painting As an Object of Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

*This paper surveys the similarity between painting and philosophy; comparing the textual and the visual evidence of both sides as they bring meaning and understanding to humanity. It argues that both subjects are largely similar, seemingly differing only in character. A reflection on expressions and creations of scholars provides bases upon which the conclusion is drawn in this research that visual art is creativity and creativity is philosophy. Contrary to the popular insinuation in contemporary African society, there is no significant difference between art and philosophy. Objective wise, one bears evidence of textual truth while another locates a hermeneutic truth within the elements and principles of design. The common goal is locating the truth, the essence, the abode of lasting peace.*

## **Introduction**

The understanding and thinking of Sullivan (2010) toward art as a special mode of knowledge is gaining ground. This knowledge is said to be constructed within the context of emotion and imagination, which of course assumes truth outside the empirical logic that runs contrary to the belief of the old structure of knowledge in the physical and social sciences that infers the right to know and verify claims. In art, the nature of truth is subjective hence its foundation is based on experience and imagination.

One misconception shared by the public and some uninformed critics at large about what art is, some with naive ideas, is that art is the direct

personal expression of individual emotional experience as it translates into personal expression of life in visual terms. Art, however, differs from such views. According to Nochlin (in Alperson 1992), the making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, more-or-less dependent upon (and free from given temporality) defined conventions, schemata or systems of notation, which have to be learned and worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship or along individual explorations. The language of art is materially embodied in paint, line, form and space on canvas or paper, in stone or clay or plastic or metal. But it is neither a sub story nor a confidential whisper.

Conversely, philosophy is defined as a discipline concerned with examination of 'truth' as it relates to issues and 'being,' and its facts or postulations are analysed and reasoned out textually over time (Ukhurebor in Thompson, 1993). One of the key ideas in this paper is that philosophy has contributed to the understanding of artistic import and matters in the notion that we should not take the word 'art' at face value and accept it uncritically.

In contemporary Western value system, the word 'art' is commonly taken to refer to a set of things that contain certain types of paintings, sculpture, literature, theatrical and musical performance and such other subjects like philosophy. In everyday common sense, understanding of certain objects is regarded as being clearly and identifiably 'artistic in nature.' For example, the idea that Jerry Buhari's painting *:Nigerians House*, a poem by Wole Soyinka: *Telephone Conversation*, a play by Ola Rotimi: *The Gods are Not to Blame* or a story from Chinua Achebe, *There was a Country* is indeed an artwork that engages the reader with philosophical thought and artistic emotion, tells a lot.

Aniakor (2005) holds that an object of art that is a creative production of the artist is imbedded with philosophical meaning and eternal truth that most times cannot easily be read on the surface of the object but with careful contemplation. The nature of truth is such that it is difficult to assume a single position because the materiality of truth is relative to the person searching for the truth. Harold Pinter (in Sullivan 2006), holds that there is no hard distinction between what is true and false in the theatres, but could be compared with the inquiry of

knowledge in the visual arts especially painting. Pinter notes further that:

Truth in drama is forever elusive, you quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is your task. More often than not, you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or shape which seems to correspond to it, often without realising you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic arts. There are many faces to it; these truths challenge each other, and recoil from each other, reflect each, ignore each, tease each other, and blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment, then it slips through fingers and it is lost.

This is the same condition of truth in painting and in most visual (fine) arts as an instrument of knowledge. It is elusive, the material and the materiality combine to capture the essence of material truth in any given work. The truth depends on what one is looking for. It is at this point that nature of truth become objects of philosophical contemplation, whether as painting or as extant text.

Take for instance the Heideggerian theory which holds that Van Gogh's painting of the peasant shoe of the female farmer or perhaps his painting titled the 'potato eaters' construe universal truths that philosophy and religion seek to interpret. Van Gogh's paintings bring us face to face with the farmer's world, deeply attuned to the struggles and farming women plough the earth daily, caring for, struggling with, and ultimately depending on the earth to nurture and bring forth the harvest. Heidegger suggests that no one is more immediately attuned to the struggle between the earth and the world than the experienced farmer, long intimate with the 'uncomplaining fear as to the certainty of bread' as well as 'wordless joy of having once more withstood want.'

A simple painting by Van Gogh has captured the truth of life and brings to bear some reality about our daily struggle for survival. It also

captures the realism of the ordinary people who work hard enough before they could afford food to keep alive. These paintings, in no small measure, reveal truth that painting manifests.

In the same vein, Piet Mondrian drew on the Kantian theory of 'originality' which asserts that the work of fine arts (Bernstein 1992) should be groundless, without determined antecedents. It brings free production, one that cannot be explained or accounted for in terms of its antecedences, neither historical nor psychological. It should be constitutive in form and manifests freedom in its appearance. The way which freedom appears as originality becomes manifest in two modes: destructively and constructively, in order of their setting of new standards for judgement; this is another way of revealing their status. This theory informed the creation of paintings by Mondrian. He removes all influences of society and all traces of human factor replaced with a mechanical hardedge.

Aniakor (2005) reflects that Mondrian brought to bear constructive effect as a method of art which processes destruction and in it, construction paved way for dynamic equilibrium. It throws light on a constructive event, which destroys in order to create anew. Such forms lack basis for reference or antecedent. In this light, Odutokun (in Danjuma, 2010) also insists that his paintings are products of accident and design. He holds that accident creates a design and a design is recreated by the same accident in cyclical order. He notes that life itself is a product of this event and this brings us back to the Kantian theory of destructive and constructive occurrence as a true nature of art and philosophy.

### **The Argument of the Paper**

This paper tends to argue that painting and philosophy share a common position which is a hermeneutic interpretation of issues and only differ in the material of expression but unite in the materiality of the idea that each tries to capture in its mode of expression. It wishes to persuade this point in the thinking of the readers with the analysis of the works of two prolific artists, namely Gani Odutokun and Mike Omoighe, to establish their exudation of the relatedness of painting and philosophy in human development.

## **Gani Odutokun (1949-1995):His Painting and Philosophy**

### ***The King Addressing his Subjects***

The paintings titled “The King Addressing his Subjects” shows a standing King figure with two armed soldiers by his side while he addresses his subjects. His throne, placed on a pedestal, is behind him. Symbolically, the surface is divided into two: the lighted area that hosts the King and his soldiers and the dark area where the subjects are depicted by their shadows rather than their forms (see Plate I).



Plate I: Gani Odutokun, *The King Addressing His Subjects*,  
Oil on Canvas, 1987, 88cm x 88cm

Odutokun employed shadow to create empathy for the suffering people that are being oppressed. They are but shadows of themselves while the King and his soldiers live luxuriously at their expense. The shadows portray the people as if unable to resist the oppressive rule of their King. Shadow was employed here as a metaphorical element to show, perhaps, the suffering masses and their inability to control the situation around them. This is so because shadow is an element of existence that dwells on the strength of the object that casts it. Odutokun used this reality to visually communicate with his audience on the plight of the common people; and this is philosophy.

Odutokun was a prolific Nigerian experimental artist that engaged his art with various expressive ideas right from the early 1970s that he graduated

from the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His artistic culture was an experimental one in the sense that he did not dwell on a particular style for a long period of time. He started off with bold aggressive brush strokes. One of the works that earned him his first contact with the public is “the Durbar Charge” exhibited at the FESTAC 1977, a festival of black and African people hosted by Nigeria. Subsequently, the aggressive brush work began to change into a sweeping brush with the human forms which are created within this context. The whole of the surface of his paintings and the imageries created were more of symbols that represent the issue or subject in context. At that period, his technique continued to reflect his agitation with the political situation in the country. Shortly after this period, Odutokun (in Fuso 1984) philosophises his artistic trend as thus:

Life’s pattern is considerably influenced by the phenomena of accident and design. They turn out to be mutually complimentary: accident induction of design, accident destroying design and, design transforming a design to be destroyed later by accident and recreated, and so the process continues in an endless cycle.

In this vein, his works took the concept of liquid oil colours which flows on the surface of his canvas capturing, according to him, the “*restless spirit of our time*”. This, he continued until his death in 1995. Before then, he had been able to create a philosophy within the concept of his art. His imageries were derived from daily inspiration in his context, and his human forms are realised as a concept.

This study does not think that Odutokun set out to create images that represent the actual data but to conceptualise an understanding of these forms as he perceived them. His whole idea rests on philosophical issues that bother the thinking, cultural and social context of his society; his virtual aim for depicting space, colour, line and conceptual form was probably to express philosophical ideas. He intended that his paintings, as a body of aesthetic expression, would deliver a contemplative space that its viewership can interrogate.

Odutokun presents a complex philosophical idea in his work titled *Dialogue with Mona Lisa* created in 1995 using gouache on paper as a

medium. From the composition of the piece, it is seen that the artist sought to create a dialogue between two different cultures. The Mona Lisa image arguably represents the beauty and the growth of Art in Western civilization while the Nimba mask presents the sophistication of African culture. Odotokun engaged the two strong elements in his painting as a philosophical dialogue of the two cultures as they are perceived in modern popular culture today. The two images in this dialogue present beauty from both sides of the African and the European culture and the modern African and European dialoguing with these two cultures as a symbol of modernism and scholarly and artistic emancipation.

Art liberates the real import of appearances from the semblance and deception of this bad and fleeting world, and imparts to phenomenal semblances a higher reality, borne of the mind. The appearances of art, therefore, far from being mere semblances, bear the higher reality and the more genuine existence in comparison with the realities of common life.

However, for Hegel, the philosopher, there is a stark line between fine art and both nature and common life. Despite being concerned with a different distinction, Hegel's insistence on a particular type of art has a similar effect with that of Kant, insofar as it emphasizes art as something higher than that which is not art.

While Kant and Hegel keep their distinctions between beauty and interest or art and not-art fairly abstract, Heidegger's separations are perhaps best shown through his extensive use of an example: the famous painting of peasant shoes by Vincent van Gogh. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger explains that "as long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general or merely look at the shoes as they stand there in the picture, empty and unused, we will never learn what the equipmental being of equipment in truth is". However, he goes on to revise this, saying of the painting, "From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth". Heidegger believes "the equipmental being of the equipment" is "its reliability" and that construes the import of art in understanding our daily life. Gani's paintings have captured the essence of originality of the Kantian theory and have clearly demonstrated that painting and philosophy are one and the same discipline.

## **Mike Omoighe (b.1959)**

### ***Philosophy of Igbobanelimi Masquerade***

Another artist considered in this philosophical argument is Mike Omoighe. The paintings of Mike Omoighe have perhaps given impetus to what these writers think is the second phase of the art direction of the Yaba School of Painting. He studied at the same Yaba School and for his higher diploma went to Auchi Polytechnic where he completed his training as an academically trained painter. His paintings are highly influenced by his intuition of metaphysical presence of 'being' and the surest position on his journey of life and death. His ideas in painting are framed between figurative abstract expressionism and neo expressionism. His is a combination of the style that could be found in the two schools where he underwent his artistic training. His images are metaphorical symbols of the country's political characters. His art, it could be argued, is what gave birth to what we know today as the second phase of artistic style that emerged out of the Yaba School in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Such influences could be seen in the graduates of the school like Kainebi, Isichie and Titi among many others.



Plate 2, Mike Omoighe, *Philosophy of Igbobanelimi Masquerade*,  
Mixed media on Canvas, 60 x 84, 2012-14



Many scholars may argue with this assertion but the fact remains that prior to his joining the Yaba Art School as a teacher, no such influence existed within this context of the school's expression of painting. The school had been known for its naturalistic style until 1980 when Omoighe joined its painting staff. Since then, students of the college began to create paintings with figurative abstract styles taking after his works. Why the authors have reviewed his painting oeuvre is not to argue for his prominence of position at the Yaba School of Painting but to point out that his works embody philosophical messages, which is the primary concern of this thesis.

Omoighe's works are inseparable from religion and philosophy. His paintings, which bear subject matter such as 'the Market Place', are more spiritual than physical images. Most of these paintings express the metaphysical or metaphorical presence of the journey of life within the context of birth, rebirth and the consciousness on earth and humans' struggles to achieve their daily routine which is also spiritual. His human images are consciously symbolised to create a feeling of human presence; not the exact enactment of it but the artistically realised idea (philosophy) of it.

The position of this thesis is that reality is subject to one's ability to reason and understand the material world around one's self; that is to think that reality itself is a subjective illusion. One of the most prominent philosophers of this belief system is Susanne K.Langer. She argues (Langer 1969) that works of art represent the artist's ability to create a structure or forms that are in their relationships analogous to the forms of feeling in human experience. Thus, what the artist is able to do is to provide means through which feelings can come to be known. Langer (1969) writes:

What does art seek to express?...I think every work of art expresses, more or less purely, more or less subtly, not feelings and emotions the artist has; but that which he knows; his insight into the nature of sentience, his picture of vital experience, physical, and emotive and fantasy.

Such knowledge is not expressible in ordinary discourses like dream experiences. The reason for this ineffability is not that the ideas to be expressed are high. In addition, anything else, but that form of feeling and the forms of discursive expression are logically incommensurate. The idea that art can be regarded as a form of knowledge does not have a secure history in contemporary philosophical thought. The arts, traditionally, have been regarded as ornamental or emotional in character. Their connection to epistemological issues, at least in the modern day, has not been a strong one. Are the arts merely ornamental aspects of human production and experience or do they have a more significant role to play in enlarging human understanding?

The paintings of Omoighe continue to bother us on this concept of understanding and it has been able to show that paintings are indeed embodiments of philosophical knowledge. Technique seems perhaps not to be his strong point, but the messages of philosophical content that the virtual spaces in his painting pass to the audience seem to be the dwelling place. His forms are the combination or hybrid of German modernism and neo-African modernism.

Omoighe is currently dialoguing with new materials within the context of political and religious expression. Over the years he has been developing a particular language of expression that personally represents his art. The language style is well appreciated by many of his audiences. His present philosophy which mostly engages the metaphysical aspect of philosophy of his painting captures the essence in his works. His early influences could be the works of Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky with whom he shares so much in common in the spiritual deconstruction using painting as a means of communication.

One of the characteristics of his paintings is the presence of the human figure which is reduced to form or symbolic expressions, in his painting. Sometimes the paintings depict wilderness and lonely figures quasi-styled into some images resembling abstract expressionist images. Most times these images he creates in his paintings become metaphorical expressions of our spiritual journey in life.

His paintings exemplify the Kantian theory of ‘originality’, the work appearing as a pattern in the body of carpet which is inseparable from the entire body of carpet without any antecedent of any kind but the beauty radiates and imposes itself on the viewer. His paintings are entirely concepts derivable from designs; the forms transform into pure aesthetics rather than the physical appearances which they signify in the primary stage. His forms continue to depict a scarecrow. According to Omoighe (2005):

The scarecrow series is symbolically a reflection on the state of the Nigeria nation and its development. A parallel in the cycle of the between the African rural and urban modern city settings, within this context the scarecrow is a camouflage often used in an African intruders. Fear is the main potent instrument of scarecrow-camouflage. The changing beauty in them are themselves are the effect of weathering conditions and possible additional materials. Plastic clothing or other synthetic materials for each of the new season...

He holds again as thus:

I try to set myself free in search for the archetypical, and[ then] when completed the scenery or object that served as the launching pad is recreated through principle and elements of painting with a view to generating a more obviously alive result than they are in their daily existence. Unlike painting what or where is in front of us as straight forward as I can, without decoration or flattery, I realise more of imagination or fantasy...

Omoighe’s paintings spring forth from the contemplation of his heart and imagination of his mind. This is where most of his philosophical content emerges from. He has been able, over the years, to create a style best known by his logic of painting. We would think for Mike the spaces in which his images created are the energy field for both spiritual and physical contemplation. His paintings continue to testify to his ability to address both physical and spiritual issues like his

mentors Kandinsky and Mondrian. His paintings are the height of technical and scholarly combination. He is about the only polytechnic teacher and one of the two authors of this paper, Dr. Irokanulo that has assumed this feat.

### **Conclusion**

We can see how Gani Odutokun and Mike Omoighe have used their painting surfaces to create philosophical contexts which have spurred critics to continue to debate upon. It is the intention of this paper to assume that philosophy, whether textual, oral or visual, is embodied with meaning and ideas that propel them into being. The position of this paper is that the two disciplines share common a ground, which is idea and the process of thinking and realising it. Should not philosophy reveal the truth of life and the things within them?

In conclusion, these authors have accepted that Heidegger's imagination of aesthetics is true and can be examined within the context of this paper; that art and aesthetics construe deep meaning beyond mere control of design or beauty. This paper shares the same viewpoint with Smith (in Irokanulo 2015).

The poverty of philosophy remains a failure to act. And yet a philosophy of action seems the only hope remaining in the face of our present conditions of existence. Such a philosophy will materialise, I believe, when the philosopher has learned to engage body, mind, and spirit in the concrete representation of a philosophical abstraction. Who will this philosopher be, if not the artist-philosopher?

It is obvious that these artists have demonstrated the position of these two authors in this paper. Art, especially painting, is the materialisation of abstract philosophic logics in form of spaces, lines and colours. Easel or any form of painting would continue to represent this fact and theory.

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