

## **APPROPRIATIONS IN MODERN PAINTINGS BY NIGERIAN ARTISTS**

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### **Abstract**

Appropriation in Art, is the act of taking compositions and design components from existing works (paintings) to produce new ones, and can be traced back to leading exponents of Art through many of the Art Movements. Cogent statements of war, politics, social and cultural issues are sometimes used as compositional influences targeted at fulfilling purely aesthetic yearnings. Since modern artists of European descent have done immeasurably well of appropriation, this paper attempts to view into selected appropriations done by Nigerian artists. The paper tries to understand the obvious and subtle motivations for appropriating elements and compositions from other artists' works. It takes a look into the emotive, aesthetic, perceptive, social or psychological levels. This research adopts a Qualitative Research method and engages a narrative research design. In view of the comparative complexities involved in this research, the study weaved together a sequence of events, from many documents to realise its aim and objective(s). The study's data is collected from stories that form these documents. This research found out that various levels of appropriation that characterise the paintings under review; some are partial, others total, or compositional formats from the original in order to make new, valid and aesthetic statements. That once an idea is reproduced by another painter, no matter the source, it ceases to be that idea and transmogrifies into a new expression. The original then, have been a source of inspiration upon which it was meant to grow and make meaning among others.

**Keywords:** Ambiguous, Appropriation, Deception, Illusion, Re-interpretations, Taking

## **Introduction**

Celebrity artists have famously appropriated, sampled or taken design elements of pre-existing works for use in newer approaches to paintings and arts. In Europe and America, the French born American artist Marcel Duchamp (1888-1968), the Catalanian artist Salvador Dali (1904-1989) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) are well known for such tendencies. Nigerian artists Yinka Shonibare (b.1962), Chika Okeke Agulu (b.1966) and Gani Odutokun (1946-1995) are also akin to this phenomenon as they too have appropriated, drawing inspiration from either established Nigerian masters or even from the vestiges of Western art.

The thrust of this research is to look at appropriations created by Nigerian artists. Thereby try to understand the obvious and subtle motivations for appropriating elements and compositions from other artists' works to make new and valid statement in painting. What happens on the emotive, aesthetic, perceptive, Social or psychological level to the artists or audience when these appropriations take place? When a painting is taken away from its original setting to a new contextual domain does it lose some inherent content, contextual authenticity?

## **The Research Design used is the Narrative Approach**

This research adapts a qualitative research method and engages a narrative research design. Owing to the comparative complexities involved in this study, the research read documents and weaves together a sequence of events, issues pertaining to appropriation by European artists and Nigerian artists, the role of appropriation. This research therefore gathers data from many documents to realise its aim and objective(s). Which are: to look at appropriations created by Nigerian artists? Thereby try to understand the obvious and subtle motivations for appropriating elements and compositions from other artists' works to make new and valid statement in painting. The study's data is collected from stories that make up those documents.

## **Basic Definitions**

Irvin Sherri (2006) Opines that "appropriation in art is nothing new. Borrowing from the work of other artists has been a time-honoured practice throughout much of art history: painters for instance, have often

repainted the works of others in order to explore the application of their own style to a familiar composition and subject matter". Elaine Sturtevant (1924-2014), a master of appropriation who recreated works by iconic 20<sup>th</sup> century artists in order to explore authenticity, artistic celebrity and the creative process. Of course, Sturtevant took appropriation to a new extreme. Simply to paint a precise copy of another artist's work and claim it as one's own work, while openly acknowledging that it is a copy, poses a certain kind of challenge to the concept of authorship that had previously been posed. Gbaden (2012) identifies appropriation as "the act of borrowing or reusing existing elements within a new work." He maintained that postmodern appropriation artists tend to negate the idea of originality, claiming that in reusing existing imagery and its elements, they are "re-contextualising the original imagery, allowing the viewer to renegotiate the meaning of the original in a different, more relevant, or more current context" it is usually the famous works of popular artists which can be easily recognizable that are appropriated (Gbaden, 2012).

Marcel Duchamp (1888-1968), the French-born American artist, is probably the first artist to successfully demonstrate the ability to appropriate concepts with his use of "readymade" objects such as toilet seats and bicycle wheels as art works (Gbaden, 2012). He believed that it is the artist's ingenuity which leads him or her to the choice of what an art object should be. For him unaltered everyday objects once placed within the context of a gallery or museum assume the status of works of art (Princenthal DVD). Damian Loeb on the other hand used film and cinema to comment on themes of simulacrum and reality. Other high-profile artists working at about the same time as Loeb include Christian Marclay, Deborah Kass, Damian Hirst and Genco Gulan.

By appropriating elements, forms, symbols from their original contexts to new settings artists attempt to re-define meaning and engage the public in imbibing new understanding of issues contrary to those opinions that are better known to them. Artistic borrowing is not a preserve of the visual arts alone as appropriations take place in the literary, performance and theatre arts as well. Some other school of thought say that only lazy people who have nothing to say let themselves be inspired by the past in the way of appropriation. Others fear that this new trend of appropriation is caused by nothing more than the wish of embellishing oneself with an attractive genealogy. Sherrie Levine was

taking part in “picture”, the famous exhibition at Artists Space that launched appropriationism. A phenomenon which reflects “the overproduction of reproduction, remaking, reenactments, recreations, revisionings, reconstructing, and etcetera by copying, imitating, repeating, quoting, simulating and adaptation pre-existing name, concepts and forms”.

Appropriation art has resulted in contentious copyright issues regarding its validity under copyright law. The U.S. has been particularly litigious in this respect. A number of case-law examples have emerged that investigate the division between transformative works and derivative works. Andy Warhol for example faced a series of lawsuits from photographers whose work he appropriated and silk-screened. Sandomir (2013) narrated saying “Patricia Caulfield, one such photographer, had taken a picture of flowers for a photography demonstration for a photography magazine. Without her permission, Warhol covered the walls of Leo Castelli's New York gallery with his silk-screened reproductions of Caulfield's photograph in 1964”. After seeing a poster of Warhol's unauthorized reproductions in a bookstore, Caulfield sued Warhol for violating her rights as the copyright owner, and Warhol made cash settlement out of court. On the other hand, Warhol's famous “Campbell's Soup Cans” are generally held to be non-infringing of the soup maker's trademark, despite being clearly appropriated, because “the public was unlikely to see the painting as sponsored by the soup company or representing a competing product. Paintings and soup cans are not in themselves competing products” according to expert trademark lawyer Jerome Gilson.

In 2000, Damien Hirst's sculpture “Hymn” (which Charles Saatchi had bought for a reported £1m) was exhibited in Ant Noises in the Saatchi Gallery. Hirst was sued for breach of copyright over this sculpture by the designer and maker Mr. Norman Emms. The subject was a ‘Young Scientist Anatomy Set’ belonging to his son Connor, 10,000 of which are sold in a year by Toy Manufacturer Humbrol Limited based in Hull. Hirst created a 20-foot, six-ton enlargement of the Science Set figure, radically changing the perception of the object. Hirst paid an undisclosed sum to two charities, Children Nationwide and the Toy Trust in an out-of-court settlement. The charitable donation was less than Emms had hoped for. Hirst sold three more copies of his

sculpture for similar amounts to the first (UK News, 2000). With all the litigation issues surrounding some of these appropriations one would then ask why continue to appropriate. It is simple, appropriation artists want the viewer to recognize the images they copy. They hope that the viewer will bring all of his original associations with the image to the artist's new context, be it a painting, a sculpture, a collage, a combine, or an entire installation. The deliberate "borrowing" of an image for this new context helps the artist comment on the image's original meaning and the viewer's association with either the original image or the real thing.

## **Review of Related Literature and Works**

### **History of Appropriation**

In the early twentieth century Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque appropriated objects from a non-art context into their work. In 1912, Picasso pasted a piece of oil cloth onto the canvas. Subsequent compositions, such as *Guitar, Newspaper, Glass and Bottle* (1913) in which Picasso used newspaper clippings to create forms, became categorized as *synthetic cubism*. The two artists incorporated aspects of the "real world" into their canvases, opening up discussion of signification and artistic representation (Masterworks Fine Art, 2024).

Marcel Duchamp is credited with introducing the concept of the *ready-made*, in which "industrially produced utilitarian objects attain the status of art merely through the process of selection and presentation. Duchamp explored this notion as early as 1913 when he mounted a stool with a bicycle wheel and again in 1915 when he purchased a snow shovel and humorously inscribed it "in advance of the broken arm". In 1917, Duchamp formally submitted a readymade into the Society of Independent Artists exhibition under the pseudonym, R. Mutt. Entitled *Fountain*, it consisted of a porcelain urinal that was propped atop a pedestal and signed "R. Mutt 1917". Mann (2017) stressed that "the work posed a direct challenge to traditional perceptions of fine art, ownership, originality and plagiarism, and was subsequently rejected by the exhibition committee". Duchamp chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its utilitarian significance disappeared under the new title and point of view by so doing created a new thought for that object.

The Dada movement (including Duchamp as an associate) continued with the appropriation of everyday objects. Dada works featured deliberate irrationality and the rejection of the prevailing standards of art. Burns Zé (2013) holds that “Kurt Schwitters, aspired to join the Dadas and start his own chapter in Hanover, Germany. For those who need a refresher, Dada was an avant-garde movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Basically it was a bunch of weirdos who loved nonsense, paradox, and hijinks while opposing the art thought of the bourgeoisie”. Schwitters constructed these art forms from found objects and they took the form of large constructions that later generations would call installations. The Surrealists, coming after the Dada movement, also incorporated the use of 'found objects' such as Méret Oppenheim's *Object (Luncheon in Fur)* (1936). These objects took on new meaning when combined with other unlikely and unsettling objects. In 1938 Joseph Cornell produced what might be considered the first work of film appropriation in his randomly cut and reconstructed film *Rose Hobart*. In the 1950s Robert Rauschenberg used what he dubbed "combines", literally combining readymade objects such as tires or beds, painting, silk-screens, collage, and photography. Similarly, Jasper Johns, working at the same time as Rauschenberg, incorporated found objects into his work.

The Fluxus art movement also utilised appropriation: Grey Art Museum (2013) affirm that “A truly international network of artists, composers, and designers that developed in the 1960s, Fluxus resists categorization as an art movement, collective or group”. Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol appropriated images from commercial art and popular culture as well as the techniques of these industries. Often called "pop artists", they saw mass popular culture as the main vernacular culture, shared by all irrespective of education. These artists fully engaged with the ephemera produced from this mass-produced culture, embracing expendability and distancing themselves from the evidence of an artist's hand (Grey Art Museum, 2013).

### **Appropriation art and Copyright**

Jeff Koons has also confronted issues of copyright due to his appropriation work. Photographer Art Rogers brought suit against Koons for copyright infringement in 1989. Koons' work, *String of Puppies* sculpturally reproduced Rogers' black-and-white photograph

that had appeared on an airport greeting card that Koons had bought. Though he claimed fair use and parody in his defense, Koons lost the case, partially due to the tremendous success he had as an artist and the manner in which he was portrayed in the media. The parody argument also failed, as the appeals court drew a distinction between creating a parody of modern society in general and a parody directed at a specific work, finding parody of a specific work, especially of a very obscure one, too weak to justify the fair use of the original. In October 2006, Koons successfully defended a different work by claiming "fair use". For a seven-painting commission for the Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, Koons drew on part of a photograph taken by Andrea Blanch titled *Silk Sandals by Gucci* and published in the August 2000 issue of *Allure* magazine to illustrate an article on metallic makeup. Koons took the image of the legs and diamond sandals from that photo (omitting other background details) and used it in his painting *Niagara*, which also includes three other pairs of women's legs dangling surreally over a landscape of pies and cakes.

According to Casetext - CoCounsel (2024), In his decision, Judge Louis L. Stanton of U.S. District Court found that *Niagara* was indeed a "transformative use" of Blanch's photograph. "The district court judge granted summary judgement to the defendants on the ground that Koons's appropriation of blanch's photograph was fair use", the judge wrote, "but uses it as raw material in a novel way to create new information, new aesthetics and new insights. Such use, whether successful or not artistically, is transformative." The detail of Blanch's photograph used by Koons is only marginally copyrightable. Blanch has no rights to the Gucci sandals, "perhaps the most striking element of the photograph", the judge wrote. And without the sandals, only a representation of a woman's legs remains and this was seen as "not sufficiently original to deserve much copyright protection."

The review of paintings below reveals different aspects of appropriation. Some depict minimal borrowing of elements from the original to create new compositions. Others are elaborate re-interpretations of existing paintings aimed at parodying not only the content but also the ideological perspectives derivable therein. It is possible to extrapolate ideas, compositional or figural formats, cosmological or cultural themes, mythologies and legends from original paintings to inspire the production of new works.

### **Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593) and Matthäus Merian (1593-1650)**

The portrait *Campus Anthropomorphos* (1671), (Fig. 2), by the Swiss-German artist Matthäus Merian is appropriated from an image the *Autumn* in (Fig. 1) by the Italian artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593). This painting a century older than Merian's is a renaissance composite portrait. The contraption Merian borrowed can be seen in the arrangement of the objects in the portrait *Autumn*. *Autumn's* bearded man a composition of organic vestiges becomes a row of densely populated trees moving up the hill for Merian's *Campus Anthropomorphos*. The disparity assumes an obvious direction in Merian's work where the engraving exists as a landscape composition, much against Arcimboldo's that is a still life composition; formed from a carefully selected old master's hues of fruits and flowering plants that bear shades of ocher, browns, grey, yellow, maroon and forest green. The fruits are balanced on a strapped collection of woods creating the hair, face and the subject's neck. The background is characterised by a dark shade of brown and framed on the edges by green leaves and maroon flowers. Stafford and Terpak (2001) note that, "the depiction of a mountain as the head of a bearded man was popularised by a painter and a widely circulated print created by Matthäus Merian in the early 1600s." Further, he maintained whether a work of nature or an imaginative painting created by a human hand, an anthropomorphic landscape elicits astonishment in the viewer because of its ability to be two things at once. The effect of an anthropomorphic landscape conforms to the philosopher René Descartes's description of wonder: "When our first encounter with some objects surprises us and we find it novel, or very different from what we formerly knew or from what we supposed it ought to be, this cause us to wonder and to be astonished at it".



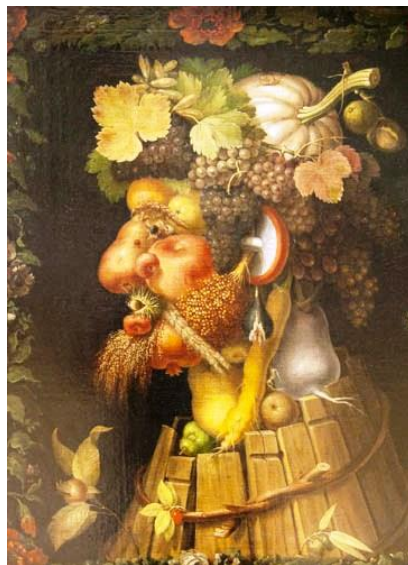


Fig. 1, **Giuseppe Arcimboldo's**, Autum, Oil on Canvas, 76cm x 63.5cm, 1573  
(Source: Images for Giuseppe Arcimboldo's composite)

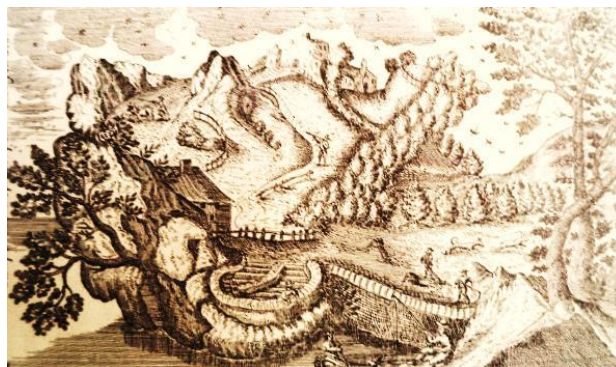


Fig. 2, **Matthäus Merian**, Campus Anthropomorphos , Engraving, 15cm x 23cm, 1671  
(Source: Seckel, 2004)

### **Anonymous French Postcard, (ca 1905) and Charles Allan Gilbert (1893-1929)**

According to Seckel (2004) “double imagery was extremely popular during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Many of these double images were created anonymously, and imitations were rampant as they were distributed on puzzle cards and on popular advertisements.” One of such well-known and repeated motifs involved a couple preoccupied by their conversation(s) and a hidden skull, such as *L’Amour de Pierrot* [www.revolvy.com](http://www.revolvy.com) (Fig. 3), the work is basically created in black and white. The background is presumably composed of dark curtain that open up to form a white circular space presumably an outer environment which is manipulated to create an image of a hidden skull. This skull portrait has the couple’s heads balanced in middle of the open space to form the eyes. The couple’s hands joined together at the centre of the composition highlights the nasal opening. There seems to be two wine glasses on a glass table that indicates the lines of the teeth. An anonymous French postcard, ca. 1905 (also adapted from earlier versions), which was later appropriated by Charles E. Gilbert an American magazine illustrator, who created perhaps its most famous version “*All is Vanity*” [www.revolvy.com](http://www.revolvy.com) which emerged in ca. 1920.



Fig. 3, **Anonymous**, *L’ Amour*, French Postcard, Size Unknown, 1905  
(Source: Images for <https://www.revolvy.com/main/index>)

Charles Allan Gilbert, was a prominent American illustrator. He is especially remembered for a widely published drawing (a memento mori or vanitas) titled *All Is Vanity* (Fig. 4). The drawing just like the previous image created in black and white. The skull is balanced in the upper middle of the drawing. The head of the woman in the picture is repeated in such a way that it forms the eye openings. The drawing employs a double image (or visual pun) in which the scene of a woman admiring herself in a mirror, when viewed from a distance, appears to be a human skull. The title is also a pun, as this type of dressing-table is also known as a vanity. The phrase "All is vanity" comes from Ecclesiastes 1:2 (Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.) It refers to the vanity and pride of humans. In art, vanity has long been represented as a woman preoccupied with her beauty. So is art that contains a human skull as a focal point is called a memento mori (Latin for "remember you will die"), a work that reminds people of their mortality. It is less widely known that Gilbert was an early contributor to animation, and a camouflage artist (or camoufleur) for the U.S. Shipping Board during World War I (revolv.com. 2018).



Fig. 4, **Charles E. Gilbert**, *All is Vanity*, Drawing, Size Unknown, 1920

(Source: <https://www.revolv.com/main/index>)

**Anonymous: American Puzzle Card and Edgar Rubin (1886-1951)**

Anonymous (Fig. 5) is a portrait which features a topsy-turvy image. Essentially a drawing, which is drawn in black and white, is a wine goblet. A line divides the background of the drawing into two equal halves. The distribution of lines, shades and shadow on the lower portion of the work interacting with the repeated patterns of the goblet's waist creates two upsides down faces. If you invert the goblet containing wine, you will see two solemn looking individuals. Since the artist here is not known and there is no written document to suggest its purpose, it is not clear what this drawing was set to achieve. A century later Rubin would use a standing goblet in a flat drawing where the faces were stood. Still in black and white Rubin's version was more of a design and with a more balanced repetition of the faces (www.Edgar+Rubins+Hidden+Faces 2018).



Fig. 5, **Anonymous**, Hidden Faces and Goblet, American Puzzle Card, Size Unknown, 1880

(Source: [www.google.com/search?q=Edgar+Rubins+Hidden+Faces](http://www.google.com/search?q=Edgar+Rubins+Hidden+Faces))

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many psychologists were behaviourists who took the position that all psychological phenomena could be explained with observable phenomena, namely, stimuli and responses.

The Gestalt psychologists bristled at this idea, because to them it seemed obvious that hidden processes within the brain were crucial to explaining perception. To prove their point, Gestalt psychologists liked to show ambiguous figures. The Danish Gestalt psychologist Edgar Rubin freely adapted the earlier late nineteenth century American puzzle card into the Rubin face/goblet figure-ground illusion. The picture (Fig. 6) can be seen as a vase-like object or as two faces. This is because two different perceptions can result from the same stimulus the gestalt psychologists argued, clearly there was something going on inside the head to determine which figure was seen. Perception involved more than just the stimuli that entered the eye. Central processes (brain processes) were involved. Both of these popular ambiguous images are ubiquitously seen in psychology textbooks.

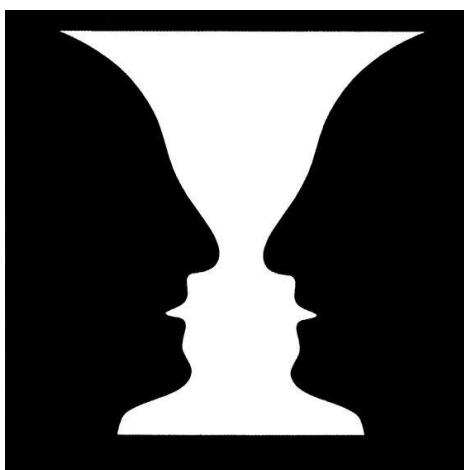


Fig. 6, **Edgar Rubin**, Hidden Faces and Goblet, Medium unknown, Size Unknown, 1915

(Source:

[www.google.com/search?q=Edgar+Rubins+Hidden+Faces](http://www.google.com/search?q=Edgar+Rubins+Hidden+Faces))

**Anonymous: German Postcard and Edwund Boring (1886-1968)**

The visual illusion in *Young Woman/Old Woman* generally presents the viewer with a mental choice of two interpretations, each of which is valid. Often, viewers see only one of them, and only realises the second, valid interpretation after some time or prompting. In this

image (Fig. 7), this is the profile portrait of a young woman drawn in black grey shade and white is typically interplay of white and black. For the image in (Fig. 7) the background is completely black while that of (Fig. 8) is made white. Both hats in the images are white but the one in the later image is merely a line layout. While the face of the girl in the former drawing is grey, the girl in (Fig. 8) is white with few linear expressions. The sweater on the old woman in (Fig. 7) is draw with tones, highlights and shades, the one worn by the woman in the second design is thick black and flat. If the viewer's eyes focus on the woman's hat the brain interprets a young woman's three quarter profile. But when the eye encounters the young woman's face first, then an old woman's side view becomes discernible. Kim (2006) says "when the viewer attempts to simultaneously see the second and the first interpretations, they suddenly cannot see the first interpretation anymore, and no matter how they try, they simply cannot encompass both interpretations simultaneously.



Fig. 7, **Anonymous**, Young woman/Old woman, German Postcard, Size Unknown, 1880  
(Source: Seckel, 2004).

There were many popular nineteenth century motifs that incorporated double images. Two of the most famous are *Young Woman/Old Woman*, which was later freely adapted by the psychologist Edwund Boring into the classic *You see my Wife, and Mother-in-law*, also known as the “Boring Figure.” Boring’s version is however, simplified into basic line drawings making it even more difficult simultaneously to see the second and the first interpretations, here because lines and patches are used to create the image. One cannot see the first interpretation anymore, and no matter how one tries to get a grasp of the interpretations, they simply cannot cover both interpretations simultaneously.



Fig. 8, **Edwund Boring**, *You see my Wife and Mother-in-law*, Medium unknown, Size Unknown, 1941  
(Source: Seckel, 2004).

### **Rob Gonsalves (b. 1959) Magic Realism**

Gonsalves works constitute some architectural apparitions where imagination seems to become real. For *The Sun Set Sail* for instance, which is a painting characterised by blue, white and shades, predicated on proportion and repetition. There is a reduction in the size of the ships so much so that forms become blur, colour intensity also blurs towards



the end point at left side of the painting. It may not be possible for ships to sail at such an architectural mathematics, Gonsalves impossible world however, makes it possible. In the image (Fig. 9), one encounters a perspective well worked out, and towards the right of the painting Gonsalves feels the need to make the dreamlike, magical occurrence depicted seem more concrete, as if the sail could be experienced in the physical world. Gonsalves, driven by a frequent desire to express the wonder of imagination, manifested as images causes him to explore this same composition as can be seen in the later appropriations that followed.

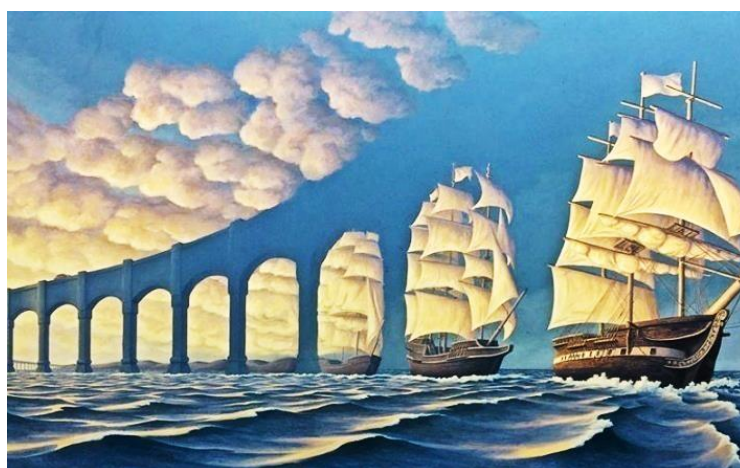


Fig. 9, **Rob Gonsalves**, The Sun Set Sail, Acrylic on Canvas, 2001, 101.5cm x 51cm

(Source: <http://www.google.com/search/q=Rob+Gonsalves>).

The same composition as the former, the image in (Fig. 10) becomes a conglomerate of plants and animals. Created in the families of blue, purple, yellow and ocher, this painting is also characterised by workings of proportion and repetition. There is also a reduction in the size of the camels so much so that forms become blur, colour intensity also blurs towards the end point at the left side of the painting. at the left side of the painting even the identities of the animals are lost. The arches in the earlier version are replaced by trees. The voids of the arches which in the former were ships become camels. Gonsalves cleverly appropriates a



sea setting to a desert scene establishing two extreme contrasts that seem to work well in their own right.

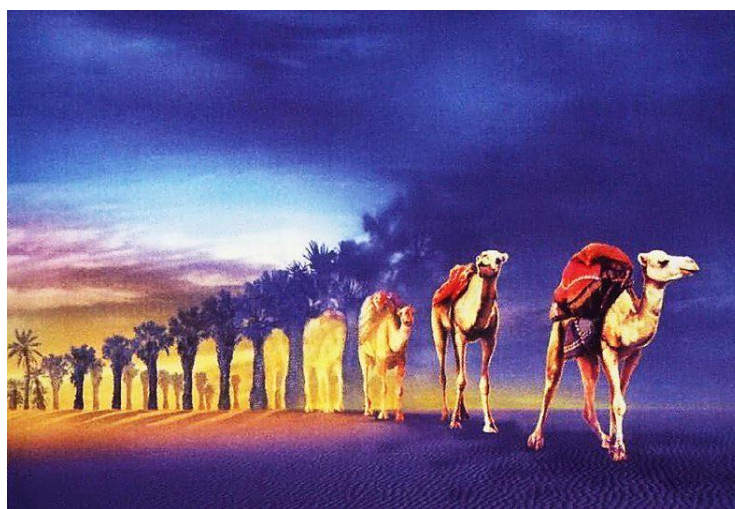


Fig. 10, **Rob Gonsalves**, Unknown, Acrylic on Canvas, 2001, 101.5cm x 51cm

(Source: <http://www.google.com/search/q=Rob+Gonsalves>).

### **Appropriations done by Nigerian Painters**

#### **Bridget Riley (b. 1931) and Amos Saghevwua Agaku (b. 1980)**

“Movement in squares” is essentially Optical arts, composed of squares. The shapes are repeated in an alternating pattern forming a checkered pattern. From the left side of the painting to mid right of the work, the squares reduce in size until they become tapered. They again begin to increase in size from the mid right side to the right. Consequently, the entire design vibrates in the viewer’s eyes and imparts on the viewer, a sensation of movement caused by a peeling of one check from the other, or two checkered pillars rubbing against themselves. The use of black and white here gives rise to a much desired contrast needed for the accentuation of such optical movement. This work directly influenced the making of Agaku’s *Movement with Ellipses I*. The Nigerian born artist copiously used this image by replacing the squares with ellipses to create a current work.

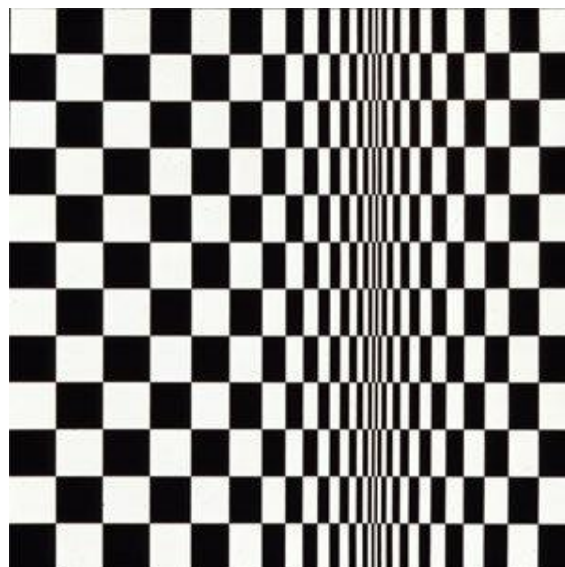


Fig. 11, **Bridget Riley**, “Movement in squares”,Tempera on Board, 122 x 122, 1961

(Source: [www.artnet.com/artist/bridget-riley/](http://www.artnet.com/artist/bridget-riley/))

Agaku’s *Movement with Ellipses* (Fig. 12) is a depiction of movement caused by the placement of colour, varying of shapes and background chroma. The background is painted in four shades of dark brown, orange, yellow orange and light yellow. Shaded from the left side of the picture, the background lightens into orange from the middle of the painting. The lighting is stopped abruptly towards the right side of the work. There is a straight line created as a result of this breakage between the yellow orange and the light yellow. Yellow ellipses are painted in interchanging rows starting from the left side of the painting. Their sizes are tapered as they move towards the lighter areas until they get to the sharp cut edge. On the light yellow portion, the shapes begin with the slimmest sizes and they open up into bigger ones to the right side of the work (Agaku, 2015). As a result, the movement so created looks as if one was peeling the whiter part with some measure of speed. The hues also tend to change identities. Both yellows on the two extremes, left and right are of same shade. But one would notice that the ones on the dark background are pure while those on the light tend to become shaded. Inspired by Riley’s “Movement with Squares”, this

painting seems not to be as resonant in illusion of motion as its source of inspiration.

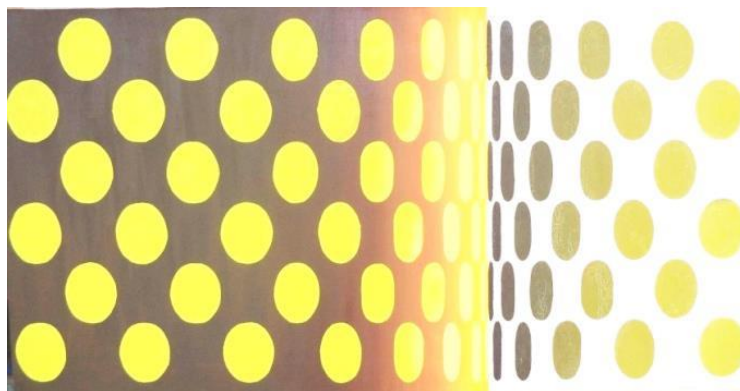


Fig. 12, **Amos Saghevwua Agaku**, Movement with Ellipses I, Oil on Canvas, 75cm x 213cm, 2015  
(Source: Artist Collection)

#### **Gani Odutokun (1946-1995) and Chika Okeke – Agulu (b.1966)**

Nigerian artist, Chika Okeke-Agulu (b-1966) specializes in classical, modern, and contemporary African art history and theory. He is a professor of art, and teaches in USA. Okeke-Agulu's acrylic painting titled, *Tyranny and Democracy* (Fig. 14) is an appropriation of Gani Odutokun's *Police Brutality* (Fig.13). It is another example of a complete appropriation in the vein of Charles Allan Gilbert. Although the colour usages in both paintings have been altered, where the background of Gani's work is rendered in families of red, Agulu has patches of blue and black. Perhaps because Agulu turned his subject in an angular profile, his painting has highlights, tones and shades. Looking at Gani's *Police Brutality* however, one would notice the deliberate use of flat hues black and white. Hardly are there major changes in the composition aside from the position that the now undressed tyrant is facing, and the fact that the artist has reduced the emphasis placed on the female figure being masticated by the beast (Gbaden, 2012).



Fig. 13, **Gani Odutokun**, Police Brutality, Poster colour, 75cm x 55, 1994. (Source: A Legend of Nigerian Art)



Fig. 14, **Chika Okeke – Agulu**, Tyranny and Democracy (detail 1 of 7 panels), Acrylic on Canvas, 152.5 x 122cm, (1994) (Source: Okeke 75)

## **The Role of Appropriation**

Apart from the aesthetic value of appropriation it is clear that borrowing saves the headache of composition, style and technique, since the original work has already provided all these. The theme is usually already well laid out. In most cases even the medium remains the same. Appropriations are veritable tools for psychotherapy and social commentary. Society has acquired illnesses which require highlighting in order to address them. Gestalt Psychology, (2007) posit that “In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many psychologists were behaviourists who took the position that all psychological phenomena could be explained with observable phenomena, namely, stimuli and responses”. The Gestalt psychologists bristled at this idea, because to them it seemed obvious that hidden processes within the brain were crucial to explaining perception. To prove their point, Gestalt psychologists would show ambiguous figures some of which this paper highlight (Gestalt Psychology, 2007). The Danish Gestalt psychologist Edgar Rubin freely appropriated the earlier late nineteenth century American puzzle card into the Rubin face/goblet figure-ground illusion. The aim was to affirm that something is going on inside the head to determine which figure was seen. In this they attempted dealing with issue of perception (Gestalt Psychology, 2007).

When Gani Odutokun did his gouache painting of *Police Brutality* (1986) it was at a time when Ibrahim Babangida regime was meting out its worst record of human rights abuse on the citizenry of Nigeria. These atrocious acts had to be captured by Odutokun and perhaps other artists such as Olu Oguibe (b. 1964) who's painting; *And the beast had the face of one I know* (1988) had the General's face collaged on the beast's head. Chika Okeke-Agulu's appropriation of Odutokun's work with the apt title of *Tyranny and Democracy* (1994) makes us to reconsider the salient nature of a democracy founded on falsehood, on brutality and inclinations of blood thirsty military rulers. At this time, it was General Sani Abacha who seized the mantle of leadership and unleashed a reign of terror.

## **Conclusion**

Conclusions derivable from this research indicate various levels of appropriation that characterise the paintings under review; some are partial, others total, or compositional formats from the original in order

to make new, valid and aesthetic statements. After all what makes painting a core art form is using coloured pigments on two-dimensional surfaces. In the long run painters seek to express model aesthetic parameters in their art in such ways as to provoke reactions from the public. The provocations could sometimes be perceived as social commentary, political satire, historical narratives or parodies, and powerful allegories. The reviewed paintings may have succeeded in this regard. Let us analyse some of them and draw up parallels with what the Nigerian situation has presented to painters.

Appropriation in the manner in which Gilbert does it, is absolute and total. Not only does the artist appropriate ideology, imagery, and concept, he also parodies, in a rather sophisticated style, the very idea of its fruition. Anonymous French Postcard, *L'Amour*, has inspired Gilbert to also produce *All is Vanity* which the drawing employs a double image (or visual pun) in which the scene of a woman admiring herself in a mirror, when viewed from a distance, appears to be a human skull. It refers to the vanity and pride of humans. Odutokun, in *Police Brutality*, makes virulent social commentary on the physical and psychological torture Nigerians go through under the Nigerian police system, a supposedly civil defence apparatus; Okeke, in *Tyranny and Democracy*, parodies the decaying state of Nigeria's democracy which is a mere mimicry of the true value of justice and human equity. Odutokun uses the police to depict the horror of brutality the Nigerian polity endured under years of military rule. There is no beauty here, only perhaps in the neat composition where one can never misread the message. Coloured pigment drips down the canvas like blood oozing out of wounds of millions of Nigerians inflicted by bullets, machetes and humiliation of psychological torture.

If we examine the appropriation idea in carefully, we are likely to reach a plausible conclusion that all art is an appropriation of nature, the environment, human activity and supernatural phenomenon. After all is it not Plato, the great philosopher who said art is mere imitation of nature? Even if we dismissed his statement as being stoically antagonistic to art as we well know, it means then that the artist imitates when he appropriates. This is only correct from one perspective: if the imitation were not meant to be a forgery as many young Nigerian artists are being paid to do recently. One particular incident is that of Gani Odutokun's *Dialogue with Mona Lisa* which was plagiarised and posed

for the original. There is however, no information as to who did the forgery.

The painter appropriates from a wide variety of sources, nature, photographs, the internet, space, science, technology, computers, literature, philosophy, music, poetry, masquerades, festivals, dance, drama, religion and common daily life's lessons and exigencies. These enrich the vocabulary of painters and empower them to act according to phenomenal changes. Once an idea is reproduced by another painter, no matter the source, it ceases to be that idea and transmogrifies into a new expression. The original would then have only been a source of inspiration upon which it was meant to grow and make meaning.

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