

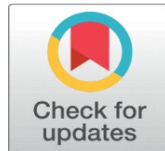
POTTERYSCAPING BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA'S FEMININE PLASTOGRAPH

Akinde T. E. ¹✉, Ayodele O. B. ², Abokede O. O. ¹, Eyinade A. S. ³

¹Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso, Nigeria

²Department of Creative Arts (Visual Arts), University of Lagos, Akoka, Nigeria

³Department of Creative Arts (Visual Arts), Emmanuel Alayande University of Education, Oyo, Nigeria



Corresponding Author

Akinde T. E., teakinde@lautech.edu.ng

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ABSTRACT

This study is on Potteryscape1 as exemplified in selected Bruce Onobrakpeya's feminine plastographs. Bruce, an artist cum nonagenarian from Urhobo extraction of Nigeria, born in the early 1930s and trained in the late 1950s through to early 1960s. He is, to say the least, an eclectic experimentalist, exponential arbiter and living legend. Bruce is noted for his incredible vigour for breaking new ground, significantly plastograph. He is arguably, the most celebrated and decorated Nigerian modernist artist with over sixty years practicing exposition. Much as scholarships were on his art; apparent however, is dearth of discourse on his feminine plastograph and their Potterscapingness2. As such, this study attempts Potteryscaping3 Onobrakpeya's artistry, particularly his feminine plastographs. Theoretical and methodical approaches were adopted; sourcing literary and artistic samples from books and the web through the internet of things (IoT), which were corroborated with personal communication. A total of five (5) plastographic pieces were shortlisted and subjected to potteryscaping extrapolation. They are Emete Ayuvbi, Emete Igboro Rain and cry at Otorogba, Adumadan, and Emuobonuvie, executed between 1972 and 1976. Finding revealed Potteryscapingness of the pieces as exemplified in the body accessory elements like beads, ivory and brass. It further attest women resilience, tenacity, empathy and tranquility. The study consequently, advocates adoption and promotion of Potteryscape as a genre in Visual arts, significantly by artists, scholars and art lovers in line with article five (5) and nine (9) of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Potteryscaping, Figure, Feminine, Print, Plastograph, Composition

1. INTRODUCTION

Unlike bookscape, seascape, waterscape, skyscape, moonscape, villagescape, cityscape and townscape, Potteryscape is a budding genre [1, 2, 3, 4]. It was conceived to demystify the much neglected active and passive pottery/ceramics contribution to two dimensional arts as exemplified in still life and figure drawing, painting, print and photography [5, 3]. Its nascent emergence is traceable to the 2018 publication that revealed and publicized its advent as budding genre in still life and figure composition [3, 6]. Advocacy for Potteryscaping contributions in Visual arts has since been of germane concern4. Potteryscape like free pendular, navigate thematic, stylistic and technical domains of Visual arts [7], x-raying its relevance to Bruce Onobrakpeya and his feminine plastographs.

In doing this theoretical and methodical approaches were adopted in the study. Theoretically all relevant and available literature on Bruce Onobrakpeya, his works, prints, plastographs, feminine art, Potteryscape, and related materials were purposively sourced and appraised. The samples were methodically sorted from books and social media handles through virtual and physical libraries, courtesy of the Internet of Things (IoT) [8] and corroborated with personal communication. Sorted samples were his post independence plastographs chronologically dating from 1972 to 1976, summing a total of five (5) master pieces, visually and Potteryscapingly discussed.

Bruce Onobrakpeya was born in pre-independence Nigeria to the family of Papa and Mama Onobrakpeya on Tuesday, the 30th of August, 1932, precisely the 35th Tuesday and the 243rd day of the year in the Georgian calendar [9]. His humble beginning is traced to Agbarah Otor, an ancient Urhobo town in Delta State, Nigeria [10, 9]. The era was indeed a time when indigenous religion reign supreme over any foreign incursion, particularly in the hinterlands as Agbarah Otor and Otorogba, his father and mother's home towns [11, 12]. It is not clear whether Bruce's parents were members of the Olokun (Water god and goddess) fraternity [13], though; what was sure however, was the worship of Oghene (Almighty God) as was the norm before Christian incursion of Urhobo land. Oghene is the creator of the world, life and death, His worship, ritual and ceremonies is often associated with the production and usage of earthen wares [11].

In Ojie's [11] words, bathing babies' with concocted water from Omototo pot, wards off illness, guaranteeing stronger and healthier health as a result of its spiritual and medicinal benefits implications, apparent in longevity and vitality. Today, the rest is history, as Onobrakpeya is a living testimony to the aforementioned bathing claims, at age ninety two (92); he is still waxing strong and full of life (Fig. 1). Though, much was not known of Bruce until he got admitted into Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, Zaria in 1957 [14, 15, 16, 17, 18]. He, like few other young lads of his vicinity had primary and secondary education in the old Bendel State, navigating between Agbarah Otor and Benin City; the then capital of the State. Interestingly, night errands with embers fire, as torch light has been argued to illuminates bush path, which usually bring to fore bizarre figures of ghosts, witches and spirits [18]; aiding creative illumination and rendition as evident in Bruce's folkloric adventure.

The latter trait, Bruce further nurtured at Ondo Boy's High School during his stint engagement as a teacher before gaining admission in Zaria to study visual art. At the department, he was able to harness his indigenous creative ingenuity which was not in tandem with the prevailing Western indoctrination of the time [19]. His interaction with like minds, significantly Simon Okeke, Yusuf Gillo, Demas Nwoko, Uche Okeke, William Oloosebikan, Okechukwu Odita (Fig. 2), was a game changer for him creatively both corporately and individually. In the corporate sphere, Bruce in collaboration with the aforementioned talents, played prominent roles in the birthing of natural synthesis and Zaria Art Society as students in 1958 [20, 21, 22, 23]. His cooperation was also material to the establishment of Society of Nigerian Artist in 1963 [24, 25].



Figure 1 Bruce responding to interview during his 90th Birthday celebration at Nelson Gallery, SMO Contemporary Art Gallery: 2022



Figure 2 Bruce Onobrakpeya at 80th Birthday celebration.

L-R: Ogbonnaya Nwagbara, Yusuf Grillo, Okechukwu Odita, Sandra Mbanefo, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Demas Nwoko, SMO Contemporary Art Gallery: 2022

As a true leader, Bruce injected this virtue in many of the visual art students; he had the privilege of teaching, particularly at St. Gregory's College, Lagos, Nigeria. His attempt at giving back did not stop there, but flourished courtesy of his Ovuomaroro gallery in Lagos State [9] and Harmattan Workshop project in Agbarah Otor, his home town in Delta State [9, 26, 27, 28, 29]. Individually or personally, he remained faithful to his folkloric course, perhaps as a result of his background and significantly for the Africanist consciousness of the time. An art he does with ease, having plethora folkloric artistic master pieces to show for it, particularly after graduation from Zaria [30, 31, 32].

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

His mention and that of his works in scholarly circle is incredulously plethora, though diverse by scholars, professional in academic and secular spheres [33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40]. It will not be out of place to accord him, the most versatile and decorated practicing Nigerian artist by virtue of his exhibits and awards. Some of which included exhibits at the Tate Modern, the National Museum of African Art Washington, the Malmo Kosthall in Sweden, the National Gallery of Modern Art, Lagos and on the home front, the virtual Museum of Modern Nigerian Art. He is a humble recipient of the Nigerian National Order of Merit Award for Humanities [34, 35, 36, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44]. Bruce is today, the most prolific studio artist of all the Zaria Art Society members, judging from the number of his original works in circulation around the globe and significantly at the Ovuomaroro gallery [19, 41, 45, 45, 46]. In his words, art work gives body to an idea conceived in the mind and from a single inspiration, one usually produce many art works [27]. Little wonder why he is acclaimed, creative supporter of modern artistic values [36]. His contributions to African artistic canon, particularly Nigerian art is not only secured in his ideographic imageries but commendable [42].

Pa. Onobrakpeya's artistry crisscrosses pre-independence, independence and post-independence Nigeria. He is an arbiter, nonagenarian and possibly the oldest living Nigerian visual artist. His eclectic prowess is exemplified and substantiated in simple block prints from lino engraving through to deep etching also known as plastograph (Figs. 3 and 4), a feat reserved for genius [46, 47, 34].



Figure 3 Olokun, Lino Engraving
Bruce, 1970, Bruce, 1975, The Spirit in Ascent: 1992



Figure 4 Ibiebe, Plastograph, 92 x 60 cm,
Bruce, 1984

According to Kant [making of]...beautiful art requires human genius, the special ability to manipulate materials so that they create a harmony of the faculties causing it beholder to respond with neutral or distanced enjoyment as exemplified in Bruce's plastograph [48, 49].

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Plastograph no doubt is an advancement on intaglio etching or deep etching. It was incidentally stumbled at by Onobrakpeya in 1967. Bruce's initial premonition was to fill the unwanted holes and lines in the plate with epoxy resin. The altered plate surface was later observed amazingly impressive giving an unusual but sensational and satisfying sculptural effect, which today has come to stay as altered print technique. This technique is conglomeration of background colouration, plate inking and sectional colour application. It background colouring is ultimately done with paper stencils, while its main plate is inked all over in one colour, usually a dark hue and wiped as in intaglio printing. Application of colours on appropriate areas of the inked block were done with the aids of small rollers, which stands out

for easy sectional inking, giving an impressive brilliance and finishing [50]. Brilliant and impressive as this plastographing technique of Bruce Onobrakpeya is, much as not been done on it, needless to say its feminine picturesque or pottery-scaping implications. It is in view of the latter that it became expedient to carry out this study.

4. THE SAMPLES AND DISCUSSION

The pieces were Bruce Onobrakpeya's earlier plastographs, shortlisted based on their Pottery-scaping inclination. They were five (5) in number, feminine in orientation and executed between 1972 and 1976. In other to achieve emotional, intellectual and imaginative stimulus, this study adopt extrapolative interpretation or questioning of the pieces [48]. This ability is equally likened to criticism; a catalytic reagent that brings to life, beauty or better still aestheticism [43, 39]. It is adjudged the quality and capacity to extend known experience into an area not known to arrive at usually conjectural knowledge of the unknown [51]. As such, Emete Ayuvbi, Emete Igboro, Rain and cry at Otorogba, Adumadan and Emuobonuvie [52] were chronological subjected to Pottery-scaping extrapolation and questioning (Fig. 5 - 9).



Figure 5 Emete Ayuvbi, Plastograph, 46.9 x 62 cm,
Bruce, 1972, Bruce, 1975, The Spirit in Ascent: 1992

Emete Ayuvbi means beautiful women in Urhobo dialect; it is the title of this Plastograph of women bathers in the stream. This print was rendered in 1972 from the 1965 studies of the stream below Ore Bridge on the Old Benin Ijebu Ode road [52]. Emete Ayuvbi is a conglomeration of eight beautifully scarified nude ladies bathing in diverse postures; five (5) standing, two (2) seating and one (1) reclining. They exhibit body scarification that remind one of the patterns found on Adire fabrics and wood or bronze carvings. According to Bruce [52], this piece is one of his nude series intended to showcase hiding African feminine body aesthetics; exemplified in pubic body paintings and tattoos, often covered in apparel. The piece, apart from the figure body markings, it showcased their arm beads, neck beads and waist beads, attesting to the Pottery-scapingness of the composition. Interestingly, such beautiful scenes are often captured at home, stream and farm through "purposiveness without a purpose", which to a very large extent is the thrust of any meaningful aesthetic appreciation or better still appraisal [49]. Nonetheless, the disposition and gestures of the nude feminine figures suggest purity, currency, youthful and very excited to mingle.



Figure 6 Emete Igboro, Plastograph, 61 x 46 cm,
Bruce, 197, Bruce, 1975, The Spirit in Ascent: 1992

Emete Igboro is the title of the above piece produced in 1973. It was inspired in recognition of the contributive and supportive efforts of the Urhobo female folks to livelihood and fishing in particular [48]. This Plastographic piece is composed of six standing maiden, cluster for a brief chat on their way to a fishing escapade at Eruvbi stream [52]. The chat on supposedly is anchored on maidenhood and other prevailing issues of their milieu. The piece showcased each maiden apart from their fabric attires and body markings, adorned in Ukoko Igboro (oblong gourds) on the neck and Ayaro (a woven basket) on the arm. The woven basket (Ayaro) is use to scoop fishes hidden in the shrub covered corners of the stream, when the area is disturbed, the basket is then raised, catching small fishes which are then collected into the oblong gourds (Ukoko Igboro). Apparently, the entire maidens were adorned in coiffure, wearing fitted dresses, some on gown; the others were on blouse and wrapper, off shoulder or sleeveless blouse and burger. Also evident is beaded neck laces, apparent on two damsels, one on the near right and the other on the far central; all attesting to the potteryscaping nature of the piece.



Figure 7 Rain and Cry at Otorogba, Plastograph, 45.5 x 61 cm,
Nelson Gallery, 1974, Bruce, 1975, The Spirit in Ascent: 1992

The title Rain and Cry at Otorogba was rendered and executed in 1974, conceived during the demise of Bruce Onobrakpeya's distant maternal uncle at Otorogba, though the incident actually occurred at a place called Ogua Ovie in August 1973 [52]. In Bruce's words "we were in the middle of a welcome ceremony of kolanut breaking and pouring of wine on the ancestral shrine in uncle Ekukotu's house, when suddenly raised a cry from outside "Johni Ghwuru". True to its title, this plastographic piece gave a vivid account of the incident and all that transpired at the scene. The piece showcased the remains of the corpse covered in an umbrella as a result of the drizzling state of the hour, supported on a bicycle ambulance by his relatives, wives, and other mourners on the procession train. In sorrow, they beat their breasts and flung their hands which revealed beaded bands over their heads as sign of grieving. Also significant are the three (3) distance sympathizers, composed of two (2) males and a female, probably reminiscing on the good and bad deeds of the deceased. The umbrella nonetheless, plays host to an Owl, which traditional support the people's belief in witchcrafts and its attendant death causalities [52]. The beaded hand bands are perceived evidence of potteryscape.



Figure 8 Adumadan, Plastograph, 68 x 41.5 cm,
Bruce, 1975, The Spirit in Ascent: 1992

This plastographic piece is titled *Adumadan*, a Yoruba word for darkened and radiantly shining object, which lexically means black is beautiful [52]. The piece was rendered in 1975 with the intent of capturing the culture of the Nigerian women [53, 54]. This print, Bruce observed is one of the three pictures, he submitted for consideration as stamp designs to the 1977, Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in commemoration of the event in Lagos [54]. The dimension of the piece is 68 cm by 41.5 cm, showcasing juxtaposed damsels of Nigerian extraction, each adorned in selected hair style of the nation's ethnic divides. Hairdo of the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were significantly given preference. Interestingly, the Igbo coiffure can be likened to Benin cum Urhobo style, while that of the Hausa has semblance with the Fulani hairdo complimented in carved calabash. The piece, housed a total of ten (10) beautiful maidens, some with evidence of red beads finishing of their hairs, while others are adorn in beaded neck laces, attesting its Pottery-scaping inclination.



Figure 9 *Emuobonuvie*, Plastograph, 62 x 45.6 cm
Bruce, 1976 Bruce, 1975, *The Spirit in Ascent*:1992

Emuobonuvie is the title of this 1976 Plastographic piece, though executed from a 1975 study. It was made in honour of Jean Calapai's bravery and courage in venturing in lobster fishing, reserved of men's folk [52]. Little wonder, it was christened *Emuobonuvie* meaning "what one owns is worth more than a kingdom". The piece is divided into two of background and foreground. The foreground played host to two nude feminine figures, Jean Calapai and her friend, adorned in body painting and holding lobsters caught at Stonington in Maine. The two women were rendered to suggest Urhobo descent base on their tattoo orientation and ornamentation. Both figures were crowned in beaded diadem, covered at the pubic area of the waists in beaded bands and lobsters. The background is subdivided into upper and lower. Visually the upper ground is predominated by a circular fan, secured with a vertical handle. While its lower ground is patterned in Urhobo traditional fabrics design with seventeen square blocks each housing rectilinear or curvilinear shapes, ranging from vertical, horizontal, triangular, circular, diagonal to conical. The piece is Pottery-scaping by virtue of its beading inclination.

5. CONCLUSION

The story of plastograph can be likened to the proverbial insignificant stone that later became the corner stone; in the sense that much was not expected of the technique but became the most celebrated contribution of Bruce Onobrakpeya to print biographically, autobiographically and scholastically [12, 37, 38, 47, 50, 52]. However, this contribution has been viewed from Pottery-scaping perspective, mainly for its nascent conception as a genre in artistic practice [3, 4]. According to Kalilu [55] concept is canonical and fundamental to the growth of visual arts... [it] allows for

continual frontier extension... achievable only through analytical reasoning, extraordinary vision and research inclinations [55], little wonder why Picasso, observed thus;

A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. ...it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it is finished, it ...goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it. A picture lives a life like a living creature, undergoing the changes imposed on us by our life from day to day. ...the picture lives only through the man who is looking at it [56].

The above Picasso view's brings to mind Baker's [57] questioning as pivotal to objective and subjective reasoning. Barnett [58] consequently, questioned art from two major angles. One holds sole meaning as given by the artist. The other validates several meanings; noting that of the artist, its first audience, later audiences, and current audiences. It is in the light of the latter that this study Potteryscape Bruce Onobrakpeya's feministic plastographs [52].

Thematically, the aforementioned works reflect feminine social and economic experiences surmised in womanhood with emphasis on resilience, tenacity, empathy and tranquility. And the examined pieces, true to their plastographic nature were all rendered in brilliant hues. Their background conspicuously dark, while the middle and foreground of the compositions takes brilliant colourations; ranging between red, yellow, green and blue [50, 52]. Their Potteryscapeness were apparent in pottery/ceramic elements like beads, ivory and brass adopted as embellishment accessories on hairs, ears, hands, ankles and waists of the examined imagery, attesting Pa Bruce Onobrakpeya as a potteryscapist⁵

The study consequently, advocates adoption and promotion of Potteryscape as a genre in Visual arts. Conclusively, this study hopes its findings will provoke further discourse on Potteryscape both from life and still-life perspectives by artists, scholars and art lovers in consonant with articles five (5) and nine (9) of the United Nations' sustainable development goals.

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6. NOTES

- 1) Potteryscape is a terminological categorization of visual composition, hitherto typified as figure and still-life, covering active and passive pottery forms and contents on two and possibly three dimensional surfaces.
- 2) Potteryscapingness is simply the quality or state of firm adherence of pottery/ceramic forms in drawing, painting, prints and photography.
- 3) Potteryscaping is the act of or practice in terms of pottery/ceramic material, place, process, product and personalities on two dimensional surfaces.
- 4) Dr. Toyin Emmanuel AKINDE coined Potteryscape in 2017 as pottery/ceramic theoretical contribution to still life and figure drawing, painting, prints and photography.
- 5) Potteryscapist is the person or artist whose works has inclination with pottery/ceramic forms and contents material, place, process, product or personalities on two dimensional surfaces.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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