

SYMBOLIC SYNOPSIS OF MUA'ZU MOHAMMED SANI'S SELECTED PAINTINGS

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Abstract

Artists across the globe have delved into diverse artistic renditions. In Nigeria, graduates from Art schools have equally experimented with different media and styles. Mu'azu Mohammed Sani is one of the painting graduates of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria who has, over the years, done works on "Splash" and "Roll in, Roll-Out" Techniques. This paper x-rays the materials, themes, techniques, symbols and styles the artist employed in his paintings. The contextual meaning of the symbols he used in his paintings are, to provoke viewers to relate issues with things that are happening within Nigeria and beyond.

Key Words: Painting, symbolic, synopsis, styles, technique.

Introduction

The quest for individualistic styles among artists across the globe is unarguably evident and has a long history. At every point, artists respond to happenings around them by depicting events and issues in their works. Such artistic exercises come to fruition by employing varied styles, techniques and media. Sadiq (2005) opines that, "by constantly experimenting with different media and arriving at certain results which range in form, style and technique, many artists have become famous among their contemporaries."

The establishment of art schools in the 1950s and 1960s has opened up opportunities for Nigerian artists to showcase their talents. This effort is credited to contemporary Nigerian artists whose giant strides included the use of Western materials to advance the African negritude as well as the inclusion of visual art in Nigeria's educational curriculum. This became an avenue for many interested individuals to study art up to higher institutions, and such artists thereby, produced works that depict the African culture.

As the art schools began to graduate students, various artists went into the art market in which they showcase their works in diverse styles, techniques, forms, themes as well as content. The Zaria art school, which is the fore runner among Nigeria's art schools, has continuously graduated great artists who equally went and started other art schools within the country. Among the graduates of Zaria Art School in the 1980s is Mu'azu Mohammed Sani, whose consistency in art practice has been evident. On this backdrop therefore, five of his works have been selected and discussed in this paper.

About the Artist

Mu'azu Mohammed Sani was born in 1959 and began his early education in Katsina, Katsina state after which he proceeded to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. In 1983, according to Duniya (2009), "Sani graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree in Fine arts and a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in 1986, both specializing in painting." Jari (2017) indicates that, when the PhD programme in Painting and Sculpture commenced in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, during the 2009/2010, Mu'azu Sani was one of the first set of students to have enrolled into the nascent painting programme. Subsequently, he obtained his PhD in painting in 2014, and worthy of note, he probably became the first Nigerian professor of Painting with a PhD in Painting as far as this paper traces.

Mu'azu Sani's artistic drive was influenced by a man he simply refers to as "Shehu artist" during his primary school days in Katsina (Duniya, 2009). According to Timothy (2014), during Mu'azu Sani's early education, he was also inspired by pictures in the *Michael London* and *Michael West Dictionaries* which he constantly flipped through. Out of the illustrations in these books, he produced his first painting in 1975. This artistic enthusiasm continued throughout his career

where he indulged in stylistic renditions. His works took forms such as sculpture, collage and painting but with more emphasis on collage and paintings. He experimented with collage using what he calls "Ceiling Board on Ceiling Board," "Canvas on Canvas Collages," "Splash" painting and several other experiments in the past. During his PhD and Post PhD programme, Sani has been experimenting with a style he calls "Roll in, Roll Out" paintings.

Mu'azu Sani has to his credit several awards and has participated in both local and international exhibitions. In an interview with the artist, Mu'azu Sani states that, his personal philosophy is "to try not to cheat anybody, but to do his best in anything he is doing, while not being a stumbling block to others."

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this paper is hinged on Okachi's (2015) view of Semiotics. The author states that, "semiotics is the production of interpretation and meaning. Its basic principle is that, meaning is made by the deployment of acts and objects which function as 'signs' in relation to the other signs." Chandler (2014) further explains that, "semiotics is not only concerned with (intentional) communication but also with ascription of significance to anything in the world". The semiotics theory therefore, is used to discuss various signs and symbols which have been adopted by Mu'azu Sani's works under study. The artist's selected paintings embody specific symbols and signs which were used to describe situations that concern Nigeria and the world at large.

Selected Works of Mu'azu Sani

Five works of the artist have been selected for this paper. They cut across some of his techniques which he has been employing in his works. While conversing with the artist, he narrates that, "Today, the existence of our beautiful world is based on four angles. The angles are religion, cultism, war and peace; the worries we are subjected to. These accumulate as our today's problems on this earth. It is therefore, on this concept of four angles that my works are based on." One of such paintings titled, "Roll out the Mat of Justice" in plate I, talks about the need to push off religious sentiments and display justice. When such is done, Sani is of the view that, Nigeria's religious differences will be eliminated. Issues such as "Boko Haram" and Religious conflicts will be tackled.



Plate I: Roll out the Mat of Justice II, 2010, Mixed Media, 122.5 CM x 152.5 CM.

Source: Artist's collection.

The painting in Plate I shows both the minaret and cross symbols which the artists portrays on a red background; these represent Islam and Christianity respectively. According to the artist, the two religions in Nigeria are guilty of fanning the ember of hatred among their followers which has resulted in so many crises in the history of the nation; hence, the red which signifies the spilt blood of the innocent. On the other side of the painting, a symbol of justice is painted white on a white background. The larger white surface is shown being rolled over the red

surface in a symbolic move to give peace a chance. Sani laments that, “before now, it used to be Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine, but today, another form of dance is on the stage with Iran, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Nigeria our great country are at war.”



Plate II: Which Grave Would I Enter? 2010, Mixed Media, 122.5 CM x 152.5 CM.

Source: Artist's Collection

The issue of wars among nations of the world is conspicuously depicted in another painting titled, “Which Grave would I Enter?” (Plate II). The artist chooses five Western countries and five from Middle East. Sani represents these nations by their flags being held in the left and right hand of a human skeleton. Below the figure are two graves which are painted blue and red respectively. The artist explains that the blue represents a peaceful grave where the just will enter and have rest, while the red signifies doom and agony meant for the wicked. Here, the skeletal figure represents death and is contemplating on which of the graves to enter with the ten nations of the world. The viewer is left with the judgment; which grave should the dead take these nations into after causing unending wars?

Mu'azu Sani continues to charge viewers with his conceptual paintings as shown in Plate III. The painting titled, “The Meeting of the Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” is a response to what the artist feels about how Nigerians used to live as a family. Sani explains that,

It is pertinent to note that in Nigeria, similar issues are bothering our initial peaceful country. The insecurity, threats, war mongering, political thuggery, bunkering, religious intolerance, cultism, to mention but a few, are courses or threats to the peaceful coexistence of what we used to see or know in Nigeria.

A few years back, every Nigerian could live in any part of the country without the fear of molestation; however, things have changed largely because of the issues the artist has raised above.



Plate III: “The Meeting of the Good, the Bad and the Ugly”, 2010, Collage, 122.5 cm x 152.5 cm.

Source: Artist's collection.

The painting in Plate III above shows three figures embracing one another. The artist says these are the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria: Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. In this painting, the figures represent the good, bad and ugly faces that are responsible for Nigeria's woes. The three figures can take any of the names in this painting: Good, Bad and Ugly. When it comes to looting of the nation's treasury, the three are united. It does not matter where they are coming from or the religion they practice, what unites them is the act of looting thereby causing hardship among the masses. By extension, when these three ethnic groups truly unite, Nigeria will once again know peace. The conspicuous Nigerian flag is equally shared into three to represent the issue at hand, and the yellow background exemplifies royalty which the artist sees Nigeria to be among her peers. The spatial colour splash is purposely done to show how Nigeria's royal birth has been stained by vices. Ironically, most of the paintings in this paper were creative in 2010, a period that the nation was experiencing the height of Boko Haram and kidnappings.



Plate IV, Roll Out the Binding Mat (Nigerian Flag), 2010, Mixed Media, 122.5 CM x 152.5 CM.

Source: Artist's collection

The painting in plate IV titled, "Roll out the Binding Mat (Nigerian Flag)" is similar to the painting in plate I. Here however, the two major religions are portrayed in white which signifies a peaceful situation, against the former which was shown in red. In this painting, the artist suggests that one Nigeria should be preached in places of worship, most especially among the two major religions in the country: Islam and Christianity. What binds citizens of a nation is the love of it, this is also expected of Nigerians to seek and practice. As much as Nigerians love their individual religions, they should shelve their religious differences and embrace a peaceful Nigeria.



Plate V: In the Grave II, 2010, Mixed Media, 122.5 cm x 152.5 cm.

Source: Artist's collection

Mu'azu Sani concludes his dialogue on the canvas with a painting titled, "In the Grave II". The artist, after much contemplation on issues bothering Nigeria and the world at large, he comes to

a point where peace is hard to achieve. In his opinion, true peace can only be found in the grave. Sani demonstrates such by depicting the symbols of Islam and Christianity shaking hands in the grave. Both the red, grey and black colours in this painting show the woes and vices that are found in this world, while the white depicts peace which is finally found in the grave as opined by the artist.

Conclusion

The paintings of Mu'azu Sani in this paper are basically conceptual. Issues raised are hinged on vices which have destabilized the peace of most countries especially in Nigeria. The artist tries to visually capture the disturbing vices that the country is plunged into. Most of the issues have to do with religion and politics. The works infer that the two major religions have a role to play in ensuring that peace reigns not only in Nigeria but the world at large. Also, the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria play a great role in its political scenes and can unite the nation, Nigeria, by truly loving one another as they join religious leaders in preaching peace among the citizenry.

As the current Nigerian government fights corruption, it is the duty of all and sundry to join in the fight. By so doing, resources will be recovered, preserved and genuinely disbursed to proper organs that are responsible for building the nation. It will provide infrastructure, create employment, quality education, and functional health services. This perhaps, will reduce the vices consuming Nigeria and cut off terrorist activities which have caused untold hardship on citizens, most especially those in northeast Nigeria.

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