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THE HUMAN FIGURE: AN APPRAISAL OF THE PAINTERLY REPRESENTATION OVER THE YEARS

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Abstract

The human figure artistically for thousands of years has been a favourable subject for artists from ancient times. Through the ages the human figure has been discovered on cave walls, used in portraits activities on vases that have been used to tell stories or express belief or used to explore what epitomises being human. For the artists, the representation of the human figure means more than simply reproducing a likeness of a person. Having looked at the literatures it was observed that despite the development in spheres of life, the human figure has remained uniquely the same, not evolving with time. This therefore has made the human figure to have place in an artistic exploration. The thrust of this paper is on representations done on two dimensional surfaces within the scope of painterly renditions confined in serial successions of creative development from the ancient through modern to the post modern era. This study uses qualitative observation methods and depends on both primary and secondary information. The research instruments include photography and scanning to provide photographic evidence of data and content. useful findings are made from the observation process which has consequently generated the following recommendations that with technology challenging its limits by the day, more efforts should be made to boost the future representation of the human form.

Keywords: Human figure, painterly representation, ancient, modernism, postmodernism

Introduction

The concept of the human figure in art is an area of interest or representation where the scope of this article is delimited to rendering of the human form on a flat surface. The thrust of this paper is on representations done on two dimensional surfaces within the scope of painterly renditions confined in serial successions of creative development from the ancient through modern to the post modern era. From the literature used in this study, it was observed that the reflection of the society at each particular time played a prominent role into how the human figure was represented. The human figure was seen at instance that was worth studying beyond the being. As a historical and cultural category, the human body undergoes numerous transformations as prevailing social, political, and economic forces change. Race, gender, and class, as well as religious and cultural values, have been imprinted on depictions of the human body and sanctioned throughout history. Representations of the human body in art, whether identified as religious or secular, raise questions concerning structures of power, ideology, and identity. Artistic renderings and interpretations of the human body privilege it as a symbolic value and a political agent.

For many cultures, including Renaissance Europe, the presentation of the human body was a visual means of classifying knowledge about the world. In contrast, those religious cultures in which the human was seen as a mirror of the divine, such as classical Greece or Hindu India, emphasized the beauty and balance of the human form. These cultures interpreted the human body as the locus and signifier of internal modes of religious life and thought.

The Egyptians for example believed symbolically in the full representation of the human form. Every part was conceived important as body could not function without its full components. Another epoch example worthy of note, is the Vitruvius drawing by Leonardo da Vinci used to represent an ideal human body with an accurate expected proportions seen in fig 1.

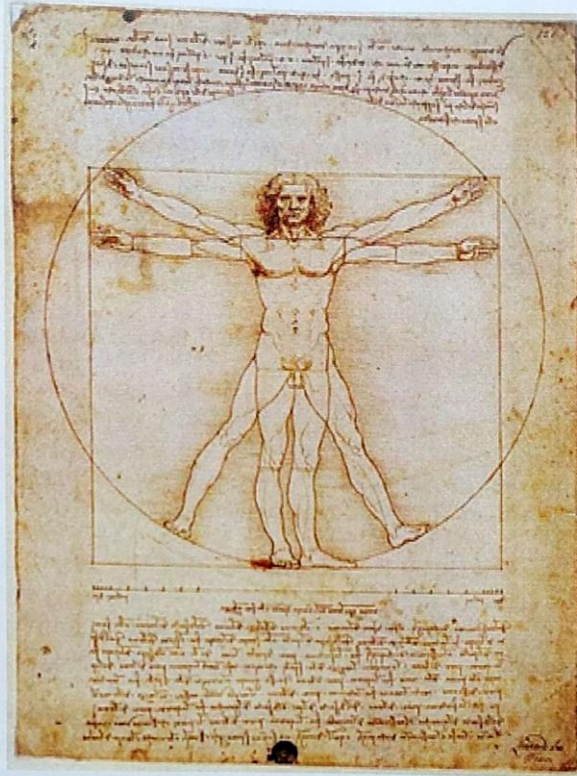


Figure 1.
Artist: Leonardo Da Vinci
Title: Vitruvian Man
Source: Public Doman@wikicommons

Human Figure as Subject and a Symbolic Figure

The Ancient World

The pictorial representation of the human body (figure) is an act of practice that has been around for a long time. The tradition of painting the figure which has existed for thousands of years is still firmly established today. The account of human civilisation on record dates back to the stone era, where humans were able to visually document their activities on hard rocky surfaces in their areas of abode. Amongst these illustrations were forms that suggest human nature by the upright position they were portrayed in. Therefore, it is not an understatement that the human figure has been one of the constant subjects of art practice since the time of the Stone Age, as seen in fig 2,

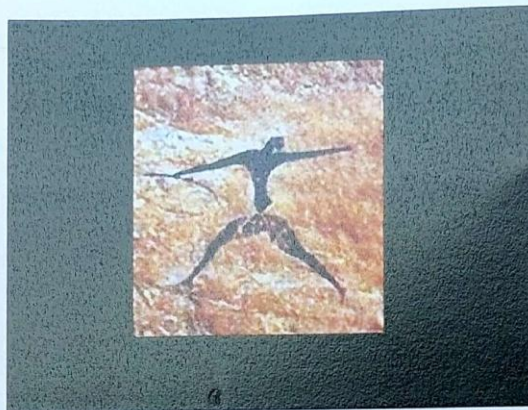


Figure 2,
 Title: Cave man
 Source: www.slideshare.net/mobile/RachealVanDyke/history-of-the-figure

and it has been reinterpreted in various ways throughout history Clark (1956). The figure provides an absorbing study for both the experienced and inexperienced artist, and as well as being a readily accessible subject, which offers an infinite variety of shapes and forms.

Representing the human body in art have varied through the centuries, and may be considered to epitomize the different society's attitudes and ideologies. A society's general view of man's position in the universe in relation to God or nature is often recognizable in how the figure is shown in art and how realistically done.

Since the birth of classical ideal some 25 centuries ago, artists have been influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the philosophy, which was then expounded. A belief in the intrinsic beauty of the human body and its proportions, which was expressed in the art of Ancient Greece, later it became one of the motivating factors for the artist of fifteenth century Italy. This revival of interest in the human figure, which coincided with the existence of some of the greatest artists the world has ever known, led to the era being known as the age of Humanism, or as it is more commonly recognized, the Renaissance.

Artist since then have worked in many widely differing styles, but their depth to the Renaissance remains clear. Stan and Linda (2003) assert that the understanding of perspective and anatomy taken for granted today is an heirloom from these earlier times. It is with good reason that these are still considered to be important areas of study for the artist, being able to represent the figure realistically, which has become increasingly possible with the growth of scientific knowledge, has always been one of the most important initial aims for the figure painter. Man seems to have a strong desire to represent himself as he really is.

(I). Egyptian Figures

In contrast to the Egyptians, whose sights were set on the hereafter, the Ancient Greeks were concerned with the here and now. The Egyptians made no attempt to represent the human figure as he was for this would not have served their purpose. The human figure was represented by his obvious features to make recognition by the gods and acceptance into the afterlife inevitable as seen in fig 3.

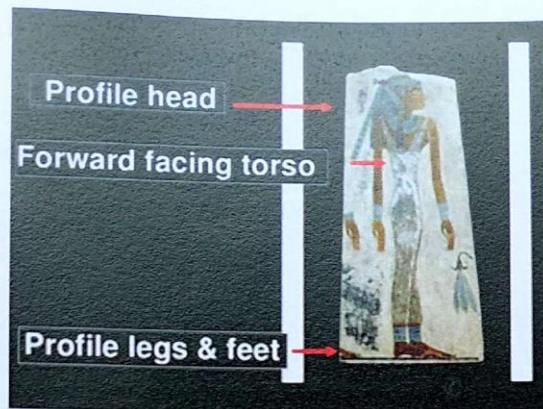


Figure 3,
Profile Image view of Egyptian Figure

Source: [slideshare.net/mobile/RachealVanDyke/history-of-the-figure](https://www.slideshare.net/mobile/RachealVanDyke/history-of-the-figure)

Egyptian artists painted in a very simple, 2D manner, using only a set number of colours to depict their form of a human being. All of their appendages, such as hands and feet, are portrayed as flat and front on. Their eyes also appear to be a frontal view instead of the conventional side on view of the eye when looking at the face from the side angle. A similar thread runs through of the Greek ideology. Their appearance is analogous in similar style to Egyptian art. Both representing 2D forms with very simple approach, reserved use of colour and no 3D qualities at all.

(II). Greek Figures

The Greeks however, did not share the Egyptians conviction that there was better to come in the afterlife. The Greek interest in the human body and their conviction in its inherent beauty led to their desire to represent it in art in the most vibrant, life-like manner imaginable. Looking at the pots and vases according to Edward (1992), it is possible to gain an idea of how the Greek figure painting developed. A substantial number of which has survived to the present times as this one seen in fig 4.

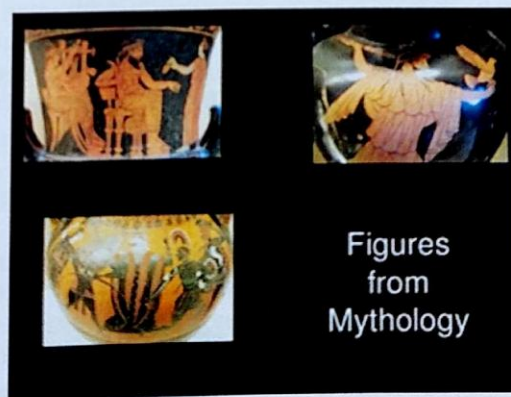


Figure 4,
Images on Vases

Source: [slideshare.net/mobile/RachealVanDyke/history-of-the-figure](https://www.slideshare.net/mobile/RachealVanDyke/history-of-the-figure)

Until the fifth century B.C. the figures on these vases remained stylized. Work dated before this time were usually known as black figure pottery because the figures, which tend to be of a geometric design are silhouettes filled in with either dark brown or black. Around 500 B.C. this decorative scheme was reversed and the figures were picked out of the red against a black background.

(III). Roman Figures

The Romans were impressed by the art of Greece, it is obvious not only from the numerous copies, which they made, but also from number of complimentary reference made to it. However, the Romans were of different psychological makeup, and this began to show in their painting. Their realism was often unflattering and sometimes brutal despite the fact that subjects were usually the ones to pay the artists bills. Many of the Roman walls were executed in fresco which continued as a popular and durable method until, and after the Renaissance. The artists made realistic use of tone, highlighting and naturalistic colours to enhance their forms and create a sensitive and expressive piece of work. This saw the emergence of the female nude as an interesting subject, as long as she was held within the framework of mythology. The Romans continued to paint the female nude sometimes in an openly provocative manner, for two or three centuries, after which it disappeared as a subject until the Renaissance.

(IV). Renaissance Faddism

The renaissance period saw artist becoming less dependent on the church for patronage because of the rise of rich families who were able to encourage the arts. There was a re-emergence of portraiture painting, which was to surpass the Roman period. Released from the strict confines of religious painting artists were free to use a wider range of subjects and there was a resurgence of interest in mythological themes. Also, the study of anatomy, abandoned for centuries was resumed with vigour, leading to a mastery of nude paintings in this period. Their curiosity was not confined to the visual arts, but was also concerned with the philosophy and science. The body was studied for its own sake, not just for the sake of realism in art.

The Modern Era

(I). Atristic Dernier Cri in Painting

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw some of the most sensitive and sensual painting of the female, but there was a danger of the subject becoming stifled by the classical tradition many artists sought to emulate. There was a strange double standard, which accepted paintings of nude figures in a classical mould as respectable, but cried out in horror at work, which simply presented the body as a thing of beauty, worth revealing simply for its own sake. It is ironic that this same attitude was the basis of most of the work produced in ancient Rome, when female nudes were presented in mythological settings. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, artists began to create works in which the nude figure is painted performing everyday tasks. Edgar Degas (1834-1917) and Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) both produced a number of pictures of women in these directions.

The impressionist, for instance were preoccupied with light and colour being reflected or partially absorbed by objects and wanted to convey the effects of light in the paint. The Fauves were concerned to portray emotions using particular strong colours. Representational or Figurative art was largely considered a thing of the past by the end of 20th century. But Matisse Henri (1869-1954) and Picasso Pablo (1881-1973) Paul (2007) asserts made the radical painting that would define a new era of modern art. Matisse disfigured the figure with his bulging Blue Nude in 1907, a painting, which he did from a photograph to free his imagination and break from habits formed by drawing from life. Picasso also used photographs to paint his 1907 *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* fig 5.

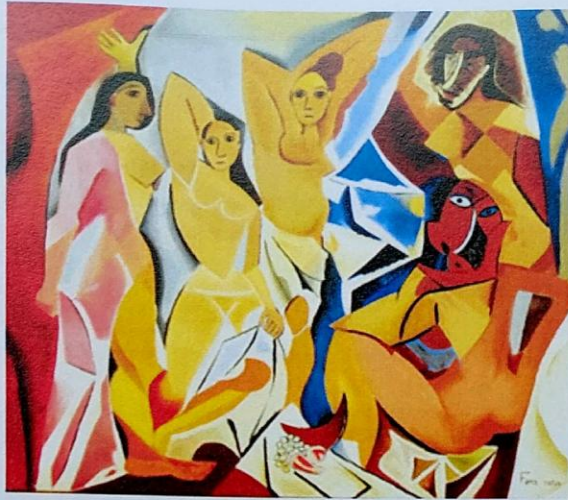


Figure 5.

Artist: Pablo Picasso.

Title; Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.).

Medium; Oil on Canvas.

Year: 1914

Source: dotwe.Wordpress.com/2014/11/27/les-femmes-d-alger-the-young-ladies-of-alger-the-painting-of-pablo-picasso/

with each figure seemingly like a multiple exposure seen from different angles at the same time. But in recent years, a number of contemporary painters have begun reacting to the roots of modern art to find new ways of expression, artist like Peter Doig (fig. 6)



Figure: 6.

Artist: Peter Doig.

Title: Fall in New York.

Medium: Oil on Canvas.

Size: 120cm x 98cm Year: 2012

Source: www.polarimagazine.com/visual-arts/new-paintings-peter-doig/

They are mixing the human figure and other recognizable forms with elements of abstraction and ambiguous narrative in ways not seen before.

(II). Vogue of Contemporary African Works

The African continent, especially Nigeria is not left out in this quest of human representation. Even though African arts in these regard were mostly in sculptural forms, they were portrayed for their functional and philosophical belief that the head is a superior faculty of the human body due its thinking ability. This idea was translated into their artworks, the concept was called African proportion. This was more evident in the sculptural figure art piece. Painting as an aspect art was not popular, but strived on decorative costumes and on mural decorations. Until western influence came giving a new dimensional approach to the arts. This saw the birth of visual blending of the foreign and our local concepts pictorially. A reflection of the beauty of our diverse culture and tradition.



Figure 7.
Artist: Yusuf Grillo.
Title: Woman with Headscarf.
Medium: Oil on Canvas.
Size: 51cm x 41cm
Source: www.artnet.com

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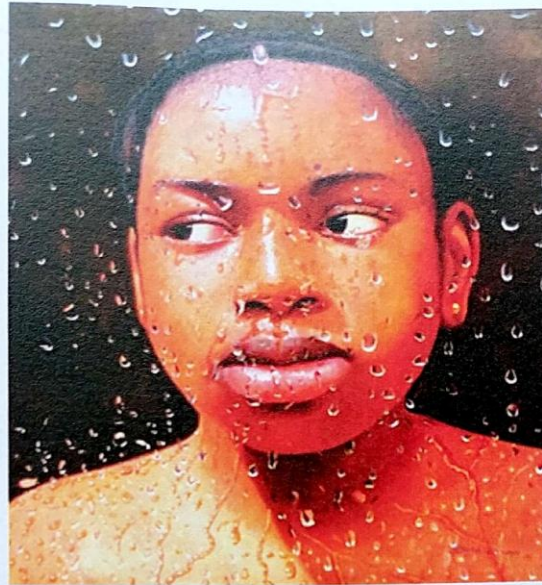


Figure 8.
Artist: Oresegun Olumide.
Title: Glancing.
Medium: Oil on Canvas
Size: 35 x 28inc.
Year: 2015
Source: www.bellanaija.com

Figure 8 shows a realistic painting by Oresegun Olumide, a Nigerian hyper-realistic artist born in Lagos. Olumide has always been fascinated by so many things that are round him and has had a wish to replicate such things through his art. He specialises in hyper realistic paintings created in oil. His painstaking attention to detail and the desire to replicate things as they are in real life, makes his completed paintings to appear life-like so much so, that it is hard to believe they are not. *Glancing* in figure (III) is one of such life-like paintings. The work focuses on a young female looking sideways with water droplets sliding down her face. Water according to the artist is a recurring theme in his art because according to a popular adage in Yoruba language 'water has no enemy'. The use of water provides a translucent effect thus, the viewer's visual experience is not tempered with. The ability to capture the true nature of the fluid liquid as it slides down the face of the child is a testament to the artist great skill and dexterity. His focus and interest is in the exact visual representation of objects around with a specific focus on children as they either play or pose for him.

Treatment of Human figure in paintings among Nigerian artists currently assumes a 21st century dimension, hence enjoying elastic freedom of varieties of techniques, media, materials expressed in modernistic styles, but weird and innovative in currency, strength and inventiveness, reflective of post modernist contents and character, especially in the exploration and discoveries of techniques and media, introducing a shift of creative dynamism away from conventionalism of the preceding era. A few more are purposively sampled for this essay in terms of peculiar visual character, which according to Nyah (2017) are beheld in works with traits and traces in modernism in all attempt to reveal the marks of the expressionists, the impressionists, the cubists, but less of the minimalist, the surrealist and other forms of "isms" of extreme weirdly character in portraiture. Nyah further has it that the strength of modernism as a direction in the identified forms in their portraiture is subdued in simplistic, objective and subjective imagaries and conceptualizations. A sampled form of high conceptual post modern portraiture is however seen in the work of Best Ochigbo's portrait of figure 9, titled "Beauty Pageant", a professor of painting born in Okpokwu in Benue state, which is less

reflective of any physical likeness of a person, but a pictorial description of intrinsic attributes of beauty and heroism through symbolic use of colours and distortion. This pyro-plasticol chromatic inventiveness is an unmistakable mark of a 21st century creative radicalism. His pyro-plastic technique is achieved by the melting of different colours of plastics by heat process to serve as colours and forms of desirable ways. This pyro-plasticol portrait by Ochigbo wears the character of abstract expressionism in style, mounted on an engraved wood panel as part of the work; a mixed media of sort.



Figure 9.
Artist: Best Ochigbo. Title: Beauty Pageant.
Medium: Pyro-plasticol,
Size: 60cm x 95cm.
Year: 2007
Source: (Artist Journal, 2017. Vol.1, No 3.)

“My testimony” of figure 10 is a knife painting portrait of Anselem Nyah, a lecturer of painting, University of Uyo, a work of oil on canvas, rendered in wild strokes of fresh colours. These are portraits of rich philosophical, physical and psychological depiction of a personality whose peculiarities and inherent traits are the strong focus and contents. The visual character of this portraiture is an embodiment of postmodernist traits, while the artistic style situates within the confines of impressionism of the modern era.



Figure 10.
Artist: Anselem Nyah.
Title: My Testimony.
Medium: Oil on Canvas,
Size: 60cm x 90cm.
Year: 2007
Source: (Artist Journal, 2017. Vol.1, No 3)

Ndu Osita from Anambra state whose research on the use of colour-fabrics and other extraneous materials for portraiture is a shift from the ordinary use of conventional media. His portrait works on fabric collage manifests an artist who is in search for creative satisfaction.

The portrait “Ben Ekanem” of figure 11 is a testimony to his transcendency, as he abandoned conventional media to create portraits in patches that fit into facial physiognomy of his subjects. His adaptation of fabric appliqué in the treatment of human figure is inventive in media, materials and techniques but impressionistic in style.



Figure 11.
Artist: Osita Ndu.
Title: Ben kanem .
Medium: Fabric on canvas,
Size: 45cm x 90cm.
Year: 2007
Source: (Artist Journal, 2017. Vol.1, No 3)

“Udo Nnaneyin” of figure 11, a cubist's portrait of an ill-fated personality in Ikot Akpabio is an impressive rendition by Soni Ekwere, from Etinan, Akwa Ibom state. The figure is represented in an undistorted form of human likeness, executed in a sharp contrast of high light and shade, “Udo Nnaneyin” is captured by the dazzling array of precisional geometric puzzles rendered in chiaroscuro in quite an unusual way.



Figure 12.
Artist: Soni Ekwere.
Title: Udo Nnaneyin.
Medium: Pencil on Paper,
Size: 60cm x 45cm.
Year: 2009
Source: (Artist Journal, 2017. Vol.1, No 3)

Findings

The findings from the observation design used in this study reveals that from past to present through the ages the painting of human forms responds to unending metamorphosis, exceeding the limit of realistic rendition of physical life-like of the human forms to the characteristic representation, experimentation of techniques and discoveries of both materials and media found to be used within the context of existing styles of modernism in the 21st century post modernist conceptualizations. Therefore opening windows in view of greater exploration, especially in this era of technological advancement. Representation of human forms has moved from symbolism of the ancient through objectivity of the modern to subjectivity of the post modern conceptualizations, which also often times, the post modernists representations embrace the synergy of the afore mentioned triadic concepts.

How ever, the study also establishes the fact that, despite the introduction of technology into every facet of life, not excluding the arts, It is evidently clear that the practical approach to the representation of the human figure still stands a niche ahead from the emerging technologies appropriated in art. The media, used accidentally or deliberately over time have stood the test of time.

Conclusion

Reflecting and redefining new ideas, scientifically and technological development have radically extended the conventional media of painting. The use of materials which artists gradually abandoned in adherence to innovative ideas about representation of media to embrace new means including technological

The discovery of new media arts is a modern technological exploit that is apparently inconclusive in terms of human figure representational approaches of which is an exclusive preserve for further review that is not within the scope of this article.

The study and expression of the human figure do not only have its limits visually to painting but extends to other paradigms like drawings, sculpture and so on. Art in contemporary times shows more explicit than that of the past, that the human representation does not simply represent the body, but relates it by analogy to all structures that have become part of our imaginative experience.

Recommendation

In looking at how the human body had inspired artistic exploration from the artist into an unimaginable thinking the end result has simply and will continue to be breath-taking. In these contemporary times, the reality facing the artists in representing the figure realistically has become increasingly possible with the growth of scientific knowledge and incorporation of technology. The expressive study of this phenomenon from time in memorial has attained a formal standard by which drawing is made compulsory in art programmes at all tertiary levels. Drawing gave an in-depth understanding towards painting composition with the figure. The study hopes that the curriculum be flexible enough to accommodate artists who find the human form overwhelming to comprehend into compositions. It is also hoped that, with the growing advancement of technology, digital apps and assistive virtual technologies be designed to enhance the 21st century artistic horizon for artists at all levels. This will boost the confidence of the artists especially the amateur or learners.

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