

MARKET SPACE; STIMULI FOR IMAGINATION, SYMBOLIC CONCEPT FOR ARTISTIC EXPRESSION BY FOUR NIGERIAN ARTISTS

JOSHUA, John Oyedemi

Department of Fine and Applied Arts,
University of Jos, Jos. Nigeria
joshuajo@unijos.edu.ng
johnoyedemi@gmail.com
+234-7032103688, +234-8052513071

SAMUILA, Ezra Rabo

Department of Fine and Applied Arts,
University of Jos, Jos. Nigeria
ezeesamaila@gmail.com
samuilae@unijos.edu.ng
+234-8038736373

DAPOET, Doemeh Arsun

Department of Fine and Applied Arts,
University of Jos, Jos. Nigeria
deeddydapoet@gmail.com

Abstract

The Market Scene is one of the popular themes among Nigerian artists. Market in several communities serves as centers for meetings, commerce, and relaxation. In some instances, calendars are tagged based on the days between market days. Market is a subject that cannot be exhausted, because every painter brings in his experience to bear and gives it a refreshing view. This article seeks to look into artists and their paintings whose inspirations came from market activities and especially Abiodun Olaku, Kolade Oshinowo, John Oyedemi and Sam Ovruti. The artists were purposively selected to fit the desired theme which looks at the artistic practices of representing market arena, idea, and colour schemes. A conclusion is drawn for a comparison and point influences. It is expected that these four artists' works would give insight into market representation in Nigeria.

Introduction

The Market trip began with the welcoming of colours, very bright and lovely colours that were gorgeously worn by the fruits who sat so perfectly at their stands. The green, yellow, red, maroon, peach, black, white and all their cousins screamed warmth of welcome, my heart aligned so well with. The grains had their heads standing tall in their stalls as if they knew perfectly the kind of hunger they could quench and their brown, nude and dusty colours told better their tale. The freshness those vegetables wore were so sharp they could cut through a pot's skin. The sweet smell from the after rain, brown floor was sure soothing. The clothes in their stalls were calling at everyone to pick them else how do you explain that height of beautiful mixture of colours walking side by side each other as if in a salsa tussle. These colours are undeniably the reason I have made the market my home and that is not about to change.

Danjuma (2016), on Market Scene posits that,

The Market Scene is one of the popular themes among Nigerian artists and this might be so because the market scene to be a very important place in their lives. The market place in several communities is centers for meetings, commerce, and relaxation. In several communities calendars are tagged based on the days between market days. Market is a subject that cannot be exhausted, because every painter brings in his experience to it and gives it a refreshing view.

The market then offers certain attractions that make interaction and interrogation worthwhile. It holds a social value for a community through interface where resources are shared together. These values are common in most markets creating room for new relationship and maintaining the existing one to achieve unity and peace in the society. Artists of note have developed interest in capturing market scenes in both technique and medium. This art practice is imbedded with attributes that gives a direction and entrenched in a well-defined objectives associated with training and development of an individual. The practices main actors are the artists and his audience who principally appreciate for collection and marketing and promotion. In different climes within Nigeria, market activities differ from place to place and so are the artists who derive inspiration from them.

Concepts are developed from rich cultural heritages in Nigeria, market is not an exception. Artists have developed expressions with

perspective that portray orientations connected by different movements and currents in communication usually giving symbolic meaning to the activities of a market, its cultural significance or environmental designation. Markets generally may play significant role in cultural setting especially in villages where they are named after a deity, a person, events and other connotations known to the environment. The attraction is because it holds narratives that inspire artists in term of patches of colours created by theatrical scenes without script nor rehearsals, communication in audible and inaudible voices and gestures. These and many are what captivate artist and form the integral parts of every composition on canvas. The traditional market creates ideological direction of communal aesthetics that serves as a reflection of African societal values. Many artists because of training have adopted impressionists approach and techniques to represent concepts from the market places. This is noticeable in artistic practices in Nigeria is evident by the fluid arrangement of subjects and rendering. This can be categories under daily human activities. Artists like to capture the hustling and bustling, buying and selling, men and women in different attires, regalia, some in white and others in black, traders sitting while others are standing, walking, carrying items bought or selling, hawkers and truck pushers. In recent years, certain configurations are affecting these aesthetic settings creating room for organized shopping complexes that may not arouse much interest and representing the African outlook. The organic nature of market setting in Nigeria makes it interesting and fascinating to artistic possibilities challenging the intuition to develop paintings using different schemes.

Trained from different institutions in Nigeria, Abiodun Olaku, Yaba college of Technology, John Oyedemi and Kolade Oshinowo, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and Sam Ovrity, Auchy Polytechnic, they amongst others are some of the great artists who have shaped markets representation in painting in Nigeria. They live in different part of the country and bringing their experiences to bear on art practices. The four artists under review incidentally had been exhibiting together under different platforms both in Port Harcourt and Lagos.

Abiodun Olaku b. 1958

Olaku is a graduate of the Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos. His influences can be connected to the great mentors, like Yusuf Grillo and Kolade Oshinowo amongst others. Despite been taught and mentored by these great minds in the visual arts, he has perfected his skill

in handling medium and subject of interest without deviation through the years. It can be rightly said he has carved a niche for himself. Askart.com (2024) explains that:

‘Inherent in his work there is a compelling dichotomy between the precision with which the artist frames his compositions and responds to his subject matter - and the subject matter itself - the minutiae of nature's atmospherics and the complex narratives of human activity’.

His art practice of consistency evolved and developed overtime. A trait of apostolic artist can be said of him because he has become a movement of a sort. In this he manifested an artistic practice that is paving ways for others to follow. This focus has kept his work unique with nuances of a master. His work in technique can be likened to the old British masters like JMW Turner (1775-1851), a romantic painter, famous for his landscapes and seascapes regarded as master of light. Olaku has this characteristic in his works (National Gallery.org, 2024).

Arguably Olaku is one the renowned Nigerian artist who is playing significant role in promoting art practices from Nigeria. His art practice has spanned more than three decades. It is steady, holding frequent exhibition either in partnership or solo in and outside Nigeria because of his proficiency. He is known to have dwelled on divers’ subjects especially the market scenes of different parts of Lagos, the northern Nigeria depicting activities of the day. His representation street scenes of Lagos of both night and day are driven by passion to moments. It is noteworthy to ascribe his early paintings of the market scenes to the design pattern and technique of the impressionist academic milieu. Bold long and short strokes with subdued scheme that invoke the atmosphere of calmness, also portraying the character of intellectual order especially those selected for this write up. According to Bonhams (2014)

On his methods and techniques, Olaku openly asserts that he does not allow current or emerging trends to influence his aesthetic. He aims to create works that will stand the test of time, and leave an "indelible artistic legacy". Olaku largely works in the traditional medium of oil; however, his work is not stuck in the past. Open to innovation, the artist explores new horizons within established.

His paintings are some of the most valued in and outside Nigeria. The paintings are connected by colour scheme akin to him in the mastery of gray and black. The play of light is achieved through dramatic distribution that makes the onlooker glued to his paintings to read different part without getting weary. The charm of his composition makes gazing and marauding back and forth to understand the thought of the artist. It is the hand of a master craftsman at work, the dots of men and women arranged to make statements about the time of the day. From figures 1-4, the transition is obvious in colour scheme and rendering. Figures 1 and 2 show early years of practice which suggest the impressionist tendency while the later figures 3 and 4 give a perspective that integrate qualities that express a romantic essence.

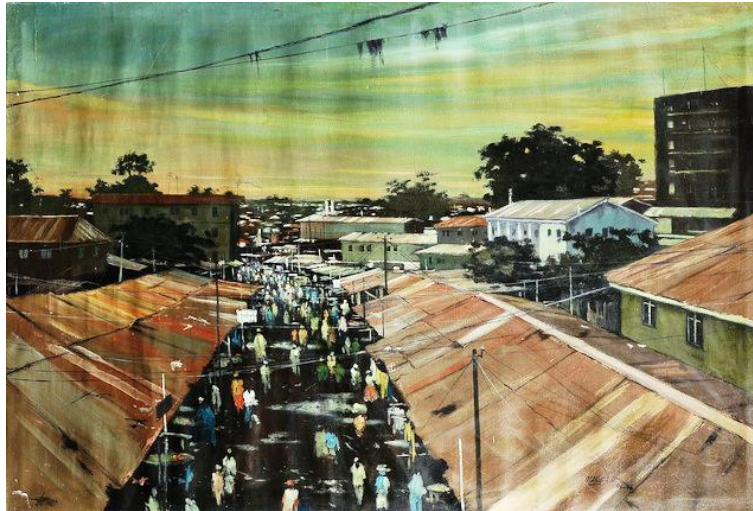


Fig.1 Ibadan 1995-96 oil on canvas 90x132cm

Courtesy: Bonhams.com (2014)

<https://www.bonhams.com/auction/21448/lot/6/abiodun-olaku-nigerian-born-1958-ibadan/>



Fig. 2 Spirit of Enterprise (1995) oil on canvas 78 x 96cm (30 11/16 x 37 13/16in).

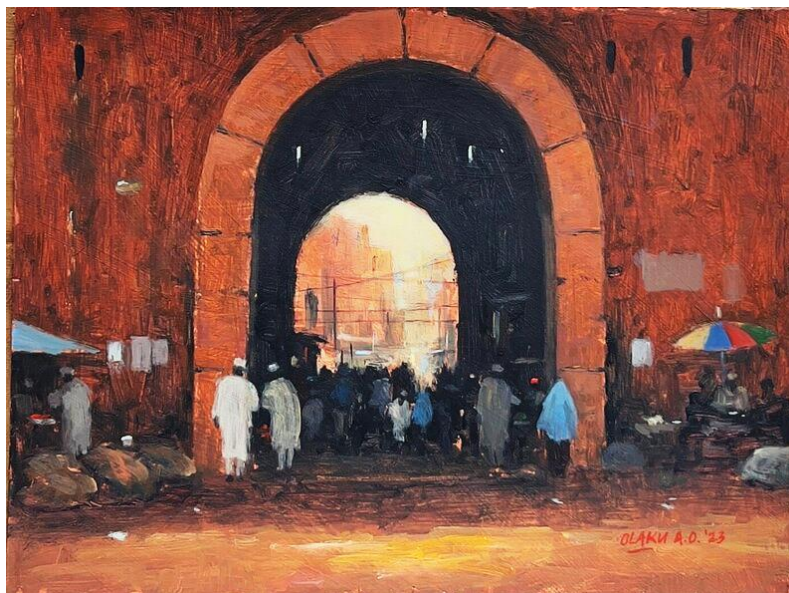


Fig.3 Passage of hope (Northern Market) 2023 Oil on paper, 13x17inches
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/abiodun-olaku-passage-of-hope-northern-market-1>



Fig. 4 Evening Enterprise, 2008; Medium: oil on canvas; Size: 76 x 91.2 cm. (29.9 x 35.9 in.)

https://www.askart.com/artist/Abiodun_Olaku/11211777/Abiodun_Olaku.a_spx

John Oyedemi PhD b. 1966

John Oyedemi, a graduate of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria specialized in painting. He was taught by some of the most highly rated academics and professionals, such as Gani Odutokun, Jerry Buhari, Jacob Jari, Sani Mohammed Muazu, amongst others. His influence came from many artistic practices in Zaria where Duke Asidere, Danjuma Kefas, Best Ochigbo, Philip Gushem Obed and others who were a time postgraduate students. Many of the students worked together in a studio and were influencing each other to have the kind of tradition that has endure to date. It is this tradition that Oyedemi has carried on for more than two decades. His art practice has its root in Zaria synthesis with strong attachment to Northern Nigeria scenery as his inspiration.

Danjuma 2016, captures the time and practice of John Oyedemi thus;

Oyedemi grew up around the market and has an understanding of the market environment. The excitement, noise, movement, colour, dirt and chaos were subtly absorbed by the mind of the young boy.

These have found expression in his paintings, one may venture to say that the market scenes painted by John seem to capture the soul of the market. The energy and power in the paintings permeate the surface of the picture-plane and leaves the viewer feeling he/she has been to that market. For his Doctoral research, the painter decided to select an unusual subject, "The Charcoal Market". Ordinarily, the sight of the charcoal market is black, gloomy-looking, spirit-dampening and even the manner the sellers sit portray hopelessness. If you were to visit the market, you might end up not only staining your clothes with soot, but going home feeling sad and not knowing why. It was in this subject that John worked, he brought out the beauty in the black and shades of greys. He also brought out the subdued colours in the environment

His technique evolved with moment of time as observed by Dajuma Kefas in 2016. It is spontaneous and tensed and swift application of colour/pigment on canvas, dramatization of light, dominant scheme. In figs 5-9, the colour schemes are luminous, dominant and influential. The idea is to create a dialogue between colour spaces and lines. The use of colours in his paintings design scheme is the adaptation of composition of large spaces which is characterized by ornamentation of variety of abstract shapes. At the background, the application of colour is flat and vague with intermittent line of vertical and horizontal drawn into it.

In 2011, he introduced intersecting linear rendering, incorporating organic lines as part of the composition weaved into each canvas. This was inspired by the works of Rick Stevens (1958) who used what he called 'organic association', a cosmos-tic flair is achieved by this. It was in the course of the PhD research that he started introducing organic lines into his paintings. The thick and thin lines create a rhythmic contour which became part of his practice. The dialogue in the flow of space, the lines of diagonal, vertical and horizontal orientation is fused in to create a conceptual domination. The line is used to fragment different composite spaces in a manner that result into densely intimate and intricate design.



Fig 6 Market Day 2016 90x100cm oil on canvas



Fig 7 Market Day 2 2016 94x110cm oil on canvas



Fig 8 Dede Market 2016 Oil on Canvas 90x99cm



Fig 9: The Green (Market) 2016 90x100cm oil on canvas
Location signature Beyond

Kolade Oshinowo b.1948

He is a graduate of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He was a lecturer at Yaba College of Technology where he eventually retired to resort to studio practice. As a teacher and lecturer, has mentored generation of artists both within and outside the institution where he worked. Lagos has great influence on art practices as the commercial nerve city of Nigeria and the expatriate communities who mainly serve as major collectors is giving it a boost. It is also one of the most densely populated cities in West Africa, largest economy and outlet for arts.

Market activities among others have been a source inspiration to artists like Oshinowo. He is known to have explored different aspects of it in his paintings making it one of his explored subjects of interest. This is evident in the paintings accessed in the course of this writing and based on personal relationship dating back to 1990s. His markets are dramatized in cluster arrangements, an example in figure 10. The design from the background superpose a non-definite perspective of opening where either an exit or where people are emerging from. At the foreground which seems to carry the weight reveals the centre of trade which show food items and vegetables.



Fig 11: Kolade Oshinowo 2002. 99 x 100cm (39 x 39 3/8in) Oil on canvas

Source; <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Market-scene/A577071B96F1AA04>
5/5/2023

Use of lines

Oshinowo always laced his images with dark lines in a poetic manner to create a fragmentation in space. This analytical construct is likened to the cubist approach with a feel of impressionism. He explores this technique that gives his paintings a significant distinction among the contemporary Nigeria art scene. The spontaneity of linear geometry cultural motifs can be connected to the environment from which he came from. The atmosphere of each canvas is dripping with conversation of colours and lines in a rhythmic movement of his culture. This experience crafted on is a display of scenes that unveil the cosmopolitan glamour of Lagos.

Oshinowo integration of lines is reminiscence of Paul klee (1879-1940) linear rendering. klee line shows two kinds of lyrical and bold thick lines that he creates to encircle each object and figures. It is observed that Oshinowo lines seem mainly vertical orientation including the composition. His compositions are portend typical rural setting seemingly because the subdued feel of his palette. Sowole (2016) reported that;

Oshinowo proves that incendiary of ‘repetitive’ themes can hardly be exhausted as he captures eleja (fish sellers) in a very uncommon scenery. From Youth Wing, Neighbourhood Fish Hawkers, to They Come from Makoko series, Oshinowo’s brushing exhales freshness into Lagos streetscape on canvas. In fact, the artist’s capture of women fish hawkers in They Come from Makoko series is more interesting in the drove movement of the women.

Colour scheme

Oshinowo uses austere pattern, dark, black and colour to express market scenes, a personal expression that shows his direction. This austere colour patterns entail the artist did not create illusions of depth but small flat patches that connote blocks of colours encased in thick and thin lines. He devised an approach where images are juxtaposed with abstract background to achieve a market space.

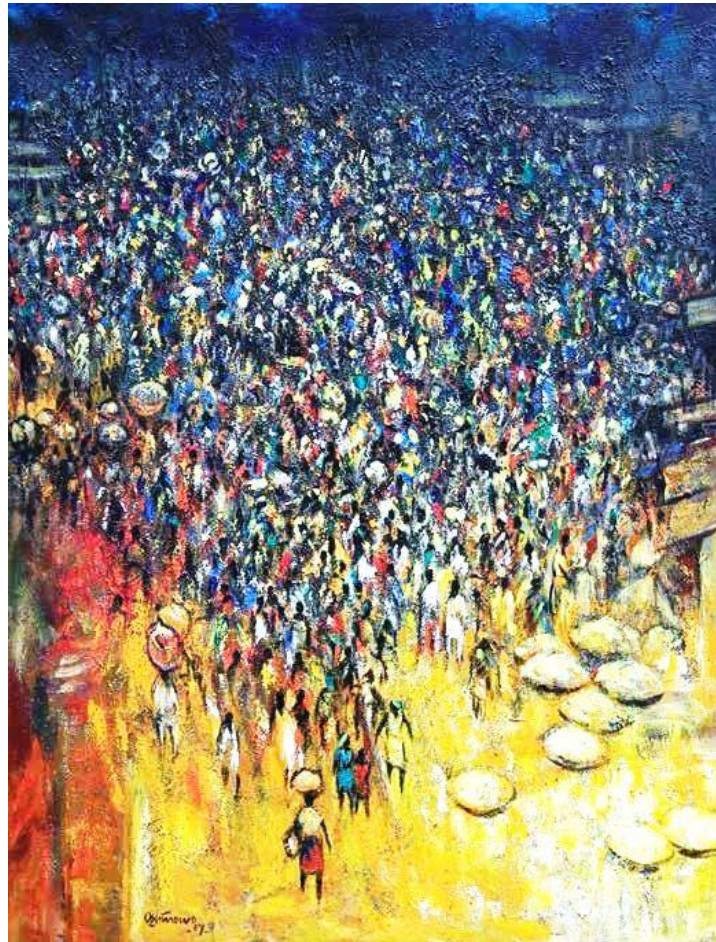


Fig 12: Open Market 2007 122 x 91.5 cm. (48 x 36 in.)



Fig 13 Kolade Osinowo Youth Wing 84x91inches. Acrylic on canvas
<https://guardian.ng/art/a-nations-changing-times-on-canvas-of-oshinowo/>

Sam Ovrity b.1961

He is a graduate of Federal Polytechnic Auchi specializing in painting. He is a master artist, a quintessential impressionist, one of the pioneering colourist. He has been in the field of art practices for more than four decades without wavering. His watercolour to the younger artists was a reference point in terms of colour, theme and composition for learning in almost all the art schools in Nigeria. His paintings cut across different subjects and one of which is the market scenes. He is also involved in Hamattan workshop, auction sales, and art talk shows, solo and group exhibitions. Mbonu-Amadi 2016 reported that Ovrity says he uses his painting to turn the light on people. “I use colors that can give people peace, colors that can make people happy...painting for me has become particularly a color phenomenon, color becomes the primary intent for painting.”

His usage of colour is lavishly applied on canvas in a way that can almost be falling off because of the texture. This generous application of colours excites and captivates his audience to get glued to reading his painting to understand the process. Ovrity mastered the use of tints and colour which gives his painting a soft outlook. This is the trait of impressionism in the handling of media in their art practices. Adler (2024) posits that ‘the Impressionist artists shared a desire to record the modern world around them by capturing the transient effects of light and color.

They generally avoided traditional modeling and compositions, focusing instead on texture, tone, and high-keyed color’.

Ovriti’s subject cut across different areas of daily human activities especially the market scenes which he like other artists in this paper greatly favoured. There is no doubt that Ovriti influence is not within the Nigeria art practices except for the theme. His impressions of aerial view capture different aspect of market activities showing roofs in convergence with the background. Some show umbrella while there dots of what portray human movements in different position. He represents this without much detail or modeling but illusion of depth is achieved by soft dark tone for contrast between colour and tint.

Writing on Ovriti and his paintings portend studying influences of impressionism movement whose characteristics is evident in his work. The techniques adopted by him are enumerated from the writing of Lesso (2023) who outlined the five characteristics noticeable in impressionists’ artists. This is not far from what Ovriti is exhibiting in his painting as if he lived in that era. Key among these are;

- Rejection formal, painterly traditions for a new language that was fresh, bright, airy and full of light’.
- Loose brush strokes
- Capturing the fleeting essence of the moment as light flickered through patchy skies or onto dappled grounds.
- Pale and bright colours, instead, they often painted darker areas of shadow and definition with a contrasting darker hue.
- Cropped compositions and unusual viewpoints can be seen in the work of many Impressionist painters, and these concepts came from several key cultural influences,

All these are prevalent in the works of Ovriti, an attribute that makes paintings fresh ‘Resulting in paintings that were swiftly painted, with a fresh, fluid and spontaneous quality’ ...his painting style suited the Impressionists...



Fig 13: A new agenda 6 oil on canvas, 48" × 60", 2018
<https://www.hourglassgallery.com/artworks/a-new-agenda-6/>



Fig 14: African Market 2011 Oil on Canvas 30x40inches
Source; <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/african-market-sam-ovrati.html>



Fig 15: Auchi Market 11, 2021 , Oil on canvas, 123 × 153 cm
Source; Alexis Galleries

Comparison

The four artists who are both painters have unique way of depicting their figures. Interestingly, the artists both employ the use of multiple figures in their paintings of market scenes. One is tempted to assert that their palettes are the similar, however, few variations are noticed especially in the works of Ovrati. His impressionistic style is higher than those three. Ovrati's figures seem to diminish into the environment, yet, their identity and actions are not eluded. One aspect of his paintings is the strong influence of foreign palettes that is evident in the works. To some extent, some of his figures look more like westerners not Africans. Looking at Olaku's market scenes, the artist cherishes, to some extent, pictorial depiction of his subjects. The viewer is brought to a point of zooming himself or herself into the paintings of Olaku. The realistic nature of his works is suiting, enjoyable and has the ability to transport the minds of people into the world of fantasy. Not only art lovers, even those who usually claim they do not like artworks, can be pulled into the mind of the paintings of Olaku. It has been established in many quotas that realistic paintings are still the most admired works of art up till now. This may be connected to Olaku's style of resurrecting the realistic scenic beauty of

African markets using foreign materials. It also brings to memory the advocacy of Aina Onabolu who insisted that paintings should be realistic in nature to capture moments of history and to challenge the western worlds who feel Africans do not possess the ability to create anything beautiful. On this, Olaku has succinctly fulfilled the wish aspiration of the proponent of this theory.

The energy found in Oyedemi's paintings of market scenes is magnifying. The artist, over three decades, has successfully transported every viewer of his works to northern Nigeria. Those who have been to the north and those who only know of it as a region in Nigeria, Oyedemi vigorously forced the Northern scenes into the mainstream art. His multiple figures are uniquely compressed into murky surroundings; yet, the figures identities are neatly retained. His mastery of grayish manipulation on the canvas has undauntedly portrayed him as the master of northern scenes and architecture in painting. At various points, Oyedemi's paintings share great resemblance with Oshinowo's works. For instance, Oshinowo's paintings in Figures 11 and 12 can be likened to Oyedemi's works, vice versa. What could be their connection? Could it be the Zaria art school link or mere coincidence? At this point, many reasons can be attached to these similarities.

Moving on, Oshinowo cannot afford to drop his brushes at this his ripe age but not tired. His influence is noticed in his students and admirers. His name cannot be detached from multiple figure paintings. The magical coronation of figures, items, structures and the picture plain is intriguing. Sometimes his figures want to stand on their own while at various points the figures mashed themselves to the point that identity is lost but the activity is retained. Oshinowo loves austere pattern, dark, black and colour in his market scenes, however, the presence of yellow ochre is nearly visible in most of his paintings like Oyedemi's. An example is noticed in Figures 12 and 13. In a nutshell, the four artists share many things in common in their paintings of market scenes. The use of multiple figures and colour schemes vary from one artist to the other.

Conclusion

Conclusively, painting of market scenes in Nigeria has received much attention by artists of various genres. In painting there are names that keep ringing in the art mainstream both within and outside the continent of Africa. This paper has taken a look at four painters who share some similarities in their works. These artists include: Abiodun Olaku who

attended Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, John Oyedemi and Kolade Oshinowo went to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and Sam Ovraili attended Auchu Polytechnic, Benin. Based on their resilience in painting, they are tagged as some of the great artists who have shaped markets representation in painting in Nigeria. Although they live in different parts of the country, they bring their experiences to bear on art practices. Not limited to the aforementioned, these four artists have exhibited in different platforms. They have also thought other artists either in formal or informal settings.

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