

Improvisation: An Alternative to Conventional Art Materials

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Abstract

Improvisation of materials is a very important aspect of Art. This is because some Art materials are scarce and so pose problems to Artists who need them: in some cases, even when the Artist cannot afford them, and this is where improvisation comes in. Art tools/materials can be improvised from, so many objects around us. This paper therefore serves as a means of alleviating problems for Artists by providing an alternative to art materials that are either too expensive or not easily available.

Introduction

The word ‘Art’ has over the years been given various definitions which can be said to be personal to them. That is, there has been no particular definition for the word Art. According to Stanfield (1956:1) “Art, is a means of self-expression, it helps one to think for himself and to develop his creative abilities and critical powers.”

Emokpae (2001) defines, art as an expression of one’s inner mind, with the use of materials in a visual form, that is any idea conceived by an individual within his/her mind cannot be seen and enjoyed by others unless it is put down for others to see using any of the medium e.g., paper, clay, wood, paints on canvas, cloth etc.

Banjoko (2000) says! (“Art is the universal, language of self-expression of many in his natural and environment of many in his natural and cultural environment through the use of some material, skills and techniques to produce various works of self-satisfaction, utility and aesthetic or beauty”). Ogumor (1993) is of the opinion that Art generally is a way of life. It is any skill, trade, craft or acquired expertise. It is the study and creation of things in forms, texture, lines and colour which gives pleasure to the mind and satisfies our sense of beauty.

In the opinion of this paper, which is not far from what others have said, Art is a means of self-expression using various media including improvised materials.

Origin of Art: Everything on earth has an origin, Art inclusive. Banjoko (2000: 1) says: “... word ‘Art’ originated from Latin word ‘ARTI’ which means “TO DO WELL.” Art,

he says, could be traced back to the early man who wrote and drew on the walls of their caves, rock surfaces, wood and hides, though most of these materials are aged and perished now.

Various techniques were used by these cavemen in representing objects on such surface and they include scratching, engraving graffiti or incised drawing and painting. Such paintings were produced with natural or earth colours like red, yellow, black and the white of chalk mixed sometimes with animal fat to form a kind of oil paint. Others were done with sharp and hard tools like farming and hunting implements. Cave Art was basically done for magical purpose, for objects of worship and for attracting animals they want to kill.

Importance of Art: Art is very important to the society due to so many reasons: it is a universal language, a means of communication. Art can be used in identifying different cultures, it beautifies both body and surrounding, it is entertaining and lastly; a means of livelihood to many Artists.

Branches of Art: Art is broadly divided into two main branches: visual and non-visual Art. Visual Art is that aspect of Art that we can see and feel the products while non-visual Art involves performance, entertainment and relaxation. However, the following areas of specialization namely painting graphics, textiles, ceramics and sculpture will be explained.

Painting: Painting is an aspect of Art which involves the use of colours to express ideas on paper, board, canvases or on the wall (mural), through drawings, pictures or imagination.

Some of the basic materials for painting include pencils, colours (oil, water, poster, acrylic and pastels), brushes (oil and water colour) paper (e.g., cardboard, water colour), drawing board, palette and palette knives, drawing board, easel fixative etc.).

Graphics: Banjoko (2000) defines graphics as a communication Art in which forms, shapes and other elements of design are arranged meaningful and orderly for visual communication. Graphics include drawing, engraving, printing, packaging, designing of greeting, cards, posters, book covers jacket, logo, billboards, and advertising of products both in electronic and print media. Materials used in graphics include pencils, leter and calligraphic pens, poster colours cartridge/cardboard papers, Lino block and cutter, printing ink.

Textiles: Textiles according to Hollen et al (1973) comes from a Latin word meaning “a woven fabric or raw materials suitable for weaving such as cotton or wool”. Knitted, non-woven fabrics or the different man-made fabrics are also very important in the study of textiles.

The production of textiles they say is world-wide: almost every country values textile production as part of its economy. The benefits however are not equally distributed or enjoyed by all. In some of the remote, less developed areas of the world, the primitive spindle is still used to spin fibre into yarn, and fabrics are woven by hand.

Textiles is a necessity in all communities in the world: every cloth or fabric existing today is a textile product, the clothes we put on e.g. shirts, dresses cardigans other clothing items

like bed sheets, curtains, table covers, mufflers and other fashion accessories are products of textile design some basic materials is needed in textiles include, fabrics dyes, poster colours, brushes, cardboard papers, brushes, for dyeing, knitting and weaving yarns, knitting pins and crochets, looms, knitting machines, printing ink and tables, hand gloves, sewing machine and the needed accessories.

Ceramics: Ceramics is the brand of Art that models with clay and other related materials like plaster papier **Mache** etc. These materials are used to produce household items like mugs, plates, teapots, jugs, flower vases and pots, sanitary wares, bricks, tiles, etc. some of the basic tools/materials needed for ceramic modeling include clay (which comes in different colors), modeling tools, a throwing wheel, scrapper and kiln for firing their products. Pencils and papers are also necessary for a ceramist because every Artist in most cases has to make sketches of what he/she is going to produce before embarking on the practical.

Sculpture: This is the branch of Art that deal with the use of various materials like clay, wood, stone, cement etc. to form figures or objects in the round. In other words, it is a three-dimensional Art.

To expatiate on this, Banjoko (2000:5) says “sculpture is the Art of forming figures and objects in a solid three-dimensional way either in relief form or in the round, it is under Fine Art and the works are executed by sculptors”.

A sculptural piece can be produced by carving, modeling and construction. Carving is a subtractive process while modeling is an additive process.

Explaining further, Emokpae (2001:85) defines sculpture as ‘an aspect of Art concerned with the formation of figures objects in relief, solid or in the round form.’ (3- or 2-dimensional sculpture)

In sculpture, various methods are applied during formation stage. These include carving which is reduction or subtractive method, and modeling which is additive method. Sculpture also does a lot of welding and cement work. In fact, a cement work cannot be achieved without, first welding the caricature using iron rods. Some basic materials in sculpture include clay, cement wood, rods, stone, carving and modeling tools like chisel, mallet, adze spatulas, drill, adhesive or glue pencils and papers which they use for drawing before modeling. ‘Improvisation is to make devise or provide without preparation, to concoct out of what is conveniently at hand. Oxford (1999) on the other hand defines improvisation as to produce or make something from whatever is available’.

From time immemorial, Artists have been improvising one way or the other, but the upcoming Artists are still in the dark as to how to improvise materials. In our country Nigeria, the financial situation and high importation duties make it difficult for Artists to get or purchase materials brought into the country. As earlier mentioned, even when these materials are available, they are very expensive. The Artist should work every day if he must keep up with global advancement in creativity. Where he cannot afford these materials, he has no choice but to improvise with the objects and materials around his environment. With the call of the present democratic government to look inward, improvisation can be one way out of the financial down turn presently in our country Nigeria.

Improvisation of Some Art Materials

Colours: Taalabi (1979) says that “potassium permanganate gives a reddish-purple colour when dissolved in litter water. This water solution can be used for water colour. Colours are also made from materials from the fireplace-soot, ashes and charcoal. Ashes are scrapped into a container leaving out the dust and gum is added to it and stirred properly to a good consistency. If a darter tone is required, ground charcoal is added to the paste. Charcoal can however be used on its own as black colour, the same goes for soot, from pots. According to him (Talabi)” “certain plants give colours when crushed or boiled, their leaves in most cases gives a green colour while their stems and roots gives different colours. A good example is ‘Amoje’ a Yoruba plant which produces a red liquid from the stem when the bark is cut. Another plant is the Camwood tree called ‘Osun’ in Yoruba.

Ogumor (1993:5) explains further:

Red, one of the primary colours can be obtained from the *Bryscorpus cocineus* bark. If a cut is made on the bark, red liquid will come out. The camwood tree also produces red if the cambium layer is squashed or ground when wet. When gum is added to the mixture, it makes the colour opaque. The seeds of the Indian spinach will produce red liquid when crushed with the hand and this can used directly on paper or collected in a bottle for future use, after adding gum and lime to prevent fading. Yellow colour can be obtained from boiled ginger roots, while green is gotten from the leaves of certain plants e.g., the caladium lily and cocoyam leaves. The green colour is gotten either by

washing in cold water removing the chaff leaving to cool and adding methylated spirit which dissolves the collour from the leaves.

The black currant plant has fleshy seeds that gives a purple colour when squeezed, colours, he says can also be obtained from clayey soil gotten along some river banks. The clay is ground and sieved to from a smooth paste before using.

Pens/Pencils: Stanfield (1973:18) say:

Charcoal can be used in place of pencils for drawing, it is however better for large drawings charcoal can be made from dry dead solid sticks, about the size of a pencil or a little thicker. The sticks are placed on dry grass and covered with more dry grass before they are set ablaze. When the sticks are burnt black, they are quickly wood from burning to ashes.

In the cases of pens, he says: They can be made from feather quills, especially that of a turkey, which is the strongest and easiest to cut. A large feather is chosen and the end shaped to resemble the metal rib of a sharp cutting knife, the nib can be split in the middle, thick letters are required, make the nib point wider. For small and fine writing, the nib should be small. Where several sizes of nibs are required, one quill can be cut and re-cut several times to suit every condition.

Bamboo says Stanfield 'can also be used for pens. Sticks should be cut about the size of a thin pencil, when dry the ends should be shaped into a nib with a sharp knife. The first kinds of pens were made from quills and reeds; beautiful old manuscripts preserved in museums today were written with

such pens. A good stick can also be carved with a pointed tip and used effectively as a pen.

Charcoal and Improvised Pens

Brushes: Brushes, says Ogunmor (1993:4) “... can be produced by chewing one end of any stick to soften it.” Feathers, put together and trimmed at the end to a fine tip can also be used as a brush. Cotton wool tied on a stick can be used and coconut fibre tied to a stick can also serve as a brush. These improvised materials thus serve the problem of having both soft and strong hair brushes at the same time

Some Improvised Brushes and Pens

Dyes

Dyes can be improvised from plants around us. Wells (1997:51) confirms that “... produced with enough water and left to boil for strained on a sieve to get rid of the pulp and left to cool before it is used for dyeing fabric.”

Dyeing with Onion Dye

Emokpae (2001) tells us that dyes can be improvised from plants like ginger, petals of yellow flowers, dark fresh bitter-leaf, tree bark and the roots of some plants.

Boiled before lime juice and gum is added and it gives a yellow colour. The petal of yellow flowers is squeezed to obtain yellow colour. Dark fresh bitter leaves is poured to force out water, collect in a container and add gum to produce green colour dark blue can also indigo or very dark blue can

also be produced the bark of some trees. The tree bark is pounded into power and gum is added and stirred vigorously to obtain the desired colour. According to him, black colour can be obtained from old torch batteries and charcoal, this is done by grinding to power, then sieving the power before gum is added to it. White colour can also be gotten from Kaolin and cassava tuber. Just like the latter, grind to power, filter and add gum to form a paste. Stanfield (1973) also has some very important guidelines on how to improvise colours. According to him the Camwood (*Baphia Nidita*) can be finely ground to produce a dull red colour. The ripe seeds of the Annatto dye plant are squeezed and the red juice extracted is either used pure or diluted with water for dyeing.

Cocoyam leaf (*Colocasia Esculentum*) gives a yellowish green colour, the leaves when squeezed yields a reasonable amount of juice that is either applied directly or diluted.

Another plant called the 'yellow rhizome' produces a bright yellow colour when processed. The fresh roots can be used as crayon after washing and peeling off the thin skin. The roots can also be grated and squeezed in water to produce paint. Dendel (1974 pg 113-115) states: "While indigo is the very queen of dyes, other plants are in common use in Africa, particularly Camwood and Avocado. All vegetable dyes require a certain dedication to the task but the reward in beautiful colours is worth the effort. "Indigo can be grown in southern United States where it was once a commercial crop. In places where it freezes up in winter, it often springs up from the roots and produce leaves for summer dyeing. It is a great satisfaction to grow one's own dye plants and have them handy for experimenting".

“Indigo plant grows wild in Liberia. The leaves are beaten in a special mortar until they become a juicy pulp. This pulp is carefully molded by the dye woman into round balls and set out in the sun to dry. When the dyer is ready to use the balls, the are dissolved with liquid in the dye pot and caustic soda is added to the solution, and stirred gently after which the pot is filled to the brim and covered tightly with planks. The solution remains at least overnight to achieve the desired result. Caustic soda makes the indigo soluble so it will attach to the fibres of the cloth when introduced into vat.

Generally, certain materials and tools can be improvised when not available. Some example s is clay, killn, drawing papers, adhesives/gum, palette, modeling tools, scraper mesh, clay used by ceramists and sculptors may be difficult to get in some areas, so the Artists have to improvise by using papier mache which is a good alternative. Papier mache can be made by soaking old newspapers in a bowl of water for some hours and pounding the soaked paper into pulp when properly soaked.

A kiln can be improvised by constructing a local one; a pit is dug and surrounded with burnt bricks, the clay wares are placed in the pit and covered, then they set fire to the pit.

Drawing paper can be improvised will empty cement bag, cut neatly to size or old calendar pages (the wrong side). Adhesive/gum cabbe improvised using local starch, pap and some tree or plant juice. Any flat piece of wood, plastic, empty egg crate can serve as a palette for colours. From pieces of wood and carved to light chiffon material for printing, though, the printing may not come out as smooth as the original mesh.

Fabric off cuts can be used for designing quilts and other fashion accessories like foot mats, bed covers, for background surface (on canvasse) in painting especially mixed media Art works. Handbags, purses, slippers and several soft toys can also be produced. Fabric wastes can still sew together (collage form) to form curtains; it can be very attractive this is also improvisation.

Some Improvised Materials

Conclusion/Recommendation

With the above explanations, it is obvious that improvisation if given due attention by government, can be one of the ways out of the financial down turn in Nigeria.

Improvisation will alleviate Artists' problems of lack of materials; it will create job opportunities and reduce youth restiveness in the country. Some of the works made with improvised items can be exported to the countries and in that way, boost the finances or economy.

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