

Painting Our Stories and Legacies: Historical Evidences through Nigerian Paintings

Stephen A. Fọlárànmí¹, Nanashaitu A. Umoru-Ọkẹ²
and Ìdòwú F. Adéyanjú³

Abstract

One of the functions art serves is to visually document history for generations to come. Even with the development of writing, the artists have continued to document various aspects of what they encounter in their various communities. In Nigeria with particular reference to painting, several artists have used their paintings as visual documentaries. The introduction of the camera as a tool for documenting did little to dissuade these painters from continuing this role. This paper therefore examined selected paintings of artists in Nigeria, whose works reveal historical evidences and culture of a people. Paintings cutting across the various genres such as portraits, landscapes scenes, architecture, festivals and cultural issues from pre-independence Nigeria to the present were selected for examination and analysis. The paper explores a descriptive and comparative analysis of the selected paintings vis-à-vis the various subjects they have recorded. It concludes that these paintings show significant historical evidences that can be used to reconstruct history and others aspects of the society where the need may arise. Painters in Nigeria more than other artists have been able to record history with their works because of the pictorial and compositional peculiarity of painting as an art form.

Keywords: History, Nigerian Art, Painting; Documentaries, Evidence.

¹ Stephen Fọlárànmí PhD is of the Department of Fine & Applied Arts, Ọbáfẹmi Awólówọ University Ilé -Ifẹ Nigeria, and currently a Post-doctoral Fellow at the Fine Arts Department, Rhodes University, South Africa. folasteve@gmail.com folasteve@oauife.edu.ng

² Nanashaitu Umoru-Ọkẹ PhD is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Fine & Applied Arts, Ọbáfẹmi Awólówọ University Ilé-Ifẹ Nigeria. aishatumoruoke@gmail.com, umoru-oke09@oauife.edu.ng

³ Ìdòwú F. Adéyanjú. Department of Fine & Applied Arts, Ọbáfẹmi Awólówọ University Ilé-Ifẹ Nigeria. idowuadeyanju7@gmail.com

Introduction

Art serves myriads of functions, it however seems to have been neglected or paid insufficient attention, especially in Nigeria. Very few people understand and pay attention to the importance of art in the built environment even though they consume it daily in their various activities. The few who pay attention in many instances collect art as a status symbol, some to decorate their homes, while some invest in art for its stability as a form of investment or bond. A fraction of these collectors or art lovers truly see art as builder of a nation, as restorer of order and a sign that a city is birthed. Art builds a city; it sets a city apart from another. Most major cities of the world are usually known because of the art forms they present to the city dwellers and visitors. Examples of these can be seen in Paris largely represented by the Eiffel tower, and New York with the famous Statue of Liberty. These notable landmark monuments and architecture have been attracting millions of tourists from different parts of the world. They are symbols and historical relics that remind people of what they stand for. It is evident that art works will enable us reminisce on our past, and re-access our present so that the future will not be mortgaged.

From pre-historic times to the modern period, man has created millions of artistic representations which spans the various forms of art namely, sculpture, ceramics and pottery, prints, textiles and painting. These have formed one of the most accepted forms of record keeping the world has ever known, with rich historical references. According to Kalilu and Gboyega (1998), there exists three significant forms of information and record keeping for intellectual engagement, both scholarly and otherwise, these are written, oral and visual materials. Art in Nigeria forms that vital aspect of visual material. The Nigerian art scene with particular reference to painting has witnessed for decades, expressions of different forms and styles. According to Dike (2003), modern art in Nigeria has concerned itself with aesthetic expression of ideas; themes and subjects have ranged from social, religious, political, and historical. Modern painting from Aina Onabolu (1890-1990) to the 21st century, many illustrious painters execute paintings to chronicle events and subjects from the popular and endangered Lagos *molue*, city and rural landscapes picturing old and new architecture, market scenes, festivals and other social and cultural events. Very few literature existed on the subject matter until recent times. These studies though focused on landscape only are relevant for their scope and the insights they provide. Specifically, Ajíbóyè (2005) is based on three Nigerian landscape painters, while Ajiboye and Makinde (2011) studied the influence of the Lagos City environment and experience on ten selected landscape painters. Furthermore is Ajiboye and Fajuyigbe (2015) which is also focused on the early history of landscape painting in Nigeria in the context of modern Nigerian art, and Ajiboye and Okunade (2017) based on the history of landscape in Lagos. All these works did not go beyond landscape. The present endeavor seeks to look at historical evidences in paintings generally, it is therefore not restricted to a genre of painting as discussed by available

literature. Fọlárànmí (2018, 2004) on one hand looked broadly at the relevance of art and artists as historians, and on the other hand, examined art as a means of telling stories, as exemplified in the carved doors of Oyo palace. His broad focus however gave no room for further comparative examples of site specific imagery, especially in paintings.

Since man first developed the intuition to paint on cave walls, painters have always known how to do two very serious things and have kept busy doing them—adding to the world’s riches, and teaching people how to see (Grosser 1964). This attribute is not restricted to painters in one geographical location of the world, it is a global attribute. The perfection, elaboration and character of the painter’s picture as a work of art has always been taken as a record and measure of the quality of the civilization in which it was produced. As a record therefore one can begin to deduce that a painting is a chronicle of events and a mirror of development within a community or country, as the case may be. The Nigerian state is a place naturally blessed with talented professional artists recognized world over. But just as it is with the other professions where people have worked tirelessly for the development of this state, they have not been so recognized; when recognized, their production, invention and contributions that would have been potent sources of positive civilization are neglected by a government disinterested in the views of her citizens, and their yearnings for a better society. In many instances, these professionals are not even consulted when issues and projects relating to Art are concerned. These issues are exhibited in the recent commissioning of substandard monumental sculptures of Chief Obafemi Awólówọ⁴ and Chief Gani Fawehinmi in some parts of Lagos. Despite the noble intention and concept behind the design by the State government, the statues have generated heated debates on social media, with most reactions characterised by hilarious comments from artists and many Lagosians (Olawoyin 2017).

From the days of Aina Onabolu (1882–1963) and Akinola Lasekan (1916-1974), Nigerian painters have worked tirelessly recording historical events with their oil on canvas, water colour, pastel and other two dimensional representations. They have shown the joys of the people; recorded their ways of life; their ceremonies, festivals, victorious moments and those of grief. One may ask what can be more beneficial and memory rewarding to view past events on a rich painting hung on the walls of galleries and museums, public or private houses? The memories of such visual expressions by painters make a lasting impression on the mind of the viewers than if probably read on the pages of a book. It is the one reason why students in developed nations are constantly taken to museums and galleries to view works of art that present historical relevance and knowledge about the past. Through their numerous visual expressions in beautiful and brilliant colours, it is very possible to reminisce about what has gone before, how, where and when. Scenes from different locations have been

⁴ See <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-west/244536-awo-criticism-trails-unveiling-late-sages-statue-lagos.html>

beautifully projected in better perspective to be enjoyed and also to beautify. Behind the primary aim of eking out a living for themselves, painters also see it as a responsibility to make themselves available for these duties, which God has graciously bestowed on them. People have sometimes wondered how a two dimensional surface could be transformed with colours into an illusionistic three-dimensional view.

Previous studies on contemporary Nigerian arts have focused on the development of style, school and individual artists, but within the different styles and schools is the underlying fact that paintings are amazingly potent sources for historical evidences. The foregoing is attested to by the few examples of paintings examined in this paper. Painters from the different parts of Nigeria produce a number of their paintings with powerful influences from their backgrounds, cultures and important events that happen to catch their attention. Some paint scenes from the dream world, to illustrate their inner experiences which they sometimes imagine as an ideal situation. Their colours are also used maximally to give mood and impression to their paintings.

Functions of Painting

Painting is one of the oldest forms of two-dimensional arts and it is produced with the use of several types of materials (oil, pastel, tempera, fresco...). The most famous of these materials is oil painting, which was developed by renaissance painters in Florence around the 16th Century. Although the art of painting is not alien to Africa and Nigeria in particular, the introduction of Western styled training in art institutions brought about another form of painting different from what was initially popular. The art of easel painting was popularized in Nigerian modern art by Aina Onabolu who received his art training in England, and came back home to join in the development of the new and emerging African Nation called Nigeria. Akinola Lasekan, and Okebulu were also some of these earliest artists. They became part of the Nationalists, whose primary aim was to use their newly acquired skills to portray their people's cultural values and greatness. The immediate function of their painting was therefore to chronicle these important aspects of their new nation, which was gradually moving towards independence that came partly in October 1960.

Paintings are used as a form of decoration when hung on walls or are done to decorate the outside or inner walls of a private or public building as in a mural. Apart from decoration, which seems to be their immediate function, paintings also educate the views of such work of art, be it in a gallery/ museum or in buildings, the images in the painting may be used to chronicle events, record festivals, remember and praise heroes. Some paintings are also seen as satirical. In the medical field, it has been said that paintings could be used as a form of psychological therapy for patients when exposed to specific paintings, especially in the area of colour therapy.

It has been mentioned that before the widespread of written language in Africa of which Nigeria is a part, art was a potent means of communicating and keeping historical records. Parrinder (1967) observed that the art of Africans was used to illustrate proverbs, tales, folklore, myths and stories, and to express both the culture and wisdom of the people. Furthermore, he also stated that since African art was the only writing known in the whole of tropical Africa, it was used to interpret life in every aspect.

According to Brian, chiefs and their relatives as well as titled men, have always sought to make themselves outlast the short period of their lifetime by commemorating themselves in art. Even when written language became popular and wide spread, visual art, especially through the various forms of painting, continued to serve these functions. It has also been used to assist written language in proper representation of the message being passed across, like an eye to written words. Words and verbal expressions come alive when they are illustrated with the beautiful colours and composition of a painter.

Majority of such works of art are realistic paintings showing actual scenes, human figures, houses, streets and cities. There is that attempt by the artists because of thier subject matter to try to 'create amazing resemblances, but since the invention of the camera, it has won this game.' The artist fights a losing battle with the camera if he or she plays by photography's rules. Other than play by these rules, the painter goes beyond what photography can see. A scene can be recomposed to fall in line with the principles of a good composition. It is also true that photographers have become artists and are taught in art schools. Now photographers have become less satisfied and content simply to point and shoot. Now they blur, filter, touch, alter light and other mechanical or physical adjustments to give a pleasing view, similar to what painters do (Ocvirk 1998:18).

As a visual language, people tend to associate visual art with literature, hoping it will tell a story in a descriptive manner. Many fine works have contained elements of storytelling. It is these elements that give the historical evidences of past events and occurrences even when it is difficult for the artist to give the kind of details in the narration of literature (Ocvirk 1998).The Nigerian contemporary paintings are replete with hundreds of historical evidences which can be viewed from cultural, religious, social and political perspectives. Through these paintings, heroes are even remembered and honoured.

Heroes and Heroines

Aina Onabolu (1882- 1963) is perhaps the first Nigerian painter to have painted portraits of important personalities in Nigeria in the 19th Century. At the time, photography had been developed for more than a hundred years. The difference in his representation of portraits is the fact that they give more personality and mood to the model than what photography would have done. In 1906 Onabolu produced his first oil portrait painting of

Mrs. Spencer Savage, he thereafter concentrated on portraits of some members of the elite of the Nigerian society, not merely for their own sake but as a means of recording their contributions to the 'unforgettable memories of histories. Other portraits he painted of these luminaries were *Dr. (Chief) Sapara (fig 1)*, *Dr. Akinwande Savage and Rt. Rev. Oluwole*. He also painted portraits of some West African Nationalists such as *F.W. Dove* of Sierra Leone and *J. Casely-Hayford* of Ghana (Oloidi 1981). It may be possible that these important personalities must have taken black and white (monochrome) photographs, because that was what was available at that time. Onabolu's painting however goes beyond that, giving colour and warmth to their personalities. It is doubtful if much has been written of Chief Sapara, we may be able to find some literature of Rev. Oluwole, but many more have come into contact with these pictures than their literary accounts.

These portraits can then be viewed as historical evidences that these people existed. The portraits remain an invaluable visual documentation of the political history of West Africa. Akinola Lasekan's (1916-1974) least mentioned painting is a full size portrait painting of *Mọremì (fig 2)* housed in the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library of the Obafemi Awólówò University, Ile-Ife. This painting would best represent the heroic tale of this ancient Yorùbá woman. Oral history has it that the Ife people were constantly under siege and repeated raids from strange creatures that come from the Igbo country. Mọremì, being a wife of one of the ancient heroes, probably Ọrànmiyàn was a woman of great beauty and virtue and had a son called Olúorogbo. Fired with zeal, she fashioned out plans to free her people from this constant raids by making a vow to the *Esinmirin* stream, promising to sacrifice something of a great cost to her if she succeeded in her plans. At the next raid by these strange creatures, Mọremì was captured and taken to their country where she learnt all their secrets. She disappeared once victory was theirs. She then sacrificed her only son to the river as a fulfillment of her vow (Johnson, 1976). This large portrait shows Mọremì standing and contemplating, and in the background, the strange creatures from the Igbo state. The lush green forest also captures the vegetation of Ife in the rain forest zone.

Other artists who painted pictures of our heroes or important figures are Ehrabor Emokpae (1934-1984), who gave us a view into the distant past of *Oba-Esigie-of-Benin, (fig 3) Queen Amina (fig 4), Herbert Macaulay* and many others. These portraits are not mere portraits shadowing only the faces of the models but are fashioned in a manner to also represent in the background, activities and exploits of the personality being portrayed; the paintings are also a dedication to their memories. While Herbert Macaulay is represented seated at his desk with books, which shows him as an educated fellow, the open space in the back also portrays him as a politician during one of his campaign tours; that of *Sultan Muhammadu Bello* of Sokoto shows scents in the background portraying Sultan Bello as a warrior and also an emir who holds the exalted position as a spiritual leader of the Muslims. Apart from the character shown through the personality's activities, the paintings also show their individual modes of dressing, an evidence of the type of fabric or design worn by them

while alive. Perhaps the most captivating among these personalities is *Queen Amina* of Zaria (*fig 4*) shown as a brave woman and warrior who was a leader amongst her people in northern Nigeria, where she built the city of Zaria and also conquered nations¹¹. In the background of the painting, Amina is shown charging ahead of her army. By combining the qualities of her military prowess and beauty, Emokpae succeeded in edifying Amina and also giving a visual representation to a heroic tale.



Figure 1. Aina Onabolu, *Chief Sabara*. 1920. Oil on canvas. Photo Credit:



Figure 2. Akinola Lasekan, *Moremi*. 1967. Oil on



Figure 3. Erhabor Emokpae, *Oba Esigie of Benin*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 75 x 120cm.
Photo Credit: National Gallery of Art, Nigeria.



Figure 4. Erhabor Emokpae, *Queen Amina of Zaria*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 75 x 120cm
Photo Credit: National Gallery of Art, Nigeria.

In the portrait painting of *Samuel Àjàyí Crowther* (fig 5), Kolade Oshinowo in his usual impressionistic manner and fluid brush strokes portrays the clergyman in full regalia of a priest holding a book, probably the bible. Since the times of Onabolu, important personalities have commissioned thousands of paintings for themselves, with a view to keep them as a memorial of themselves or as a mere form of decorating their walls. Some would in fact ask the painter to incorporate in the paintings all they think of themselves. These portrait paintings then become an illustration, a brief narration of the model. Similar to these portrait paintings are the paintings of Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds, who, following the tradition established by Van Dyck, concentrated on portraits of the English aristocracy. The verve and grace of these paintings and their astute psychological interpretations raise them from mere society portraiture to an incomparable record of period manners, costumes, and landscape moods.



Figure 5. Kolade Osinowo, *Samuel Àjàyí Crowther*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 75 x 120cm
Photo Credit: National Gallery of Art, Nigeria.

City Scenes and Landscapes

The city is an entity in itself; it is a being with a character, a soul of its own. Although it does not die in the literal sense of the word, it has the capacity to war and wave according to the taste, temperament, attitude and spirit of the people who live in it (Ekwemesi 2002).

The artist with all other people in a city interacts with the city they dwell in, the artist however dialogues with the city in his numerous representations. He portrays the beauty and the squalor of the city, the chaos, the peace, the landscapes, transportation and every aspect of the city that fascinates him. The painter plays this particular role more than other groups of artists. If one takes for example the paintings of Abíódún Ọlákù (b.1950) the master realist and cityscape painter, one will begin to appreciate the perspective at which he represents the city where he carries out his legitimate activities as an artist. Despite the disorderliness of Lagos life and its attendant effect on the inhabitants, including artists, Ọlákù sees mostly the beautiful side. His paintings depict mostly beautiful scenes, rustic pools, sunsets, sunrise situated in the various localities of his environment (*fig 6*). Other notable scenes and subjects by other painters are the architecture of Lagos which have been partly documented by Kéhìndé Sanwó (b.1963) who is known to document the memories of Old Lagos, most interestingly the Afro-Brazilian architecture (*fig. 7*). In the same fashion, between 2013 and 2015, Kolawole Olójó (b.1970) painted selected scenes from the ancient town of Ile-Ife. Within a few years of his works, many of the scenes he documented are no longer standing while significant changes have been witnessed in some of the landmark buildings and street scenes. These include the Òkè-Ìtasẹ̀, the Ènuwá Square and Ori-Olokun roundabout at Mayfair area of the town (*fig 8*). In Lagos and other parts of the country, paintings have been done of rural life and architecture and urban structures, especially high rise buildings. The background in many of these paintings which has themes relating to Lagos always seems to have the Lagos skyline exhibiting the skyscrapers, especially that of the Marina. A visit to some of the spots that were painted many years ago will reveal the significant changes such locations and scenes have witnessed. Comparing paintings painted at different times and years will also reveal to us what has been added and removed from these locations.

In many places, landmark buildings have been removed and replaced with others in the name of development. Nigeria seems not to appreciate the historical relevance of these buildings and the tourism potentials and character they give a city. Only a few understand and prefer that the old buildings be preserved, and new ones erected on new sites. When one visits many parts of Lagos such as Yaba and Èbúté Meta on the mainland and Igbosere, Broad Street and Balogun on the Island, one would appreciate the scenery and landmark architecture that has been lost due to modern development. Today, several scenes of bus stops and important neighbourhoods are represented on canvas to express the mood, feelings and experiences of the artist. In Lagos for instance, a peep into the old Oshòdì is sure to conjecture images of disorder in the mind of the artist-painter, no less would it be done by heaps of refuse, blocked drainage, frustrating traffic snarls, and energy failure at night resulting in horrific dark spells in the city (Ekwemesi, 2002). And all such scenes have been painted. Today Oshòdì is a totally different sight that many hardly believe was possible. Many can hardly remember what it used to be. Even in those days that it was famous for squalor and disorderliness, the painted canvas by the artist, though recording history, gives a

beauty to behold. Lagos for us in particular represents Nigeria, all that is good and pleasing, rich, poor, squalor, chaos, filth, affluence, opulence, whatever you may wish for lies in the city. It is occupied largely by the indigenous ethnic group – The Yorùbá, but here you will find the largest number of different groups from Nigeria and all other nationals of the world.

Perhaps one of the most interesting themes and sometime an over painted subject in Lagos is the city transportation system. Lagos has its own version of the New York yellow cabs, but in Lagos there are more than cabs. There is the ‘*dánfó*’, taxis, ‘*òkadà*’, ‘*kèké Marwa*⁵’ and the most notorious, almost extinct (no thanks to the state government) but most popular is the *molue*.



Figure 6. Abíódún Olákù, *Whisperers (Ilàje-Lagos)* 2017- Oil on canvas, 76x112cm. Photograph by Abíódún Olákù, 2017.

⁵ The small Yellow VW buses are called *dánfó*, while *òkadà* are motorcycles used for commercial purposes which are common in many parts of Nigeria. The tricycle referred to as *Keke Marwa* (fig 7) seem to be the late comer among these transport modes. All these are painted in the bright Yellow and black stripes synonymous with Lagos Nigeria.



Figure 7. Kehinde Sanwo, *Campus Square Landmark*, 2013. Oil on Canvas.
90 x 78 cm. Photograph by Kehinde Sanwo, 2013.

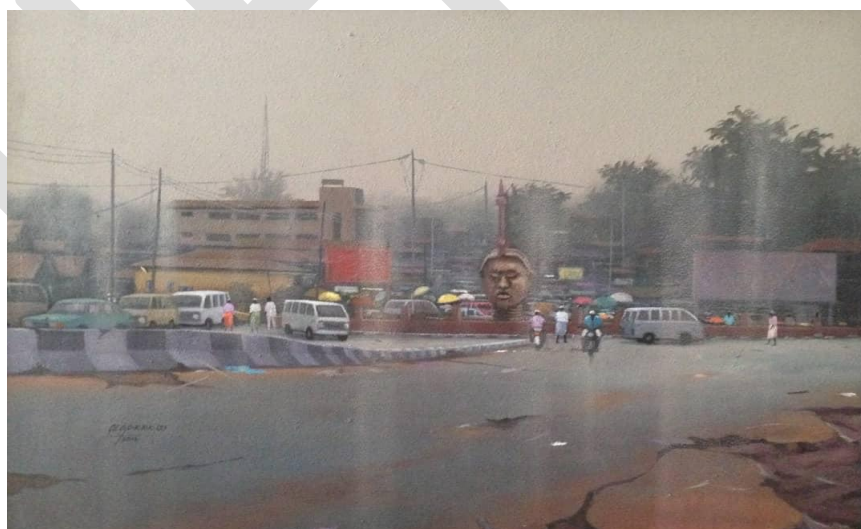


Figure 8. Kolawole K. Olojo. *Orí Olókun Roundabout*, 2014. 90 x 78 cm
Photograph by Kolawole Olojo, 2014.



Figure 9. Akinola Lasekan, *Movement into Ife*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 122x92cm.
Photograph by Debo Adenrele, 2017



Figure 10. A section of the Humanities Block, Obafemi Awólówo University,
more than 50 years after Lasekan painted the movement into Ife.
Photograph by Stephen Fọlárànmí, 2017

The Molue: Hated and Loved

The Late Afro beat King Fela Anikulapo Kuti⁶ (1938-1997) in one of his popular renditions spoke about the conditions of the *molue*⁷ bus (figure 11.) as a place where passengers suffer and smile. In the album titled 'Shuffling and Shmiling', Fela spoke about the conditions in the popular molue:

Everyday my people dey inside bus, Shuffling and Shmiling
49 sitting 99 standing, Shuffling and Shmiling
Dem go pack dem self in like Sardine, Shuffling and Shmiling
Dem dey faint dem dey wake like cock, Shuffling and Shmiling
...Everyday nah de same

Apparently, Fela was talking about the boarding conditions on the *molue* bus; people-human bodies packed and compressed in manners that resemble a canned fish meal. The numbers standing outnumber those sitting, pressing into one another, male, female, young and old, the clean and the dirty. It was not usually a place for the faint hearted, especially during rush hours. Here the conductor and his driver ensure that every space in the bus is maximally utilized. While some passengers hang on to dear life without feet touching the floor, others are seen hanging on the doorway. That expression speaks of a problem of mass transportation which even today, long after many of the *molue* buses have fizzled out, have not been seriously tackled in Nigeria. Notwithstanding all the inconveniences one goes through on these buses, it provided a much cheaper form of transportation to different parts of Lagos metropolis.

The *molue* (fig. 11) is a large bus, painted in the unique Lagos colour of cadmium yellow with double thin black lines running across the mid-section of the sides, rear and front of the bus. *Molue* drivers are usually reckless, probably after taking 'shots' of alcoholic substances and are accompanied with one or more equally eccentric conductors, depending on the size of the bus. The deep yellow hue and the size of *molue* make it a very interesting subject for painting which has been explored by several artists, especially in Lagos (fig 12-13). Equally interesting is the struggle intending passengers go through in trying to get in and out of the *molue*. The ever rushing bus with the 'eccentric' driver never stops for anybody to get in or out of the bus, it is constantly moving. Many have fallen down with grave injuries from these buses, the bus is also seen as a moving pharmacy store where all types of registered and unregistered drugs are sold, including the *gbogbo n'ise* drugs. Thanks to the

⁶Also professionally known as Fela Kuti, or simply Fela, was a Nigerian multi-instrumentalist, musician, composer, pioneer of the Afrobeat music genre, human rights activist and political maverick.

⁷From Yoruba móòluè, probably literally 'mould it' (perhaps referring to the method of construction from shaped iron sheets) from English mould + Yoruba e, 3rd person singular pronoun object, is a privately-owned commercial bus seating forty-four passengers.

National Food and Drug Law Enforcement Agency whose efforts have gradually put a stop to these trends. Besides the drug issues, are the various jokes, riddles, abuses, curses and all kinds of forced but temporary relationship that take place. Those are the scenes seen in such paintings, it is very doubtful if any word can succinctly describe the *molue* or entire Lagos transportation than the painter or the photographers. The visual tool here becomes very potent and powerful; a historical evidence of the existence of this notorious mass transit bus. These pictures will forever remind us of the *molue* long after it is gone.



Figure 11. Molue buses at Bolade, Oshodi, Lagos.
<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/06/molue-the-dinosaur->



Figure 12. Stephen Fólàrànmí, *Agége Road Mushin*, 2000. Oil on canvas 76x127cm
Photograph by Stephen Fólàrànmí 2000.



Figure 13. Jonathan Lessor, *Molue* 2003. Oil on Canvas 102 x 114 cm. photograph by
Jonathan Lessor.

Social and Political Evidences

It has earlier been mentioned that no issue passes by without the artist making his or her statement about it. It concerns him as well as others, but because he teaches people how to see, he sees more than they do and can therefore examine the situation in a better perspective. Although there are many others after him who made visual commentaries on the Nigerian political terrain, Akinola Lasekan blazed the trail as the first cartoonist in Nigeria. In 1945, he published *The Nigerian Joker and Nigeria in cartoons and paintings*. As a painter and skillful draughtsman, his best works were produced for the West African Pilot. He produced provocative cartoons as weapons of political propaganda against colonialism and for promoting consciousness. His drawings were said to be in conformity and consistence with the political stance of Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe who was also one of Africa's most illustrious fighters of imperialist-colonialism (Oloidi, 1989).

One painter that has devoted about four decades to this aspect is the master painter Kolade Oshinowo. Oshinowo mirrors people and their experiences, but mostly he tries to portray the positive side of the coin so as to give the people hope in what lays ahead, despite the heavy dark cloud of uncertainty. His paintings give hope to the hopeless, and brighten the day with colours for those that are dull and pale. One of his solo exhibition 'Land of Promise' is a testimony to this practice. Despite the deplorable conditions and the present state of Nigeria's economy, Oshinowo says, 'It is not just about reflecting and chronicling the sore points in our lives as Nigerians. With all the ugliness of our city and rural lives, we still have abundance of beauty around us. There are events, people and places that continue to gladden our hearts' (Oshinowo 2004). Oshinowo's bright colours are a beauty to behold. His several market scenes speak of the composition of the Yorùbá market where majority of the sellers and buyers are women, in contrast to other parts of Nigeria. The arrangement of their wares and goods is a rare display of the principles of nature and design, which brings some orderliness not usually enjoyed in other spheres of their daily lives. In contrast to that is the manner in which the market men and women defy new market trends in the display of goods to provide better services to their customers, and their desires to always want to sell in awkward places, especially outside of the market confinement (Yaba market). Notwithstanding, Oshinowo's positive attitude as an 'incurable optimist', also seem to have something for every taste. He has created works highlighting the socio-economic and political crises, putting together in his paintings a visual dairy of the several ills that have dampened the hopes, aspirations and dreams of many Nigerians.

There are works depicting religious intolerance, social insecurity, neglect of the traditional values and system. He gives us an account of what the Nigerian people go through. Though such experiences are powerful and agonizing, the beauty conveyed by his paintings give an impression of pain and anguish that is pleasant and therefore bearable. Apart from the positive conveyance of his pictures, is it not true that these people have been

very bearable and patient? Too patient in fact; they are a receptacle of all sorts of treatments from one government to the other (military or the demonstration- of-craze people at the helm of affairs) a reflection of his belief that there is still hope for these people who now seem to be enslaved in their own country. According to Jegede (2004), Oshinowo has painted himself into our national consciousness, and into our cultural history. Never since the times of Aina Onabolu and Akinola Lasekan has Nigeria witnessed this degree of pertinacious quest for chronicling the nation's heritage.

While this is not an attempt to praise or examine Oshinowo's contribution to modern Nigerian art, his work however represents a large body of painters either in content or the role they play in the society. It is also true that his influence is overbearing in the sense of being a teacher who has trained several good hands. Many of his former students have also been involved in chronicling events on canvasses or other media. However, it is not only Oshinowo that has fulfilled this important role as a painter, other painters like the late Gani Odutokun, Abayomi Barber, Josy Ajíbóyè, Peter Coker, Jerry Buhari, Kunle Filani, Mike Omoighe and many others have played their parts.

Cultural and Religious Evidences

In the cultural and religious context, painters have not lacked behind, rather, they have been at the forefront of the crusade to represent most succinctly their culture in two-dimensional formats. These aspect and theme for paintings is perhaps the most fertile ground for countless number of representations. Festivals, various ceremonies- wedding, naming, rites of passage, burials, sacrifices and other aspects of our rich and cultural past have been so documented. Gani Odutokun's Durba paintings in the collection of the National Gallery of Art are a testimony to some of the works done in commemoration of the important traditional ceremony in northern part of Nigeria. Kolade Oshinowo's impressionistic paintings portray mostly realistic expressions of everyday scenes, festivals and very important aspects of the Yorùbá's rich and vibrant culture. Oshinowo professes the following on his own works:

The most important thing in my painting is man, depicting the culture of the people...nothing from dreamland. I like to feel the pulse of the people, how they are living for example...when they are happy (drumming and festive occasions) and in times of tribulation (Campbell, 1993).

His expression here seems to identify what can truly constitute a potent expression of the history of a people through the eyes of their culture, which is visual. At work here, according to Campbell is the influence of Oshinowo's Cultural environment, his Yorùbá upbringing, juxtaposed with his training in Northern Nigeria, which is discernible in his hundreds of paintings and drawings over the past four decades. A vivid example of

Oshinowo's paintings reflecting such evidences is his representation of drummers from two regions of Nigeria, while some of the drums so represented in the works are still being used, some are increasingly going into extinction because of the changing tides in cultural values and the importance attached to such things. The drummers' series (fig. 14) include *The Korla Drummer, The Twin Drummer, A Master Drummer, Bembe Drummer, Drummers and Masquerades*. Most of these works have been painted after the visual experience of the subject matter as expressed by the artist; 'I do not paint festivals unless I have a visual knowledge of them (Campbell 1993)'. While Oshinowo's drummers in figure 13 are still in the business of the day, Olákù's drummers are returning home after the day's outing (fig.15). These show the various aspects of the drummers' professional practices and outing for festivities among the Yorùbá.



Figure 14. Kolade Oshinowo, *Yoruba Drummers*, Oil On Canvas. 52X38 cm. Photograph by Kolade Oshinowo



Figure 15. Abíódún Olákù, *The Prospectors*. Oil on canvas 112 x 91 cm. Photograph by Abíódún Olákù

One festival that has been very popular to paint among Nigerian artists is the Èyò masquerade (fig. 16) which is a theme in their paintings that is almost as popular as the *molue* buses, also in Lagos. Any written narration of this popular festival by any writer will give the

same account, the message will be the same, but to the painters, there is a varied view, colour, sizes and motifs that make one painting different from the other. The manner of rendition and different times and mood of the day also show the festival from different perspectives. It is virtually impossible for the writer to give colour or mood as a literary, picture no matter how descriptive the narration is.

Several other paintings chronicle other important festivals, folktales, legends, stories and other cultural themes. Foremost among those who use folklore in documenting their people's culture is Bruce Onobrakpeya. As a visual folklorist Onobrakpeya's Urhobo background screams positively at the viewer through his themes, titles and occasionally his poems. He conveys to the world the cultural tones of his people while recording for posterity the visual forms inherent in Urhobo culture. For more than six decades, Onobrakpeya has continued to tell these stories with various media from paintings, prints and installations.



Figure 16. Umeh Bede, *Eyo*, 2013. Oil on Canvas 102 x 80 cm.
Photograph by Umeh Bede.

Examining other cultures with the aspiration of being able to ascertain the same historical traits found in Nigeria may be needful, needful in the sense that it may be able to prove the potency of paintings and in general terms art, for the reconstruction or documentation of history. The example we have decided to use concerns the field of science cum archaeology. For centuries, men pondered and later discovered that there once roamed the face of the earth giant dinosaurs. Dinosaurs are a diverse group of reptiles of the clade Dinosauria. They first

appeared during the Triassic period, between 243 and 233.23 million years ago (Langer, Ramezani, and Da Rosa, 2018). Fossils and even remains of bones were found, scientists rejoiced at these findings but that was not the end. It took painters and other artists to give the world a picture of how these animals may have looked like, and the settings in which they existed. The reconstruction paintings by scientific artists/illustrators are by no means an easy task, it takes imagination and conception from little evidences to really give a wonderful historic picture.

Conclusion

Modern Nigerian painting today is characterized by individualist pursuit of a broad variety of thematic interests and aesthetic persuasions. Despite adherence to movements, schools and styles, many painters still from time return to simple themes that express their daily encounters. Myth, ideological dreams and rituals are all fabricated out of paint, canvas, and many non-traditional materials (Smagula, 1989). But it is the duty of the painter to be a witness of his present environment and society. The artist may have done some things in the past, but what is he/she able to achieve and contribute in the present situation? Should he/she be content with art for art sake without any form of function that will put him in the position of an important creative mind in our society? Artists are above all, a medium of social, professional, cultural, political and religious environment to which they belong (Spiesse, 2002). Artists today need to be encouraged, supported and the curriculum at all levels of Nigeria's educational system adapted to include some study of art, not just to give historical evidences⁸ but also and more importantly, to develop minds towards the appreciation of culture and values of the society. It has been severally advocated that for technology to be total and encompassing, it must be founded on the cultural platform of the people. Much has been lost in many spheres of the Nigerian life. Many Nigerians can hardly speak their mother tongue, they have adopted the language of the West. They eat western food, wear their clothes, listen to their music...and so on, the effect is so corrosive.

The artists make a big difference; despite the use of foreign materials, these painters are devoted to the history, culture and tradition of their people. The hope of our civilization therefore lies in the way and manner they perceive their environment. Recording historical events by artists according to Fóláránmí (2004) did not stop with the classical art in ancient times and the renaissance. The artist continues to do that today as these paintings have proven. In trying to interpret the world and create a better society, the artist provides us forms and colours which we encounter and consume in the spaces in which we live, work and recreate.

⁸This paper was first presented by the authors as a conference paper at the Historical Evidences Conference held at the University of Lagos in 2006.

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