

PORTRAIT PAINTING AS A CREATIVE PATHWAY TO THE CONSERVATION AND RETENTION OF OUR HISTORICAL MEMORY: THE ART OF IKECHUKWU IGWENAGU.

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Abstract

Portrait painting has found a pride of place in Nigeria contemporary art through the works of Ikechukwu Igwenagu. Ikechukwu Igwenagu has received over two thousand commissions for portrait painting from both the federal and state governments in Nigeria as well as individuals and private sector organizations. The present study argues that while portrait paintings may no longer command attention in public art exhibitions, Ikechukwu Igwenagu's portrait paintings have reconstructive value particularly as a tool for the conservation and retention of our historical memory. The primary argument is that portrait painting can serve as a tool for historical documentation. The study discusses some of his portrait paintings in terms of their types, production techniques and styles in order to demonstrate that his portrait paintings are in some ways quite objective in their visual import and also show us how some individual innovations can infiltrate the nature of portrait painting so that the objective can become experimental. The study concludes that Ikechukwu Igwenagu's portrait paintings serve as a form for historical documentation for the conservation and preservation of our historical memory. Therein lies their significance because, according to the German philosopher Nietzsche, history is our eternal present.

Key words: historical memory, portrait, portrait painting

The art of portraiture may no longer be in fashion within the corridors of contemporary Nigerian art practice. This may be as a result of its emphasis on mimesis or resemblance. Those who commission portrait works are doing so probably because of the drama of colors that a good portrait painter may deploy to enhance the quality of his art. Another reason

may be that photographic portraits may glisten and delight but ultimately, may fade away with time and lose their original chromatic lustre. Yet, the art of portrait painting may begin to enjoy institutional patronage when state and federal governments become the patron of a portrait painter. In this context, we begin to see how changes in systems of political leadership in Nigeria from military rule to civilian rule are preserved through the commission portraits of various leaders in Nigeria. Over a period of about fifty years. One of this portrait commissioned are the merely reproductive images of the leaders or do they have of distinguishing qualities by this we can say they also are works of art?

That portrait painting has become quite important in the history of Nigerian leadership over the years can be seen from the portrait paintings of a Nigerian artist, Ikechukwu Igweanagu. He has practiced portrait painting for the past thirty years. His works are found in the offices of every leader in Nigeria including the maximum leader, General Abacha. By analyzing these paintings, we shall demonstrate that these works are historical documents and facilitators in the conservation and retention of our historical memory. Therein lies their historical significance and why the German philosopher, Nietzsche, should define history as our historical present. His paintings may thus be seen as historical documents. In fact, Kleinbeaur (1971) tells us that works of art are products of the historical conditions that surround them and which they in turn reshape. In other words, if history is evolutionary, it goes to suggest that portrait paintings are products of history through which they also evolve overtime and leave us with their historical genealogy.

Ikechukwu Igwenagu, the portrait painter, studied for his first degree in the department of Fine and Applied Arts, university of Nigeria Nsukka. He then proceeded to study for his MFA degree as well as a Ph.D with specialization in painting. He is presently lecturing in the same department as a member of the academic staff. Over the years, he had enjoyed immense patronage from individuals, public sector organizations and other cooperate institutions. He stated seriously as a portrait painter more than two decades ago and received a lot of patronage from Nigerian military leaders during the military rule. In fact there is no civilian or military leader whose official office does not have series of portrait painting by this artist. He had done a portrait on the formal President of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the maximum leader, Gen. Abacha. All the past vice chancellors of the university of

Nigeria were painted by him, spanning the period of 1960 to present. He has also painted all her excellencies in Nigerian government, military or civilian. He had also painted many professors of the university of Nigeria Nsukka. And has enjoyed patronage by several individuals. It is estimated that he might have done over two thousand works and more if a close count is taken. If we say that he is wealthy we are not offering any exaggeration but only hard facts. He is humble and relates well with his colleagues in the department. He is happily married with bright and brilliant children well distinguished in their various professions of repute.

He is a master of the pastel medium which allows him to enjoy the freedom of his technical manipulation with an ample degree of creative dexterity. There is no study about his production methods nor of his stage by stage production of his portrait painting. What is noticeable is that earlier portrait painting seemed to follow the style of realism. With the increasing practice and maturity his portrait paintings are softer in terms of color application while not losing their chromatic uniqueness. We proceed to look at some of his works that analyze some of their characteristic qualities that distinguish him as a good portrait painter. Fig.1. is one of his portrait paintings. There is no date recorded for this painting. Yet one cannot fail to appreciate skillful touches in the use of color,



Fig.1. Willie Obiano, Executive
Governor, Anambra State, (2014-2022).
Medium: Paste.

Especially the skillful manipulation of color and color tones. The artist-painter shows a mastery control in the handling of the Governor's dress which consist of the use of subtle variations of white, perhaps to indicate something of the silky quality of the wearing apparel. The handling of the facial features is unmistakable and of the glint and reflections of the eyeglasses. The painting is well composed and has a composition of balance. The realism of the painting is different from that of the photograph because of his subtle handling of colors and portrays the Governor as a man of amiable character and good social disposition. The red cap defines his high social status while the background of the picture is handled with poetic sensibility that thrills and delights.



Fig. 2.El Anatsui. Sculptor.
Medium; Pastel.

This painting, (Fig.2.) is a portrait painting of the famous sculptor El Anatsui who everyone knows and recognizes as a global figure in contemporary art of Africa and the world too. We do not have a clear idea about the age of the sitter when the painting was done. However, the portrait painting seemed to depict El Anatsui as a young man bubbling with mirth and energy and wearing his characteristic gray hair which contrast with the youthfulness of his face. However, the realism of the picture does not detract from the richness of his chromatic handling of the picture. What delights one often is the artist's treatment of the background of the portraits. There is always this manner of handling in which forms are

concealed as if it was within the veil of darkness and playfully hide themselves to a recognition of what they are. This tend to enrich the painting in ways that are quite painterly. His mastery of the pastel media in terms of their control and handling reveals something of the stamp of his creative authority. It also reveals something about the sitter which is his introspective as a sculptor who lives in a world of imagination from which creative realities come into being.



Fig. 3. A Female Portrait.
Medium: Pastel.

Here is a portrait of a young lady. The handling of the portrait painting is unmistakably painterly. In some of his portrait paintings you will see the artist's attempt to produce what is an analogical edition of the sitter as if the artist is deliberately mimetic. In this painting, the artist seems

to opt for an inventive and expressionistic representation of the sitter without losing something of her identity and resemblance. The strands of her hair which flow down in coils have received a painterly interpretation through the use of a combination of red, blue and yellow colors while her face is broken into color planes punctuated by the use of white highlights. The background is broken into vertical planes of pink, blue, yellow and dark blue areas. The sleeves of her dress are broken into abstract linear patterns and the figure standing against a background of bright yellow color. This inventive use of colors tends to heighten the expressionistic quality of the painting and give the portrait painting an independent life. The artist also shows that painting can be an experiment in chromatic exploration.



Fig. 4. Portrait of a Female Figure.

Here is another painting of a female figure (Fig.4.) here, the portrait painter places portrait painting as if it were painting exploration. In right

side of the face is rendered in high realism while the left side is treated with some level of expressionism. In place of descriptions of her wearing apparel the artist opt for the use of color splashes while the background is washed in with transparent color glazes. The portrait painting shows the artist's ability to dare into unexplored regions of his art, perhaps for the sake of innovation and creative experimentation.



Fig. 5. Prof. Ozumba.
14th Vice Chancellor,
Universtiy of Nigeria Nsukka,(2014-2019).

Here is a portrait painting of the former Vice Chancellor, Prof. Ozumba. This can be called an explicit portrait of him because of the full attention given to all the details of the painting, from his white teeth, white shirt and tie, his facial disposition and mood to his academic gown, his eyeglasses etc. The portrait painter is working like a cartographer

preparing the map of the city or an architect and the design of a government-sponsored housing scheme. This portrait painting may be explain from the basis of the theory of mimesis or resemblance. Here the artist is working in an analogical relationship to nature. Here visual truth lies at the center in visual representation which is why all the details of the portrait are relayed clearly to the human eye as if the portrait painter is an ethnographer. Even at this, the painting conveys something of the character and integrity of the sitter and according him a high measure in his physical presence. It is possible that the portrait painter may one to impress the Vice Chancellor by operating within the boundaries of photography. One may not fail notice some inventive details at the lower part of the academic gown which consist of linear decorations meant to enhance the visual quality of the academic regalia.



Fig. 6. Portrait of Chinua Achebe.
Writer and Essayist.

This is a portrait painting of the literary legend, Prof. Chinua Achebe who one might say pioneered the rapid development in the growth and evolution of African literature. The portrait shows him probably in his seventies upwards as shown in the details of his face which manifest the subtle ravages of age. Prominent features of the painting can be found not only in his face that foretells something of his literary wisdom, his red cap and his dress which the painter has rendered in very low tones. The background of the painting is black except for what looks like a bird peeping out as if yearning for a fuller presence in the painting. The painting portrays the sitter as a man is introspective, perhaps always deep in thought, and ever reflecting and meditating on life and its deeper mysteries. If anything, the painter may have succeeded something of the psychology of the sitter as rendered in the use of silhouettes and contrasting highlights. Here, portrait painting may be in one sense be an exploration into the human psychology just as writers do when they provide literary narrative that tell us a lot about the human condition.

Conclusion

Ikechukwu Igeanagu has been discussed as a portrait painter who has risen to prominence in the public sphere through his works which are found everywhere, more especially, in the offices of both past military and civilian leaders. It is not just that he painted them, it is simply that he has continued to receive series of commission as a means of documenting the history of leadership and their administration in Nigeria for the past thirty years. In other words, these portrait paintings provide evidence of the historical development of leadership in Nigeria. By analyzing their history one is also accepting that portrait painting provides a very useful tool for the preservation and conservation of our historical memory. ” In this sense, these portrait paintings are like fillers within the blank pages of history so that history, according to the German philosopher Nietzsche, remains our eternal present. Which is why the artist, Ikechukwu Igeanagu is still deep in his portrait painting as he continues to cooperate patronage in Nigeria.

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