Materiality, Metaphor, and the Exegeses of Vernacular Aesthetics in Contemporary African Painting

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Abstract

Taking a cursory look at materiality in contemporary African painting, this article argues that materials in painting do not function only as technical supports or embellishments but as carriers of memory, metaphor, and cultural argument. Focusing primarily on contemporary Nigerian practice and using works produced by Ukwa, Job Nworie, and Ozioma Onuzulike as case studies, the paper demonstrates how shells, woven fibres, feathers, leaves, stones, camwood, charcoal, kernel and other unconventional media extend pictorial meaning beyond iconographic description. The essay proposes that materiality in African painting should be read not merely as formal experimentation but as a mode of cultural narration in which the ontology of the chosen matter participates in signification. To make that claim, the paper brings together iconographic analysis, materiality studies, and the discourse of vernacular aesthetics associated with postcolonial Nigerian art. It shows that the meaning of a painting often emerges through the interaction between image, material support, cultural memory, and the social life of things. Rather than treating unconventional media as decorative novelty or as evidence of an imported conceptualism, the article situates material experimentation within local histories of indigenous knowledge, Nsukka-influenced Natural Synthesis, and wider debates on African modernity. In doing so, it clarifies how contemporary African painters mobilise matter as metaphor: the physical characteristics, cultural biographies, and symbolic resonances of materials become part of the work's argumentative structure. The article concludes that materiality is central to contemporary African painting because it makes visible a layered relation between object-hood, metaphoric embodiment, vernacular aesthetics, and cultural critiquing.

Keywords: materiality; metaphor; contemporary African painting; vernacular aesthetics; and natural synthesis.

Introduction

The question of how paintings make meaning remains central to art-historical interpretation, yet the issue becomes especially complex when the formal image is inseparable from the material choices through which it is built. In many strands of contemporary African art, and particularly in contemporary Nigerian painting, materials do more than facilitate representation. They contribute actively to the work's semantic force. Shells, leaves, fibres, feathers, stones, jute bags, cloth, earth pigments, found objects, and other noncanonical substances often enter the painted field not as incidental embellishments but as signifying matter. Their physical properties, cultural associations, and histories of use participate in the production of meaning.

This essay argues that materiality in contemporary African painting should be understood as a critical component of visual representation. The material support, the added matter on the surface, the texture of the work, and the cultural embodiments of those materials all mediate the painting's content. The paper, therefore, moves away from approaches that privilege image over substance or that reduce unconventional media to a postmodern stylistic flourish. Instead, it advances the claim that materiality can function as a vernacular semiotic system: matter itself may carry metaphorical, historical, and philosophical weight.

The essay proceeds in six stages. First, it clarifies the concept of materiality and distinguishes it from medium in a narrow technical sense. Second, it outlines a methodological framework that combines iconographic interpretation, material culture studies, and the discourse of vernacular aesthetics in African art. Third, it situates contemporary Nigerian painting within broader debates on postcolonial modernism, the Nsukka school, and natural synthesis. Fourth, it offers close readings of selected paintings namedly: *In Defence*, *Custodian of Culture, The Figure Head*, and *Armour* –to show how materials become metaphoric structures. Fifth, it considers how materiality allows painting to function simultaneously as cultural memory and social critique. The conclusion reflects on why material thinking is indispensable for the study of contemporary African painting.

At stake is not only the interpretation of particular artworks, but also a methodological correction. Much writing on African art has historically oscillated between two limiting positions: either an ethnographic reduction that overexplains objects as ritual indexes, or a formalist reduction that isolates line, colour, and composition from the lived meanings of matter. A more adequate reading must hold together image and imagery, form and matter, object and idea. In the context of African painting, materials are never neutral. They enter the work already charged by social use, ecological familiarity, oral memory, and cultural valuation. To read them properly is therefore to move closer to the paintings' own logic of signification.

Materiality Beyond Medium: From Technical Support to Signifying Matter

The concept of materiality has acquired renewed importance in modern and contemporary art history because it draws attention to the way artworks are made, encountered, and understood as things in the world. Message and Frederick argue that object-based research must move beyond the isolated study of things as inert material residues and instead examine the social life of objects, their mediations, and the identities they help produce (Message and Frederick 2011). Their point is especially useful for the study of painting that exceeds the boundaries of oil, acrylic, canvas, and stretcher. Once a painter incorporates fibres, shells, leaves, or other nontraditional substances into the pictorial field, the work asks to be read not only as an image but also as an organised assemblage of culturally legible matter.

Materiality, in this sense, differs from medium understood merely as the technical means of art production. Medium identifies a channel—oil on canvas, watercolour on paper, mixed media on board. Materiality asks what the substances themselves do within the meaning of the work. Peter de Bolla's emphasis on the materiality of aesthetic experience is helpful here because it insists that the artwork's physical constitution participates in the very conditions of aesthetic apprehension (de Bolla 2002). Matter is not merely what the artwork is made from; it is part of what the artwork argues.

The distinction becomes even sharper in the context of contemporary art, where debates about conceptualism once seemed to displace material concerns. Lippard

and Chandler's well-known formulation of the "dematerialization" of art did not eliminate materiality from artistic practice so much as transform the terms of the discussion. Even highly conceptual work remains mediated through objects, documents, surfaces, actions, residues, and infrastructures (Lippard and Chandler 1968). In the African context, Enwezor's intervention is decisive: he shows that any account of conceptualism that reserves reflective or idea-driven art for the West reproduces a narrow and historically distorted view of modernity (Enwezor 1999). The opposition between materially dense art and conceptually rich art is therefore false. Matter and idea are co-constitutive.

This co-constitution is particularly visible in contemporary painting that mobilises culturally saturated materials. A shell is not only hard, curved, and tactile. It may suggest protection, enclosure, exchange, ancestry, femininity, or prestige depending on context. A woven fibre ground is not only a substitute for canvas. It may invoke domestic labour, indigenous technologies, agrarian economies, mats as social objects, or the everyday architecture of a local lifeworld. Charcoal may index blackness, burning, ruin, soil, or memory. Camwood may evoke bodily adornment, ritual preparation, healing, beauty, or earth-bound presence. The cultural valence of matter is therefore inseparable from its material form.

In paintings that deploy such materials, meaning emerges across several levels at once. First, the viewer responds to texture, density, colour, and compositional arrangement. Second, the viewer may recognise the material as an object from lived experience. Third, the viewer may bring to that recognition a network of associations, sayings, stories, ritual uses, or social values. Finally, the painting recontextualises those associations within a new visual argument. Materiality becomes the hinge between representation and interpretation.

Such a framework also complicates any universal definition of art grounded in beauty, skilled imitation, or medium purity. Danto's argument that art after Warhol could no longer be distinguished by appearance alone remains pertinent because it opens critical space for works whose artistic status depends on embodied meaning, context, and discourse rather than on inherited formal criteria (Danto 1997). Yet in the present context, the lesson is not that "anything goes." Rather, it is that the legitimacy of unconventional material use in painting depends

on the intelligibility of its conceptual and cultural work. The question is not whether shells or leaves belong in painting by canonical rule. The question is what they make possible in the painting's signifying economy.

Materiality in contemporary African painting should therefore be approached as an active semiotic field. It structures viewers' attention, thickens interpretation, and joins tactile presence to historical memory. The material object in the painting is not simply there to be seen; it is there to be read.

Iconography, Context, and Vernacular Aesthetics

A paper on materiality requires a method capable of accounting for both visible form and latent significance. Classical art history offers one indispensable starting point in iconography and iconology. Panofsky's account of iconographical interpretation remains useful because it insists that description alone is insufficient; motifs and forms must be related to broader cultural meanings and symbolic structures (Panofsky 1939). Yet a purely Panofskian method becomes inadequate when the meaning-bearing element is not only the depicted image but also the actual material embedded within the work. In such cases, iconography must be supplemented by attention to material presence.

The reorganised argument of this article therefore proceeds through three interrelated lenses. The first is iconographic: what images, motifs, titles, and compositional structures are presented? The second is contextual: what social, cultural, and historical conditions give those forms resonance? The third is material-hermeneutic: what meanings arise from the cultural biography of the substances used in the work? This third lens is crucial because the materials are not merely visible supports but semantic agents.

The draft repeatedly insists that the interpretation of African art cannot stop at the image and that the unseen or suggestive essence of the work must be approached through the relation between the visible and the implied. That insight is worth preserving because it articulates, in a different language, an important methodological principle: meaning in art often resides in the tension between what is shown and what is culturally activated but not exhaustively represented. The material surface becomes one of the principal sites where that tension is organised.

This is where vernacular aesthetics becomes a useful interpretive category. By vernacular aesthetics, I mean the recourse to local visual idioms, indigenous conceptual vocabularies, culturally specific materials, oral registers, and social codes that shape the making and reception of art. The vernacular, in this context, does not signal the merely local or the premodern. Rather, it names a critical resource through which contemporary artists negotiate modernity from within their own epistemic and sensory worlds. It is a way of thinking through painting with culturally familiar matter and historically grounded sign systems.

The idea aligns with the wider discourse of natural synthesis in postcolonial Nigerian art. As Okeke-Agulu has shown, Nigerian modernism was not simply derivative of European modernism; it emerged through deliberate acts of selection, transformation, and negotiation in relation to indigenous artistic resources and colonial institutions (Okeke-Agulu 2015). In the Nsukka context, uli and later nsibidi became more than sources of motifs. They provided formal and conceptual frameworks for rethinking modern artistic practice. To invoke vernacular aesthetics within this lineage is therefore not to retreat into nostalgia. It is to insist that contemporary artistic experimentation can be grounded in indigenous philosophies of form and meaning.

A methodological implication follows. When a contemporary African painter uses a material such as woven fibre, shell, feather, or sacred leaf, analysis should not assume either that the material is a direct quotation of tradition or that it is emptied of tradition by entry into the gallery. The work often inhabits a middle zone: the material retains enough of its prior life to activate cultural memory, but it is reorganised within a contemporary artistic structure that generates new meaning. This double movement—retention and transformation—defines the interpretive challenge.

Vernacular aesthetics also clarifies why the language of metaphor is so prominent in the present article. Metaphor here does not mean a merely poetic comparison imposed from outside the work. It refers to a mode by which cultural attributes of things are transferred into pictorial argument. Hardness, resilience, fragility, sanctity, vigilance, fertility, enclosure, swiftness, or patience may be culturally attached to plants, animals, stones, shells, or fibres. When such materials are

embedded in painting, those attributes can be mobilised to speak about persons, communities, states, or historical conditions. The work becomes a visual sentence composed not only of images but of storied matter. This framework also guards against two recurring errors in the draft. The first is overgeneralization: not every use of unconventional material is automatically profound. The second is cultural essentialism: meanings attached to materials are not fixed essences shared identically by all viewers. Materials must be interpreted within specific artistic, regional, and discursive contexts. The task of scholarship is therefore to produce a disciplined reading that remains attentive to both local significance and contemporary artistic transformation.

Contemporary Nigerian Painting and the Question of African Modernity

The importance of materiality in contemporary African painting cannot be separated from the historical development of modern art in Nigeria. Any attempt to discuss present-day experimentation with material must recognize that Nigerian modernism developed through argument –between colonial pedagogy and self-definition, imported academism and indigenous resources, studio discipline and cultural memory. Okeke-Agulu's account of postcolonial modernism demonstrates that the move toward indigenous visual languages in Nigeria was not a retreat from modernity but one of the ways modernity itself was negotiated (Okeke-Agulu 2015). This point remains essential because African modernism has often been misread either as derivative or as ethnographic residue.

Within that history, the Nsukka school has been especially influential for the present discussion. The adaptation of uli and related systems into contemporary visual practice enabled artists to rethink line, space, rhythm, narrative compression, and symbolic economy. The Nsukka proposition was never that tradition should be copied intact. Rather, its more compelling promise lay in translation: indigenous formal resources could become tools for contemporary invention. This logic extends readily to materiality. If line, symbol, and motif can be translated into modern painting, so too can matter itself become a site of translation.

The draft under revision repeatedly returns to this issue through references to "nku di na mba," availability, and the environment as the first resource base of art.

Stripped of rhetorical repetition, the argument is valuable. Artists work with what their worlds make available, but availability is never merely pragmatic. Materials from the environment carry embedded histories of labour, value, utility, and belief. Their selection may therefore respond at once to economy, ecology, and symbolism. In a contemporary Nigerian context—where imported art materials can be expensive, unevenly distributed, or culturally distant—the use of local substances may express both resourcefulness and philosophical intent.

This should not be reduced to an economics of substitution. The use of local or unconventional materials is not important simply because it replaces costly studio supplies. It matters because those materials retain a social life that can be reactivated in painting. A mat-like fibre support evokes uses and habits different from a factory canvas; shells evoke histories different from pigment alone. Materiality therefore, becomes one of the places where African modernity announces itself as situated rather than abstract.

Enwezor's account of African conceptualism is especially useful here. He argues that conceptual procedures and idea-centered art are not the exclusive property of Euro-American art history; African artistic practices have long involved the interplay of object, speech, symbol, and invisible accompaniment (Enwezor 1999). His intervention allows us to read materially inventive Nigerian painting not as belated imitation of Western conceptualism but as a locally grounded form of reflective practice. The work and the idea are not separate systems. Their interdependence is intensified when the chosen materials are themselves culturally intelligible.

This perspective helps explain why contemporary Nigerian painters frequently turn to culturally resonant matter even when addressing modern crises such as insecurity, political failure, urban fragmentation, memory, or identity. The artwork need not abandon tradition to speak about the present. On the contrary, the present is often made legible through the reactivation of traditional semantic resources under contemporary conditions. A shell may become a comment on national insecurity; a sacred tree may become a figure for custodianship or endurance; feathers may evoke authority, flexibility, or ceremonial dignity within a portrait of a present-day subject. Materiality, then, is neither antiquarian nor

merely formal. It is a living bridge between cultural memory and current experience.

To recognise this bridge is also to correct the lingering tendency to interpret African material density as evidence of ritual exoticism rather than conceptual sophistication. When contemporary African painting uses matter aggressively, it is often doing intellectual work: challenging inherited definitions of painting, reasserting the value of local knowledge, and producing visual thought through tactile means. Such work belongs squarely within the discourse of modern and contemporary art, even as it critiques the narrow geographies by which that discourse has often been policed.

Materiality as Metaphor in Selected Paintings

This study's strongest contribution lies in its close engagement with a body of paintings here –notably *In Defense.* Although the text may have moved unevenly between description, biography, theory, and polemic, it consistently returns to one central insight: in these works, materials are chosen because their physical and cultural attributes can be transferred into figurative or social meaning. The analysis below reorganizes that insight through selected examples. A general point should be established before turning to individual works. In the paintings discussed here, materials are not external to subject matter. They are part of the subject's articulation. A portrait made with feathers, shells, fibre, or leaves does not merely depict authority, vulnerability, or memory; it organizes those values through substances already associated with them. Materiality becomes metaphor precisely because the matter used in the work is allowed to retain some recognizable relation to the world from which it comes.

This procedure is especially significant in painting because painting has historically been associated with illusion –an art of making surfaces stand in for something else. When actual shells, fibres, or leaves enter the painted plane, the work does not abandon representation; rather, it thickens representation by introducing matter that both is itself and signifies beyond itself. The painting oscillates between depiction and presentation. That oscillation is what gives the works much of their conceptual charge.

The titles named —*In Defence*, *Custodian of Culture, The Figure Head,* and *Armour* deserve attention. Titles in such works do not merely label; they direct the viewer toward conceptual interpretation. Where the material surface may initially appear tactile, ornamental, or formally experimental, the title frequently sharpens the field of inference. It invites the viewer to read materials allegorically and socially. The result is a mode of contemporary painting in which title, image, and matter cooperate to produce meaning. The subsections that follow do not claim to exhaust the interpretive possibilities of these paintings. They demonstrate instead how a material-hermeneutic method can clarify the relationship between matter, metaphor, and cultural meaning.

In Defence: Shell, Fibre, and the Politics of Protection



Plate 1, Ukwa Job, In Defense Mixed Media, 131 X 34cm (2021)

Among the works discussed here, In Defence is perhaps the clearest illustration of materiality as metaphor. The work is described as a mixed-media painting

measuring 131 by 160 centimeters and built on a woven fibre support rather than a standard canvas. Four circular formations structure the composition, while shells and cowries outline or reinforce the circumscribed forms. The tonal range is further activated by natural colourants such as camwood and charcoal.

The formal organization matters immediately. The woven support establishes a tactile and culturally coded ground. Unlike the neutral expectation of stretched canvas, woven fibre introduces a domestic and artisanal texture into the work before any image is fully read. It signals a relation to handwork, habitation, local production, and ordinary social life. That ground already shifts the terms of painting from detached image toward embodied surface. The circular formations intensify the issue of enclosure. The title In Defence directs interpretation toward protection, perimeter, and guarded space. The shells become crucial in this regard. At the most literal level, shells are protective structures: they are habitations and armour for living organisms. Their hardness, curvature, and association with enclosure make them apt material analogues for defensive systems. Yet the painting extends this biological attribute into a wider social argument. The shell becomes a visual metaphor for the structures—desired, failed, improvised, or fragile—through which persons and communities seek safety.

Read in a contemporary Nigerian context, the work can be understood as a meditation on insecurity and the scarcity of reliable protection in public life. The painting's defensive circles do not simply illustrate danger; they dramatise the need for security as a condition under strain. Because the shells are actual shells rather than illusionistically painted shells, the metaphor acquires unusual force. Protection is not only represented; it is materially staged through substances whose everyday ontology is protective housing. The shells also introduce another layer of meaning. Shells and cowries carry long cultural biographies in many African societies. They have functioned historically as adornment, currency, status markers, and ritual objects. Even when a given work does not explicitly thematise these functions, the materials remain semantically overdetermined. In Defence harnesses that excess productively. The shells are not reducible to one meaning, but their multiplicity deepens the painting's reflection on value, survival, and social order.

The use of scale further matters. The description in the draft notes differentiation between smaller shells toward the middle and larger shells toward the lower region. This structuring produces visual movement and also modulates the sense of weight. Larger shells toward the bottom anchor the composition physically, making the work appear grounded and fortified. Smaller shells toward the center intensify concentration. Formal arrangement thus reinforces the conceptual claim: protection is imagined as both boundary and center, both external guard and internal coherence. Natural pigments such as camwood and charcoal contribute to the semantic field rather than merely to colouristic effect. Camwood suggests earth, body, ritual application, and indigenous cosmetic or ceremonial uses; charcoal suggests residue, ash, combustion, and darkened trace. Their integration into the woven and shell-based composition links the protective metaphor to the registers of life, vulnerability, and memory. The painting's material economy thereby resists the separation of aesthetics from lived history.

What emerges is a work in which materiality does not simply adorn the support but produces the support of thought. The painting's claim about defence would be substantially weakened if rendered only as an image in conventional paint. It is persuasive precisely because the chosen matter already knows something about shelter, hardness, fragility, and survival. In that sense, In Defence exemplifies how contemporary African painting can transform the ontology of materials into a language of social critique.

Portraiture as Material Thought



Plate 2, Ukwa Job, *Custodian of Culture*, Mixed-Media 2005

If *In Defence* turns to shells and woven fibre to think through security, other works named in this paper use materiality to deepen portraiture and cultural embodiment. *Custodian of Culture, The Figure Head,* and *Armour* are especially revealing because they move beyond resemblance to ask how a person or office can be figured through matter. Here materiality functions not only symbolically but logically: substances are selected for the qualities they culturally imply. The draft repeatedly suggests that feathers, leaves, stones, shells, and other hard or delicate materials can be used to project power, flexibility, authority, sanctity, patience, or dignity. Such a claim becomes more coherent when read through portraiture. Classical portraiture often privileges likeness, posture, costume, and

expression as indices of identity. Materially experimental portraiture complicates that tradition by asking what sort of substance best thinks the subject. The work thereby shifts from visual resemblance to ontological analogy.

In *Custodian of Culture*, the title itself proposes stewardship rather than mere personhood. A custodian holds, preserves, transmits, and protects. The most compelling interpretation of the work therefore lies in its likely mobilization of culturally laden materials not as ethnographic illustration but as evidence of inherited responsibility. If leaves such as ogirisi or revered vegetal forms are present, they need not be read as decorative naturalism. They can be understood as signs of continuity, reverence, sacred obligation, or the endurance of ancestral knowledge within contemporary time. Materiality, in this case, becomes an archive carried on the surface of the painting.

The Figure Head intensifies the question of public identity. A figurehead is not simply an individual; it is an emblematic bearer of collective visibility. In such a work, hard materials may function as analogues of stature and endurance, while softer materials may complicate the portrait with suggestions of vulnerability or ceremonial refinement. The conceptual achievement of this kind of portraiture lies in refusing the reduction of identity to physiognomy. The sitter or emblematic figure is constructed through materials whose cultural semantics amplify the person's social role.

Armour extends this logic most explicitly. Even without full visual documentation, the title and the draft's commentary make clear that the work centers on the idea of protection, resilience, and embodied defense. The significance of Amour lies in its refusal to present amour merely as military equipment. Through material assemblage the work broadens amour into a metaphor for psychic, cultural, and communal survival.



Plate 3, Ozioma Onuzulike *Royal Amour,* Ceramic Kernel shells, (2021)

If feathers, shells, plant forms, or dense patterning are used, they turn the idea of armour away from industrial metal and toward a culturally specific sensorium of defence. This is important because it localizes the concept without provincializing it. Armour becomes a way of thinking how communities improvise protection under unstable political conditions. These works also demonstrate how contemporary Nigerian painting can expand portraiture beyond the conventions of oil likeness. The subject is not only shown; the subject is materially constituted. The painting asks viewers to infer character from texture, density, and substance.

A person associated with authority may be figured through the gravity of stone-like or shell-like hardness. A person associated with flexibility or ceremonial charisma may be inflected through feathered lightness or rhythmic vegetal pattern. The portrait is thus built from metaphorical correspondences between material qualities and human attributes.

This materially inflected portraiture also helps counter the charge that experimentation with unconventional media is merely formal novelty. In these works, material choice is disciplined by conceptual necessity. The substances matter because they say something that paint alone, or paint in a conventional relation to mimesis, would struggle to say. They render portraiture not less painterly but more discursive—more capable of holding social narrative, cultural philosophy, and political feeling in a single surface.

Materiality, Cultural Memory, and Social Critique

One of the most important argument here, is to show that materiality in contemporary African painting is not exhausted by symbolism at the level of individual works. It also performs broader cultural and political significance. Materials activate memory, anchor identity, and enable social critique. First, materials function as carriers of cultural memory. Because many of the substances discussed in the draft circulate in everyday life, ritual practice, local economies, agricultural works, or indigenous technologies, their appearance in painting recalls domains of experience that exceed the gallery. A woven fibre support may remember mat-making, seating, shelter, market exchange, and domestic space. A leaf may recall healing practices, shrine environments, ecological belonging, or proverbial speech. A shell may remember currency, ornament, divination, trade, and bodily adornment. When such matter enters painting, memory is not simply illustrated; it is materially reactivated.

Second, materiality helps contemporary African artists negotiate the relation between continuity and transformation. The use of culturally recognizable matter does not entail a naïve return to a fixed past. Instead, it stages the past within a present problem-space. The works under discussion do not present vernacular materials as museum relics. They translate them into active components of

contemporary image-making. This translation is itself a critical gesture, because it insists that indigenous materials and forms remain capable of intellectual renewal.

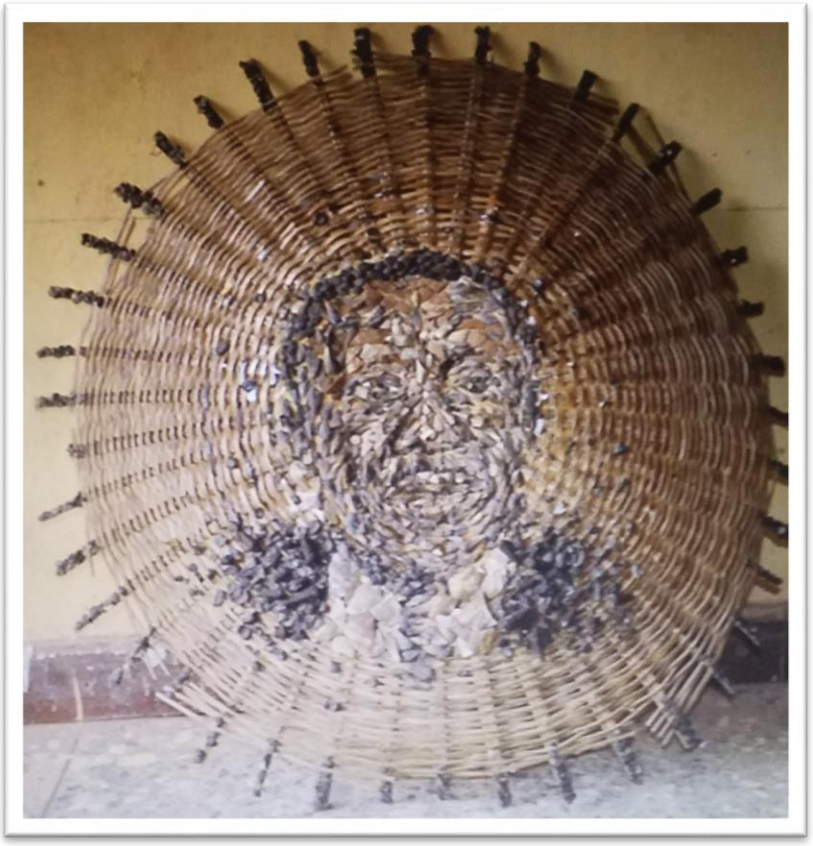


Plate 4, Ukwa Job, Figure Head, Mixed-Media 34 X 34 (2021)

Third, materiality sharpens social critique. The draft repeatedly alludes to insecurity, failed governance, social anxiety, and the struggle to preserve cultural value under modern pressure. These issues become more compelling when rendered through matter whose significance is already lived. In Defence, for example, shells become more than formal units; they become a commentary on protection in a precarious polity. In portraits and culture-themed works, revered plants, fibres, and other materials become arguments about continuity, custodianship, and the weight of tradition in a changing society.

The critical force of such works also lies in their challenge to inherited hierarchies of medium. By placing so-called ordinary or nonart materials at the center of high artistic production, contemporary painters question the assumptions through which artistic value has often been policed. The gesture is not merely anti-academic. It is epistemic. It asks whose materials count as serious, whose surfaces count as refined, and whose modes of making count as thought. Materiality thus becomes one of the ways contemporary African painting contests the authority of narrow aesthetic norms.

This is where the concept of metaphor becomes especially productive. Metaphor allows a material to carry meaning without collapsing into a single fixed code. A shell may suggest defence, but it may also suggest exchange, adornment, sea-crossing, or ancestral value. A sacred leaf may suggest continuity, but it may also suggest healing, ritual charge, or ecological precarity. Contemporary painting thrives on this semantic plurality. The artist does not necessarily aim to stabilize one closed message; rather, the work creates a field of managed associations through which viewers can think.

At the same time, disciplined scholarship must avoid the temptation to romanticize all local materials as automatically resistant or authentic. Materiality matters because it is historically and socially active, not because it is inherently pure. Contemporary African painting is often hybrid, urban, institutionally mediated, and globally conversant. Its use of vernacular materials does not cancel those conditions; it refracts them. What matters is the way artists orchestrate matter to produce culturally legible but critically open forms.

From this perspective, materiality can be seen as one of the strongest interfaces between painting and public thought in contemporary Africa. It allows artists to speak through the ordinary, to reactivate communal knowledge without reducing it to folklore, and to embed critique in the very fabric of the work. Matter becomes method. Substance becomes argument. Surface becomes a site where cultural memory and political urgency are made visible together.

Conclusion

This reorganized article has argued that materiality is indispensable to the interpretation of contemporary African painting because matter itself participates in signification. In the works discussed here, materials are not passive supports or decorative supplements. They function as metaphoric agents, cultural archives, and critical tools. Through shells, woven fibres, leaves, feathers, natural pigments, and other unconventional media, contemporary painters generate meanings that exceed iconographic description while remaining grounded in lived social worlds.

The essay began by distinguishing materiality from medium in a narrow technical sense and by insisting that the social life of materials must form part of art-historical interpretation. It then proposed a methodological framework that combines iconography, context, and vernacular aesthetics, allowing the analyst to move between what the image depicts and what the embedded matter culturally activates. Situating the discussion within Nigerian postcolonial modernism and the Nsukka-inflected discourse of natural synthesis made it possible to understand material experimentation not as marginal novelty but as a serious mode of contemporary artistic thought.

Close readings of works here –especially *In Defence,* Custodian of Culture, *The Figure Head, and Armour* –show how material choices can mediate through protection, authority, inheritance, social vulnerability, and the workings of cultural preservation. In these paintings, the ontology of the chosen substance matters. Shells carry the logic of enclosure and survival; woven fibres invoke habitation and local labor; leaves and feathers introduce culturally specific associations of sanctity, dignity, flexibility, and continuity. Meaning therefore emerges not only from what is pictured but from the relationship between image and actual matter.

The larger significance of this argument lies in its methodological and historiographic implications. A reading practice that ignores materiality risks flattening African painting into either formal description or ethnographic cliché. By contrast, attention to materiality shows how contemporary African artists transform culturally resonant things into vehicles of modern reflection. Such works neither abandon tradition nor submit to it unchanged. They reactivate

inherited semantic resources within contemporary conditions of artistic experimentation, political critique, and postcolonial self-definition.

Materiality, then, should be understood as a mode of thought in painting. It is one of the means by which contemporary African artists make visible the relation between object and idea, past and present, local knowledge and global discourse. To study these paintings seriously is to recognize that their materials do not merely occupy the surface of the work. They carry its arguments.

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