

# **Stylistic and Semiotic Change in Contemporary Painting and Sculpture in Zimbabwe: Some Perceptions and Perspectives**

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## **Abstract**

*Style is a central construct in art historiography and the general conception of art. What constitutes style has been the subject of debate by connoisseurs, art critics and artists themselves. It is personally conceived and responds in tandem to the zeitgeist and is ever changing. This study sought to interrogate the notion of style and related semiotic change amongst post independence' painters and sculptors in Zimbabwe. The study was inspired by the general interest and rapid developments in the visual arts in the country in recent decades. A qualitative methodology involving interviews of an elite kind, observations and analysis of artifacts was employed, participants drawn from practicing artists, art educators, curators and art students. Data revealed differential conceptions of style, practice and evolutionary trends in both painting and sculpture. Socio-economic and political factors were among the significant factors that influenced themes, style and visual imagery. Since independence styles among Zimbabwean artists have been constantly changing. While style can be variedly inspired, artists need to develop personal styles that are commensurate with local and individual considerations also inspired by the zeitgeist.*

**Keywords:** *Zimbabwe stone sculpture, Contemporary art in Zimbabwe, Delta Gallery, National Gallery of Zimbabwe*

## **1. Introduction**

Interpretation of visual styles has always been of major concern to art scholars. In Zimbabwe the culture of interpreting styles in visual expression is still at its infancy due to cultural and historical factors. Post independence tertiary institutions today seek to redress this situation by providing the necessary theoretical and aesthetic orientations related to style.

In an attempt to develop the visual arts in the country, a number of degree programs were initiated at some universities.<sup>ii</sup> Polytechnics and colleges of education complement these efforts by offering diploma courses in which, painting, sculpture, and stylistic analysis are articulated. These institutions play their varied roles in making students understand visual expression.

While style is as variable as art itself, it is generally conceptualised as morphological structure of artworks identified with a particular cultural group or school. Minor (1994) views style as a complex aesthetic phenomenon in art criticism, which is central in the theory of art. Schapiro's discourse on style is often considered the greatest contribution to the study of art history and art criticism (Schapiro as cited in Preziosi, 1998). According to Schapiro style refers to the formal visual characteristics of a piece of art. He demonstrates how style could be used not only as an identifier of a particular period, but also as a diagnostic tool indicative of the artistic and cultural identity that reflects the economic and social circumstances in addition to artists' cultural assumptions and normative values.

Forms and meanings of style developed overtime from Wincklemann's theory to Wolfflin's discourse following in the footsteps of Vasari in devising a method of distinguishing the development of style over time (Hart, 1982). Debates about how one can be identified with a style have emerged. Diverse views have also emerged on who determines the birth of a style. Similar debates in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries saw the evolvment of a myriad of radical aesthetic and philosophical theories about modern and post

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modern styles of visual expression. This study therefore sought to analyse styles of expression and semiotic representation in contemporary painting and sculpture in Zimbabwe.<sup>1</sup> It aimed at understanding factors that have impacted on contemporary styles (post independence) particularly in sculpture, which has been internationally recognized as a movement.

### ***Conception of Style***

Gombrich in Freeland (2001) expounds that style derives from a Latin term *stilus*, which means a writing instrument. During Classical times it was used to describe and characterise an author's manner of writing. The term slowly came into general usage during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Preziosi (1998) observes that in the eighteenth century, largely through Johann Joachim Winckelmann's biological theory, it was introduced as a term in art history. Winckelmann crystalises the essence of the concept through his writings on Greek style of sculpting. Fernie (1996) correlates Winckelmann's views and Vasari's methods and procedures. Both analysed the technical processes, identifying and defining ideal beauty. The chief exponent of this approach to the study of artworks was Morelli (1816-91) (Fernie, 1996) who devised a systematic means of establishing the authenticity of attributions by training the eye to recognise minute characteristic details of style in a highly concentrated form of scholarship. Lessing (1986) also studied semiotic signs in visual expression. These scholars conclude that style involves the object, its subject matter, quality and feeling. Style can also mean the manner in which something is typical or representative of an epochal historical era (<http://www.rupkatha.com/arthisoryartcriticism>).

Winklemann's biological model also entails that every style has conceptual boundaries in terms of places where it begins and ends. His hierarchy denotes evolvment of style from birth (the early stage), through maturity (the middle or classic phase), a decline (the late) and finally, disappearance. It would be interesting to find out how Zimbabwean art, marked by dramatic political and plural socio-economic events, has evolved since the attainment of independence in 1980.

Hegel and Riegel also articulate the issue of style. According to Hegel, the history of art is governed by universal periodic laws (Fernie, 1996). Styles carry the spirit hallmarks of their time, as a result of the "will to form" *Kunstwollen*, or aesthetic age of the period. Riegl's approach differs from Hegel's chiefly in two ways. Firstly, Riegl is more involved in objects and the distinction between fine art and craft. Secondly, for Hegel each age in human history is a step up the ladder towards the fulfillment of the world spirit. For Riegl no period is more important than the other. For example, the late Roman period, was neither a decline from the peak of antique Classicism nor a step to perfection. It was one age among all the others, which happened to stand as a period of transition between two great ages of human history, the ancient and the modern. Fichner-Rathus' (2001) interpretation of style is similar to that of Gombrich in Freeland (2001) and Minor (1994). Minor (1994) articulates the anthropological, archeological, social and cultural perspectives in style. Style is thus an important tool for analysing experiences and events.

### **Semiotics and Art**

According to Schwedt on <http://www.capemaycountyherald.com/article>, the aesthetic movement of the time influences all the reigning styles of its day. In grappling with issues of style, there are theories

which form the basis of art. These include Plato's sign theory, in addition to theories by Vasari, Wolfflin, Winckelmann, Baudelaire and Tolstoy. These theories are supported by the sign theory or semiotics. Semiotics contributes to the study of stylistic change as much as it does to the study of other forms of language. According to Whannel (2006) semiotics allows us to understand the relationships between signs, what they stand for and the people who must interpret them including the people for whom the signs are designed. This would mean that semiotics entails every sign perceivable by human beings as

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<sup>1</sup> Zimbabwe stone sculpture was initially called Shona sculpture, Shona being the dominant cultural group (constituting over 80% of the population) in the country. This notion was later dismissed since sculpture was practiced by many other ethnic groups within Zimbabwe and some immigrant groups from countries in the region such as Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi and Angola.

having the function of transmitting a message and providing a unifying conceptual framework for understanding modes of communication such as gestures, postures, dress, writing and speech.

Semiotics seeks to uncover the codified meaning(s) in an aesthetic object by examining its connectedness to a collective consciousness. Art historians do not commonly commit to any one particular brand of semiotics but rather construct an amalgamated version, which they incorporate into their repertoire of analytical tools. In an effort to define the functionality of the array of signs, Liess (1986) declares that,

We consult linguists to find out about language, art historians or critics to find out about paintings, and anthropologists to find out how people in different societies signal to each other through gesture, dress or decoration. But if we want to know what all these different things have in common then we need to find someone with a semiotic point of view, a vantage point from which to survey our world.

This connotes rigorous engagement in semiotic analysis than passive absorption of meaning. Liess *et al* (1990) posit that this semiological approach suggests that the meaning of an artwork does not float in buoyance waiting to be internalised by the viewer, but needs to be interrogated by way of attending to how different signs are organised and related. Because meaning is not surface deep one has to make an effort to understand it.

While teleological objects exist in another existential realm, they can only be understood through the mediation of signs. We see only what available sign systems allow us to see. Much the same could be said of texts in other art genres and media. The meanings generated by these signs are multiple and diverse. Semiotics therefore highlights “the infinite richness of interpretation which... signs are open to” (<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem13.html>). Interpretation is the main outcome of the semiotic process. These semiotic changes as a result of differential interpretations given birth to styles, which are individually conceptualised as reflected in Goodman’s expression theory and Tolstoy’s theory of communication (Freeland, 2001).

### ***Research Questions***

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the major styles of expression found among contemporary Zimbabwean painters and sculptors?
2. What factors influence change in their artistic styles?
3. What semiotic change in style is discernible in contemporary art practice?
4. What are the theoretical implications of stylistic change to development of expression among contemporary artists?

## **2. Research Design and Methodology**

The study used a qualitative approach (Bogdan & Bicklen 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Silverman, 2011; Patton, 1990) in which the description of observations is expressed in qualitative terms. It involved data generation techniques of observation, interviews and analysis of artifacts. Participants were drawn from the National Gallery of Zimbabwe (NGZ)<sup>2</sup>, and a privately owned Gallery Delta. Selection of the two galleries was based on the dominance of art exhibitions held at the former since independence and over the last two decades at the latter. Participants were 15 artists, three education officers, four curators and two art directors. These were purposively selected (Patton, 2002). The main data generation approaches used in this study included interviews, observations (Creswell, 2007; Koshy, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), photo elicitation and

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<sup>2</sup> This is the first gallery to be established in Zimbabwe. It was an initiative of McEwen in 1957 and was instrumental in the promotion of stone sculpture. Currently there are two other national galleries and several privately owned galleries all over the country.

document analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Patton, 2002; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Interviews were conducted to establish the relationship between art material and styles. Video footages were made of artists describing their visual styles, forms of expression and working themes. While field notes were taken using pen and paper during the interview processes, video footages were used to capture salient data about artists' practice. Photo elicitation revealed various aspects of visual styles. Visual analysis skills such as art criticism, connoisseurship and semiotic techniques were applied to ensure correct interpretation of the styles. In addition, informal discussion with artists and gallery owners focused on insights into the artistic styles in painting and sculpture.

### 3. Findings

#### *Conceptual Derivatives of Style*

Various responses emerged in the definition of style from the local artists. Two male artists defined style as a philosophical concept, that, "style is our way of thinking." Cited examples were how one begins on a sculpture, the material handling and the methods that reflect style. On the painting genre, they described how one mixes and applies paint. Ten artists described style as the appearance of an artwork, whether it is realistic, abstract or semi-abstract. One refuted such definition arguing that it compartmentalises art and eventually kills creativity, "I do not want my art to be classified. Just know that my art identifies with my culture not Western "isms". The artists expressed that society should only relate with their artworks.

#### *Changes and Evolution of Styles*

Six painters concurred that painting styles consist of painting blocks, heavy outlines and finally vivid patches of colours. On the other hand the seventh painter echoed that she enjoyed working in impasto (thickly applied paints) and building layers of over 45 colours. The canvas or paper is heavily textured resulting in abstract styles. The other seven artists asserted that realism and semi-realism were the driving force on styles of visual expression. They acknowledged the use of multi-media as a way of style recognition. They also believed in availability of local resources, which spur them to create artworks. The single sculptress confirmed that she was inspired by semi-realism as this enhances her gender themes, particularly in metal sculpture.

It emerged that, for some participants, stimulating consciousness occurred by chance and luck. Although talent is an inherent construct, one also needs a platform to start from, "I was lucky to have come across those guys who were doing just what I loved to do in my life. That helped me immensely in the development of my visual style." As reflected in the interviews, creative vision comes through conscious intent to master and transcend prevailing artistic expressions. The process commences with appreciating other artistic expressions and techniques and being inspired to shift from one's individual and usually static paradigmatic approach and try to transcend the domain's collective vision. As one artist echoed,

If you want to be creative, you do not need to keep things to yourself because you will find out at the end of the day, you have done nothing special. You need to see what others are doing and improve on your own piece. When I tried to put into stone those visions and fantasies that boiled in my head as I observed expert artists, I got disappointed that I could not produce like them. Collective vision is inspired by observing other experts in the field, within and beyond one's cultural boundaries.

The above response confirms that one needs to also see other artists' fascinating styles to be inspired to come up with own ideas. This is similar to what one other artist said earlier on: "It is like music when you hear it. When you know you have your own way of doing it, this does not mean that one will see others and copy them. Style can also evolve from interaction with other artists as one artist explained, "So, if you want to be creative, you do not need to keep things to yourself, but constant interaction with other artists will enable one to develop better styles of representation."

### **Cultural Consciousness, Beliefs, Practice and Experience as Determinants of Style**

Participating artists perceived their creative processes metaphorically as talking to stones to release their spirits.<sup>3</sup> Depending on the artist's spirituality, some perceived stone as a reincarnation of ancestral spirits while others simply respected paint and the stone for their aesthetic qualities and potential commercial value. Spiritual reverence reduces the probability of breaking the stone, thereby enhancing successful craftsmanship. Talking to the stone describes the artist's imaginative mode of looking at the stone, scrutinising its features and negotiating possibilities of what to carve. Luckson Gutsa illustrates his approach,

You look at the stone and you can have a silent conversation where you look at the shape of the stone and say, hey this looks like! You then scrutinise the stone further and see if it does not look anything like an animal or whether there is a human being hidden in there. In this communication, it is not really talking to a stone like you have lost your head, but the stone talks to me by its presentation. As artists are unique individuals, it is not surprising that the metaphor talking to stones, probably has different meanings to different artists. However, the end result is the same in terms of producing creative art.

As part of dialoguing with the stone, other artists perceived their creative vision as unwrapping the parcel hidden in a stone. A sculpture titled *Exodus* by Luckson Gutsa, a second-generation artist,<sup>4</sup> confirms the influence of culture on evolution of form. The artist is inspired by cultural symbolism, dream visions and reincarnation of beliefs. For artists who believe in '*spirit in the stone*,' their work is more than art, but a life mission.

Although the artists believed in innate talent, they also expressed that they acquire expertise developed through conscious intent - hard work and practice. In the process of acquiring experience, participants credited trial and error-learning approach, practice, feedback and self-criticism. Therefore feedback refines style, and resilience builds confidence, and expression of opinions and personal philosophical ideas. Those experiences were intriguing stories by female participants who derived inspiration from their reactions to negative experiences of their cultural gender role. Helen Lieros relates how she derives inspiration from courage and determination acquired during her tough childhood experiences. She claims that it took her ten years to establish a palette, synonymous with her style. Her medium of expression is oil on paper and etching as a printmaking method. As a Zimbabwean artist of Greek parentage, she fuses Greek mythology and Zimbabwean cultures in her abstract style. Her work has also evolved from early realistic figure drawings and landscapes to current mysterious, symbolic and sacred worldviews. She has developed a unique style through her working method. There is a strong relationship between medium and style as evidenced by these artists. One can conclude that artistic inspiration is partly influenced by unique life experiences and circumstances including gender roles. Interviews also revealed that artists construct new ideas by reflecting on their past experiences, recycling and reevaluating them.

### ***Morphological and Metaphorical Dimensions of Artworks***

The painting *Africa Apocalypse I* by Helen Lieros is a mixed media on canvas measuring 130cm by 110cm. A general colour scheme includes deep maroon colours; violet, and golden thin line dividing the top lane. It is a purely abstract style in which colours are interwoven to voice an "African Apocalypse." Apocalypse simply means a disclosure of something hidden from the majority of mankind in an era dominated by falsehoods and misconception. One can hardly trace visible brushstrokes or movements except for the squares and rectangular shapes that occupy the centre of the canvas going upwards. This painting celebrates the physicality of paint and excites a tactile sensation in the viewer. The central

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<sup>3</sup> Traditional stone sculpture in Zimbabwe had a spiritual dimension. It was therefore functional and was used at ceremonies. This traditional belief still influences some contemporary artists who are adherents of the traditional culture. However contemporary sculpture is now mostly art for art's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Zimbabwe stone sculpture has been classified under first, second, third and fourth generations starting from McEwen's times in the 1950s. Most contemporary sculptors belong to the third and fourth generations.

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collaged motif suggests a typical granite rock formation with its rough texture quality. The earthiness of the colours reminds us of the geology and mineral wealth deposits beneath the Great Dyke<sup>5</sup>. The African mythology also symbolises dominion and sacred areas rich in deposits of mineral wealth. The golden line may suggest the existence of gold and the red as sweat and blood of the departed heroes and heroines. Blue or purple colour is often regarded as the colour symbolising spirituality and power. Here the spirits seem to reside in the rock below. Hoodman in Carney (1991) identifies style with consistency, features of the symbolic functioning of a work that are characteristic of the author. Lieros' work is in line with Hoodmann's claim of consistency with spiritual and cultural themes, which are inspired by the African continent and her subconscious experiences from the Zimbabwean and Greek cultures. Her other famous works treated in a similar style include *Sacrificial Lamb* and *Christ Untitled*.

The painting *Poor* (1993) by Meque is a semi-abstract oil painting on paper measuring 34cm by 30cm. The painting contains a single male figure in white shirt, blue trousers and a red headgear. The figure is seated with its head buried between the legs and on the thigh is a piece of paper written "POOR" in capital letters. Goodman recognizes elements of style in a work's content, its form, and in the feelings it expresses. His proposal is that the stylistic features of a work make up a subset of the features of what is said, exemplified, or expressed. The effectiveness of Meque's style is in its simplicity and naivety.

The painting *Drawing Nearer* (2010) by Shiridzinomwa is an impressionist style denoting a collection of chairs. A standard red chair occupies the centre of the composition with a lamp shining brightly on it. The canvas is dominated by red, yellow and blue. Several other chairs are scattered and radiate from the middle of the canvas. The sizes and shapes of the chairs are randomly different and in a variety of colours, while the big red centred chair appears to be addressing the confronting chairs. The theme seems to be a socio-economic and political issue. It appears the chairs are metaphorically placed to seek audience with the most attractive centre chair which appears to have two wide open eyes. The black and white eyes seem to be recording the proceedings being deliberated upon.

Metaphorically the painting connotes the agitated mass, which wants to hear if their suggestions were captured in the new constitution, which is long overdue. The impasse seems to be on-going until there was a blackout, or power cut because the masses are tired of empty promises. They are keen to have their grievances addressed once and for all. They have to use a paraffin lamp, which is closer to the boss hence the title, *Drawing Nearer*. The artist was inspired by Vincent Van Gogh and Manet. So one can see a hybrid style which tries to capture the Zimbabwean social and political life inspired by Western masters. Style in works of art, carry the spirit hallmarks of their time, as a result of the *Kunstwollen*. This painter's work carries the spirit hallmark of his time. The big red chair represents authority and the small hard chairs or stools represent the down trodden.

### ***Art Students' Perceptions of Evolving Styles***

Students came up with their own definitions of style emanating from the famous painting styles of Europe. The most popular styles mentioned were the impressionist, realist, expressionist, semi-realistic and abstract representation. Yes, it was embedded in their belief that as aspiring artists one day, one needs to attain international recognition by improving on one's style of painting or sculpturing. Any success in the visual circles comes through a creative process of producing a unique style of working that identifies ones' artworks with the rest of the world.

The students concurred that indeed material culture and education have serious impact on styles of expression. In accordance with Langer's (2005) discourse, critical cultural consciousness may be understood as being mindful of cultural beliefs and value systems. Accordingly, belief systems, whether based on subjectivity or logical factors, are part of the dynamics of inspiration. Western art history was

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<sup>5</sup> This is a mineral rich geological landform running diagonally from the south east to the north east of the country..Besides having huge deposits in chrome, asbestos, platinum etc, It also has rich deposits of stones used in stone sculpture.

another determinant which motivated artistic styles. Students sounded more familiar with Western art than styles of contemporary painting from the local artists. They attributed this to lack of publicity of Zimbabwean art and African art in general. All this calls for more research on our contemporary art.

#### ***Art Curators' Views on Expression***

There were mixed feelings given by the curators. According to, one curator, "... style is a way of expression and is dependent on an artist's mode of painting or sculpting." The other one did not believe in the term style as he said this leads to a dead end, "Artists should just create and continue to represent what is happening in society using their own ways." He acknowledged the existence of abstract and realist styles among Zimbabwean artists as they articulate the various themes that include the rural landscape and township scenes. The issue of style is seen as a restrictive measure to many great works of art.

#### ***Art Educators' Views on Expression***

The three art education officers unanimously agreed that style is the way an artist expresses himself/herself through the various media. It is however, never stagnant as one lecturer echoed, "Styles evolve, but one can borrow from the predecessors and develop it and represent his ideas differently in visual terms." He emphasized the willingness to add to the current styles,

There is no more new style. How can people continue to reinvent the wheel? People have to admit the development of an already existing style, and not anything totally new, unless a new generation wants to revolt and stop using the conventional canvas, paper or chisel and hammer. That we already know. Then, shall we entertain the so-called *new style*?

Education is critical in the development of students' inventive capabilities as it broadens their creative styles. Art education is correctly located, it can help promote the desire for creativity. This was also confirmed by art educators who indicated that when students share new insights as a result of their reflection and practice, it leads to new discoveries. Schon (1997) supports reflective learning when one mulls and refines new ways of teaching in action and on action. In this case students find painting and sculpting methods that lead to unique style of expression. Furthermore, the teachers become more creative in their pedagogical approaches.

## **4. Conclusion**

The research revealed patterns, trends and themes that could change perceptions, styles and art practice in Zimbabwe. The corroborated data revealed that the artists differed in their conception of style. Definitions are dependent on artists' cultural backgrounds, formal art training, and media use. Artists did not like their artworks to be classified according to any Western movement or group, but instead, focus should be on speaking to society without attaching any stylistic names. Multi-media works enhanced by technology were also invading the exhibition space. It was noted that the first decade after independence had fewer blacks doing painting and there were limited tertiary institutions to train the locals in art. The issue of style was more inclined to whites who dominated the painting category because of their constant contacts with Europe where they had formal training. Local artists were more into stone and wood sculpture.

Interviews with art educators and students revealed that style was an important aspect of art. Statements such as "There isn't anything new which has not been done in terms of style" show that it is necessary to psyche up students into knowing the value of creativity in establishing new visual representational styles. The majority of the students and their lecturers were content that culture adds value to development of style. They saw this as a way to achieve new approaches different from the documented "isms" from the West. Also notable was the impact of socio-economic issues as a major source of themes which later feed

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into styles of expression. The value of style is embedded in the culture of its people. There is need to document styles of visual expression from a Zimbabwean perspective.

Style is never static. It is ever changing as it responds to various factors. This is characteristic of contemporary Zimbabwean art that has been influenced by a myriad of factors that include political, economic and individual considerations. Interactions among artists are an important factor in the growth of style. Artists learn from each other as well as explore individual paths and directions. While theoretical models in the study of style have been put forward, these have not been fully embraced in Zimbabwean art practice. Historical factors have played a significant part in this regard. Overall, contemporary painting and sculpture in Zimbabwe demonstrate significant semiotic change amidst art educational reforms in the country.

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