

**WORKSHOP AS A PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY FOR PRINTMAKING: A  
REVIEW OF THE SIXTH NSUKKA PRINTMAKING WORKSHOP.**

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**Abstract**

*In May 2009, the sixth printmaking workshop was held at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. This paper is a review of this creative workshop. Critically evaluating the demonstration of drypoint and collagraphy techniques in the exercise, effort is made to highlight the effectiveness of workshop as a strategy of teaching and disseminating the art of printmaking. Also surveyed is the historical evolution of workshop in the development of printmaking in Nigeria, with emphasis on how the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria adopted workshop in its academic programme. Beyond the learning of skills, the sixth Nsukka printmaking workshop is used to interrogate the issue of trans-national and cross-cultural networking in art. The contemporary construction of art history is much affected by how artists, artworks and artistic styles get interconnected in physical, printed and electronic forms. The sixth Nsukka printmaking workshop was a product of such contact, and inspired further linkages for younger artists from Nsukka as will be elaborated in this essay.*

### **The Evolution of Printmaking Workshop in Nigeria**

Prior to the analysis of the sixth edition of the Nsukka printmaking workshop, it would be necessary to reflect on an aspect of the history of Nigerian art that laid the foundation for the exercise. In the area of printmaking, Bruce Onobrakpeya is one of the most celebrated names in Nigeria. In the Agbarha-Otor Harmattan Workshop of 2003, he asserted: "What would I have been today without the workshops of Ulli Beier and Ru Van Rossem in Ibadan, Oshogbo and Ile-Ife?" This acknowledgement validates the adoption of workshop as a means of printmaking propagation in Nigeria, beginning in the early 1960s. In 1961, the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of Ibadan organised a printmaking workshop directed by Ru Van Russem, expatriate artist mentioned above by Onobrakpeya.

Another notable workshop was led by Ulli Beier from Germany, and in 1964, the Mbari Art Workshop series kicked off. Onobrakpeya's contemporary, Solomon Wangboje must have participated in the workshops too. Hence, taking advantage of his administrative position in the University of Benin, Wangboje was inspired to conceive workshop and other experimental exercises that would groom artists for the spread of printmaking processes. Filani (2004:9) put it thus: "The UNIBEN academic experiment of the early 80s produced Arodu Francis with his evolay technique, Amaefuna with starchset, and Kunle Filani with petropolystren in printmaking." Nonetheless, it was not mainly the UNIBEN experience that brought those names into the story of printmaking in Nigeria. There is evidence that during that time, printmaking as an art form had begun to gain ground simultaneously in different places. Amaefunah is a case in point here. He must have attended the Benin creative programme from the South-Eastern Nigeria, where there was a burgeoning printmaking tradition resulting from his efforts combined with those of others. He created the Graphic section of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and printmaking became a major area in the section (Uka 2007:78).

In 1980, Nsukka adopted the workshop phenomenon. According to Oloidi (1986: 7), the first was held that year on art and environmental aesthetics under the supervision of Mrs. Barbara Hager, and the second, directed by Winfried Schmidt in October 1985. Exactly one year later, Schmidt came back for the third workshop sponsored by the Goethe Institut, Lagos; French Cultural Centre, Lagos; and the University of Bayreuth, Western Germany. The nearly fifty participants worked in three intaglio techniques drypoint, etching and aquatint, producing prints that had extra- ordinary integration of societal and personal experiences.

In 1987, what Oloidi termed "Nigerian-German cultural coalescence" became more apparent: Winfried Schmidt and Thomas Gose Brush led another workshop from 29 October to 2 November that year. That was the fourth edition, although in the exhibition catalogue, it was erroneously captioned "The 3<sup>rd</sup> Printmaking Workshop." The sponsorship was undertaken by the same organisations except for the exclusion of the French Cultural Centre and inclusion of the University of Nigeria. While woodcut, drypoint, etching, aquatint and mezzotint were studied in that edition, the scope was narrowed down to drypoint technique when the next workshop took place in 1990 under the supervision of Arnulf Spengler and his wife Christians. Sponsored by the Goethe Institut in addition to Barning Foundation, that one seemed to mark an end to the long-standing art-cultural relationship between Nsukka and Germany. For nearly two decades, Nsukka did not host a printmaking workshop, and its link with external organisations

seemed to be broken. While no one can account for the reason, the situation could be attributed to the breaks, shifts, disconnections and other historical circumstances that shape the making of art history.



Fig. 1: The workshop participants

Source: Dionne Haroutunian, U.S. State Department Cultural Envoy: Final Report

The objective of this article is to relate the creative experience of the printmaking workshop that came after the long pause. It was the sixth edition and was directed by US cultural envoy, Dionne Haroutunian from May 14 to 20, 2009 in the printmaking studio of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka. Dionne demonstrated two processes of printmaking: drypoint and collagraphy. Beyond mere reporting of event, this review is intended to serve pedagogical purposes much as the workshop itself does. Effort is made to explain the technical procedures involved in the techniques, to enable interested persons try them out. Meanwhile, it is vital to first highlight the contact that engendered the workshop in the first place. This will help us appreciate the place of travel and networking in the propagation of art particularly within the purview of present-day experience.

### **Creating the Contact Zone**

In contemporary times, construction and definition of boundaries among global communities remain essential in the formation of humanity. The boundaries are in turn broken through kaleidoscopic networks that favour international co-operation. Travel is one of the many ways of network formation. In his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, James Clifford extensively discussed forms of travel and how it leads to “intercultural understanding and production of complex knowledges”

(1997:34). Histories of art are littered with stories of spatial movement of artists and other people, art forms and ideas. The results include contacts that enable the study of the visual arts to cross cultural, civilisational, ethnic, religious and geographical boundaries.

Beginning especially in the wake of the twentieth century, the history of art in Nigeria includes much of how expatriate artists came into the country, how creative-conscious Nigerians travelled abroad, and how the resulting contacts shaped artistic development and practices. As x-rayed at the outset, workshop evolved as an outcome of such networks. In subsequent times, other forms of networking emerged: residency, study tour and international exhibition, which have directly or indirectly sustained workshop as a pedagogical approach to art dissemination in Nigeria. The contact that produced the sixth Nsukka printmaking workshop was a residency programme undertaken by Krydz Ikwemesi in 2007 in an art centre owned by Dionne Haroutunian in Seattle, United States of America. While Dionne demonstrated printmaking techniques to him, he taught her the rudiments of Uli art. Little did they know they had created a contact zone that would in a couple of years later bring the US into the picture of the Nsukka printmaking tradition. In addition to the Washington State; the US Embassy, Lagos; and the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka that sponsored the workshop, Dionne got donations of ink, plexiglass, rollers, tarlatan, texture paste and drypoint tools from friends and colleagues. These materials defined the scope of the exercise and limited it to drypoint and collagraphy. Although the number seemed scanty, the techniques challenged the nearly forty participants to experience the creative involvement and versatility of printmaking.

### **Drypoint**

Drypoint is an intaglio technique in which a sharp steel needle, diamond point, or any other hard stone tool is used to scratch an image directly onto the surface of a copper plate (Smith 2003:240). The movement of the scratching tool on the plate throws up a rough edge known as burr, along the furrow. The burr retains ink and enables the line to be printed with rich velvety result. Since the burr appears above the surface of the matrix and is therefore fragile, it is vulnerable to the extreme pressure of the press. It is quickly worn down by printing. So, only a limited number of impressions may be successfully taken. Smith's awareness of this drawback is reflected in his identification of copper as the plate for drypoint. Copper is acclaimed as the most suitable for that technique given that a burr raised in copper holds up in printing far longer than a burr raised in other materials (Ross, Ross & Romano 1990:82). Nonetheless, if printmaking should retain its experimental attribute, artists have to try out other surfaces such as zinc and plastic in drypoint. While none possesses the quality for which copper is highly rated, they have their individual advantages that could make artists experiment with them. Generally, drypoint is identified to be the closest to sketching and a method whose plate can be worked without great technical preparation or skill, other than of draughtsmanship. Still, the process is much easier when transparent plastic is used. While demonstrating the drypoint technique in the printmaking workshop, Dionne put it thus: "The transparent nature of plexiglass is an advantage; you could see the design through the plate as you scratch, as though you are redrawing it with hard pencil." She quickly made a design, incorporating the *uli* elements she learnt from Ikwemesi. Placing the drawing under the plate, she scratched.

The working of drypoint plate presents the artist with creative decisions which if wisely made, would result in the vitality of the final print. While the parts thoroughly

scratched with the sharp tools print black in black ink, the sandpapered areas leave grey impressions. Meanwhile, before the plate is inked, its sharp edges are filed down to prevent damage to the blankets of the press or the printing paper (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Beveling the edges of the plate

Source: Dionne Haroutunian, U.S. State Department Cultural Envoy: Final Report

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Fig. 3: Inking session  
Source: Dionne Haroutunian,  
U.S. State Department Cultural  
Envoy: Final Report

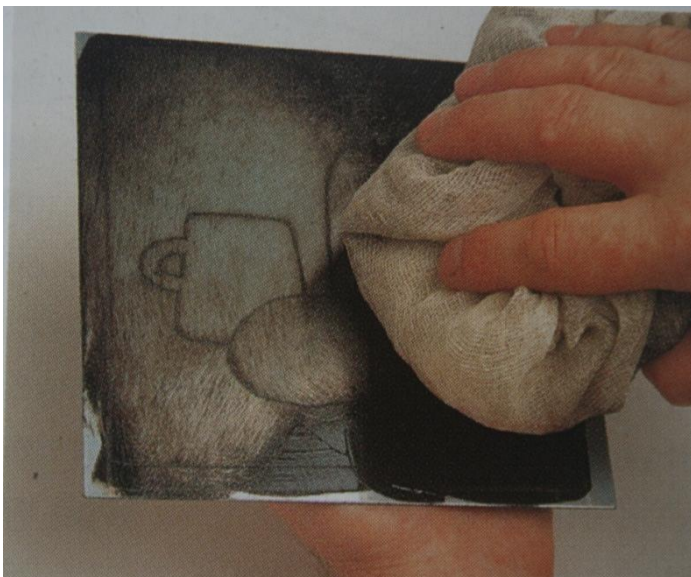


Fig. 4: Wiping drypoint plate  
Source: Ray Smith's *The Artist's  
Handbook*, page 246

The inking is done with small squeegee or any other related material such as piece of thick paper. The ink is spread across the scratched surface, forcing it into the incisions (fig. 3). Another clean piece of thick paper or stiff card is run across the surface to remove excess ink. The plate is to be rubbed with a bundle of scrim or tarlatan for further wiping. Dionne's recommendation of the use of "circular motion" is in consonance with Smith's as illustrated in his earlier cited book (fig. 4). The lightest tone could be achieved by thoroughly wiping some areas with clean paper, tissue or cotton wool so that they come out blank after printing.

The printing paper needs to be soaked in water, especially if it is heavily-sized. After being sponged off, it is stacked between sheets of glass, drawing boards or dry papers. On a sheet of paper taped on the bed of the press, the inked plate is placed, facing up. Then the damp paper is laid over it. Covered with the blanket, the entire stack is passed through the press. The pressure forces the paper into the incised lines to pick up the ink, thereby making the impression of the image. After the printing, the paper can be stretched by placing it on a flat surface and sticking it down with tape. This enables it dry absolutely flat. However, the embossed impression of the plate itself may be lost; so it is best to stack freshly pulled prints loosely between blotted papers (Smith 2003:246).

As the workshop participants watched the products of the exercise they had for days engaged in, they got motivated to delve further into the experimental world of printmaking. Barely had the drypoint session ended when preparations began to be made for the learning of collagraphy.

### **Collagraphy**

In Collagraphic printmaking, the artist prepares a base plate of aluminum, thin plywood, plastic, card or any other flat surface, with beveled edges and rounded corners. This could be done in a variety of ways: by applying acrylic texture paste onto the plate and scratching into it, or by gluing textiles, small objects or other materials onto it. Smith noted:

It can be inked up as for a relief print, with ink simply rolled over the surface before a print is taken... or as an intaglio print ... where ink is rolled over but then wiped back so that it goes into the cracks and fissures of the textured surfaces before a print is taken, or a combination of the two processes.

In the workshop, the resource person first demonstrated the intaglio facet of collagraphy. She applied paste on thick paper cut to the size of the proposed print, stamped the brim of a bottle cover all over it and glued a piece of cheese cloth on a selected part of the plate. When it had dried, it was inked and run through the press (fig.5).



Fig. 5: Prepared plates about to be run through the press

Source: Dionne Haroutunian, U.S. State Department Cultural Envoy: Final Report



For one thing, Colligraphy is one of the most experimental methods of printmaking. In the workshop, several approaches were tried to prove so. The first was the “blind” technique where the prepared Colligraphic plate passed through the press without inking, thus outputting an embossed impression worth displaying as a finished piece of art. In the “viscosity” printing, Dionne mixed ink and linseed oil to a creamy state and used roller to apply it on the relief surface of one part of the plate, leaving the other inked as an intaglio block. Then the impression was taken. She furthered the process by dropping two colours on the palette. Using the roller on them, she moved her hand sideways to enable the two colours mix at a point. The “splint rainbow” approach as she termed it was a fitting description of the rainbow-like result of the mixture which was applied on the raised surface of the plate already inked with intaglio output in mind. The outcome was a crossover between relief and intaglio. In the end, the prints produced both in drypoint and collagraphy were pulled together and exhibited in the Ana Gallery located in the department (fig. 8).



Fig. 6: The first successful print in the workshop

Source: Dionne Haroutunian, U.S. State Department Cultural Envoy: Final Report

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Fig. 7: *NUGA Hangover*  
Drip point produced in the workshop  
Artist: Agbo George Emeka  
Size: 24 X 21cm



Fig. 8: The exhibition in Ana Gallery  
Source: Dionne Haroutunian, U.S. State Department Cultural Envoy: Final Report

Considering that the programme placed emphasis on process of production rather than theme, the meanings of the works were mainly read in the context of cultural crossing. Dionne recalled in her report:

...Onuora gave some final words that were of interest to me: "You just saw a lot of art. Some of it you liked, some you didn't. And a lot you probably didn't understand at all. But the important thing is that you got to be exposed to it." I was mesmerized. "Not understand? Our art? What is there to not understand?" I guess that goes under the heading, "The beauty of cultural differences."

That remark points to the comparative production of knowledge forged through travel and how art histories are constructed along that line. Few months after the workshop, one of the participants – Ngozi Omeje – spent a month as a resident artist in Dionne's art centre in Seattle. In the manner in which Dionne played as US cultural envoy in Nigeria, Omeje was in my view an "agent" of Nigerian art-culture in Seattle. Such spatial movements shape the global advancement of art.

### **"..An Endless Thing"**

At the end of the practical session, part of the final comment made by the workshop director reflects the broad nature of printmaking: "Other experimental possibilities abound; it is in fact an endless thing." Although the workshop did not cover many other printmaking techniques, the remark rightly captures the limitless creative potentials of the art. Printmaking chiefly possesses the capacity of producing what John Richardson called "multiple original" (1972:268). In other words, each piece is not a copy but an original, since it is not a reproduction of another work of art. With this technical advantage, art becomes accessible as the general public, not just the wealthy few, can own original works (Fichner-Rathus 2004:143).

Beyond the principle of multi-production, the artistic engagement of printmaking manifests itself all through the process. To enable the printmaker produce high quality prints, he is expected to possess considerable draughtsmanship and general imaginative capability. Then he demonstrates mastery of his materials and tools. Creativity is also required for the inking. While too much ink rolled on the plate obscures tiny details and results in heavily smudged prints, uneven inking outputs prints of patchy outlook. Most interestingly too, the difficulties and frustrations emanating from constraints of materials and tools, as well as the challenges of exercising control over them, spark off studio accidents that can be turned into new discoveries. Hence Stella Idiong (2003:33) remarked: "Printmaking... is one of the most experimental art forms... anything with a surface can print."

These attributes have over the years driven the interest of artists so that despite their deep involvement in their various areas of specialization, they still devote some time and energy to printmaking. Kunle Filani (2004:9) put it thus:

There was hardly any ancient and contemporary great master in the history of art that did not engage in printmaking. History has bestowed on us the prints of great artists such as...Goya and Picasso to mention a few. It has become a test of dynamism and greatness to see how master sculptors or painters can actually express themselves in printmaking.

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Also important is the fact that printmaking shares processes with sculpture, painting, ceramics and textiles. As noted earlier, collagraphy is a crossover between relief and intaglio on one hand, and between printmaking and mosaic painting on the other hand. While carving is common with woodcut, ceramics and wood in sculpture, serigraphy is simultaneously a textile and printmaking process. As these inter-relationships continue to give creative boost to printmaking, artists are ever poised to search into new materials, tools and production processes that can help them express their thoughts. The workshop challenged the participants to think and work in this direction.

Also, the poetry performance by George Agbo and Iheanyi Onwuegbucha helped to place the workshop in the context of production of history and to highlight the creative mix characterizing the art programme of the University of Nigeria. One of the poems by Agbo is titled *The inking Tradition*:

Waters up there,  
Overflowing the banks,  
Cascading down  
Onto the matrix;  
From matrix to substrate,  
Our thoughts are stamped,  
With all their exuberance.  
They will tell our story  
When we may have all gone.  
They will push on and on  
The inking tradition (2009 Performance).



Fig. 9: George performing *The Inking Tradition*

Source: Dionne Haroutunian, U.S. State Department Cultural Envoy: Final Report

The poetry is reminiscent of the 1990 workshop which ended in banquet at the Archeology Village. The experience turned the workshop into a poetic, philosophical, theatrical and musical event. While the interdisciplinary nature of the arts comes into focus here, the intercultural formation of the visual arts is in the sixth Nsukka printmaking workshop foregrounded in at least two respects. First, considering the background of the resource person, Nigeria-American exchange is apparent. Secondly, the talk she gave on “Printmaking in the North-West and Beyond” brought the attendants into contact with the varied professional practices of printmakers elsewhere. In no better ways than these, would Nsukka determine the level of its development in the art of printmaking and then locate itself in the larger picture of the history of the art. The artists would find reason to consider or ignore Dionne’s last statement in the workshop: “Continue with what you’re doing. Your own distinct style is what makes you relevant in the global story.”

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