

# VISUAL ARTS: THE HUB IN THE WHEEL OF COMMUNICATION

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(Received 13 July 2005; Accepted 11 March 2008)

## ABSTRACT

The meaning of Visual Arts and Communication is that it has no meaning outside that which it means. This is the cyclical philosophical locus which this paper aspires to trail. Designs make no sense without function, so also visual arts make no sense without far-reaching social communicative agitations. The global initiative for self construction is gradually but steadily becoming a reality by the instrumentation of high speed facilities like the information technology systems, air borne transportation etc. The by-pass to the success of these initiatives and facilities resides in the proper understanding of signs and symbols that govern their manipulative structures.

These signs and symbols are created through designs, which are art-based. On a general note, they are visual images without whose universal understanding; no progress can be made outside such universal visual images lie the subjective world of images which are confined in the strait jackets of geo-cultural settings. They are variously understood as different things depending on peculiar social belief and disbelief systems. This paper aspires to establish the inevitability of visual images in communicative dispensation. Putting it succinctly, the triad of visual image marker (the visual artist; his stimulus and the society, form the tripod on which this paper stands).

**KEYWORDS:** Visual Arts, Art Literacy, Communication, Visual Image.

## INTRODUCTION

Art is a visual language whose statements record man's response to a multiplicity of environmental stimuli. Such stimuli can be social, political, cultural or even religious in closed or open societies, while the onus of creativity dwells with the visual artist, the incumbency of interpretation ultimately lies with the general public that may be referred to as the consumers (receivers). It is a language of form and colour in which complex intuitions are expressed. Generally, many people view art as a major communication system.

Others interpret it as a point of contact for social interaction with a visual complex. By their visual input, communication is established between the artist's work of art and the community of receivers or consumers.

It is this ding-dong relationship that this paper aspires to establish- the one emanating from the artist's work to the society (consumer), and back to the visual artist which further generates a secondary stimulus. Fig. 1 illustrates a graphic view of the above concept of primary and secondary nature of the stimulus.

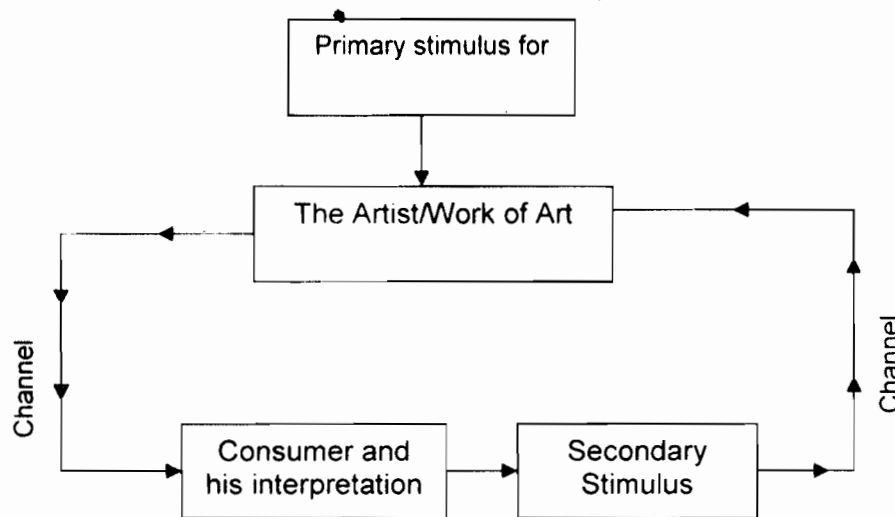


Fig. 1: Cyclical framework for art and communication

## ART LITERACY AND COMMUNICATION

Man has been expressing his experiences in artistic forms and images. His creations can serve different purposes which can be understood by the communities for which they are meant. In African societies, preceding the age of writing, art was the most reliable source of communication. In other words, works of art spoke and are still speaking.

*Art may be more than a form of communication, yet it is certainly that and it is the business of art history to learn the languages (Gardener, 1975)*

For one to increase one's literacy and sensitivity, one requires visual awareness which can be achieved by keen, ocular perception and broad- time perspective. To observe and make reasonable meaning out of any visual image requires spending

time and looking closely for visual information and clues which can be elicited from styles, materials and concepts. For such understanding, there exists a need, at every turn, to develop and beef up a visual vocabulary to lend a dialectical impetus to art literacy. There, also, ought to be a sustained quest to enlighten one's self in all areas of life. This cannot, however, be achieved outside the acquisition of skills, and understanding borne out of a trio of learning, practice, and experience.

## ABSOLUTE VISUAL COMMUNICATION

For the purpose of this paper, the word 'absolute' in the qualification of visual communication stands for that which cannot be doubted or questioned. This type of communication is the one over which the consumer has no power. The images are not relative in interpretation. The meanings remain universal. Images and symbols in the Highway Driving Code are typical examples of absolute images of communication. To flow in the realm of visual communication, one must be knowledgeable in its encoded symbols, which are universally accepted.

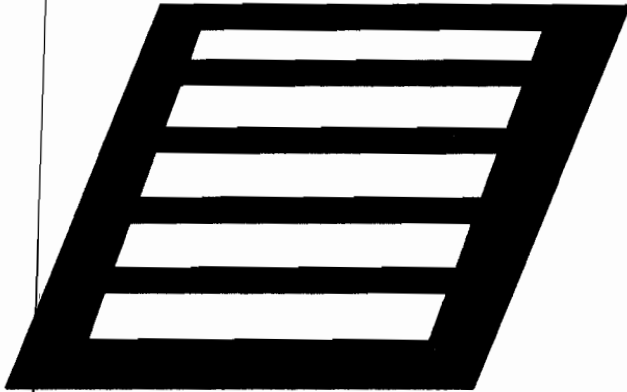


Fig 2: Zebra Crossing

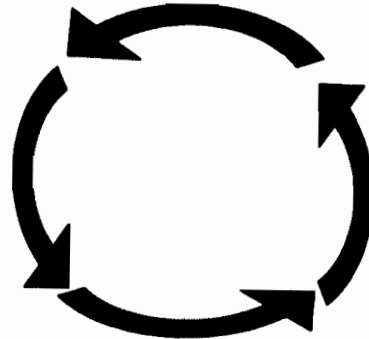


Fig. 3: Roundabout

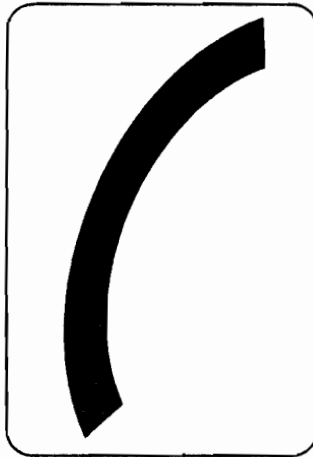


Fig 4: A Bend

## THE CONCEPT OF RELATIVE VISUAL COMMUNICATION

A creative process cannot be complete without reasoning on how images create meanings which are appreciated by observers. What is created is a manifestation of the contents of the artist's mind. The visual images are expected to arouse feelings, recall experiences in the mind of consumers, and sometimes, have enormous cultural contents. Arts communicative capacity is multi faceted.

*Art is an important element in the life of humans. It is perceived in every aspect of human life, movement, Dressing, eating, working, homes, offices, worship, environment, etc(Ofem, 1998; 79)*

From the above, visual communication is embedded in the heart of life cutting across all existential platforms of everyday activity. Talabi (1979) asserts, "The life of man is expressed entirely in the arts". Having said that, the uniqueness and the understanding of the visual meanings of the artistic images and symbols are coded in the vernacular structure of each cultural setting. Relativity of interpretation resides therefore in the belief or disbelief system; of each social setting. For instance, in some African social settings, the tortoise and the python are regarded as sacred animals not approved for the soup pot. Be this as it may, other communities regard them as highly-prized delicacies for children and adults alike. The yardstick for interpretation, therefore, relies variously on cultural platforms. This relative concept is a broad-minded, interpretative terrain, where individual or group viewpoints are

personalized along cultural locations. Art literacy here remains informal.

### ART AS A LANGUAGE

Language is the vehicle on which communication thrives. In the views of M.J Emme (2004), modern views on art criticisms have enabled art educators to reorganize that along with its formal meanings, art represents, inter alia, the culture of its maker or the culture, which provides stimulus for the art. It is therefore clear that images play a central role in the complex communications that both link and separate communities and institutions.

Communication has been given various meanings and definitions. Nwosu (1996) defines it as "the exchange of information or ideas, either sending or giving between persons, through a common system of symbols" Ugbojah (1985) sees communication as "all acts of transmitting messages to channels which link people to the languages and symbolic codes which are received and stored and the rules, customs, conventions which define and regulate human relationship and events". From the standpoint of man's history, communication positions itself as the vital key to social order. It is the sharing of meaning- information, thoughts and ideas aimed primarily at social continuity. Behind every artistic creation or activity is the intention to communicate ideas, through the use of forms, symbols, lines, colours etc. art as a mode of language inherent in all branches of art is very indispensable to human existence and communication.

Language is a unique human attribute, a distinguishing aspect of humanity. It is made up of symbols which have meanings common to a particular community. The eminent communicative and symbolic qualities of language are seen in art. Communication cuts across all aspects of human dealings, from political, social, and economic even to religious activities. Invariably, one partakes in one form of communication, or the other, every minute of the day, even at night.

Akpan (1987) explains that all communication has one major goal-changing the conscious behavior of the message encoder and decoder to the extent that the decoder responds with a feedback to the sender (secondary stimulus). It can only be said to be successful if the message sent, using any medium is understood by the consumer that is the person who is the recipient. Art has been adequately defined as that form of human behavior which purposely interprets and enhances the quality or the essence of the artist's experiences

through the creations. "Such creations are significant because they contain the essentials of the creator's feelings" (Sawa 1983:6). Art makes experiences clearer to artist who is the creator and to his audience (perceiver) with or without an interpreter (mediator). It is another system of language without any verbal dimension but rather graphic. This art involves a silent language activity. In the above language system, the eyes do the work and the message is perceived in the mind. This message can be understood by both the literate and the illiterate. Mediators are sometimes not needed for the correct message to be understood and internalized.

Looking at mediums, techniques and styles in an art work is not an end to it. Artworks are physical images which are the possibilities of mental transactions between the artist and his environment. These imageries are sometimes accorded definite meanings called icons (absolute communication). In communication, one just has to use icons, themes, motifs, symbols that the receiver can comprehend with or without a mediator. Every icon is a link in a chain of images running from the artist's (encoder) mental image. It directs viewers to the correct meaning of the artist's work.

An example of this is the traditional African art where communal interpretations are firm in terms of visual concepts which make statements (belief and ideas with motifs based on classical conventions). "Their arts are interpretative, symbolic and functional" (Fosu, 1986). Fosu goes ahead to explain that these artworks convey ideas that imply the interpretations of signs that bear rich meanings defined in symbolic motifs, that content and form are essential to the proper understanding of African art. Tubb and Moss (1987), quoting Goyer in determining the effectiveness of communication said that,

*"Communication is effective when the stimulus as it was initiated and intended by sender or source corresponds closely with the stimulus as it is perceived and responded to by the receivers"*

### VISUAL DIALECTS

Dialects are language-based. They are variations of the same language having basically the same meanings. Time or spatial distances are, more often than not, responsible for them. Incidents of dialectical differences are very high among frontier communities where there are at least two languages rubbing shoulders. Visual dialects are also art-based. When different visual images have the same meanings, they are said to share dialectical differences



Fig 5 "Mother and Child"

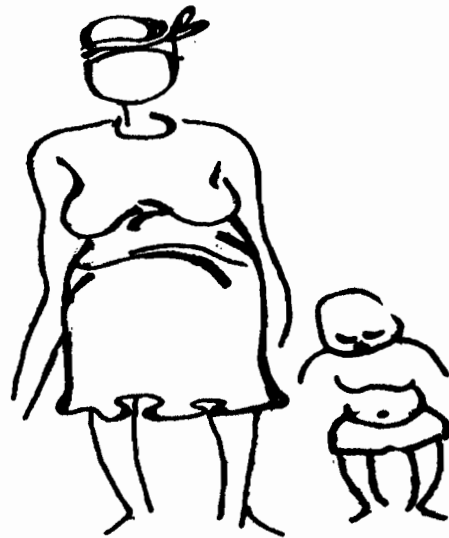


Fig 6 "Mother and Child"

Fig 5 and 6 represents two dialects of the same visual language

Another dimension of visual dialects in imageries can be found in how these images are presented. Two broad areas of presentation: naturalistic and abstract presentations. Each of these can be used for communication at various levels.

*Art is used for story telling and story making. It has a communicative function and intention and is enacted as a way to remember, celebrate, make Meaning, describe, invent or come to terms with an experience. Children may create art to communicate, express and articulate experiences. (Steele, 1998).*

Steele's view cuts across all dialects of visual presentations. Visual dialectics can be used as a term to describe the use of elements of art or elements of design. These terms assist in inter-personal or transcultural communication. Heather, A. Pastro argues that the elements of art are as integral to the understanding of visual art as the periodic table of elements is to understand chemistry. He further explains that, the elements of art serve as a framework for the structure of visual art. These elements are expressed as lines, shapes, value, form, space, colour and texture. Other elements are balance or lack of it, variety, gradation, rhythm, proportion, movement, emphasis and harmony. Visual dialect made up of the elements and principles of art are important to the artist as drums and music are to the dancer. For total understanding of communication of feelings, moods, or ideas etc, there must be proper utilization of the visual dialect.

*By your choice of subject matter and the manner in which you draw it, using the formal elements, you can communicate a message to viewers in emotional drawings (Greene, 1995)*

"The formal language of design, (line shape, balance, contrast etc.) is a legacy of the modernist formalization of art knowledge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These words can help us to describe the visual choices made in organizing a work of art" (Micheal, J. Emme, 2004). Whichever way one pursues one's art practice, one cannot divorce the art from the bondage of communication. To say the least, their 'marriage' remains irrevocable.

## CONCLUSION

In all the place of art as a communicative facility naturally assumes an indispensable status. Since this is basically true, the creator of the artwork, the artist, is a pivot of communication and a hub around which absolute and relative artistic communication revolve. It is therefore quintessential to gird our loins in pursuit of art literacy, which is a window into language and dialectical understanding of communicative art.

At a general level, therefore school and educational curricula should invariably be coloured with dynamic doses of art in their content to guarantee human products that are not just academic but intellectual stimulants.

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