

**Charcoal as a Medium for Contemporary Art Production****Chinezerem Adaeze Eze****Abstract**

Charcoal is said to be the oldest material used by man for drawing. Its use dates back to the prehistoric period. Charcoal drawing easily captures the light and shade effect; on objects and is easily applied and erased on a surface. In spite of these, charcoal drawing has not received the expected in-depth study it deserves by modern artists. Charcoal drawing is the type of drawing produced using the product of a wood "subjected to a slow-burning process that reduces it to carbon". This paper, therefore, aims at giving charcoal drawing the needed attention in art historical studies in Nigeria. The objective of this paper includes, proving that charcoal drawing could be considered as a complete art form. The methodology employed in this study is historical as well as analytical. It is based on the expressive theories, that, art is viewed as the representation of the inner part of the artist. The paper describes the types of charcoal used in drawing, the processes of their production, techniques and history of charcoal drawing as well as the analysis of some charcoal drawings. The study reveals that charcoal drawing is an end in itself, not a means to an end.

**Keywords:** Charcoal, Art, Contemporary, Medium

**Introduction**

The use of charcoal as a drawing medium is not a new development in human draughtsmanship). It is dated back to 23,000BC that was during the existence of the early men, referred to as the prehistoric period. In this period, charcoal was used to draw images of animals on cave walls. This is evident in a very detailed Ibex from the Niaux cave in France (Kurt 2014). The charcoal in question was from "charred stick" or burnt sticks. These were used for studies and/or for sketches for more detailed paintings. Illustrated Oxford Dictionary (1998) States that: "Sketches, generally, are linear drawings made as synoptic outlines of an idea or an object. It is also a rough, slight, merely outlined or unfinished drawing or painting, often made to assist in making a more finished picture. The above definitions prove that the earlier charcoal drawings were not regarded as finished works but mere preparations for a painting.

From the cave drawings down to the present period, charcoal drawings have been constantly in practice, unveiling what Ikwuemesi

(1992) called *Stylistic Bazaar*. However, the use of charcoal produced from burnt organic materials, especially wood, for drawing is not new in visual art practice both in traditional and modern era. Many artists have experimented with it at different times and at various levels, and have made ground-breaking discoveries. (Obodo, 2010). Bitter soup (2016) states:

Charcoal is rather versatile, allowing the artist to approach texture, shading and tone with ease. Charcoal is easy to apply and does not adhere to the grooved surfaces of canvas, giving artists the freedom to create smooth drawings that are easily corrected. However, without a fixative, charcoal illustrations are vulnerable to smudges, which could explain why so many artists use it as a preliminary tool. The renaissance artists drew with charcoal and at the same time developed the use of fixative. Even from the Romantic period down to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, artists produced charcoal drawings.

In the early 1960s, Uche Okeke, a draughtsman from Nigeria, drew with charcoal. He produced and exhibited charcoal drawings, such as *Madonna* (1960), *Waiting for Bus* (1961), *Munich Girl* (1961) and *The Fallen Wall* (1962) among others. Chijioke Onuora also employed compressed charcoal in his present drawings. Odoh (2004) observes that, Chijioke Onuora's drawing is projected by the fluid, spontaneous and rhythmic movement of sensuous lines. Working the shaft of the charcoal stick, he produced vertical, diagonal, horizontal, wavy, circular and convoluted marks which are choreographed into well ventilated compositions. The artist also employs a technique which relies on the expressive power of the travelling charcoal mark, not only to set the tone of his compositions, but also to anchor other pictorial elements.

Drawing changes "like other human activities" both in materials, processes, techniques and ideas. This made the media for drawing unlimited/anything can be used for drawing hence it can create a continuous mark. Even the techniques and ideas vary and are also unlimited. Some artists express their ideas in tiny, broad/bold, spiral and gestural lines, while most of them employ lines only for preparatory sketches. This is why charcoal is a "foundational and quintessential" art material. Aniakor (2004) avers;

It has attracted the attention of professional artists over the ages from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Is it because of its linear poetry, its facility that enables the artist to work the linear corridors of his creative consciousness, the antipodes of the human mind in the search for legibility? Any wonder

it enjoys a pride of place in both creative practice and pedagogy.

In expressive theories, according to Spiegel (1998), art is viewed as a representation or manifestation of the inner state of the artist. That is an artist expressing himself the way he wants without considering "visual likeness". This theory encourages creative freedom or unlimited expressions.

Charcoal as a drawing medium encouraged different unconventional approaches to draughtsmanship, "the proliferation in every direction of the type of forms" that a draughtsman can produce. A draughtsman can draw based on observation, scribble, draw in space, imaginative and even by "play-play", regardless of the theory of imitationalism, representing nature as exact as possible. It is such freedom of expression and the use of charcoal in the contemporary drawings that prompts this research which is hinged on Charcoal drawing: using the charcoal drawing of Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka as an example.

This paper therefore focuses on the drawings produced in charcoal, while the essence is to document and prove that charcoal is an effective material for drawing, and its products are artworks not just preparatory sketches for artworks.

### **Charcoal Drawing: Historical Development**

Charcoal is as old as man, in the sense that it was already in existence before the early men thought of using it for drawing images of animals on the ceilings and cave walls. This practice was informal in training. They accidentally picked up "burnt sticks" which created defined marks on surfaces. Eventually this quenched their thirst for something that can make marks and serve as material for drawing or painting of the animals for hunting. The drawn images of animals, they believed, helped them during their hunting expeditions to kill the expected drawn animals. This is a magic ritual where they cast spell on such animal images that made it possible to make weaken the spirit of the animals in the field.

During the renaissance period charcoal drawing was used mostly as a preparatory material for sketches and the period fixative was also developed as a technique for fixing charcoal works. Michelangelo, Titan and Tintoretto of the Renaissance era worked with charcoal. An example is the charcoal drawing produced by Michelangelo, titled *Study of a man shouting*. The use of charcoal for drawings continued through the Romantic period down to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries of modern art. For instance, during the Romantic era, a French sculptor, Baryen (2016) made a very

remarkable charcoal drawing entitled *Dead Young Elephant*. His depiction of the fallen giant is another example of the depth and emotion possible in charcoal drawings. Also the French impressionist, F.dger Degas introduced charcoal in developing his "pastel drawings".

In 1928, a German Expressionist, Ernst Bar Lach projected a good number of charcoal drawings, such as *Self Portrait*. In 1936, an emotional charcoal mark was produced by Robert Black Burn. He titled the drawing *Man with Load*. In this drawing he portrays a "mixture of darkness and shadow" in such a creative way that captures the emotional drudgery and physical exertion of the laborer. Even the Indians are not left out in the charcoal drawing tradition; this is evident in *the drawings devoted to the god Shiva on the ceiling of the cathedral hall of the great Temple of Lepakshir*. (Bitter Soup, 2016).

In Africa, with special focus on Nigeria in West Africa, charcoal drawings were also in practice. Remarkably, charcoal drawing made a triumphant entry into the University of Nigeria Art Department through Seth Edward Anku, a Ghanaian draughtsman and art teacher, who joined the Department in 1981(Onnora 2014). His 'stylistic echo' strongly influenced one of his students Chijioke Onuora, who later influenced some younger artists.

### **Types and Medium for Charcoal Drawing**

Charcoal drawings appear in different forms that differentiate the types. They can appear in Abstraction, Realism, Expressionism and stylized type among other intermediate approaches which is personal to other practitioners. Fusel (2016) defines Charcoal as burnt organic material and also as the product of a wood subjected to a slow-burning process that reduces the wood to carbon. There are three types of charcoal used in drawing. These include Vine, Compressed and Powdered charcoal.

Vine charcoal is a product of willow wood. "Willow is a tree with thin leaves and branches usually found near water". Vine charcoal is simple to apply on a surface and its removal is very easy. It is always in the form of a round stick. Its marks on a surface are lighter when compared with compressed charcoal marks, and it smudges easily.

Compressed charcoal refers to charcoal forms that appear "in round stick, square stick, or as a pencil". They produce darker impression which makes their marks very difficult to erase. Powdered charcoal is the type of charcoal in a powdered state, which has not been compressed into forms.

## Techniques of Charcoal Drawing

Charcoal drawing appears in different techniques like any other aspect of visual art. The techniques vary as a result of how the artist wants to express his or herself. The techniques are: hatching, cross hatching, pointillism and blurring. Hatching technique involves the use of closely drawn parallel lines in vertical, horizontal or diagonal forms to shade and produce a finished drawing. Sometimes, artists choose to cross-hatch the existing hatched lines or strokes to achieve a different visual expression.

Cross-hatching refers to introducing a different linear movement on top of the existing one to achieve proximity, repetition, varieties and the effect of light and shade. Pointillism is the use of repeated minute dots to introduce tonal gradation in drawing. Blurring technique is employed in charcoal drawing through the process of applying charcoal in a smooth and well blended tone.

## Uses of Charcoal for Drawing

During the prehistoric era, charcoal was used as a preparatory material for paintings. In some cases, it is used for edging and skeletal drawings. However, the Renaissance artists used it for pure linear drawing exercises. Presently, it is used as a material for a finished drawing. This is without prejudice to the minority that still uses them for sketches for bigger works. Its dark effects attract visual attentions.

## Charcoal Drawings: The University of Nigeria, Nsukka Experience

It is obvious that Uche Okeke drew with charcoal and was able to produce a good number of drawings in the medium. He did not teach or influence anybody on the use of charcoal as a medium of expression. Instead his interest was to introduce Igbo *uli* drawing technique. The use of charcoal as a medium for drawing was first seen at Nsukka through Seth Edward Anku, Onuora (2014) states; At Nsukka, Anku taught drawing and painting for nine years. To the first and second year students, he taught basic design and elements of drawing, and to the third, fourth and fifth year students, he taught life and natural form drawing. Figure drawing was his area of interest while compressed charcoal was his favourite medium. In his drawing class, he never subjected any student to any particular medium, but instead, he encouraged the use of any drawing medium a student chose to employ and explore.

Onuora further postulates that; Anku employed "the shaft of compressed charcoal with the dexterity of accomplished orator or a gifted dancer on cartridge sheets." Emotional appeal combined with concentrated

power and directness of expression is the basic qualities of Anku's drawing. These qualities of his compressed charcoal drawings achieved from experience, dedication and cubist stylization captured the interest of some of his students like Chijioko Onuora and Preston Kubeinje. Fig. 1, captures the Schematized facial characters of an unknown face, produced in a bold and linear mark of the charcoal. This drawing is cubist in style and produced with exaggerated eyelids, lips and nose. A close look at the drawing, one attempts to see how Anku explores human face in action surrounded with some gestural sweeping movements by the sides. The interplay of light and shade and the clear defined edges of the facial features give unity to the work. Unity is also introduced through proximity, repeated and continuous bold linear expressions.

As Anku's drawings explored human facial expression, Chijioko Onuora, one of his earlier students influenced by his compressed charcoal rendition "added decorative and symbolic Uli and Insibidi motifs to enrich his statements and to identify with ideology of natural synthesis as practiced in Nsukka school" (Onuora 2014). Chijioko Onuora came in contact with the Ghanaian born draughtsman, during his second year in the University when he developed a reasonable degree of interest in Anku's drawing techniques; he stayed back at during holidays to work in Anku's studio on Campus. Anku, provides him with all the necessary materials for charcoal drawing. His interest in Anku's medium and techniques made him a compressed charcoal draughtsman in "Nsukka School" today.

At the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Onuora taught students and at the same time produced "Semi-realistic images in figurative stylization" in charcoal. He executed drawing that were highly striking, simple and with a good dose of curvilinear strokes. The effect of the compressed charcoal attracts "thin and bold sweeping lines". *Uli* motifs and symbols are introduced to actually achieve the poetic lyricism displayed in most of his drawing. (Nnamele, 2016). This is evident in his compressed charcoal drawings, such as *K'anyi Muo Uli Ibo n' Ibo Kwulu* and *Bikozie nu*. The drawings presented in figs 2, 3 and 4 capture the present political, economic and social unrest in Nigeria. The curvilinear movements represent the effects of change of leadership in the country, where everything is turning upside down, inside out, and outside in. Images projected in these drawings represent the masses managing to survive in a confused, hard, and unstable economic situation. On the other hand, *Ibo n'lbo kwulu* attempts to emphasize that if the Ibo, an ethnic group in the south eastern part of Nigeria stands together as one, nobody can penetrate them. Moreover, is begging the entire nation to see peace as the only thing that can save her

from the present unrest. The peace may only come if the Fulani Herdsmen, Boko Haram, kidnapers, Niger Delta Avengers, and our leaders see us as brothers and sisters. If not, many of us will go on exile without committing any crime but to save them as seen in fig.4. While *K' anyi muo uli* (fig. 5) is not actually telling us to learn how to draw *uli* linear expression but to learn how to live together in peace without quarrelling.

## Conclusion

Charcoal drawings have been in existence from the prehistoric period till date. Its medium, charcoal is discovered to be an effective material for drawing and very easy to get. Irrespective of the compressed, vine and powdered charcoal, one-can easily use burnt sticks as a very good charcoal type for drawing. Charcoal drawings have appeared in different forms and styles. The Renaissance artists made extensive use of it and some Romantic, Impressionist and Expressionist artists made excellent attempts in producing charcoal marks.

Charcoal drawing which came to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1981, through the employment of a "Ghanaian artist", Seth Anku, is today a type of drawing that some Nsukka artists are known for all over the country, Chijioke Onuora, whom this style influenced, has taught and also influenced a good number of Nsukka artists because of his constant experimentations and exhibition of charcoal drawings. However, it is very clear that charcoal drawing is a complete art form. Irrespective of the fact that charcoal medium sounds old in contemporary mentality, that material has a lot of creative possibilities. This paper, therefore, has given charcoal drawing the needed attention in art historical studies in Nigeria. This is the beginning and not the end of the studies on charcoal drawing.

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