



World Scientific News

An International Scientific Journal

WSN 220 (2026) 64-82

EISSN 2392-2192

A Study of Lemi Ghariokwu's Paintings

Mathew Tobiloba Adegbite and Gabriel Adebayo Maradesa*

Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Faculty of Environmental Sciences,
Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho, Oyo State, Nigeria

Emails: adegbitemathew4@gmail.com

*Corresponding author: G. A. Maradesa; maradesagabriel@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.65770/OVOD4907>

ABSTRACT

Lemi Abiodun Ghariokwu is one of the most prominent and distinctive visual artists in contemporary Nigerian art, widely recognized for his politically charged, culturally assertive, and technically eclectic paintings and album cover illustrations. Despite his significant contribution to Nigerian and African visual culture over five decades, scholarly documentation of his work remains sparse. This study examines twelve selected paintings by Ghariokwu, analyzing them thematically and stylistically to document his artistic philosophy, technique, and contribution to contemporary Nigerian art. The study employed a qualitative approach, combining primary data gathered through oral interviews and studio visits with secondary data from libraries, exhibition catalogues, and internet sources. The selected works are classified under socio-political commentary, Pan-African iconicity, cultural identity, and liberation themes. The findings reveal that Ghariokwu's paintings are characterized by vigorous expressionist illustration, vibrant colour symbolism, and a consistent Pan-Africanist ideological orientation. His work serves both aesthetic and didactic functions, bridging music and visual art through album cover design and communicating social critique to broad audiences. The study concludes that Ghariokwu represents an essential voice in the documentation of African cultural identity and resistance, and that systematic scholarly attention to his work is urgently needed.

Keywords: Lemi Ghariokwu, Nigerian painting, Pan-Africanism, contemporary art, illustration

1. INTRODUCTION

Painting as a creative practice has accompanied human civilization across its entire history, from cave walls and Gothic stained glass to the canvases of the Renaissance and the diverse media of contemporary art. In the Western Renaissance tradition, painting emphasized beauty of composition, figure drawing, and the use of vibrant colour, with masters such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo producing works that remain defining landmarks of world art history. Successive movements mannerism, impressionism, expressionism, fauvism, and cubism each extended the boundaries of the painted form, with artists such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso drawing explicitly on African artistic traditions in formulating some of the most influential innovations of twentieth-century Western art (Nwafor, 2019). What is less commonly emphasized is that this debt to African art was rarely acknowledged in the colonial era, and that contemporary African artists have had to negotiate both the influence of Western modernity and the imperative to assert and preserve indigenous cultural values within their practice.

In Africa, painting and visual art have always performed vital communicative and archival functions. Before the widespread adoption of written language, art served as a primary means of recording historical events, transmitting cultural knowledge, and expressing cosmological and religious worldviews (Parrinder, 1967). Tinga Tinga mural paintings in East Africa, the Nok terracotta traditions of Nigeria, the Benin bronzes, and the Ife terracotta works all testify to the depth and sophistication of African artistic production across centuries (National Commission of Museum, 2009). Agbaje-Williams (1996) argued that art heritage represents the eyes, mouth, and sensory organs of our forebears, a repository of information that communities can revisit across time. The preservation of this heritage is therefore not merely a cultural concern but an act of historical documentation.

Nigerian contemporary art emerged from a complex encounter between indigenous visual traditions and colonial modernity. Lt. Chief Aina Onabolu (1882–1963), the pioneer of modern Nigerian painting, trained in Europe and returned to champion naturalistic portraiture as the highest expression of artistic achievement, successfully integrating art into the Nigerian school curriculum in 1923 (Nwafor, 2019). Kenneth Murray, who arrived in 1952, took the opposite position, encouraging artists to draw on indigenous visual traditions rather than importing European techniques. The tension between these two orientations has structured Nigerian contemporary art ever since. Artists such as Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Bruce Onabrakpeya sought synthesis, while others including Dele Jegede, Kolade Oshinowo, and Abiodun Olaku developed practices informed by classical modernism. A third group, including El Anatsui, Yinka Shonibare, and Sokari Douglas-Camp, broke entirely with established conventions to produce post-modern work that engages global audiences while speaking to specifically African experiences (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

Nigerian painters have recorded historical events, cultural ceremonies, and social realities in work ranging from Onabolu's portraits of Lagos elites to Akinola Lasekan's heroic representations of historical figures such as Moremi of Ile-Ife. The painter, as Grosser (1964) observed, has always known how to do two serious things: to add to the world's riches, and to teach people how to see. In Nigeria, this dual function has been enacted with particular force by artists who have used their work to comment on the political crises, social inequalities, and cultural dislocations that have marked Nigerian life since independence.

It is within this history that the work of Lemi Abiodun Ghariokwu must be situated. Born in Lagos in 1955, Ghariokwu is a self-taught artist who developed an immediately recognizable visual language combining illustration, portraiture, caricature, and expressionism across media including poster color, acrylic, oil, charcoal, and ink. He is most widely known for the 26 album covers he designed for Afrobeat legend Fela Anikulapo Kuti, work that brought music and visual art into a uniquely integrated relationship and earned him recognition in *The Observer Music Magazine*, UK, as the "King of Covers" (2004). His painting *Anoda Sistem* (2002) is held in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, and twenty of his artworks were included in *Area 2* (Phaidon Press, 2008), a global survey of 100 influential graphic artists. Despite this considerable record of achievement and international recognition, Ghariokwu's work has received little systematic scholarly attention in the academic literature on Nigerian art.

An illustrator is an artist who specializes in enhancing writing or elucidating concepts through visual representation corresponding to the content of associated text or ideas. Ghariokwu is pre-eminently an illustrator in this sense, but one whose images carry autonomous political and philosophical weight beyond any text they accompany. His work draws its themes and energy from Pan-African ideology, socio-political critique, and a commitment to promoting African cultural values and liberation from what he terms mental slavery. The study is further justified because Ghariokwu is still alive and actively practising, making it possible to gather first-hand information before such access is lost. This study therefore aims to analyze and document twelve selected paintings by Lemi Ghariokwu, to classify his works thematically and stylistically, and to assess his contribution to contemporary Nigerian art and the promotion of African cultural values.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Study Area

This study focuses on the work and practice of Lemi Abiodun Ghariokwu, a Lagos-based Nigerian artist. Ghariokwu was born on 26 December 1955 in Agege, Lagos State, though he is originally from Agbor, Delta State. He grew up in the Igbobi and Fadeyi areas of Lagos and has spent his entire professional life in the city, which has served as both the physical and ideological environment for his artistic practice. His studio in Lagos constituted the primary field site for this study, and the study's thematic focus on socio-political Nigerian realities means that Lagos as a city is integral to understanding the subject matter of his paintings. Primary data collection was conducted through a studio visit and oral interview with the artist, providing direct access to his perspectives on his own work, artistic philosophy, and the circumstances of individual paintings.

2.2. Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design informed by art historical and ethnographic methods. Qualitative methodology was appropriate for this inquiry because the central objective to analyze, classify, and document the stylistic and thematic dimensions of an artist's practice requires interpretive engagement with visual objects and oral testimony rather than quantitative measurement. The research design combined primary fieldwork with a systematic review of secondary literature on contemporary Nigerian art, Nigerian painters, and the specific contexts of Ghariokwu's work. This combination allowed the study to situate the artist's practice within a broader scholarly framework while grounding its specific claims in direct observation and testimony. The approach is consistent with methodologies used in related studies of individual African artists and their contributions to contemporary art practice (Okoye, 2014; Ogundele, 2000).

2.3. Types and Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary data were employed in this study. Primary data were gathered through oral interview and personal observation at the artist's studio in Lagos. The interview was conducted using a recording device to ensure accurate transcription, and photographs of the artworks were taken to constitute a pictorial record for analysis. The artist's oral responses provided direct information on his biography, artistic philosophy, working methods, thematic concerns, and the specific circumstances and intentions behind individual paintings. Secondary data were drawn from multiple sources, including library resources, exhibition catalogues, the artist's own notes and records, online sources, and published interviews with and articles about Ghariokwu in Nigerian and international print and digital media. Additional secondary literature on contemporary Nigerian art, Nigerian painting history, and the functions of African art more broadly was sourced from academic journals, books, and university library resources.

2.4. Methodology

A total of twelve artworks were selected using purposive sampling to ensure coverage of the major themes, media, and time periods represented in Ghariokwu's practice, from his earliest Fela album covers of the 1970s to his more recent large-format paintings of the 2010s. Each selected painting was subjected to descriptive and analytical treatment organized around four parameters: medium and material, style, thematic content, and colour symbolism. Style analysis drew on established art historical categories illustration, expressionism, portraiture, impressionism, and cityscape to classify the works formally. Thematic analysis organized the works into clusters: socio-political commentary, Pan-African iconicity, cultural identity, and liberation. Colour symbolism was analyzed with reference both to pan-African and Rastafarian colour traditions and to the artist's own stated intentions as expressed in the interview. The oral testimony gathered from Ghariokwu was analyzed within the framework of verbal art, treating his accounts of his own practice as culturally significant texts that illuminate the ideology and intentionality behind his visual production.

3. RESULTS

The fieldwork and documentary research generated detailed data on twelve paintings representing the major thematic and stylistic dimensions of Ghariokwu's practice. These works span more than four decades, from Ikoyi Blindness (1976) and Sorrow Tears and Blood (1978) to Brain Drain and Brain Gain (2019), and demonstrate the consistency of his ideological orientation across significant shifts in medium, commission, and technical approach. The results are presented below, beginning with a biographical account of the artist that contextualizes his artistic formation, followed by a classification table summarizing the selected works, and concluding with stylistic and thematic analyses of each painting.

3.1. Biography and Artistic Formation of Lemi Ghariokwu

Lemi Abiodun Ghariokwu was born Emmanuel Sunday on 26 December 1955 in Agege, Lagos, from a family with roots in Agbor, Delta State. He grew up in Igbobi and Fadeyi with his parents and siblings, and spent his long school vacations in Ajegunle. His father intended him to become a mechanical engineer, and he attended Yaba College of Technology Secondary School, where he studied technical and science subjects. His formal academic journey ended at secondary school, but education in the broader sense did not. He read extensively and equipped himself constantly with knowledge, developing his artistic skills independently. He is therefore an autodidact self-taught who learned from people around him, from exhibitions, from nature, and from instinct. He is married with four children: Asilem Eweka, Tamana Ajasa, Omotosho, and Odafin-Nevo Shekinah.

Ghariokwu's artistic practice involves a variety of styles, often using vibrant colours and individuated typefaces of his own design. His work has been described as rebellious, comical, political, and at times erotic, but above all he is recognized as a genius in pictorial narration, realism, and iconicity. He met Fela Anikulapo Kuti in 1974 through journalist Babatunde Harrison. Fela was immediately impressed and gave him total creative freedom, a relationship grounded in their shared Pan-Africanist ideology. Ghariokwu designed 26 of Fela's album covers, working by listening to the musical lyrics and translating his response into visual illustration. He subsequently designed covers for Osita Osadebe, James Iroha, Bob Marley, Kris Okotie, Lucky Dube, Miriam Makeba, and over a hundred other musicians globally. In the early 1980s, he served as the consulting album cover designer for Polygram Records in Nigeria for eleven years. His painting *Anoda Sistem* (2002) is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. In 2008, twenty of his artworks were published in *Area 2* (Phaidon Press), a book showcasing one hundred emerging and influential graphic artists worldwide.

His intellectual formation was shaped by the ideas of Fela Kuti, Peter Tosh, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Kwame Nkrumah, and Steve Biko. As a Pan-Africanist, he uses his art to encourage Africans to take pride in their cultural heritage, resist mental slavery, and imagine a continent defined by creativity, dignity, and self-determination. He has organized artist talks and online interviews through which his art, life, and ideology have been shared widely, particularly with young people.

Table 1. Summary of Selected Paintings by Lemi Ghariokwu Analyzed in This Study.

Fig.	Title	Medium	Style	Year	Theme
1	Sorrow Tears and Blood	Pencil, Ink, Pen, Poster color	Illustration	1978	Socio-political
2	Ikoyi Blindness	Oil Paint	Illustration	1976	Socio-political
3	Lagos City	Poster Color	Cityscape	2002	Cultural/Urban
4	Nelson Mandela	Acrylic on Aludi Bond	Portraiture	2018	Iconicity/Pan-African
5	Chinua Achebe	Acrylic on Canvas	Portraiture	2018	Iconicity/Pan-African
6	Bob Marley	Acrylic on Canvas	Portraiture	2018	Iconicity/Pan-African
7	Basket Mouth	Acrylic	Expressionism	2011	Cultural/Political
8	J.J.D	Poster Color, Ink and Pen	Illustration	1977	Socio-political
9	E-MIND-CIPATION	Acrylic on Canvas	Illustration	2009	Pan-African/Liberation
10	Renaissance	Poster Color and Ink	Expressionism	2004	Pan-African/Identity

11	Brain Drain	Acrylic and Pen	Impressionism	2019	Socio-political
12	Brain Gain	Acrylic and Pen	Impressionism	2019	Socio-political

3.2. Stylistic and Thematic Analysis of Selected Paintings

Figure 1. Sorrow Tears and Blood (1978)

This illustration was created as the album cover for Fela Anikulapo Kuti's 1977 album of the same name. The work is executed in mixed media pencil drawing for the portrait of Fela, and poster color, ink, and pen for the caricature elements. It depicts police and army brutality through a composition in which figures are scattered, their livelihoods destroyed, some near death. The moon is shown shedding tears, the background bathed in a sunny warmth that is ironically undercut by the red of blood across the foreground. The painting communicates the helplessness of ordinary people in the face of institutional violence and presents the audience with a scene of confusion and terror. The artist uses his pictorial skills to render the true intent of Fela's song: that the state has made its violence a regular trademark, leaving behind sorrow, tears, and blood as its insignia. The work demonstrates Ghariokwu's ability to make an album cover function as autonomous political art, capable of communicating its message to viewers who have never heard the music.



Figure 1. Sorrow Tears and Blood (1978). Medium: Pencil, Ink, Pen, Poster color. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu.
Source: Instagram

Figure 2. Ikoyi Blindness (1976)

This oil painting is one of Ghariokwu's earliest documented works and already demonstrates the mature clarity of his satirical vision. The work illustrates the class divide between the affluent Ikoyi district of Lagos and poorer areas such as Mushin and Shomolu. A suited figure identified as a lawyer by professional markers is shown blindfolded, carrying a spanner in his breast pocket, and walking directly away from a signpost reading 'No Road Shallow Ahead'. The irony is precise and damning: the blindfolded leader cannot see the environment he presumes to govern, rendering his authority an absurdity. The blue suit and tie, markers of educated professional status, become signs of self-deception rather than competence. The painting anticipates what would become central to Ghariokwu's practice: the use of illustration to expose the structural contradictions of Nigerian governance and the disconnection of elites from the lived realities of the majority.



Figure 2. Ikoyi Blindness (1976). Medium: Oil Paint. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram.

Figure 3. Lagos City (2002)

This large cityscape painting was produced for a published book titled *Lagos: A City at Work*, and represents a major departure from the album cover format into a more panoramic, documentary mode of painting. Executed in poster color, the work depicts the full social and sensory landscape of Lagos: traffic congestion, commercial buses (danfo and molue), motorcycle riders, children hawking on the street, Eyo Festival masquerades in white costumes, scenes of people fighting, drinking, engaging in commerce, and experiencing both joy and squalor simultaneously. Ekwemesi (2002) observed that the city is an entity with a character and a soul of its own; Ghariokwu's painting captures precisely this sense of a city alive with competing energies. The work demonstrates his capacity for compositional complexity and his ability to sustain visual interest across a large-format, densely populated surface.



Figure 3. Lagos City (2002). Medium: Poster Color. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram

Figure 4. Nelson Mandela (2018)

This acrylic painting on Aludi bond (a form of aluminum board) is part of the artist's Iconicity series, in which he creates portraits of Pan-African heroes as an explicit counter to the dominance of Western fictional heroes in the imagination of African children. The painting of Mandela, the anti-apartheid revolutionary and first democratically elected President of South Africa, features a strong white light on the subject's face, suggesting radiance and hope. The red background is used ambivalently: red in African national flags symbolizes the sacrifices of independence struggles, but red also connotes love, passion, strength, and courage. The white at the right edge of the composition introduces peace. The smile on Mandela's face is the dominant emotional register, communicating the triumph of perseverance over injustice and offering the viewer both an image of historical documentation and a source of affective inspiration.

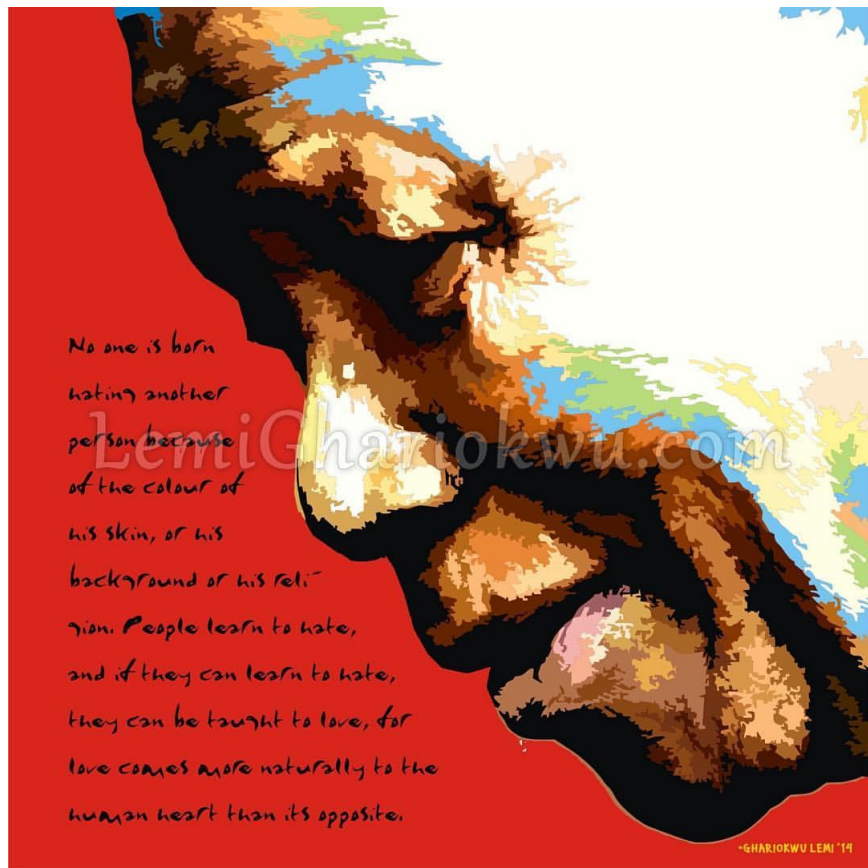


Figure 4. Nelson Mandela (2018). Medium: Acrylic on Aludi Bond. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram

Figure 5. Chinua Achebe (2018)

This acrylic portrait on canvas depicts Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist widely regarded as the dominant figure of modern African literature. Ghariokwu employs a rich, multi-layered chromatic scheme: yellow in the background symbolizes wealth, fertility, beauty, and precious life; red represents the blood that unites people of African ancestry and that was shed in liberation struggles; black affirms the existence and identity of a people as a nation; green symbolizes the abundant natural wealth of Africa; orange suggests struggle and the fight for liberation; and purple connotes royalty, wisdom, dignity, and independence. The figure of Achebe is rendered in deep contemplation, as if carrying the weight of the stories he has told and those still to be told. The painting positions Achebe not merely as a literary figure but as a cultural institution, a Pan-African icon whose work embodied precisely the values that Ghariokwu seeks to assert through his own art.



Figure 5. Chinua Achebe (2018). Medium: Acrylic on Canvas. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram

Figure 6. Bob Marley (2018)

The third painting in the Iconicity series selected for this study depicts Jamaican reggae musician and Rastafarian icon Bob Marley. The chromatic scheme is grounded in the colours of the Ethiopian flag red, green, and yellow which the Rastafarian movement adopted, connecting the African diaspora to an idealized Ethiopian homeland. Red represents the blood spilled in defense of Ethiopia and the sacrifice of African forebears; yellow signifies peace, harmony, and Ethiopia's bright future; green symbolizes hope, the fertility of the land, and its richness. The subject's dreadlocks are rendered with particular care, representing Rastafarian doctrine the affirmation of natural living and African identity in explicit opposition to Western norms. The expression of inner joy and radiance on Marley's face aligns with the broader Iconicity project: to present African and African-descended figures as sources of genuine strength, joy, and cultural authority for contemporary viewers.



Figure 6. Bob Marley (2018). Medium: Acrylic on Canvas. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram.

Figure 7. Basket Mouth (2011)

This acrylic work is painted in the shape of a wall clock, depicting Fela Anikulapo Kuti known for his outspoken pronouncements, with his mouth rendered in the shape of a basket. A microphone is integrated into the composition, connecting the visual symbol of an open, perpetually speaking mouth to the medium through which Fela's words reached his audiences. The round format echoes both the clock face and the vinyl record, reflecting Ghariokwu's sustained preoccupation with the relationship between visual and musical form. The work serves a dual aesthetic and functional purpose as both art object and wall clock. Yellow and blue are used to produce a beautiful green effect, demonstrating his attention to the optical properties of colour interaction. The subject, Fela's mouth, the instrument of political speech situates it within the same ideological terrain as his explicitly political paintings.



Figure 7. Basket Mouth (2011). Medium: Acrylic. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram.

Figure 8. J.J.D (1977)

J.J.D. Johnny Just Drop is an album cover illustration for Fela's 1977 album, which lampoons Nigerian returnees from Europe and America who bring back cultural inferiority complexes about their own heritage. The illustration depicts a suited-up 'been-to', dressed like a cartoon British toff, parachuting from a plane into a street in Lagos, to the bemusement of passers-by. Since the advent of colonialism in Africa, the education system left Black people with an inferior perception of their own culture (Nwafor, 2019), and J.J.D. is Ghariokwu's visual argument against this internalization. The parachute descent is a precise visual metaphor: Johnny has been expelled from the sky of Western privilege back into the African soil he has been trained to disdain. The surrounding figures of different African cultures are shown in expectation, a composition that suggests both the comedy of Johnny's delusion and the seriousness of what is at stake when Africans return carrying borrowed worldviews rather than useful skills or cultural affirmation.

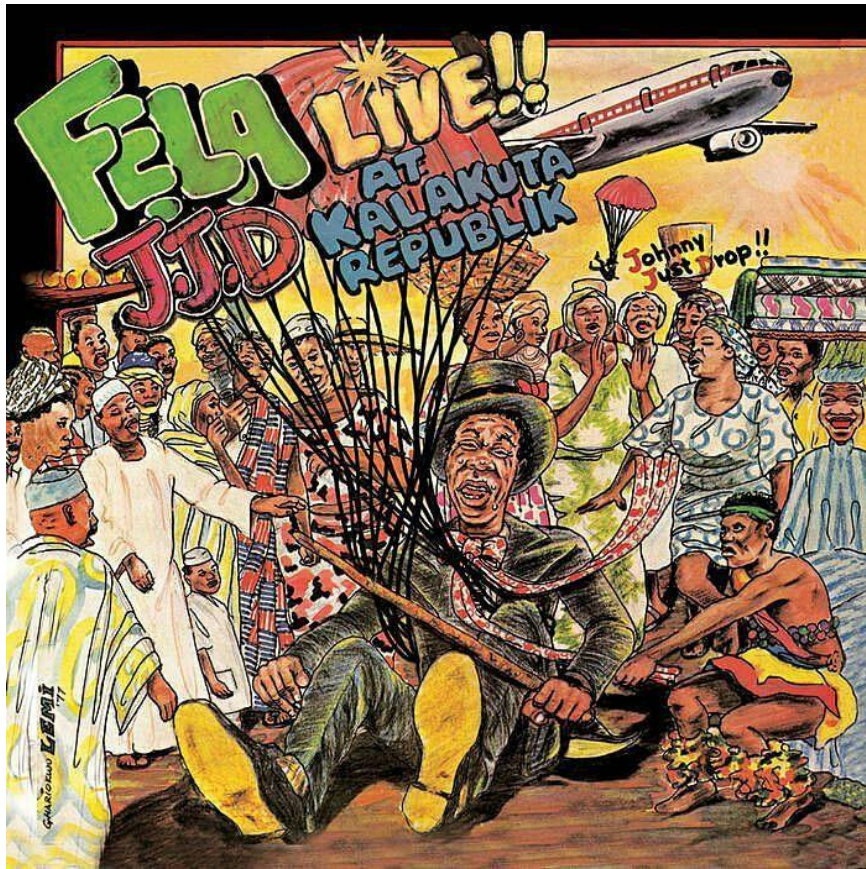


Figure 8. J.J.D (1977). Medium: Poster Color, Ink, and Pen. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram.

Figure 9. E-MIND-CIPATION (2009)

This large-format acrylic painting (60 x 60 inches) takes its title from a deliberate play on 'emancipation', inserting 'mind' at the center to foreground the argument that liberation must be cognitive before it can be political or economic. The composition illustrates the African brain circled by chains that finally break free, with the liberated figure speaking in a voice demanding to be heard. The map of Africa appears in red, symbolizing the African voice asserting itself across the continent. Human figures linked by chains represent the persistence of modern forms of slavery psychological, economic, and cultural. Rainbow colors in the background symbolize liberation from mental slavery, recalling President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, but shifting that historical reference into a contemporary African context. The work is among the most ideologically explicit in Ghariokwu's practice, functioning as a visual manifesto rather than a narrative illustration.

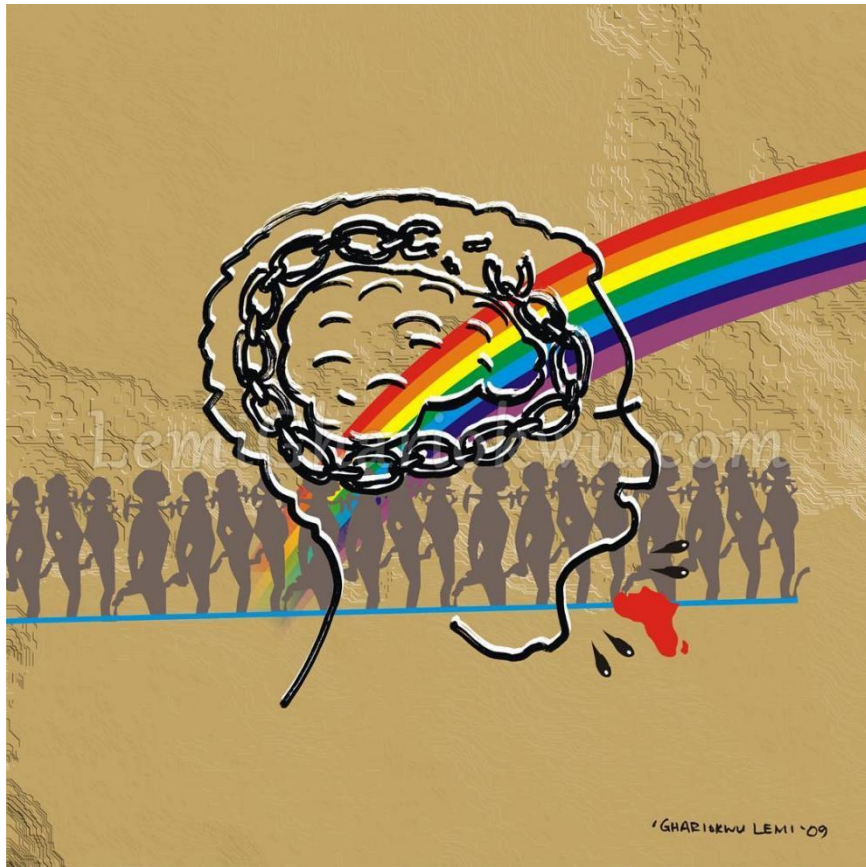


Figure 9. E-MIND-CIPATION (2009). Medium: Acrylic on Canvas, 60 x 60 inches. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram.

Figure 10. Renaissance (2004)

Titled to invoke the European Renaissance a period of cultural and intellectual rebirth this painting reappropriates the concept and applies it to the African condition. The work is a self-portrait of the artist himself, positioned as a creative and philosopher contemplating the beauty and glory of self-knowledge. He projects the map of Africa, whose contours emerge from his own face or are held in his mind, rendering the continent literally and figuratively as part of his identity. Rainbow colors arc across the composition, suggesting African glory and the promise of new possibility. White circles represent light, a triangle indicates forward growth, and birds symbolize the liberty of the African mind. The thematic content self-determination, unity, identity, development, and transformation amounts to a programmatic statement of what Ghariokwu believes African art should do: foster a revival of African hope and prosperity through creative self-assertion.



Figure 10. Renaissance (2004). Medium: Poster Color and Ink. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram.

Figure 11. Brain Drain (2019)

This large-format impressionist painting (60 x 60 inches) in acrylic and pen depicts the contemporary crisis of emigration among Nigerian and African youth. The composition shows figures streaming away from their homeland, driven by unemployment, economic stagnation, deteriorating educational infrastructure, insecurity, and the collapse of public services. Brain Drain visualizes the social costs of this exodus: the disunity it produces, the skills deficit it creates, and the circular relationship between bad governance, economic failure, and the loss of trained professionals who might otherwise address those failures. The paired relationship between this painting and Brain Gain produced in the same year, at the same scale, and with the same medium is itself a compositional and ideological statement: the artist presents the problem and its resolution as a diptych, refusing to leave the critique without an affirmative counterpart.

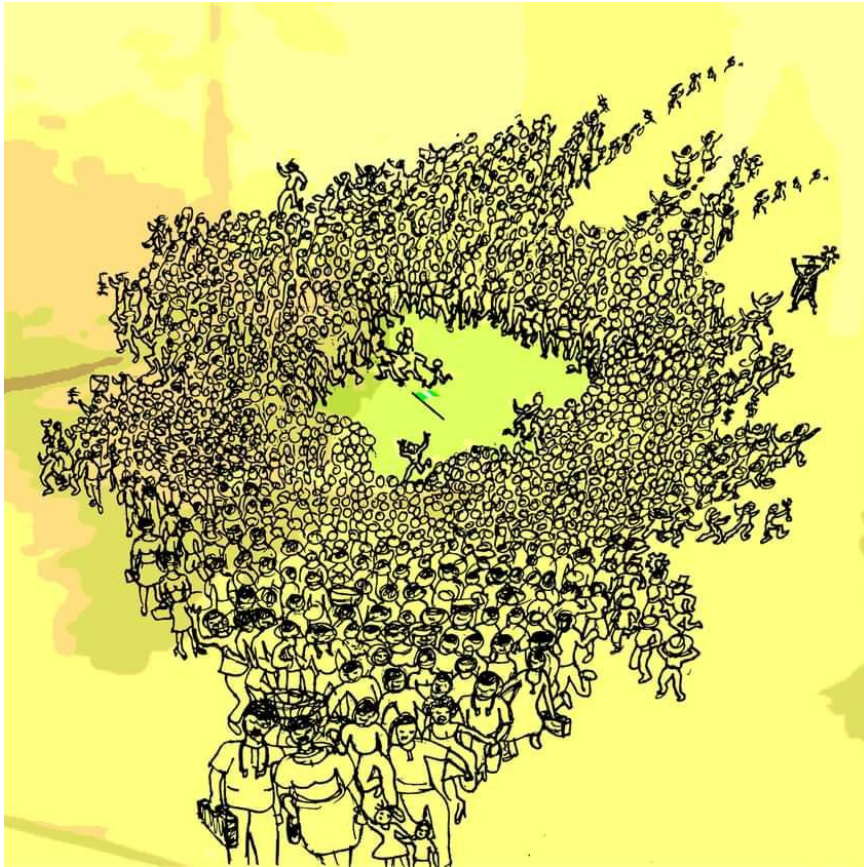


Figure 11. Brain Drain (2019). Medium: Acrylic and Pen, 60 x 60 inches. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram.

Figure 12. Brain Gain (2019)

The companion piece to Brain Drain reverses its direction of movement: figures stream back toward a Nigerian flag that is shown struggling to stand upright, sustained by the collective effort of a returning people. The painting affirms patriotism, belongingness, and the possibility of national reconstruction through the return and contribution of the diaspora. Ghariokwu invokes the needs of safety, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization as a framework for imagining what Nigeria might become when its citizens invest in arts, music, sports, and education for a new generation. The Nigerian flag rising under collective human effort is the most optimistic image in the twelve works studied, and the pairing of Brain Drain and Brain Gain as a diptych demonstrates Ghariokwu's refusal to produce pure critique without also imagining transformation. Together they constitute a visual argument for civic responsibility, Pan-African solidarity, and the necessity of return.



Figure 12. Brain Gain (2019). Medium: Acrylic and Pen, 60 x 60 inches. Artist: Lemi Ghariokwu. Source: Instagram.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The stylistic and thematic analysis of twelve selected paintings by Lemi Ghariokwu reveals a practice of remarkable internal consistency across five decades of work, diverse media, and shifting commission contexts. Whether producing album cover illustrations for Fela Kuti in the 1970s, cityscape documentations in the 2000s, or large-format impressionist statements about emigration in 2019, Ghariokwu sustains a coherent artistic identity organized around Pan-Africanist ideology, vigorous pictorial narration, and the conviction that visual art must perform a social and didactic function as well as an aesthetic one. This is consistent with Parrinder's (1967) observation that African art has historically been used to illustrate proverbs, folklore, and cultural wisdom, but Ghariokwu extends this tradition into the contemporary urban moment, addressing the specific crises of post-colonial Nigerian society with the same directness that traditional artists brought to cosmological and ritual subjects.

The classification of the selected works reveals three dominant thematic orientations. The first is socio-political commentary, represented most powerfully by *Sorrow Tears and Blood* (1978), *Ikoyi Blindness* (1976), *J.J.D.* (1977), *Brain Drain* (2019), and *Brain Gain* (2019). These paintings address state violence, class inequality, cultural alienation, emigration, and the failures of governance with a satirical precision that recalls the tradition of social realism in Nigerian art while exceeding its formal conventions through Ghariokwu's expressionist illustration style. The second orientation is Pan-African iconicity, exemplified by the portraits of Nelson Mandela, Chinua Achebe, and Bob Marley a project whose explicit aim is to offer African children images of African greatness as a counter to the Western heroes that dominate global popular culture.

This connects directly to Agbaje-Williams' (1996) argument that art heritage constitutes the sensory memory of a people. The third orientation is cultural identity and liberation, most fully realized in E-MIND-CIPATION (2009) and Renaissance (2004), both of which make the cognitive and philosophical emancipation of the African self their explicit subject.

Colour symbolism is a central instrument of meaning across all twelve works. Red consistently carries multiple valences: political sacrifice, blood, passion, and strength. Green signifies hope, fertility, and the abundance of African natural resources. Yellow represents peace, wealth, and brightness of future. Black affirms African existence and identity. These colour meanings draw on a shared Pan-African and Rastafarian chromatic tradition the Ethiopian flag colours appear in the Bob Marley portrait, but Ghariokwu also uses colour with considerable local specificity. This layered use of colour is consistent with observations by Ikwuegbu and Ngumah (2015) on the integration of spiritual and material dimensions in African artistic expression, and situates Ghariokwu within a broader tradition of African artistic symbolism even as his specific visual language is entirely his own.

Ghariokwu's stylistic eclecticism his movement across illustration, portraiture, expressionism, impressionism, and cityscape reflects both his autodidactic formation and his ideological commitment to using whatever formal means best serves the message at hand. He has described his style as very eclectic, shaped by instinct, reading, and observation rather than formal training. The Observer Music Magazine's designation of Ghariokwu as King of Covers reflects international recognition of the originality of this visual language, and his inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection and in the Phaidon Press Area 2 anthology confirms his standing in global contemporary art.

Despite this recognition, Ghariokwu's work has received remarkably little academic attention in the scholarly literature on Nigerian and African art. This study, based on primary fieldwork and a systematic analysis of twelve paintings, represents a contribution to filling that gap. The urgency of this documentation is underscored by the artist's own statement that his objectives include passing messages to viewers and teaching the youth to be conscious of their environment, to think big, and to be creative.

In conclusion, Lemi Ghariokwu is an essential figure in contemporary Nigerian art, not only for the quality and originality of his paintings but for the consistency with which he has used visual art as a vehicle for Pan-African cultural assertion and socio-political critique across five decades. His twelve paintings analyzed in this study demonstrate a practice simultaneously rooted in the specific circumstances of Nigerian post-colonial life and oriented toward a continental and diasporic African audience. His technique is characterized by vigorous illustration, expressive colour symbolism, and an ability to integrate diverse media into a coherent personal vision. His thematic preoccupations state violence, cultural alienation, African heroism, mental liberation, and the possibility of national renewal reflect the major concerns of contemporary African public life. It is recommended that further scholarly documentation of Ghariokwu's practice be undertaken, including archival research into his early career and comparative analysis with other Nigerian expressionist painters. It is equally recommended that his work be incorporated into the curriculum of Nigerian art institutions as a resource for teaching the intersection of visual art, music, politics, and Pan-African ideology.

References

- [1] Adeyemi, T. A. (2022). Afrobeat, art, and ideology: Visual culture in the Fela Kuti universe. *African Arts*, 55(1), 14-28. https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_a_00580
- [2] Agbaje-Williams, B. (1996). Art heritage as cultural memory in Nigeria. *Lagos Museum Studies*, 3(1), 12–24.
- [3] Ekwemesi, C. (2002). The city and the artist: Urban identity in Nigerian painting. *Journal of Nigerian Art History*, 8(2), 45–58.
- [4] Enwezor, O. (2020). Contemporary African art and the postcolonial condition. *Third Text*, 34(2), 101–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2020.1734441>
- [5] Grosser, M. (1964). *The painter's eye*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- [6] Ikwuegbu, N., & Ngumah, C. (2015). Igbo wood sculpture and the materiality of spiritual art. *Journal of African Art Studies*, 7(1), 33–47.
- [7] Johnson, S. (1976). *The history of the Yorubas*. CSS Bookshops.
- [8] National Commission for Museums and Monuments. (2009). *Nigerian art heritage: A documentary record*. Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism.
- [9] Nwafor, O. (2019). Painting modernity: Aina Onabolu and the politics of African art education. *African Arts*, 52(3), 22–35. https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_a_00458
- [10] Ogundele, K. (2000). Art heritage and historical documentation in Nigeria. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Studies*, 5(1), 8–19.
- [11] Ogunyemi, B. (2021). Album art as political statement: Lemi Ghariokwu and the visual language of Afrobeat. *Popular Music and Society*, 44(3), 287–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2021.1876432>
- [12] Okeke-Agulu, C. (2015). *Postcolonial modernism: Art and decolonization in twentieth-century Nigeria*. Duke University Press.
- [13] Okoye, O. (2014). Religious art and cosmological expression in traditional Nigerian society. *African Religion and Culture*, 6(2), 55–68.
- [14] Parrinder, G. (1967). *African mythology*. Paul Hamlyn.
- [15] Sowunmi, M. A. (2008). Cultural heritage preservation in sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges and approaches. *Journal of African Studies*, 11(2), 77–89.