

ADAPTING THE KWAGH-HIR PUPPETRY THEATRE TO CREATE KINETIC PAINTINGS

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Abstract

This article examines the aesthetic qualities of the Kwagh-hir puppets and how gesture and drama can be used to create kinetic paintings. In doing this, it adopts the historical-analytic and artistic methods to present a concise history of the Kwagh-hir puppetry theatre, with a view to putting together its aesthetic attributes as sources of inspiration for the creation of paintings. It further interrogates the drama and gestures of the Kwagh-hir sculptures, as would-be compositional influences. It argues that the use of gesture and drama to create kinetic paintings though could be very challenging, is a fascinating creative experience for the artist. Hence, such creative transformations could be made to represent various aesthetic designs worthy of public and individual patronage and appreciation.

Keywords: Adaptation, Kwagh-hir puppetry theatre, Kinetic paintings, Tiv

Introduction

The Tiv Kwagh-hir puppetry originally started as a revolt cult in the early 1950s. Kwagh-hir in Tiv means Tiv folklore. The Kwagh-hir has been traced beyond Adikpo Songo in Kwande Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State. Hence, it is a concept of the individual inventor of performance. Kwagh-hir in its present form can be traced to the late 1950s. The earlier forms of the Kwagh-hir had existed prior to European colonization, and encompassed the story-telling tradition, the poetic and dance traditions all of which are components of the Kwagh-hir and whose origin go into the earliest times (Hagher, 2003). The introduction of the puppets into storytelling and poetic and dance traditions however, began the modern Kwagh-hir (Hagher, 2003).

The Kwagh-hir theatre emerged about a decade later. It was in 1964, the year of Atem-Tyo, the most brutal Tiv revolt that Kwagh-hir

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spread like wildfire round the whole of Tivland. The Kwagh-hir comprises many art forms, namely: storytelling, poetry, puppetry, music, dance, and dramatization. Kwagh-hir as a theatre is performed at night, as an event which provides secular entertainment, education, and socialization through the enactment of the past and contemporary events by human performers. The Kwagh-hir theatre uses puppets, which vary in size and style. These puppets could be made to perform a number of intricate movements. For example, soldiers executing an armed robber or a puppet doctor operating on a pregnant woman and removing the child. Kwagh-hir theatre has both rod and string puppets as well as masquerade puppets which have one or more persons inside the puppet operating its movable parts (Hagher, 2003). By 1981 the theatre was made into an annual competition, with participants drawn from all the fourteen Tiv-speaking LGAs in Benue state.

The Tiv are a people whose history has been traced to the Congo. Though there is no single universally accepted version of the origin of Tiv people, they are said to have descended from a progenitor called Takuruku. Oral traditions have so far been more plausible and appealing, except that views differ as there are so many oral traditions. Others have accepted that shon was the first person that originated from the original deity or Supreme Being. Aondu shon is said to have given birth to many children amongst who were the Tiv, Uke (foreigners) and the whites, Buter. Tiv is further said to have given birth to two sons, Ichongu and Ipusu. This prestigious man called Tiv, left Congo to Cameroun, and was settled at a place called Swem in Cameroun. This is where he died and his children, not happy to bury their father or leave him behind, burnt his corpse and packed the ashes together with that of his father Takuruku Nyamazenga in a small pot and travelled along with it to this part of Africa where today they are called citizens (Igirgi, 2007). The group is largely homogenous, speaking one language with only tonal variations and exhibiting (with the exception of minute peculiarities) similar cultural traits throughout the land. They occupy over thirty local government areas spread across Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba States, with large migrant communities also found in Plateau and Adamawa States. All members of this ethnic group regard themselves as descendants of the great patriarch Tiv (Hagher, 2003).

The puppets in their original state are sculptural. These sculptures are grouped into three, namely, giant puppets, masquerade puppets and miniature puppets. Regardless of whichever category they may belong, these sculptures possess certain characteristic features that are common to all. Features such as their African proportion

(disproportionateness or technical inefficiency). In this regard, Ehem (1976) states that "some puppets are naturalistic, some grotesques and others ridiculous". They appear primarily in pungent colours, with white bulgy eyes almost Nok-like and pure black pupils. Ehem further argues that the puppets reflect the moral prejudices and sanctions of the community (1976).

Aesthetic Qualities of the Kwagh-hir Puppets

The Kwagh-hir puppets possess aesthetic characteristics which this study identifies as geometric formations like their triangular noses, Nok-like eyes, small lips and triangular nostrils. The colours used in painting the puppets are vibrant, because the Kwagh-hir artists use colours straight from the source. There is no deliberate attempt at creating tones, shades or tints from such colours. Costumes for the masquerades are elaborately made and are also highly coloured. This work is interested in the use of such attributes as the pungent colours of the puppets; the compressed proportion of the figures; the almost Nok-like eyes, small lips and triangular noses and nostrils alongside their gestures and how all these have influenced painting. It would also interrogate the creation paintings inspired by the drama and influence of the gestures of the Kwagh-hir sculptures and Kwagh-hir puppets which could give an illusion of movement, and possibly stimulate the visual senses into perceiving movement.

Conceptual Framework

Visual motion in art practice is hinged on the concepts of the twentieth century art. The concepts, theories and formats have influenced the development of visual agitations in painting and arts in general, including Cubism and Futurism (Buser, 2006). Cubists dissect forms and place them in such a way that they interact with the space around them. Futurists, on the other hand, focus on motion in time and space to capture the dynamism of modern life, which gives one an insight into the creation of kinetics in painting. Relying on the foregoing, we adopt the 20th century art as the conceptual framework for this study. This theory allows for several other movements and ideas to be adapted and accommodated, hence, the variables of this article which are the appearance of the Kwagh-hir sculptures and their kinetic tendencies.

Review of Related Literature

The presentation by the story-teller requires the rendering of dialogue and representation by means of gesture, expression and voice of the characters involved in the dialogue. The story-telling art

is a communal art in Tivland. There are elaborate props and costumes to initiate the characters in the narration. There is a spontaneous audience response which also offers criticism of the art. Song and dances are the main musical events accompanying the narration. The narrators enliven their art with dance, gestures, mimicry and mime. The story/plot is structured by crisis, partial solution, renewed crisis and final solution with latent ambiguities (Hagher, 1990). This statement further buttresses the story telling aspect of the Tiv Kwagh-hir.

The poetic thought of the Tiv people is significant to the Kwagh-hir theatre in that it underscores the relationship between poetry, an essentially speech art, and theatre, a doing art. In Tiv poetry, other art forms exist in a composite form. The forms are poetic narratives, songs, including ballads, religious songs, and song accompaniment to dances. Others are ritualization performances, proverbs and riddles. However, in spite of this informative account of the Kwagh-hir poetry, no section was given to the visually artistic aspect of the Tiv people.

A number of Nigerian artists have used aspects of their speech art, wooden sculptures, and story-telling art, among other things, as sources of inspiration. But none has particularly dealt with the Tiv aspects as a source of inspiration for painting as provided by the study at hand. For example, Bruce Onabrakpeya, a pioneer Nigerian artist, gained his inspiration from some series of paintings from Urhobo myths and legends. Stories for him are 'themes' that he employs to "expresses and accentuate the various stylized and abstract forms" of Africa. To paint his pictures he uses abstractions and stylizations in telling stories. For Bruce, stories are very stimulating sources of inspiration for the artist (Buhari, 1984). Bruce Onabrakpeya (1932) use of myth and legends as sources of inspiration relates to this essay to a large extent as both studies take up subjects within a story and story-telling art and explore their aesthetic possibilities. As such, Onabrakpeya's prints series cannot be said to have touched on the Tiv Kwagh-hir on a specific level.

In other parts of the world, artists (painters) were inspired by the arts of Africa. Several 20th century painters/artists adapted in their works the African approach to arts. Movements such as Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, Constructivism and Kinetic art at different times have drawn inferences from African ideas. But none has particularly dealt with the Tiv aspect as a source of inspiration for painting as provided by the study at hand.

"An Armed Robber at the Stakes" (1976)

The Kwagh-hir puppet (Fig.1) reveals in their aesthetic intention abstracts from reality those situations, attitudes and social behaviours

which are not only given in Tiv communities but represent something of the universal human situation. The Kwagh-hir theatre uses puppets which vary in size and style these puppets are highly advanced and could be made to perform a number of intricate movements. For example, there could be soldiers executing an armed robber or a puppet doctor operating on a pregnant woman and removing the child (Hagher, 2003). Enem (1976) explains further that:

The quality of actuality is often achieved by the literal representation of essential details of a situation presented. For example in the vignette of the execution of an armed robber by a firing squad, an actual shot is fired and at the same time the animals head jerks suddenly and drops to one side. An ironic edge in that situation is pointed by the presence of his helpless relations (presumably his parents) at his execution.

As such this article sees the aesthetic qualities of the Kwagh-hir puppets and their theatrical attributes as possibilities for creating paintings.



Fig.1, Artist: unknown, An Armed Robber at the Stakes, Woods, Size Unknown, 1976 (Source: Nigeria Magazine No.120, 1976)

"Unique Forms of Continuity in Space" Umberto Boccioni (1882 - 1963)

This piece is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and is rendered in bronze. It shows how the human body interacts with the environment as it moves, describing motion as the essential characteristic of modern humans. Feldman (1971) opines that "it possesses a gracefulness and embellishment of form. One needs only reflect on how details of an adjacent landscape appear in our peripheral vision when we are travelling at great speed". Though this figure does not possess Kwagh-hir features such as Nok-like eyes, small lips and triangular noses and nostrils, it however, reminds one of the speeds of Hungwuandere (puppet).



Fig. 2, Umberto Boccioni, Unique Form of Continuity in Space, Bronze, 110.1x88.5x40cm, 1913
(Source: Experiencing Art around Us)

"Nude Descending a Staircase" Marcel Duchamp (1887 - 1968)

Marcel in nude descending a staircase juxtaposes his Cubist and Dadaist experiences. The artist uses yellow ochre on the subject which makes it look like pieces of wood. Marcel succeeds in arranging these

'pieces of wood', as though they possess fulcrums at certain intervals. Placing the subject on a brownish background the artist creates a remarkable contrast thereby making a nude figure look like a mechanical object capable of motion.

Buser (2006) explains that:

Nude descending a staircase in imitation of a photograph that captures a person in motion by means of multiple exposures inspired by Cubism, he fragments the nude into overlapping flat planes. Duchamp then painted the fragments in regular groups organized in a descending rhythm as the nude takes one step after the other down the stairs".

Although the figure does not exhibit the kind of aesthetic characteristics owned by the Kwagh-hir puppets, this paper however, finds the fragmentation and rhythm appropriate in describing the activities of giant puppets.



Fig. 3, Marcel Duchamp, Nude Descending a Staircase, Oil on Canvas, 143cmx89.2cm, 1912

(Source: Artist Rights Society (ARA), New York /ADAGP)
 Discussion of Works Produced from the Adaptation



Plate: I, Agaku Saghevwua Amos, Dough Ityu, Mixed Media,
 140cmx130cm, 2012
 (Source: Artist collection)

"Dough Ityu" (Plate: I), an abstracted figure of Yion describes the motion created by the spontaneity of the puppets movements as walking forward, turning of head from left to right and the removing of pipe from mouth. Forms are moulded with sawdust mixed with ponal (carpenters glue) and allowed to dry. In this coloured relief the artist implores the use of complementary colours of yellow and purple. There is a fragmenting of the forms of the figure from the top left hand side of the painting. This describes the turning of the puppet's head and right hand. The yellow brush strokes that appear on the fragmentation further enhances the motion while the other purple brush strokes below indicate the direction of the figures movement as a result of this movement the puppet's eyes are also fragmented. The repetition of the form of the pipe from top right hand side of the painting, and its increase in size and subsequent resting at the lower middle of the painting creates a rhythm that describes the removal of pipe from the mouth. At this level, the artist begins to combine Cubist, Dadaist and Futurist tendencies; hence, it shows an affinity with the nude "descending the staircase."



Plate: II, Agaku Saghevwua Amos, Na Shuoon, Mixed Media,
140cmx130cm, 2012
(Source: Artist collection)

Further abstracting of the figure of Yion shows Na Shuoon (Plate: II), repeating forms in the painting. This painting like the one in Fig. 4 was moulded with sawdust mixed with ponal. The embossed surface was then filed with sandpaper and painted an undercoat of grey colour. The embossment of the figure is allowed to create the highlights and tones. While the shades are created by the coloured patches of blue, red and brown. The fragmenting of blue and red, on the background and the brush strokes that fall on the left hand side of the painting, indicates the body movement. Also, there is a repetition of the pipe from top right hand side of the painting, and resting at the lower middle of the painting which creates a rhythm that describes the removal of pipe from the mouth. This spontaneity of the puppet's movement sees its left hand repeated from the top middle of the painting downwards which depicts greetings being offered. Here, forms are further lost that one does not see any eye, facial features, the patterns of the anger attire and the head gear, an affinity of this painting to Duchamp's "Nude Descending the Staircase" could be discerned.



Plate: III, Agaku Saghevwua Amos, Yion Tema, Mixed Media, 120cmx90cm, 2012 (Source: Artist collection)

"Yion Tema" (Plate: III) like the figure in Plate: II is a seated figure of Yion removing the pipe from its mouth. It shows a dissolving of form into shapes. The intention in this painting is to register clearer kinetic using an abstracted figure. It is essentially a transformed level of painting as forms are fragmented, simplified and distorted so that formal properties of line, shapes and colours come to the forefront. Though movement here is not spontaneous, the figure describes some degree of movement. Yion in a seated posture moves his head from one side to the other as such moving the pipe across the breadth of the painting. There is a fragmenting of patches of yellow ochre from the left hand side of the painting to the right hand side. This indicates the gradual body movement. The harmonious fragmentation of blue, green and yellow in the background, also gives the painting an affinity with Duchamp's "Nude Descending the Staircase".

Conclusion

This paper has explored the dynamic relationship between painting and sculpture. It look at certain vistas of theatre, a doing art, through a presentation of the Kwagh-hir puppetry tradition as kinetic paintings worthy of public appreciation. Adapting Kwagh-hir proportion and motion to create kinetic paintings could be a challenging as well as an exciting creative experience for the artist. Apart from its theatrical significance, Kwagh-hir puppets could present the artist with a variety of forms with which creative transformations could be made to represent various aesthetic designs worthy of public and individual patronage. This essay has as a finding noticed that brush strokes, patches of colour, and repetition of design elements have transformed perceived

movements made by the Kwagh-hir puppets into graceful pictures of kinetic images. The images produced were conceptual in appearance because of the transforming of the identity of the source of inspiration. Though Futurist artists (painters) like Umberto Boccioni and Marcel Duchamp have been inspired in their works by human figures to create motion in painting, this essay has however, has chosen to use an abstract figure (Kwagh-hir figures) as its source of inspiration to create kinetic in painting. This paper brings to bare motion of Kwagh-hir figures in painting by the fusion of repeated lines, colour, shape and forms to create kinetic paintings.

Recommendation

It is also hoped that artist (painters) could begin to use other traditional sculptures, for example, the "Dabo Dabo", "Ere Ibeji", among other things, to create paintings through a study of the combinations of traditional proportions and motion; by repetition of lines, shapes, colour and form in paintings to bring to the fore this motion.

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