

Improvisation of Painting Supports: Sustaining the Creative Place of the Calabash

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Abstract

Many Nigerian painters rely to a great extent on the use of ready-made supports for their painting exercises and so the preference for locally sourced alternatives for the same endeavor has been on the decline. This trend poses the constraints of scarcity coupled with some bottlenecks such as the exorbitant cost of foreign supports and the impracticable experimentations occasioned by set limitations in the rampant use of the conventional supports. The aim of this paper therefore is a copious attempt through direct participation to overcome the limitations mentioned earlier with the introduction of the calabash as a laudable alternative painting support. The calabash, its attendant materials, methods and techniques, and themes for the works embodied in this paper are duly highlighted to give insights to the creative odyssey the calabash possess in chromatic expressions. Finally this paper presents conclusions and recommendations regarding the boundless possibilities the calabash as a support holds in stimulating practical experimentations in the modern world of paintings or colour expressions and the need for creative circles or art institutions in the country to encourage budding painters to search out diverse improvisations as alternative support for their works.

Introduction

Painting by classification under the fine arts exists wholly on a flat, two-dimensional support, plane or surface with the primary concern of creating colour impressions on either papers, boards, canvas, walls etc. Ibrahim (2009), simply termed it as "the drawing and shading with colour". The colour illusion which a painting creates becomes so convincing that most often it is easy to forget, and one may tend to interpret its concept in terms other than its own which inadvertently generate some level of appreciation or misconception. Painting depending on the medium or materials sourced for its execution, can manifest itself in the form of still-lives, murals, landscapes or seascapes, abstracts, figures and may more. In view of techniques however, a painting exercise can lend itself to dry or wet paintings, glazing, impasto, frescos, tempera, dry bush, drips etc, and finally in media such as poster colours, water colours, crayons, pastels, oils, acrylics, gouaches, natural earth or tree barks of diverse colourations, eye pencils and lipsticks, charcoal, washing blue etc. Painting then is bound to be the media in which it is executed and to the technique employed.

Since the beginning of the last century, a lot of Nigerian painters rarely incorporated locally sourced supports in their works due to the vast importation and sale of foreign painting formats or supports like boards, canvas, bafts, cartridge or water colour papers, aluminium panels etc which they purchase from art shops. Many notable Nigerian painters like Chief Aina Onabolu, Prof. Ben Enwonwu, Prof. Chike Aniakor, Yusuf Grillo, etc studied painting overseas and were consequently trained to adopt these foreign materials and techniques as well.

Since Chief Aina Onabolu, who is adjudged to be the father of modern Nigerian painting, who in turn was trained in the foreign academy style of painting popular then, most painters with informal tutelage under him, stuck to the use of these foreign supports or formats from the continents of Europe, America and Asia. According to Chukwueggu (1998), Onabolu availed himself of the opportunity for professional training abroad and obtained diplomas in art from St. Johns Wood School in London and Academic Julien in Paris, France. It is worthy to note that before this contact with the western world and her art of painting, Nigerian painters expressed themselves using local formats or supports which were sourced from their immediate environment. The mud walls, broad dried leaves, weaved mats, hides and skin etc filled up this need. There has been a gradual decline among creative minds in sourcing for improvised alternatives in the execution of their works. This trend cages worthy self-expression and gives room for occasioned

limitation. The primary aim of this paper is to project the consciousness in looking out for practicable and improvised materials which can make for acceptable grounds for painting exercises which the traditional calabash if used and sustained can fill up the yawning gap.

Ever since painters started using oil and acrylic colours in the 15th century, Uttridge (2007) opines that canvas, linen, wood, panels, boards, and other desirable surfaces were most suitable to paint on. This occasioned an increase in the demand for such painting supports mainly because of their specialty and response to brush strokes, with no other surface to match their spontaneity as it is believed that these supports have weaves that provide a key or toothed texture to hold colours. However, as demand increased, the prices for such painting supports followed and eventually paved way for scarcity of the supports. This situation opened up channels for newer, cheaper, and improvised alternatives to find their way into the Nigerian art market. Whenever artists were unable to lay their hands on conventional supports, they had to resort to improvisation, bearing in mind the ability of these improvised materials sourced locally to convey same creative expressions when compared to conventional foreign supports. Studies with the calabash show that it is a satisfying and inexpensive surface for painting, so long as its peculiar concave surface is properly primed with sealants to reduce porosity and improve colour adherence.

According to Uzoagba (2004), painting involves color, which when simplified is the breaking-down of white light into its seven spectral constituents of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. This is scientifically proven when a ray of light passes through a prism block, and a spectrum is produced. The colour or hue of an object is determined by the way in which it either absorbs or reflects the rays of any one of the spectrum colours. For example, an object is green in colour because it absorbs all the other six colours of the spectrum and reflects only the wavelength of green. Colours too, come in different classes, harmonies, properties, and emotional symbolisms.

Improvisation as a Sustainable Communication Strategy

Sustainability is the potential for long term maintenance of well-being, which has ecological, economic, political and cultural dimensions. Therefore, sustainability is the art of being sustained and as such only an environment that is in a continuous state of economic development can be called a sustainable environment. A sustainable environment is simply the environment that continues or lasts for a long time without distortion by providing enough of what the inhabitants

needs in order to survive or exist. An environment can only be sustained by man's ability to harness both the natural and human resources existing with him.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines improvisation as the making of something from whatever is available without advance planning. To be more specific, Gretlein (2002), cites it as an involvement in the creation of a substitute for the original. It is an offshoot of creativity with that ability to convey worthy expressions using available materials within one's environment. Living in an information explosion age as a result of the ever increasing communication media coupled with improvements on the channels that existed previously, communication is basically a performing art, and it is that instinct to make known with the enviable advantage of having a welldefined audience whose satisfaction it specifically sets out to achieve. To improvise for a painting support, there are elements which can be seen as communication processes and their components as well. These communicative components remain essential and should not be isolated from each other as each plays a vital role in the language strategy.

Examination of Communication Processes

The Communicator. The communicator who is the artist/painter must be an excellent interpreter. He should be in a good position to process ideas effectively and should be able to transform such into a desirable output that appeals to the viewing audience or clients. Primarily, he sets the communication chain in motion. A competent painter therefore should be able to handle the rapidity and flexibility of ideas. This puts his creative prowess to bear. This creative drive is however improved when he adopts alternatives in both materials and techniques for existing approaches.

The Objective. It is only by establishing a clear cut goal that the artist/ painter can effectively set off the rewarding steps in the communication process. Most often, these set goals or rather themes are not defined thus bridging communication or making it difficult to comprehend.

The Audience. These are the people whom the artist/painter wishes to use his ideas or concepts on. The significant point to note here is that the target audience possess degrees of differences that can inevitably propagate or hinder communication. For example, when a painter improvises for his work, to art aficionados, his work could generate wide acclamation whereas to some his reasons for using such an option might not be appreciated duly.

The Message. This is the lesson which if accepted or rebuffed by the audience, helps the artist/painter to attain the height of his objective or redirect it again as the case may be.

The Channel. Whatever be the concept the artist/painter wishes to convey, it must be transmitted via a channel, though some might succeed where some might fail.

The Treatment. This embraces the unique way the artist/painter seeks to project his ideas, concepts or intents within a given channel. The manipulation of techniques and materials in his painting experimentations remain what the audience wants to see in the real sense of it, since people to a large extent are more likely to believe what they see. Improvisation for the already known or conventional, brings to bear the level of the artists creative quotient, and stirs up awe and spontaneity in the eyes of the viewers.

Sustainability of the Calabash as an Improvised Painting Support

The calabash is sourced from the fruit of the plant *lagenariasiceraria*. It is also known as the *Opo Squash*, *Suzza Mellon* or *Fasmania Bean*. It is a vine grown for its fruit, which can either be harvested young and used as a vegetable or harvested mature, dried with the husk hollowed out. It makes for many utilitarian purposes like reservoirs, musical instruments and food containers.

Many plants have worked their ways into peoples' lives, with very few having as much flair as the calabash. Some have eaten from it, used it as decorations, fished with it as goblets and even made music with it. It comes in a variety of shapes, colours, and sizes.

When fully ripe, the fruit from which the calabash is gotten changes its colouration from green to yellow ochre or brown. In the northern and western parts of Nigeria, it is a major requisite for the craft of carved decorations, where its cuticle or outer skin is scraped before decoration using intricate geometric, abstract or natural patterned incisions. In the western region of the country, calabashes are evident. A historical fact to this is the piece discovered in the Igbo Ukwu excavations of Prof. Thurstan Shaw. Oyelola (1981) posits that the calabash has been in use domestically before 100BC which was about the same age the Igbo Ukwu civilization flourished.

For use as an improvised painting support or surface, the calabash lends itself to a lot of techniques, as long as the surface is properly treated. The texture of the calabash depends on the primer and a well seasoned calabash has a very fine texture with an impressive thickness that is usually less expensive than other supports. Its concave outlook creates an illusion of three dimensionality different from the two dimensional genre which paintings belong to generally.

Calabashes are very practical for the execution of small paint studies, for painters who aim for personal, rustic and unconventional appeals.

Currently, the stringent economic situation in the country since the post Covid-19 era has given rise to the need to search out local yet sustainable alternatives as painting supports for artists. This will hopefully reduce dependence on imported painting supports, and appreciably provide Nigerians in the creative sector, the liberty to set new production initiatives for the advancement of the society especially where local improvisations are readily abundant. There is no doubt that the spirit of sustainability and self reliance has also been a cognitive factor that midwifed improvisation as well as the painters immediate environment. Artists seek for substitutes for the known and when widely encouraged, boundless possibilities are opened up to those who are willing to take a trip on the thresholds of experimentation.

Methods of Preparation and Illustrated Themes

Sanding. At this stage, the proposed calabash support is properly sanded manually or automatically with the aid of an electric sander. This is done to reduce the glossy nature of the calabash cuticle, enhance priming or sizing, and also for proper binding or adherence of the eventual colour pigments that would be laid on it.

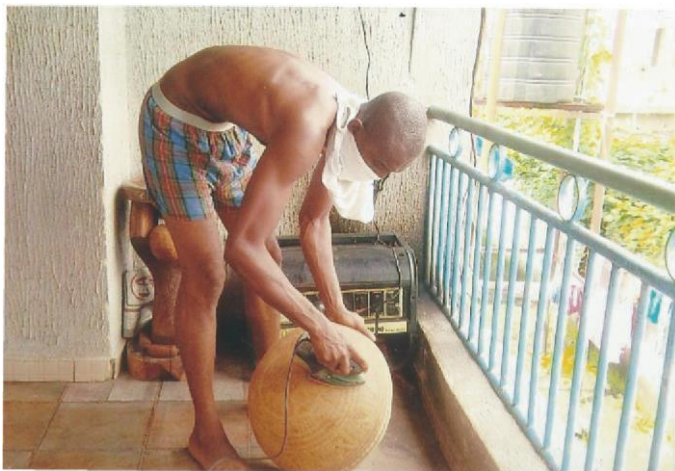


Plate i: Sanding (c)Okpara, 2020.

Priming/Sizing. This follows after the sanding stage. These stable and permanent primers are sealants that are spread over the calabash support to reduce its porosity and also aid adhesion

of paints. A simple primer can be a mixture of glue and emulsion paint and depending on the mixing ratio chosen, it can be spread evenly over the calabash using rollers, brushes or spatulas. Ample time should be given to a primed or sized calabash to dry properly before the actual paint renderings.



Plate ii: Priming/Sizing (c)Okpara, 2020.

Sketching and Eventual Studio Work (Painting). Anybody can sketch more or less correctly provided there is a master continually at his elbow to point out his weakness or flaws. To observe with an artists' eye is another factor altogether and this is a gift which only the aesthetic mind can possess. At this point, sketches of a selected theme at the disposal of the painter is made on the calabash in either pencil, conte, charcoal, colour washes etc., to reflect the researcher's experiences concerning life, work or even his immediate environment.

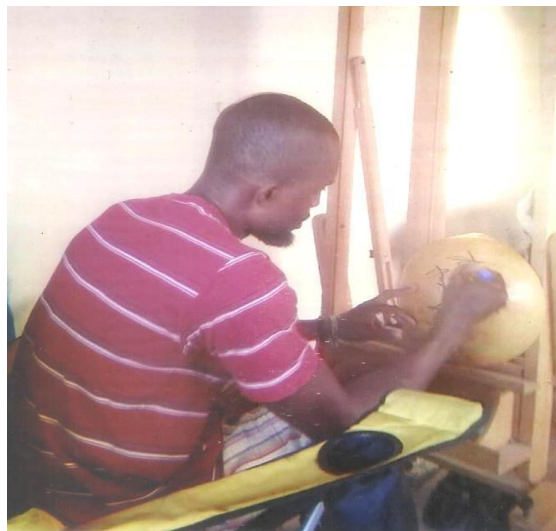


Plate iii: Sketching/Painting (c)Okpara, 2020

The sketch rendered on the calabash support should be properly studied so as to understand its workability on its nature-induced concave regimentation. This to a certain degree can suggest the kind of painting technique to be used. For this paper, the thick application of mixed out acrylic colours on the palette (impasto) with the aid of the spatula shaped palette knives of various sizes was employed. Professional paint brushes were also used in some areas for intricate detailing.



Plate iv:
“Ancestral Abode”
 Medium - Oil on Calabash
 Size – 13 inches Diameter

(c)Okpara Ik,2019.

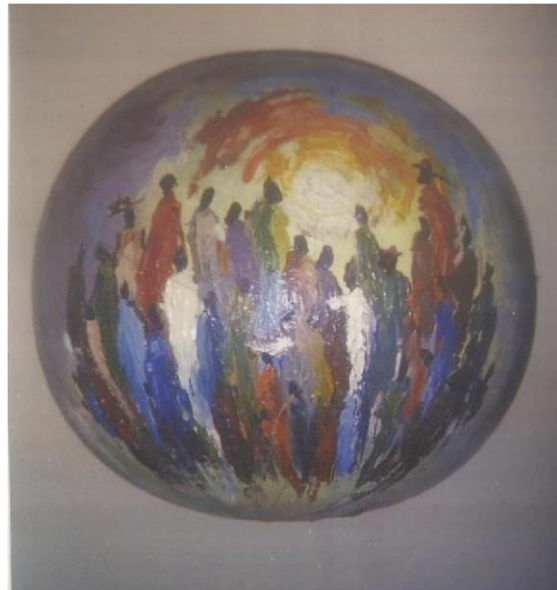


Plate v: *“Mobilization”*
 Medium - Acrylics on Calabash
 Size - 13 ½ inches Diameter
(c) Onyehara Louis C. 2020.

The painter is in a better position to access his progress on the calabash support and the more he practices, the better he becomes, thus not only developing, but sustaining this unique approach to creativity as well.

Finishing. There is this preference for paintings of enduring quality for years without physical corrosion. The problem of permanency merely raises the same issue of chosen material

and its corresponding level of degradation. This, the artist/painter should be aware of. Hence, this paper champions the use of finishing varnishes like the local wood varnish, lacquer or fixative to make permanent, the finished calabash rendering and give it a protective covering. According to Samiguel (2011), the protective film isolates the layer of paint from the environment; they should be applied when the painting is completely dry preferably between 4-10 months, otherwise the varnish will interfere with the colours in the painting.

Conclusion

Findings in the course of this study reveal that not many artists/painters venture into the world of alternative supports rather they tend to lean towards the use of conventional painting formats. This is an obvious lack of exploration of sustainable alternatives. Those in this category can better their paintings or works by seeking less expensive options which are abundant in the environment, rather than the conventional ones as the effects achieved in both cases are relatively same. Basically, grounds for improvisation for painting exercises need to be established before its usage can apply. With a particular theme in mind, the painter searches for suitable materials to aid its execution or vice versa. Whichever comes first, it is reassuring that these improvised supports exist for exploitation and eventual usage.

Recommendations

With the calabash as a sustainable support for painting exercises, this paper duly recommends that the calabash not only projects the environment from which they are sourced from, it also encourages endless possibilities rather than the limitations posed by relying solely on conventional supports which are sometimes scarce or even exorbitant to procure. The calabash alternative will create sustainability of our traditional creative practices and will also develop new art styles or trends in the country to the level that can even generate global interest. Finally, by using improvised painting supports, one becomes more acquainted with the environment and consequently places more value on it.

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