

TOWARDS A DURABLE ALTERNATIVE MEDIUM IN MURAL PAINTING: THE AUTO PAINT EXPERIMENT

BABSON AJIBADE

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ABSTRACT

In the traditional parlance of mural painting among Nigerian artists, the use of emulsion paint has become universal. After years of professional practice, the observation is that these emulsion-paint murals do not last on the walls. The reason is that the emulsion paint made in Nigeria is of very poor quality. Under the onslaught of tropical Nigeria rain, the beautiful paintings wash off very quickly from the walls upon which they are made. This paper is therefore the documented result of the visual artistic experiments spanning about 13 years, in the identification of a durable alternative medium for executing mural painting in Nigeria. Among possible paint mediums like emulsion paint, emulsion/glue mixture and oil paint, auto paint proved to be the most durable and applicable alternative to emulsion paint for mural painting.

KEY WORDS: Mural Painting, Emulsion Paint, Emulsion-glue Paint, Oil Paint, Auto Paint, Durability

INTRODUCTION

A mural is an artwork executed on the surface of a wall. There are several types of murals. There are those executed with paint mediums, those executed with ceramic tiles (called mosaics), those executed with a combination of ceramic and other materials like wood and plastics (called collage), and sculptural murals executed with mortar, plaster, metal (or a combination). Mosaic mural is believed to have been developed in Mesopotamia in about 3000Bc, and it later became a major Byzantine decorative form in the 6th Century AD (Ogumor 1993). The beginning of collage as an art form may not be very much different as man is naturally experimental in his need for visual expression either for religious or secular purposes. Thus found objects and scraps of divergent materials were adhered together with gum unto a background, in this case, the wall. As a form of art the "collage developed from abstract, non-figurative art and most of the works are really abstract in nature" (Ogumor 68).

Mural painting with colour pigments predates both mosaics and collages in that man has always found the need to apply colours to his body, utensils, cave walls and even on the surface of mountains. A wide range of such ancient murals has been found in the Tassili Mountains. The ancient Pyramids of Egypt are also home to some of the finest murals, which depict historical events in the ancient kingdom in pictorial or hieroglyphic forms. Several European murals and frescos (painting on wet plaster) also survive till today, with the result that we have a clear insight into the life and times of historical cultures. Like all other art forms, murals are executed from the basis of a subconscious or conscious urge to communicate or explore a theme that is critical to the society (Andrewes 157). And, in traditional Nigerian (African) societies mural decorations were done on the walls of houses, shrines and palaces of Kings.

The development of mural painting in Nigeria has been nation-wide, unlike a sister art form, sculpture, which for instance could not develop in the northern part of the nation since Islam was antagonistic to it (Umukoro 1994). What historical evidence shows is that, external murals in the rainy belts of Southern Nigerian societies tend to be more in wood

and clay medium (sculpture), while those in the dry North were mainly wall paintings with pigments as is evidenced in the palaces of the Sultans and Emirs.

At any rate mural painting gained currency as a medium of expression in the post-independence Nigeria with the proliferation of tertiary educational institutions that trained fine artists. Among notables, Yaba College to Technology is one such institution, which has a perimeter fence decorated by murals of educational themes. The orthopaedic hospital at Yaba, Lagos, also displays mural paintings of health themes. With the increase in the awareness of murals as mass mediums, corporate organizations commissioned paintings on their private walls. Thus we find murals in profusion decorating the Eleganza Plaza at Alaba Suru in Lagos, as well as on several corporate walls depicting company products and socially relevant activities.

Statement of the Problem

Having been in arts practice for about two decades, and having also taught fine arts at the tertiary education level for more than half of those years, I find that mural paintings executed by Nigerian artists do not last on walls, South of Nigeria. Such beautiful murals tend to wash off the walls nearly as quickly as the rains came. This has meant that more money and professional labour is required to incessantly resurface the washed out colours. This has not only rendered mural paintings rather expensive, but also financially unsustainable for many institutions and organizations that would otherwise have required them. The crux of the problem is not that murals are not durable works of art, but that the medium that has become universal for mural painting in Nigeria is emulsion paint. More than the fact that emulsion paints are water-soluble those manufactured in Nigeria, and available to artists, are of very poor quality indeed. And when the artist uses these to execute mural paintings, the aesthetics so achieved become, at the end of the day, transient and expensive. This article is the result of a practical experimentation with auto paint as a durable alternative medium for mural painting in Nigeria. The primary social factors in this visual artistic experiment were durability, availability and applicability.

Table 1: Paint Mediums Alternative to Emulsion and Observations Concerning their Application to Mural Painting.

S/No	Alternative medium	Visual Results.
1	A mixture of emulsion paint and white glue	The paint adhered to the wall and the mural lasted longer than ordinary emulsion paint. But the painting soon flaked as the glue content absorbed and gave up rainwater and atmospheric humidity. The formation of algae cultures was also observed in some cases.
2	Oil paint	This achieved brighter colours than emulsion paint. It was additionally more durable than either emulsion or emulsion/glue mixture. But some of the colours also washed out or faded quickly because of the effect of ultraviolet rays from the sun. The disappearance of colour may be due to the fact that permanence is not a stringent requirement in the production of Nigerian brands of oil paint.
3	Auto paint	The pilot murals (and others after it) were much more stable than emulsion, emulsion/glue or gloss paint. Additionally, since auto paints are traditionally made to withstand UV (Ultraviolet Rays) they are permanent and the colours did not fade or wash out under intense tropical sunlight.

Since emulsion paint, which is the normal mural painting medium in Nigeria has not proved durable; the experiment was to identify a durable alternative that is applicable to wall painting. Additionally, it should be remembered that durable mural painting colours will normally be imported at high foreign exchange costs since they are not available or produced in Nigeria. Therefore the identified alternative paint medium must be one that is available in the social economy of Nigeria. For this study, initial pilot experiments over the last 13 years utilized several possible alternative paints. The alternative paints used, along with the observations concerning their durability, are shown in table 1.

MATERIALS

There are four paint mediums used in this experiment: emulsion paint, emulsion-glue mixture, oil paint and auto paint (car paint). Oil and auto paints belong to a broad family called 'gloss paint,' because of the sheen associated with their oil, resin, latex, urethane or acrylic bases (*Duron's Edge 2001; Gloss Paint 2004; Automotive Touch-Up 2004*).

Emulsion paint is a water-based paint, produced by mixing colour pigment with water-based emulsifiers and polymers. It is available in matte, silk-emulsion, and mid-sheen varieties. Matte emulsion does not shine when dry; silk-emulsion has a feel like the silk fabric, and mid-sheen has a gentle shiny finish. It is the addition of vinyl or other polymers that produces the silk and mid-sheen varieties of emulsion. These 'super' emulsions are not available to the general mass of Nigeria. It is available in an expensive and exclusive market operated by multinationals like Julius Berger and very wealthy patrons. Contract values of commissioned murals do not afford Nigerian artists the luxury of espousing these expensive emulsion paints. In the regular Nigerian paint market it is the matte emulsion that is available. And the producers of local emulsion paints are over-prudent with the chemical additives. The result is that paint particles dust-off, wash-off or rub-off surfaces. Applied to mural paintings, this local emulsion is unsuitable as they wash-off walls and obliterate beautiful artworks.

Emulsion-glue paint is a compromise mixture many Nigerian artists have used. They mix white glue with the local

emulsion paint to increase the quality. But it is not effective and stability is illusive. It washes away as rains dissolve it

Oil paint is produced by the use of natural oils or synthetics as base. They have high covering (hiding) power and are relatively more durable than emulsion paints. They are much more weather resistant than emulsion paints. But, again, the Nigerian factor that motivates local paint companies to use inferior or incomplete chemical compositions comes to play in the manufacture of oil paints. The brands available on the local market are very inferior oil paints in very limited colour ranges. Many of them will flake-out or even disappear completely from mural surfaces, exposed to weather and the sun's ultraviolet rays. Good quality oil paints are available in the very expensive stores of multinational paint marketers in Nigeria.

Auto paints (car paints) are traditionally made to high weather and UV-resistant qualities. They are made in paint systems including urethane base coat, acrylic lacquer clear coat, urethane clear coat, synthetic or acrylic enamels (*Automotive Touch Up 2004*). They are also made in aerosol spray cans. Auto paints are available in a very broad range of lively colours at affordable prices in the local Nigerian market. Because of the superior components of auto paint, even the so-called low-grade types, sold at about N700 per one-litre can, applies effectively to outdoors and mural painting.

METHOD

For this experiment a wall was applied for and secured at the library of the Cross River University of Technology (Crutech), Calabar. The wall, which was defaced by posted bills (plate 1) had to be watered and scraped both to remove the dirt and to expose the bare wall by stripping it of its poor quality emulsion paint finish. The area of the mural was marked out with twine, masking-taped and primed thoroughly with high-quality Berger Luxol emulsion paint. At the drying of the priming, the pre-painted colour rough was transferred in sketches unto the wall. Brushes were used to generously apply auto paint, bought and premixed in the various required colours (see figure 1). Plates 1 to 3 show the critical stages in the mural painting. At the end of the painting masking tape boarder was removed and auto paint stains on the lower wall were also covered with paint of the wall's original colour.



Plate 1: The wall of the Library in its defaced state before the mural was executed.



Plate 2: The author (bent over) with the student resource persons during the execution of the mural project. At this stage the general beauty of the mural is already perceivable. From left, Imelda Ame Nkereuwem, David Bekom Danor, the author and Aniekanabasi John.



Plate 3: The finished mural titled "The Readers." The painting adorns the formerly defaced wall of the Cross River University Library, Calabar. By this mural the general location of the library, from this view, is aesthetically reclaimed, leading to a better social environment at the institution

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At the end of the mural painting it was found out that the colours were much brighter/expressive than that achievable with available brands of emulsion or oil paints. The reason is that, while emulsion comes in chalky tints, and oil is sold in unstable limited colours, auto paint is sold in bright ranges of colours. Also, because of the superb nature of auto paint, composed as it is of standardised and superior quality pigment, hardening and light-fast agents, the mural was very much impervious to the torrents of Calabar rainfall. Again too, unlike emulsion, emulsion-glue and oil paints, auto paint turned out to dry very fast, making it possible to work and apply several layers of colour in relatively shorter periods of time. It was also discovered that errors and alterations were more easily made by the application of subsequent layers of excellently opaque auto paint. This operation would have proved tedious with oil paint, and even more tedious with the use of emulsion paint or emulsion-glue mixtures. In all, the experiment shows that it is faster, more aesthetically rewarding, more durable and ultimately cheaper to use auto paint for mural painting.

CONCLUSION

It has been discovered that auto paint is a faster and more durable medium for executing wall murals than traditional emulsion, emulsion-glue or oil paints used by Nigerian artists. The results tend to suggest that auto paint is the more sustainable alternative paint medium in mural painting, that is, in the absence of the ideal but imported and overly expensive mural painting mediums. It is also deducible that auto paint is ultimately the cheapest of these locally available mediums. For while the initial costs for both emulsion, oil and auto paints are not dissimilar, the non-durability of emulsion and oil paints requiring regular repainting and retouching makes them much more expensive, at the end of the day, than auto paint.

Thus artists and mural clients should appropriate auto paint over and above emulsion, emulsion-glue and oil paints in the execution of wall murals in Nigeria.

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