

The Artists in Pandemic, Pandemic in Arts: Artistic Responses to the Ripples of Covid-19 in Nigeria

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Abstract. The battle between the human race and the coronavirus started as an epidemic in Wuhan China, in 2019 by end of January 2020, there had been reports that almost 10,000 cases of coronavirus and more than 200 people had died. Sooner it was declared pandemic, having spread to many countries and eventually all over the world. Dealing with the unforeseen challenges caused by the COVID-19 and related impacts on health, economies, and even national security in the world became a joint responsibility of international governments. Our ways of life became altered through policies aimed to serve as preventive measures. Varying responses ranging from government proactive interventions and individuals augmenting government gestures by following guidelines of staying safe, this paper discusses the import of visual art in demystifying, recognizing, appreciating and visually comprehending how deadly coronavirus is. A total of 32 respondents that form the sampled population, it traces the diverse involvement of artists, industrial arts and artisans in Nigeria that were gainfully engage in producing face masks and safety kits to augment government efforts. It concludes by considering the responses of people on the patronage of locally produced masks for preventing the spread of Covid 19.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Pandemic, face mask, responses, lockdown, visual arts

1. Introduction

Coronavirus (COVID- 19) pandemic took the whole World by surprise and virtually crippled every sector of our lives. All of a sudden every nation begins to battle with a common evil, the developed countries were the most hit as the death toll began to rise, the

new virus throws the whole world into panic. According to World Health Organization (WHO), the Chinese government reported several cases of pneumonia with unfamiliar etiology leading to initiated outbreak from the Human sea food market in Wuhan city of China. Within fifty days, its spread into more than one hundred countries was rapid through droplets and human contacts. The fear of COVID-19 began to take an emotional toll on people. Cases of infections as well as death tolls were increasing daily. These prompted international governments to take increased precautions in order to limit the spread of coronavirus. International land boarders and airports were shut while individual governments declared lockdown to restrict movements.

These began to have effects on businesses and economic activities, they were forced to shut down and institutions closed. Festivals, ceremonies, religious programs, conferences, football matches and competitions, both local and international examinations were postponed indefinitely and so on. According to Dickson (2020), there is not a business that has not felt the pandemic impact, with calamitous results for millions of money. He further noted that the art world has been far from immune because the industry even though has become synonymous with hyper-connectedness with global mobility, is now like the rest of us at standstill. As a result of this global health crisis and the uncertainties resulting from it, WHO through Federal government took the following several measures – creation of isolation centers to take care of victims, prevent the spread of Corona virus through test and quarantine of contacted persons, lockdown, social distancing order, washing of hands and wearing of nose masks. After about two to three months of admixture of total and

partial lockdowns, according to Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), to protect yourselves and loved ones from COVID-19, cloth face masks must be worn in combination with:

- Avoiding large gatherings
- Physical distancing by maintaining a distance of 2 metres between oneself and others
- Regular hand washing with soap under running water .
- Frequent cleaning of surfaces with soap and water or disinfectants and
- Wearing of nose/face mask while in public

After the relaxation of lockdown the Federal Government released the above guidelines in order to ensure containment of COVID-19 and ensure the prosecution of any citizen not wearing face mask in public places. This study discusses the involvement of art, artists, artistes consumers of the creative masks toward the containment of Covid 19.

Sweet or bitter narratives as it may appear in the midst of this perplexities, the great lesson learnt is that Coronavirus has changed the way everyone in the world is working and living their daily lives. Generally everyone all over the world responded in one way or the other to this COVID-19. “The fear of CORONA becomes the beginning of lockdown, social-distance, washing of hands .” For a moment our ways of life were altered, this paper therefore focuses on Visual Artists’ response to COVID-19 Pandemic and its implications on Lockdown.

2. Research Methods

Descriptive research design is used to obtain information concerning the current artistic creations

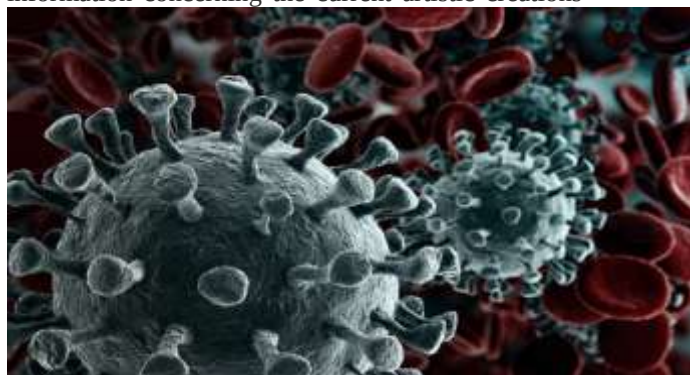


Fig. 1

Source: <https://theconversation.com>

Explaining reasons Weaving claims that:

“firstly, it fits the science that colour can’t be attributed where light doesn’t reach. Secondly, it renders images of the virus less threatening: without their red spikes or green bodies they seem less like hostile invaders from a

and consumption as response of people to the phenomena of Covid 19. The respondents were sampled randomly, questionnaires and responses were done through online discussions. Total number of 32 respondents that form the sampled population includes 7 Artists engaging COVID 19 as a subject matter of aesthetics, awareness, social change and humour, 5 artists, designers and artisans who produce face masks, 11 consumers or users of face masks for protection against infection and 9 independent respondents that were interviewed.

The under listed questions are begging for answers to clarify the unhindered responses of Visual artists during this COVID-19.

- Where is Visual arts in COVID-19?
- How do artists respond to COVID- 19
- What roles do Visual Arts play during the pandemic?

3. The Visual Arts in COVID – 19 Image

The experts have argued that the colour of the image as shown below does not represent the actual colour of the virus. It is stated that because the concept of colour and its perception is dependent on the presence of light and light is not an effective tool for seeing viruses except only under electron microscope. Weaving (2020) notes that :

one of the complicating challenges for virus visualisation is the emergence of so-called “colour” images from electron microscopes. Colour can’t be attributed where light doesn’t reach, it’s an off-white sphere with yellow protein particles attached and red spikes emerging from the surface, creating the distinctive “corona” or crown.”

science fiction fantasy. And the idea of greyness also fits the scientific notion that viruses are suspended somewhere between the dead and the living.

From the discussion above, if seeing the graphic image of the virus consistently as an inert grey particle could help reduce community fear as claimed above would it also reduce the spread and fierceness of its attack?. Can the deadly COVID19 be less deadly by the use of less aggressive hues? A poison is a poison anywhere any time, the packaging notwithstanding.

Corona virus and Colour: The Visual Implications

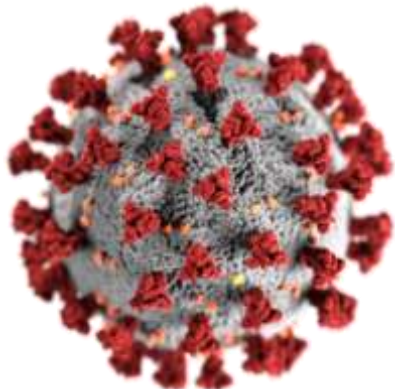


Fig. 2

Source: <https://theconversation.com>

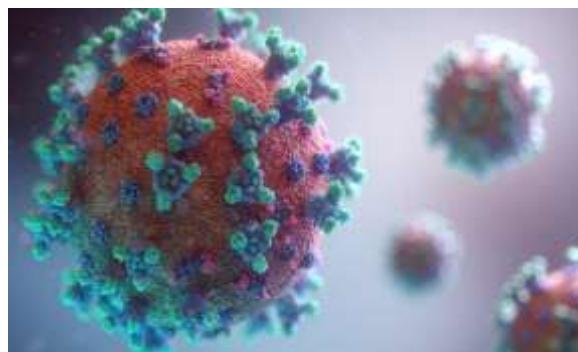


Fig. 3

An artist's impression of the pandemic virus.

Fusion Medical Animation/Unsplash, CC BY

On the choice of colours, Weaving observes that “Biologist David Goodsell takes artistic interpretation a step further, using watercolour painting to depict viruses at the cellular level. Using a methodology that was originally described as “painting,” in Fig.2, scientists are able to add colour to structures in the grey-scale world of imaging to help distinguish the details of cellular micro-architecture. Interestingly he concludes saying “all of these colour choices are creative decisions”.

It is on the conclusion of David Goosell that I premise my discourse. How would a blind man conceive colour?, how would people capture the explanations about an invisible phenomenon, its dreadful, mutations and deadly postures especially as it pertains human health? . Pablo Picasso says “Everything you can imagine is real” and “Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth! Therefore if Corona virus exists but not visible to naked eyes, conversely in the world of art, creatively extemporizing the non visual phenomenon would help us realize the hidden truth. The visual presentation of the image of Corona virus in grey on the premise that fits the scientific notion is acceptable, and further introduction of colour although questionable by experts, cannot be brushed aside, considering the existential therapy of colours to man. Explaining the importance of colour to man, Zammitto (2005) groups meanings attached to colour into three backgrounds:

“in innate”- because for several people colours are very important signals in order to survive adapt and categorize so it would be possible that information from subcortical structures triggers associations between colours and moods as a trace of our evolution by regulating arousal when we see colours.

“a personal”- the second background comes from each of our personal experiences. “a cultural background”- the third background implicates culture. We are born and bred in cultures that are full of meaning. As we grow up, we learn those meanings through socialization.

From Zammitto’s submission Colors affect different people in different ways, it is glaring that innate meanings of colour and cultural backgrounds to meanings of colour cumulate to personal experience, Kotler in Satyendra Singh (2006) posits that colors could help create attention, convey messages and so on. Therefore the choice of vibrantly red colour to project or represent corona virus should not be seen as absurdities but an effort to suggest to visually cultured humanity of the inherent danger in the virus. According to Olesen (2020) it is believed to be an auspicious color for warding off evil, represents vitality, celebration and fertility in traditional Chinese color symbolism. Could this have suggested why red colour is a choice for the creative decision for the virus’ image that is acclaimed to have originated from China? Although this is not confirmed but

universally, red has a wide and diverse range of usages and meanings among the Chinese, Indians, Africans and so on.. Aside, the general usage and derivative meanings for red colour such as luck, business, weddings, Love, passion, excitement, appetite, health, courage and majesty, Zammitto concludes that red also suggests hot, danger, blood, weapons, aggressiveness, power, fire, salvation as it was in the case of deliverance of Israelites from Egypt through painting of lintels with blood and Biblical harlot (Rahab) through hanging of Scarlet (brilliant red colour). In Oluwole, Ahmad and Ossen (2013), the Yoruba people in West Africa also have a lot of rich symbolism they associate with colour. "Pupa (red)" has the psychological dimension of a dangerous personality who possesses a trait of wickedness and lacks mercy". Olesen's assertion that red in some climes wards off evil is in Yoruba's practice of protecting their properties using "aso pupa" red piece of cloth to scare intruders from entering into their farms, touch any belonging it is hung upon. The modern usage of red colour as label, hung on haulage or entrance is a warning of "danger". Therefore it not also strange to see the image of corona virus in red as opposed to the gray colour under electron microscope. According to Mukami, (2020) "In the Somali majority of people do not know how to read or write, so they need art to understand how dangerous this problem is". This shows that average individuals need more than verbal or textual messages hence the need for creating genres of art to raise awareness about the disease. Conclusively, the spread and "the lack of medical solution/vaccines for the cure of the deadly virus justifies the artist creative decision for using adapted colour understood by an average individual to code the virus as the most dangerous.

4. General Response to COVID- 19

Generally all aspects of Arts: music, dance, creative writing, short drama, "ewi" (poetry) and visual arts respond in the fight against coronavirus. All aspects of arts are deployed to fight the pandemic, for instance many songs were composed to address best wishes, courage and hope to the sick and healthy folks, instructions on what to do and how to prevent contacting the virus. Skits and Short drama were also used to sensitize people all over the social media, the artistes humorously address prevention of the virus. Musicians like Chief Ebenezer Obey, Sulaiman Adegbenro and many others release songs on awareness and precautions against Covid 19 pandemic. Music performances were staged at some isolation centers in Lagos to keep the spirit of the isolated and quarantine up, such performances

focused on their wellness, faith hope, togetherness. Creative writing and well-crafted messages were sent to people to communicate best wishes and assurances, positive and motivational words to empathize with their loved ones. Caregivers, volunteers and health workers were not left out of appreciations, commendations and prayers, all courtesy of Arts In Medicine Fellowship.

Beyond doubt arts remain the active voice and the faithful messengers during the fight against the deadly virus. Arts have been major avenues of recording and documenting events of the present for future use, the outbreak of coronavirus is also not an exception. According to Stcherbatcheff (2020), Artists around the world are adapting to shutdowns by swapping physical performance spaces for virtual ones. Conferences, workshops, meetings, Museum and exhibitions are carried out virtually. This is confirmed by Omatsola in Nwakunor, Awa and Sowole (2020) that "Bonhams auction in London, held on March 18 actually put the viewing by appointments assisted with virtual options to test. The results of the auction showed that more than 150 buyers registered for online bidding/phone for the Bonhams sale. Sotheby's, also, from March 27 to 31 recorded 46 per cent increase in number of virtual bidding during its sales".

He further said "In the months ahead leading into the last quarter of the year galleries, auction houses and art fair events in Lagos may take the virtual options and limited congregating windows too. On the contrary Anthony Yusuf, a dance director, claims, "the pandemic has really affected his practice as a choreographer. "We have had to call off all theatrical performances that we had rehearsed for. All efforts put into creating content were in vain". (Nwakunor, Awa and Sowole 2020)

Although gallery owners, art promoters and a handful of others laments the new tide artists must swim along yet there were many commonalities in how Visual artists were responding to the shifting professional landscape around them in this pandemic time. Visual Arts do not create problems rather it seeks to solve problems. The need for urgent prevention of the hydra-headed monster (COVID 19) opens more ways for creative engagements. The operation and intervention of visual arts during this lockdown address, recognition and awareness, mobilization, empathy, product production, such as protective wears, nose masks, gloves, informative digital animations which were either fine, applied or industrial arts. Even though art industry is not totally immune to the adverse effects expected from the lockdown, Sanwo in Nwakunor, Awa and Sowole

(2020) emphasizes that “artists, generally and naturally operate even better on ‘lockdown’ mode. He said most artists naturally stay indoors for days to work” Visual artists could work in any place their materials are, more so, could produce or work effectively with little or no collaboration from colleagues. Picasso affirms that “the artists are indestructible; even in a prison, or in a concentration camp, I would be almighty in my own world of art, even if I had to paint my pictures with my wet tongue on the dusty floor of my cell”. This is unlike many other forms of arts, for instance dance, theatre, music and professional drummers who must call for rehearsal and theatrical performances, could not be achieved because of social distancing as noted by Yusuf. This restriction however does not limit some artistes who engage in short drama and skits.

5. Preventing Corona Virus

Preventing corona virus becomes a task for everyone hence the need to adhere to preventive measures put in place by WHO through Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). On 6 April, 2020, WHO published an Interim guidance on the use of masks in the context of COVID-19. One of the many ways of prevention is to wear a protective nose mask with approved specifications. The consumers’ reactions made the common medical nose mask to become scarce and the price rose from N50.00 to N200, it is the scarcity that prompted WHO to direct governments of different Countries, Regions and States that:

“In the interim, decision makers may be moving ahead with advising the use of non-medical masks. Where this is the case, the following features related to nonmedical masks should be taken into consideration:

- Numbers of layers of fabric/tissue
- Breathability of material used
- Water repellence/hydrophobic qualities
- Shape of mask
- Fit of mask”

Source: World Health Organization

This challenge was immediately embraced by creative minds to engage in local production and use of double layered fabrics of 95% cotton. The producers are basically in two major parts, designated designers/artists and individualized artisans who are tailors/ home or self-made. It is worthy to note that the domain of producing nose masks or face masks is an aspect of Visual Arts referred to as “Applied Art”. This brought creative varieties in the masks productions for governments, corporate bodies, institutions, associations and individuals. The reasons adduced to the varieties are:

- the crave for uniqueness as corporate body leading to inserting logo through heart transfer process (Fig. 11-13)
- Crave for fashion leading to aesthetically using of different colour shades of masks to match their attires (Fig. 25), many also considered it as part of dressing as such the look for designer nose mask.
- Some also wear it to satirize the pandemic and the lockdown era (fig. 9-10)

The compulsion of usage, socio-cultural mindset and need to be gainfully engaged especially in the lockdown were impetus that propel the aesthetic ingenuity of applied artists and artisans, a kind of healthy competition ensued which brought out uncommon achievements. Although not all the producers meet the specifications of WHO, some were made of inferior materials, poor finishing or both. Artists respond in varying forms during this pandemic, even though unnoticed, their interventions in the fight against covid 19 is divided into three parts: Re-presenting, interpreting or imitating Covid 19 in different forms such as 3D using metal and 2D for visual understanding and comprehension, rendering it in colour for awareness, sensitization and education -about the pandemic. Artists and Artisans’ response through designing and production of masks especially when wearing of face mask becomes a must and imported ones are scarce. Personal Protective Equipment like aprons, gowns or coveralls are all products of applied arts produced industrially. The general populace also respond through consumption (usage) of the masks.

Representation of COVID 19 in 3 Dimensional Graphics



Fig. 4
Source: Authors collection
Artist: Dotun Popoola
Medium: Metal (sculpture)
Date: 2020



Fig. 5
Source: Authors collection
Artist: Uwa Usen
Medium: Metal (sculpture)
Date: 2020

Two Dimensional Graphic expressions of face/ nose mask



Fig. 6
Source: Online
Artist: unknown
Medium: colour print (graphics)
Date: 2020

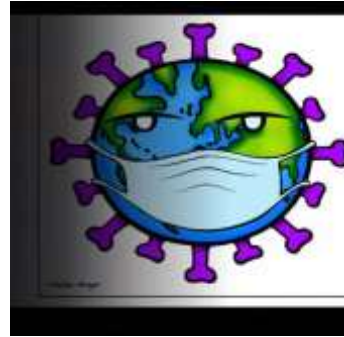


Fig. 7

Fig. 6 is an expression of the need to protect Africa through the use of face mask, hence the mask was a shape of Africa.

Expression of face masks in Paint and 3D



Fig. 8
Artist: Unknown



Fig. 9
Artist: John Adenle
Title: "KORO BE CAREFUL"
Medium: Plastic



Fig. 10
Artist: Dotun Popoola
Medium: Metal Scrap
Title: Unknown
Medium: Oil Colour

Figures 4- 5 explain sculptors concept of giving a form to the subject COVID 19, expressing topical issues through various forms of art which has been a viable way of documenting history . Fig. 6-7 present 2D or graphic ways of interpreting Covid 19 and best practice needed to put up to protect Africa while fig 8-10 are responses of visual artists with different media to produce face masks.

6. Textile Artists/ Designers Responses



Fig. 11

Artist: Oluseyi Oyenukan
Title: Customized Face Mask
Medium: Scuba, elastic, Bias
Size: S/M/L/XL/XXL
Colour: Varying colours
Date: 2020

Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Artist: Oluseyi Oyenukan
Title: Artisanal products
Medium: Scuba, elastic, Bias
Size: S/M/L/XL/XXL
Colour: Varying colours
Date: 2020



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

Artist: Unknown

Title: Artisanal products

Medium: Scuba, elastic, Bias

Size: varying sizes

Date: 2020

Fig 11 -16 are produced in Lagos, Nigeria by the Secretary; Society of Nigerian Artists, Lagos State Chapter. According to the producer artist Oyenukan, Scuba is a double knit fabric, normally polyester materials which have been mixed with Lycra or Spandex. It is also called Neoprene material or Chloroprene rubber. It has a very smooth texture and a fine gauge thread, Scuba come in different colours. It is worthy of note that beneficiaries of these artisanal products range from individual consumers to corporate and government agencies, who wanted their logo customized in synthetic plastex and sublimation printing on the nose mask. (fig. 11-13, 15 and 16). Some of these corporate bodies are: Society of Nigerian Artists, Swat leadership Academy, News in Africa, Affluent Field Properties, Vinglaju Spare Part, Vehicle Inspection Service VIS, Inter Images Nigeria limited, Churches and other individuals.



Fig. 18

Medium: socks (cotton)

Artist: Idowu Olatunji (TASUED)



Fig. 19

Medium: tie and dye (cotton)

Artist: Idowu Olatunji (TASUED)



Fig. 20

Produced by: Amos Esther FPI Ilaro

Medium: Ankara



Fig. 21

Produced by: Expressionale Abeokuta

Medium: "Aso Oke"

Figures 18-20 show efforts of other artists and artisans at producing face masks.

Consumption of Face Masks



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31



Fig. 32

Fig. 20 -32 represent consumers' responses to using local masks.

The description of materials used for producing majority of masks above seem to conform with WHO's prescription of ideal face mask on numbers of layers of fabric/tissue and breathability of material used. The materials like ankara, aso-oke are cotton and double pleated while scuba is factory doubled fabric.

7. Interview and Dialogue with Respondents

Nine respondents give their views on this prevalent situation in Abeokuta, Nigeria especially in their neighbourhood.

The responses are structured into five as listed below:

Attitude: From the responses gathered, some believed that Covid-19 is for the rich, while some believed that it is a political propaganda.

Patronage of Local face mask: Almost all respondents affirm that more than 97% of people wear locally produced facemasks than medical ones. According to them, the reasons adduced to this is that it is within the reach of the common man.

Compliance level: It was observed that the level of general compliance with the use of nose masks in my area is still very low. Some out of fear of being harassed by law enforcement agents, some because of enforcement from employers.

Economic reasons: People prefer available, durable, cheaper materials that can be washed and reused. They could not afford disposable ones which to them, are a waste of money.

Negative Bias: Some are sceptical about the genuineness of the intention of government claiming Covid 19 is a means of generating revenue from the international communities. Others assumed that since casualties were not published then it is a scam, so they do not even believe COVID19 exists. Another reason raised is that some of the masks are not convenient for people because of one's inability to breath properly. According to a respondent, "In fact, I was almost suffocating in Osiele market not quite long ago while putting on mask. My life was spared by God's divine mercy, since then I have avoided the use of face mask.

8. Conclusion

The global encounter of a new pandemic in the dawn of year 2020 brings automatic redirection to human activities. It is like nature is pressing a button to reset the socio-cultural and socio-political space. The health implications of COVID-19 infection becomes dreadful, it also took emotional toll on individuals and families, financial toll on businesses, corporate,

local and states governments. In this perplexities, international government through World Health Organization directs intermittently on treatments, precautions and measures such as tests, quarantine isolation, lockdown, social distance, regular washing of hands and wearing of nose masks. After a lot of sensitization, persuasion and enforcement by government, there was positive response on adherence to maintaining guidelines of preventing Covid 19 infection.

This study found out that visual arts has influence on Covid 19 image, since the virus cannot be seen with naked eyes except under electron microscope, the representations of Covid 19 in colours has aided peoples' visual comprehension of the shape and how dangerous the virus is. Artists represent the virus image in different media, i. e. colours, digital, metal and plastics were used by artists to express corona virus as a theme or subject for discourse. It also found out that artists and artisans respond in other forms during this pandemic, the response was timely when it became clear that imported face masks were scarce and costly since March 2020. Immediately after WHO announced the use of non-medical masks through local production, a lot of creative ingenuity were observed in the designs of the local productions, which became more embraced by individuals and corporate bodies. The responses show that almost all people prefer local masks for economic reasons, some have varieties which were changed within 3 hours intervals, while others preferred masks that could be washed and reused. Even though some locally made ones are below standard, yet many meet the specifications in the WHO's guidelines.

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