

THE LATENT FUNCTION OF APPLIED ARTS: A CASE STUDY OF CERAMICS AND TEXTILES

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Abstract

It has been observed that from time immemorial, Applied Arts are visual impressions produced to serve a particular function or a purpose. These visual impressions or expressions are not actually produced as “art for art sake” as in the case of sculpture pieces, paintings, drawings and metal designs. The paper therefore examines the latent functions inherent in ceramic and textile artistic impressions that are not visible or pronounced for people to also criticize and appreciate. The literary method of getting information is used. Personal interviews and photographs were used for data collection. Over fifty (50) houses in Obiaruku and fifty (50) offices in Delta State University, Abraka were visited. However, the latent role of ceramics and textile products are very important and vital to the patronage of these applied arts visuals. The findings show that many people within Abraka and Obiaruku are not aware that ceramics and textile products can be used for aesthetic purposes to beautify or enhance their homes or offices. It is observed that only those involved in art can really differentiate and use them. Some of the suggestions are to create educational programmes such as seminar, conferences, workshops for the people within the university environment for enlightenment and awareness. Students should be encouraged to embark on research of aesthetic roles of ceramic or textile productions.

Introduction

Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995) defines “latent” as invisibility, inertness (not gradable) present but needing particular conditions to become active, obvious or completely development while function is the duty, concern or role of anything, person or object. There is a latent function of applied art that is not visible, hiding or concealed that must be made laudable by the artists. It is this aspect which is submerged in the artistic development that this paper wants to examine in relation to ceramics and textile designs.

Applied arts in visual art family is referred to as artistic expressions created by an artist for a purpose or function designed for domestic or utilitarian and industrial use. Examples of these creative impressions are graphic arts, textile design, ceramics, photography and others. It means that applied arts designs or artworks are not created as “art for art sake” as it applies to fine art works such as sculpture pieces, painting, drawing and metal designs.

Ceramics

Clays, the main raw materials for ceramic wares are produced by the weathering of crystalline rocks such as granites, pegmatite and basalt and that kaolin or china clay $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \cdot 2\text{SiO}_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$, is the purest clay mineral kaolinite (Ahuwan 1993:41). This type of clay contains little iron impurity. He went further to cite Hanner 1975 that the name “kaolin” is said to be Chinese for “high Ridge” which was the district from which the early supplies were obtained. However, no clay is pure in its chemical composition and varies greatly. Chemically, clay is a hydrated alumina and silica plus chemically combined water. It is only when it has been processed then it can be used successfully to produce ceramic works.

Traditional and contemporary potters use the raw material clay for the production of ceramics. But Idowu (2006: 133-139) states “the traditional potters generally manufacture their wares having in mind the purpose it is

meant to serve is a great stimulus in determining the type of ware to make and the shape it is to take". Bakinde (2007: 40-46) and (2008: 1-7) supported the above statement that "all traditional vessels were manufactured based on the function they are meant to perform, and that each ethnic group has peculiar ceremonies associated with them and as such they employ pottery in carrying out these traditional ceremonies as in marriage, burial and chieftaincy title taking as vessels for serving drinks. Ekong (2000: 93) also agrees that different cultures have produced pottery forms suitable for particular purposes in their localities. These potteries are up till today not produced for producing sake, each has a purpose and any feature given to the pot has a function". Ekong also states that "Ibibio traditional potters give names to their pots with strict cognizance of the purpose for which each pot is made e.g. water, wine, cassava, musical pots and these vary in forms and shapes" (Ekong 2000:94). Agberia (1996:6) also agrees that "even the traditional potteries produced by Ladi Kwali at Kwali village are largely dictated by the technical, material and utilitarian needs of the patronizing communities.

Okunna and Umunna (2009:11) also talked on the creative communication aspect of pottery of different cultures which is already overshadowed by the utilitarian purposes. These communicative elements can only be decoded by an expert who is conversant with the cultural communicative system of the people.

It is also observed by Ngumah (2009:48) that the production of ceramic wares has assumed a new dimension whereby it has been influenced by some creative ideologies emanating from contemporary issues. This influence is observable in terms of theme, form, function and style as in the case of Nsukka Art School in the use of uli symbols and their interpretations.

The contemporary functionalities of ceramic productions according to Egonwa (2011: 85-86) Effiom (2000: 120) Uzzi (2008: 31-35) cut across table wares, sanitary wares to electrical electronic ceramics, electrical insulators, tiles, switches and plugs, refractory bricks, pressure pipes, lamp stand and constitute engineering products other than pots.

Textiles

The term textile according to the Textile Institute (1970:170) simply means a woven fabric which has grown to include any manufacture from natural or synthetic fibres, yarns or filament obtained by interlacing-which includes weaving, felting, bonding and tufting. Textiles are normally used flat, it can be a base fabric or it can be decorated with dyeing techniques, embroidery and other stitchery such as quilting or appliqué and by attaching ribbon, beads, metal and other trim. The international museum of folk art (2010: 18) stated that many textile fabrics have multiple uses. What is worn as an outer garment during the day can be used as blanket at night. A floor covering can also be bedding textile when someone lies down on it or sleep.

However, traditional textiles are mostly used for formal traditional ceremonies and their applications to fashion are determined by socio-cultural norms of the society. These include asooke, the adire eleko and adire eleso, the akwete, the okene and akwaocha cloths (Okeke 1996: 39). Okeke further explains that the "abada" Indian madras (known as George) are used culturally for different ceremonial occasions such as child naming ceremony, chieftaincy titles, traditional marriages, installation of traditional rulers or kings and age-grade ceremonies. But the contemporary textile materials breakdown ethnic walls to create a broader fashion landscape to include social dynamics, professions and religious organization.

Historically, from ancient times, "the remain of the long history of fabric construction has an usually difficult task because of the impermanence of the material. Held (1973: 7) opines that "dampness, mildew, moths, fire and chemicals in the soil also serve to destroy animal and vegetable, so that very few remnants of early woven goods survive such as those in cold southern part of Siberia, Boglands of Scandinavia, tombs in Egypt, sealed under conditions ideal to preservation. Potteries are also used in the documentation of fabric records when the fabric itself has disintegrated. Held (1973) further observed that the fired clay endures to preserve a record of the weaves employed and also an idea of tools used as projected by the "black-figure lekythos, Greece with image of vertical warp-weighted loom on a pot (terracotta) height of

6¾ in Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Ekong (2002) also noted that pottery has been the primal source of historical record, not only from the pot shards found in archaeological sites but the continued practice of the craft and its marriage to traditional beliefs.

Most contemporary artworks of ceramics and textiles are mainly functional except some artists that prefer to deviate a little from the conventional practices as stated by Ene-orji (2008: 36-42) that "Chris Echeta has succeeded in giving a new face to ceramics as a wholly aesthetic art practice, subduing the functional (salient) aspects of ceramics to a large extent". Nike creates a lot of batik works for aesthetics using the Yoruba mythology, folktales and cultural issues (The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and National Orientation (2010: 352). However, Filani (1998: 36) also stressed on Taiwo Olaniyi (twin seven seven) aesthetic works on batiks and prints using myth, folktale and legend in his subject matter.

Nwigwe, Diogu and Omeje (2012:131) also agree that cloth and clay in African society are used beyond the conventional application – to cover one's nakedness and as container of some sort. They used Onuzulike's ceramic works as examples patterning clay works after cloth to interpret the anti-social experiences of people in Africa and other parts of the world. Cloth forms and themes serve as a metaphor among other things. The unusual shape and decoding can only be done by an expert in these works.

Some of the Attributes of the Latent Functions in Ceramics and Textiles Artistic Impressions

As already stated the general public believe that ceramic wares are objects of receptacle-storage (liquid or grains), except the traditional small open pots used to serve banga or ohwo soups to keep the food hot until he or she finishes the food. But the researcher is of the view that ceramic has exceeded that level of which a ceramic object may have a dual role depending on its design and finishing. The Fig 7 and 9 may serve as receptacle objects but also hidden is the decorative function of the art pieces as stated by their designers. They do not have lids and they are quite large to be carried each time liquid or grains are to be removed from them. The Ikpolo flower vase design is made with twinning technique in

weaving to represent the Ikpolo (meaning beads) tied on the waist of most maidens in Urhobo land in Delta State. Its also symbolize beauty of the womanhood which is expected to be appreciated and as such the ceramic object should be kept in a place where people should appreciate it. The elongated neck of the pot also symbolizes the cylindrical neck of the female which moves down to the beaded waist level of the pot, showing the anatomical structure of a woman.

The Fig. 8 is also another ceramic ware with the design totally at variance with the normal or traditional pottery. The latent function in this object cannot be over emphasized because nothing like liquid or grains can be stored in it. It only shows that it is for decoration in totality, which many people are not conversant with. Its porosity shows that it is a flower vase and can only be admired by the user.

Presently, we have ceramic sculpture, or architecture and even installation which many people believe are sculpture works. Except one is knowledgeable it is difficult to understand such artistic expressions because of the decorative aspect of the works which people are not use to. Some of these pots are elongated and large.

It is also a general opinion that most textile products are for dress wears, assorted bags, shoes and hats. The normal production of these textile materials are through batik, tie-dye, printing and weaving. In textile, the materials used in the formation of the design, the technique and finishing determines the functionality of the objects.

Many people do not have knowledge of tapestry in textile and such works are graded as paintings. The design on Fig.10 and its colour scheme can actually be used for a dress wear, but the submerged function is in the technique and materials used for the work. The medium used is raffia strands using the Rya knot technique and was framed for interior decoration. The design on Fig.11 that can also be used for a dress wear but the finishing determined the functionality as it is for interior decoration as directed by the user. The Treadle loom method of weaving was used for the production. It is not as long as woven design material for dress wears and also may not be as wide as the ones used for sewing

garments. Some of them may tell a story. The Fig.12 is also based on African theme using the tapestry technique which are quite heavy and cannot be worn. They may have the three dimensional projection of figures like relief sculpture piece but the background may be smooth like a plain material. It is also a framed work and based on one motif design formation.

Applied Art: Ceramics and Textiles in Delta State University, Abraka Environment

It has been observed that the latent function of ceramics and textiles have been undermined for sometime hence the absence of these applied art works in most homes and offices in the environment. It should be noted that ceramic and textile products can also be used to decorate homes, hotels and official offices for aesthetic purposes.

There are a lot of ceramic potteries produced for aesthetic sake. Such products are found in figures 7, 8 and 9 trying to disentangle from the traditional functionality to aesthetic values for more people to appreciate and purchase for their homes, offices and external buildings.

The same latent function of textiles is also found in figures 7, 8 and 9 respectively, it is also a deviation from the normal decorative adire prints. It is the use of tapestry designs for the embellishment of homes and the environment. Tapestries are designs that have been in existence from ancient times. Academically these designs are very technical, time consuming and elaborate to achieve, but are most effective and appreciative as they are not too common as those for dress wears and furnishing.

Over fifty (50) offices visited in campuses I, II and III Delta State University, Abraka do not have a single ceramic or textile art work as a decorative piece. The same experience applies to the fifty (50) residential houses visited in Obiaruku town. Many people seem not to understand the usefulness of textiles and ceramics as a decorative medium in the home. They are only aware of the use of sculpture and painting as a medium for aesthetic values as per creative expressions.

From the researcher's interaction with the people living within Abraka-Obiaruku environment, only those who are artists and have knowledge of the different types of artistic

impressions have ceramics and textile productions as decorative pieces in their homes. Some few friends and relatives of the visual artists have ceramics and decorative batiks and tapestries in their offices. It is therefore obvious that this latent or concealment function of our honourable profession must be brought to limelight.

The Way Forward

The researcher is of the opinion that students of this aspect of art should be given assignments that will project the aesthetic functions of applied arts. The latent function is more technical and skilful and as such the sizes should not be too large for them to handle. It is advisable that the applied arts artworks produced for aesthetic appreciation and evaluation should be the items to be collected from the students for keeps in the department during final year exhibitions. Departmental exhibition should be held yearly or in other to showcase these works. These works can be sold to individuals, art lovers and appreciators at minimal cost to enable people to buy and display in their homes, offices or give out as gift item to friends and well wishers.

It is also advisable that students should be encouraged to embark upon projects that are used for aesthetic purposes. Students should be encouraged to seek financial support from financial establishment such as banks, Shell Petroleum Development Company, Chevron, Social Development Company, Non-Governmental Organizations and others. They should be instructed by their supervisors to make proposal to such organization or establishment using designs suitable for their consumption. Such projects should be allowed to be kept by the organization to project our professional career. It will also expose the latent function of applied art in relation to ceramics and textiles.

It is also suggested that common traditional themes should be used for their designs. It will encourage the average people within the environment to purchase or buy such designs because of their understanding.

Conclusion

In conclusion, some of the submerged latent qualities/features in most of the ceramic objects identified are as follow;

- a. They are designed in a manner that they have dual functions.
 - b. Some have a lot of perforations of different sizes in them.
 - c. Some are elongated, large and also aesthetically appealing.
 - d. They have highly decorated designs that need interpretation.
 - e. It may have unusual shape from the normal ceramic works which makes it more difficult to know the functionality of the art piece.
 - f. Some are installations which are more technical.
- d. Those that are wide are not long and may have decorated warp ends, using beads, bamboo or macramé knotting.
 - e. They are usually finished as wall hangings or decorative pieces.
 - f. Some of the works are also installations which make them more difficult to use for normal cloth or garment

While in textile the identified concealed latent qualities/features in the works are;

- a. Most of them are in one unit design no matter the technique used.
- b. They have small yardage unlike those for wrappers and garments.
- c. They are heavily woven with the formation of three dimensional protrusions such as relief sculpture.

The latent function of applied arts impressions should be made more laudable by the teachers or lecturers in most higher institutions. This problem may be a common one in most institutions where ceramics and textile productions exist. African or Nigerian traditional themes should be encouraged so that those within the environment would appreciate their values and interest to purchase such creative expression as a decorative art piece in their homes or offices. Lastly, educational programmes, workshops, seminars should be organized for enlightenment and awareness of the people within the university environment.

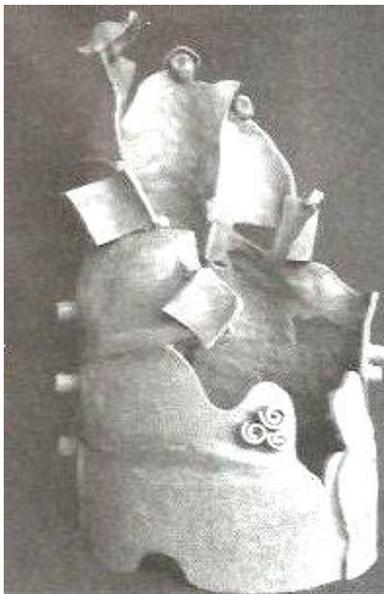


Fig 1
Artist: Chris Echeta
Title: Constructing the environment for human survival
Medium: Terracotta with engobe design
Year of Production: 2008

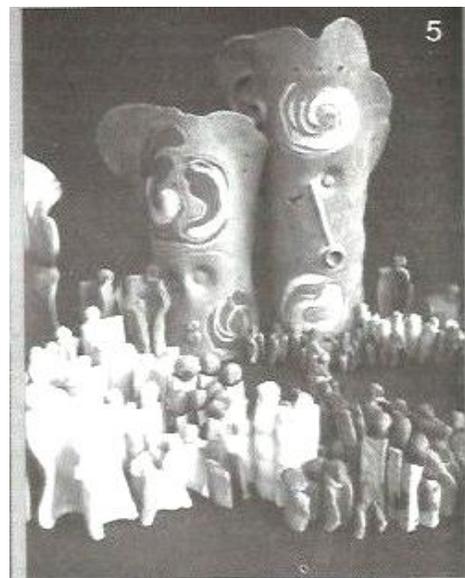


Fig 2
Artist: Chris Echeta
Title: We have come to the village square for peace
Medium: Terracotta with engobe design
Year of Production: 2006/2007

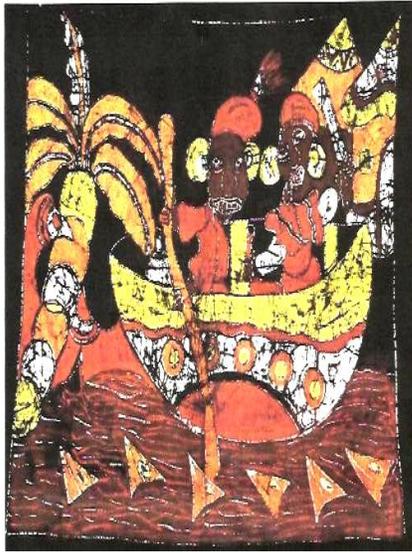


Fig 3
Artist: Nike Okundaye
Title: The royal boating
Medium: Batik on cotton with natural dye
Year of Production: 1990



Fig 4
Artist: Nike Okundaye
Title: The Shango worshippers
Medium: Batik on cotton fabric with vegetable dye
Year of Production: 1993



Fig 5
Artist: Duru Malik
Title: Carrier
Medium: Batik
Year of Production: 2012



Fig 6
Artist: Onuzulike O.
Title: The parliamentarian after another brawl
Medium: Ceramic
Year of Production: 2000



Fig 7
Artist: Prof. (Mrs.) Grace Ngozi Ojie-Ogwu
Title: Twist of existence in woman hood
Medium: Earthen ware clay
Year of Production: 2009



Fig 8
Artist: Mr. Agede Chukwuma
Title: Economic Ruin
Medium: Earthen ware clay
Year of Production: 2010

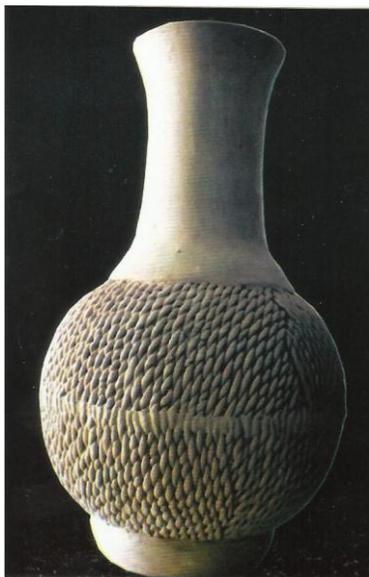


Fig 9
Artist: Dr. Abamwa Oghenekevwe
Title: Ikpolo Flower Vase
Medium: Earthen ware clay
Year of Production: 2011



Fig 10
Artist: Dr. Oghale Okpu
Title: Ancestral Conference
Medium: Tapestry
Year of Production: 1997



Fig 11
Artist: Dr. Oghale Okpu
Title: Abame Festival
Medium: Weaving
Year of Production: 1992



Fig 12
Artist: Dr. Oghale Okpu
Title: Traditional African Mother
Medium: Tapestry
Year of Production: 2010

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