

**THE CONCEPT OF NEO-BAROQUE AS A CONTEMPORARY CONTRAPTION IN
TRADITIONAL PATTERNS OF DURBAR PAINTINGS OF JOHN OYEDEMI**

By

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Abstract

The patterns in Durbar festivals are the subject of inexhaustible artistic investigation by artists in Nigeria. The visual documentation of every section of Durbar elicits a nostalgic feel of certain familiar designs found in other climes. The practices of doing by artists in this domain lead to the discovery of patterns that motivate the imagination of artistic expedition through time to create theatrical impressions on canvas. The inspiration for this study was derived from art practices and adventures into Neo-Baroque culture, which is seen as a contemporary contraption for more than two decades in the handling of subject matter by the artist. This visual experience creates fascinating inspirational images through the use of varied colour schemes. The aim is to achieve compositions that imitate colours and symbols of Durbar to make configurations of the subject. Also, to ensure each study portends an array of colour juxtaposition forming clusters of splendor inherent in Durbar. To realize this, the colours used were restricted to the primaries of Red, Blue and yellow, and the neutrals of black and white in analyzing patterns to create desirable effects. This paper concludes that the consequences of paintings from the theme 'Durbar' would stimulate more artistic exploration because of their numerous intrinsic possibilities.

Keywords: Durbar, Socio-cultural festival, Neo-Baroque, Contemporary contraption, Artistic expedition, Patterns, Symbols.

Introduction

Durbar, as a socio-cultural festival in core Northern Nigeria, is found to be a source of inspiration and expression for artists of different epochs. This tradition is associated with the Nigerian states of Kebbi, Kano, Bauchi, Yobe, Borno, Zamfara, Zaria- Kaduna, Katsina, Jigawa, and Sokoto. As an annual festival in several cities of these states, it is celebrated at the culmination of the Muslim festivals Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. Osborg (2018) reports, 'the Durbar festival

had been in Hausaland for more than 500 years. It was introduced by Sarki Muhammadu Rumfa of Kano in the late 14th century as a way of demonstrating military power and skills before going to war. The festival is also an opportunity for local leaders to pay homage to the Emir throughout the jahi cheering. The historic link with each of these states where the Durbar is held is evident in the timing and period of the festivals. It begins with prayers, followed by a parade of the Emir and his entourage on horses, accompanied

by music players and ending at the palace. This has been attracting tourists from within and outside Nigeria, thereby boosting the economy of the people and host communities through handicraft production, breeding and maintenance of horses, and also the making of different regalia in shades and colours. It is common to see in a Durbar festival, horses and riders in simple, exquisite, finely detailed, colourful, ornamental materials and fabrics that make strong visual, dramatic statements. Studies have shown that a wide range of effects are achieved by seasoned designers using subtle lines, tone, colour and texture to evoke the personality of each design, Fig. 1-2.



Fig.1 Durbar Festival| Visit Nigeria Now
visitnigerianow.com/ retrieved 18/5/2020



Fig.2

<https://nomad4now.com/articles/durbar/>
retrieved 18/5/2020

Ideas and Practices in Durbar

The ideas and practices of painting Durbar scenes reverberate through time as an area

of interest for different artists in Nigeria. These practices are derived from poetic Durbar traditional textural designs, which are part of the aesthetics of the entire compositions, from simple to complex. Symbols, patterns, and motifs make up the entire appealing designs, inspiring generations of artists to date. Artists are drawn to the subject of 'Durbar', especially the aesthetic colour compositions, as an issue to explore in research. To a large extent, artists of different genres have identified aspects of Durbar which are of interest to them. Some artists' quest and interest in painting Durbar as sources of inspiration can be traced to artistic training received at the Zaria Art School, where the tradition of exploring day-to-day activities of the immediate environment is prevalent, while others are influenced by other reasons. Writers such as Griswold, W. and Bhadmus, M. (2013) posit a cultural-sociological and dramaturgical analysis of Durbar...bound together in an aesthetically compelling ritual. It is these compelling aesthetics of no-mean relationships that are inspiring unlimited possibilities.

Durbar outline as a motif, when repeated, results in a dynamic pictorial design. It is seen as a community of cultural symbols

in aesthetic formation identifiable to people of Northern Nigeria. It is also important to note that certain traditional symbols and patterns in Nigeria explored by artists are generally found to be identified with a particular culture and people. They are used to create visual expressions on canvas and to make statements. An example can be found in the works of Victor Ekpuk, b.1964, who developed a minimalist approach to reducing form to constituent lines. His works are basically an exploration of 'nsibidi' writings, derived from his traditional graphics, as in 'Prisoner of Conscience, 2007'. He orates and represents his form in mere linear attributes, which are most often repetitions and connections of lines.

The traditional patterns in Durbar are understood for decorative purposes on regalia and the entire motif configuration. The basic identifiable motifs often used are similar to those on caps and gowns worn by men and even on buildings. Artists mimic these motifs, write them on their canvases most of the time without recourse to meanings. The aesthetic reasons supersede the meanings of symbols and patterns, except those desired by the artist.

Dynamics of Horses in Durbar

At the center of Durbar festivals are horses moving graciously, majestically and powerfully in different formations. These arrangements of colourful movements dominate the entire landscape, making it the centre of interest to everyone around. The artist in this write-up finds the movement and action of horses most desirable to paint. Horses have been an attraction to artists all through history, from the Cavemen to the Post-modernists. The flair of each period differs from one to another, though portraying the sophistication of the times. Horses are described in terms of;

Strength, swiftness, majestic beauty, dedication and at the same time, sensitivity and vulnerability. Horses are one of the first objects of fine art, depicted in cave paintings, and used in numerous sculptures. Horses have been considered sacred animals since ancient times. They are associated with fertility and connected with omens, sorcerers and pagan deities. Many people drew inspiration from the external beauty of these animals, but they also felt something else — the element of freedom hidden under the mane.

https://arthive.com/encyclopedia/52~The_horse_as_a_symbolic_image_in_art

Going through historical lanes, the cave arts have become an artistic cultural attraction and inspiration where artists around the globe have found shelter to

interact, interface and develop astonishing works. This is because cave art offers one of the most impressive early works of art and paintings by man. According to Groeneveld (2016), the walls of the cave at Lascaux are painted and engraved with abstract, animal and human symbols. He recorded that of all animals in the cave, 'horses dominate the imagery' more than others. Alonso (2015) also reported: 'The drawing technique employed was engraving the wall with a flint object and then drawing a black line using charcoal. Afterwards, it was coloured with red or yellow, Fig 3. The characteristics from cave to cave reported by different authors are similar in rendering in colours and themes.

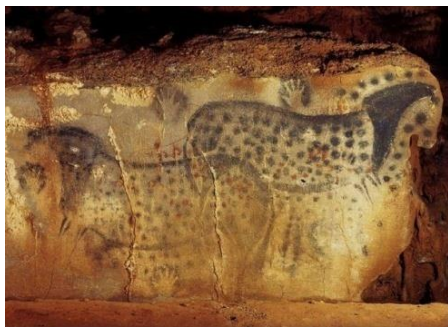


Fig. 3.

<https://arthive.com/res/media/img/ox800/article/7e8/229548.webp>

It is important to note that Oyedemi developed an unusual love for painting horses and Durbar using different media and manipulating the forms to suit his composition. He sees equestrian forms as a flexible and energetic subject for

exploration, and for anyone interested in capturing actions.

According to Danjuma (2016),

John Oyedemi is in love with the equestrian; he has painted several Durbar scenes from the northern part of Nigeria and Polo Players. Durbar celebrations are usually magnificent and breathtaking in the display of colour, costume, movement, horse riding, dancing, and music. It is of little wonder then that he has painted several scenes from the Durbar celebrations of cities in the north. Therefore, the paintings of John are a reminder to us that we must protect our society and culture, or we will lose them permanently.

Neo-Baroque as a Contemporary Contraption

Neo-baroque as a contemporary contraption is a central mantra in understanding where to categorize the Durbar paintings of John Oyedemi. To fully grasp what Neo-Baroque is, it is vital to know its advent and how the influence came about. According to Kleina and Mamiya (2015), the term 'Baroque' emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries when critics disparaged the Baroque period's artistic production, in large part because of perceived deficiencies in comparison to the art

(especially Italian Renaissance) of the period preceding it.

“Baroque is a period of artistic style that used exaggerated motion and clear, easily interpreted detail to produce drama, tension, exuberance, and grandeur in sculpture, painting, architecture, literature, dance, theatre, and music. The style began around 1600 in Rome and Italy, and spread to most of Europe”.[https://www.wikiart.org/en/artists-by-art-](https://www.wikiart.org/en/artists-by-art-movement/baroque#!#resultType:masonry11/5/20)

[movement/baroque#!#resultType:masonry11/5/20](https://www.wikiart.org/en/artists-by-art-movement/baroque#!#resultType:masonry11/5/20)
Neo-baroque can then be referred to as an advancement of baroque philosophy, but with a loose view. In painting, it adds a combination of characteristics of baroque, rich, deep colour and intense light and dark shadows to deepen itself, Fig.4. These features are basically in the Durbar paintings of Oyedemi. It is obvious that the characteristics of Baroque below essentially influenced Neo-Baroque, though some are prominent in it.

Brett & McKay(2010) outline certain characteristics of Baroque Art

1. Images are direct, obvious, and dramatic
2. Tries to draw the viewer in to participate in the scene
3. Depictions feel physically and psychologically real
4. Extravagant settings and ornamentation
5. Dramatic use of colours

6. Dramatic contrasts between light and dark, light and shadow
7. As opposed to Renaissance art, with its clearly defined planes, each figure is placed in isolation from the others. Baroque art has continuous overlapping of figures and elements.
8. Common themes: grandiose visions, ecstasies and conversions, martyrdom and death, intense light, intense psychological moments.



Fig.4 Théodore Géricault (1791–1824)

‘The Charging Chasseur’

<https://arthive.com/res/media/img/oy1000/article/24b/229556.webp>

Oyedemi's interest was drawn to the framework of Neo-baroque to enrich the local traditional Durbar milieu. This interest in capturing impressions of speed was developed in 1990 while I was a student at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. It was common to see students competing amongst themselves in developing ideas from inspiration gotten from Avant-garde artists. The neo-baroque is a movement that combined various thoughts to create a new understanding in

the context and confines of the times. Therefore, it becomes an attraction to upcoming artists who seek new ways of interpreting ideas. The rise of neo-baroque stems from interactions and infractions of different movements and the use of media to depict primarily what can be referred to as dramatic evolution. It borrowed from the classical thoughts and can be referred to as post-renaissance. This view is held by different authors, such as Kleina and Mamiya (2005) and Ndalianis (2004). It may not be fully understood to mean a context or an amalgamated position, but a reflection in some sense of post-modernists' approach of interpreting events promoted by artists whose directions crave freedom. Oftentimes, events and trends redefine the thoughts and outputs of an artist. It also affects artistic involvements in articulating critical issues in conveying messages in a way that can be read and understood. In their view, Hills, H. et al. al (2017) aver that "the baroque and neo-baroque today must be recognized as an 'open system' or hybrid network, a kind of non-totalizable whole". Artists in the 40s and upwards who became more progressive were found to do the anatomy of symbols to birth broad-minded concepts, leading to cultural developments, especially from the New

York School, where free expression was the trend. The School represent freedom and gives an insight into indices which brought about major growth of art practices and development; economic boom, cultural and industrial growth.

The first reference to Neo-Baroque in the work of Oyedemi was a write-up by Frank A.O. Ugoiomoh, 2018, in *Alternate Reality: Some Contemplations*, in an exhibition catalogue. This essentially enthused this write-up. The discovery of the classification of Oyedemi's painting in the Plate.1, spurred searches for more 'dynamic and complex aesthetics' in equestrian forms.

Ugoiomoh (2018) asserts that;

Early Zarianists emerged on the public scene with those romantic sceneries of northern Nigeria landscapes with representations of its diverse socio-cultural and economic activities in the late nineteen-fifties. That style endured into the nineteen eighties. Oyedemi's work is a rejuvenation of that tradition with an intensity of suffused earth colours. But for the lino prints of late Professor Solomon Ona IreinWangboje and GaniOdutokun's works of such northern sceneries rendered in earth colours, dominating the colour scheme, at that time, were the indigo/blue range, hues, and hazes, which controlled the compositions. Oyedemi

invigorates his work with earth colours as a departure and brings an intense cluster of persons onto the picture plane. Where early Zarianists engaged the angle of focus in bold figuration, Oyedemi pursues a neo-baroque pictorial illumination of the picture plane always directed away from the centre of the canvas.



Plate 1. Royalty, 2018. 110x129cm. Oil on canvas

Theme

The theme explored is based on 'Royalty', Durbar as a festival is centered around the palace of the Emir, a colourful tradition and aesthetically inspiring for artistic exploration. 'Durbar' in painting has become a rendering mused in a contemporary setting of a social-cultural representation. The artistic juxtaposition of patterns and colours, which is inclined towards self-course, obviously makes each painting connect to another. It has primarily attracted artists like GaniOdutokun, 1946-1995, EdosaOguigo, b.1961, AbiodunOlaku, b.1958, John

Oyedemi, b. 1966, and many others. Their attraction could be based on expeditions to capture traditional processions, royal outings and paraphernalia of a culture. They capture the pomp and pageantry, the ceremonial splendour and glory of the emirates of Kano, Zaria-Kaduna, Bauchi, Katsina, Kebbi and others.

The contemporary flair brought to Durbar festivity is a result of times, the chronicle of events and developments, which are dependent on who is on the throne. Developing a painting concept from the theme of 'Royalty' is possible because of its many possibilities from plates 1-12. The procession is according to the hierarchy of the chiefs and can easily be recognized by their followers' outfits, decorations on horses and how they are adorned. The royal garment stands out in the midst of all. This is contemplated to represent wealth, influence, power, and beauty in an array of colours and patterns. It is a society where affluence is a common occurrence and takes the lead, while the masses and downtrodden walk after those on horses, hailing and singing their praises. It portrays a kind of class distinction in a society where some are up there in joyful moods, being hailed and run after by people living in poverty (talakawas). There's thronging and pushing

to have a glimpse of the action of men on horses, drummers, flutists and then the melodious deafening sound that accompanies these movements. Tourists mixed with a multitude of mainly chanting men are seen looking excited, catching the fun of the moment. These actions all culminate into a dusty scene, a delight to the artists and other viewers.



Plate.2 Royal Display 2016.148x162cm
Oil on Canvas



Plate.3 Durbar Pace 2018, 145x180cm
Oil on Canvas

Sowole (2016) writes;

Oyedemi applies his palette to complement the elegance of horses in action. For whatever reason, most of his paintings are deodorized with fog, a style that weaves some kind of mystery around the figures and scenery. Artists deploying mist or fog to garnish their canvas is common, particularly to create depth. But in Oyedemi's paintings, his application of colours still glows under high intensity of light and shade.

The symbol of 'Durbar' used in these paintings has been sustained for more than two decades. An assemblage of motion, fantasies, and dramatization of men on horses in different configurations. The choreographic trend of horses is an exemplification of contemporary exploration, of an avant-garde. It is a search for an expression that brought about the introduction of thin and thick dark lines that run through each canvas. This attitude runs contrary to the convention of rendering in arrangements of motifs.

The Analysis of Different Aspects of Studies on Durbar

Process in making

The process of self-expression in making a design is broadened through realizing a particular motif in nature, pattern or

colour. This is complemented by the desire to explore the intrinsic colour combination in Durbar for artistic self-expression, which is the focus. A particular colour can be used as a dominant scheme, as exemplified in the paintings. These paintings are representations that depict seemingly traditional symbols and colours of Durbar using a contemporary contraption of Neo-Baroque characteristics. Each painting represents thoughts on a journey through fantasizing with motifs and patterns of 'Durbar' in different configurations and colour schemes. The paintings under analysis in this paper represent the thoughts of John Oyedemi. Rupert Warren (2020), in conversation on Instagram responding to a Durbar painting of Oyedemi, alleged that the symbols of power in modern times are often products, some say are beautiful too, from "famous" companies which in turn are attempting to show wealth and influence. None of these are presented in many of your pictures. Warren felt that it was surprising that Oyedemi used 'Durbar' as a metaphor to represent wealth and influence.



Plate 5 Royalty (Sunflower), 2020, 100 x 129 cm. Oil on Canvas

The paintings are imbued with an aura of philosophical attributes of the contemporary milieu of a loose approach after Impressionism and Neo-baroque. Adapting Neo-baroque feelings and invoking the feel of serenity and the colour vocabulary of the minimalists. Being familiar with the works of great Nigerian art masters like Gani Odutokun, this serves as a guide to manipulate patterns and symbols in narratives that portray personal expression without allowing their compositional scheme to be of any consequence in the paintings under review. The blend of artistic currents (a combination of ideas), a derivation from different genres of elements that appeal, is freely applied in an exploratory manner. According to Kleiner and Mamiya (2005), artists in their images of the sublime and the terrible often combined something of Baroque dynamism with naturalistic details in their quest for grippingly moving

visions. The paintings are in loose rendering without much detail, nor was there any attempt at detail. Speed and Spontaneity with a knife are evident in achieving movements and textural effects on each canvas in plates 1-15. Every painting is a build-up to another in terms of strokes of colour application and rendering without recourse to finesse of the outcome.

Compositional Structures



Fig. I Durbar studies



Fig.II Durbar studies.



Fig. iii Durbar studies



Fig. iv Durbar studies

The making of every painting starts with a series of sketches from realistic and snapshots as shown in the figures. i-iv. These sketches are studies of horses in graphite on paper, of men on horses done in different poses and actions, combined with abstract and imaginative elements. Attempts are made to alter poses and actions by stretching the horses to create new elements, especially when transferring to a gessoed canvas for final execution. Sketches are done using charcoal on canvas, where the structure of

each painting is determined. Fluidity of lines runs through each other as observed from the procession in a durbar race, and the patterns on the horses. That is, each canvas is prepared and choreographed with images of Durbar using a particular structure, as in Plate. 4, which conveys a sense of diagonal course.



Plate. 6 Royal Outing, 2020.100x110cm
Oil on Canvas



Plate.7 Royal People, 100x120cm.
Oil on Canvas

Writing on compositional structures in painting, Benve (2018) posits that it is an armature, or composition structure, in a representational painting, a structure that

will determine the placement of the main masses. Each design calls for a different layout of the dynamic use of light and the dark patterns with durbar forms emerging from the background. Below are sketches of eight of the common armatures in representational painting.

1. S shape 2. L shape 3. Diagonal 4. Triangle 5. Radiating lines 6. Fulcrum 7. O shape 8. Cruciform

Creating Dramatic Conversation with Light on Canvas

Contemplation for a painting sought to create interaction between each pattern and colour against an abstract background and foreground. As a conversation of images and colours ensues on canvas using different painting structures, a flicker of light is employed to create dramatic moments running through each painting as if breaking out of dark value. This is done to hold the viewer's enquiry into the painting and to read every section from the background to the foreground. Dark values are concentrated in certain areas and complemented by highlight and subtle shading effects in the background achieved by applying strong knife strokes on canvas. The background areas appear flatter, which gives an impression of

abstract patches through the systematic use of analogous colors.



Plate. 8 Durbar 2019.151 X 190cm.
Oil on canvas



Plate 9 Durbar Show,2018. 151x209cm.
Oil on canvas

Location: Signature BeyondArt Gallery,
Lagos.Nigeria.

LinearityApplication for Fragmentation in Space

Lines play a central role in defining the fragmentation of forms. Organic lines are employed to segment colour areas and create new shapes and patterns. The fluidity with which the lines flow from one end of the canvas to the other in vertical

and horizontal directions is to achieve a balance and support for the entire composition. Thick and thin lines vibrate through each piece as if piercing through a fabric material with an object, and in some as tactile stitches on canvas. The dark lines embodied the quality of the cubists' approach in the definition of forms in space. Essentially, the artist's exploration of linear application can ostensibly arrive at a new path to personal expressions. The conversation on canvas with colours and lines has shown that in the course of exploring durbar patterns, new images were realized as in Plates 10-15. Two things are evident here: a recast of social-traditional representation in a cubist practice of hard edges and a conversation with the impressionistic culture of soft edges on canvas.



Plate.10 Royal People, 2020.
94x109cm.Oil on Canvas



Plate.11 Royal Lines, 2020.
94x109cm. Oil on Canvas



Plate.12 Royal Lines and colours
66x145cm. Oil on Canvas



Plate.13 Royal Procession.
66x145cm. Oil on Canvas

Restricted Palette

The spectrum of a few colours is not based on the subtleties of tones but on the concept of using analogous colours. Interaction of values is employed in a way that is accentuated with a warm or tint value. The Minimalists and colour field artists' use of fewer colours to make statements was adopted. Some embraced the use of colour, neutral, black and white and gray to express their thoughts. An interrelated colour scheme is very much used in the exploration of the charcoal market by John Oyedemi, 'Selling the future 2015'. Also, attempts to explore other possibilities were made, especially by using a dominant colour. This is to build up a schematic rendering with a

dominance of tonality. A red nest can just be with drops of tint of an analogous colour to create depth, one primary or secondary colour along with its neighbour on each side to form a scheme to create an aesthetic appeal. The colour range is as they appear on the colour wheel, i.e., colours in close proximity to each other, while speckled dots of other colours are used to complement the dominant colour. Basic colour schemes are Red scheme, Yellow scheme and Gray scheme.



Plate 14 Royalty Race, 2019. Oil and canvas 99x109cm



Plate.15 Royal Lines 2020. Oil on Canvas 90x100cm

Conclusion

Exploration of this nature in Durbar patterns proves to be an aesthetic journey in cultural space. The structures were explored to create different compositional subjects around the theme of 'Royalty in Durbar', which shows a partial realism combined with patches of abstraction. Artists have demonstrated capacities in harvesting from the forest of ideas. These ideas are generated to project thoughts that are reanimated in the mind of the artist. A major contributing factor is the consequence of free expression resulting from the advent of social evolution of nobility, pollination of ideas and social stratum. Durbar as a subject of exploration will continue to attract artists of all genres due to its dynamism in evolving as a festival of note in Northern Nigeria. The effort to use a traditional festival like 'Durbar' as a representation is to portray the structure of our society, a community whose major preoccupation is the worship of 'Royalty'.

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