

THE ONION (*Allium cepa*) BULB FORM AS A CREATIVE RESOURCE FOR PAINTING EXPRESSION

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Abstract

*This paper focuses on the onion bulb (*Allium cepa*) form as a creative resource for visual and contemporary artists across the globe. The onion is an edible bulb used as vegetable with a rounded edible bulb with hard pungent flesh in concentric layers beneath a flaky brown skin eaten raw or cooked. Onions are used widely for cooking. They add flavour to such dishes as stews, roasts, soups, and salads, and are also served as a cooked vegetable. The onion's characteristic pungency results from the sulfur-rich volatile oil it contains. Release of this oil during peeling brings tears to the eyes, but many cooks claim that tears can be avoided by peeling onions under running water. Over the past years, visual artists have in one way or the other experimented in painting with different themes like landscape, seascape, nature, man-made objects and animals and plants and crops to mention only but a few. Onions as a plant to some artists have been a source of expression in painting. These paintings have shown the creative ability of creative artists to explore the different types of onion forms and colours as portrayed in their paintings. It has also exposed the aesthetic beauty of the onion through painting with the qualities imbedded in it. The onions have now become increasingly a scarce and very expensive commodity in our society Nigeria at this present dispensation (September 2020). This paper presents the onion for artistic expression and at the same time advocate that they also look at other types and forms of vegetables like garlic, Okro, cucumber, dates among others as creative resources for painting expression.*

Keywords: Onion, *Allium Cepa*, Painting, Aesthetic, Form, Contemporary, Amaryllaceae

Introduction/Background

This paper is derived from the onion bulb form as a creative resource for painting expression. The Onion, *Allium Cepa*, according to reviewed literature, is a common name for any of a genus of biennial herbs, of the lily family, native to Asia but cultivated in temperate and subtropical regions for thousands of years. Bulb onions are members of the family *Amaryllaceae*. The bulbs are formed from modified leaves. Their primary function is to store energy produced during photosynthesis. The true onion is a bulb-bearing plant. Its long, hollow leaves with thickened bases make up most of the bulb. The white or pink flowers, which are borne in umbels, have six sepals, six petals, six stamens, and a solitary pistil. In the varieties known as top onions, the flowers are supplanted by bulblets, which may be grown to obtain new plants. The plant contains sulfurous, volatile oils that give it a characteristic pungent taste; one component readily dissolves in water to produce sulfuric acid, which may be produced in the eyes and induce tears. Onions are one of the most versatile vegetables. They are eaten raw in salads, are cooked or pickled in a variety of ways, and are used as a flavoring or seasoning. Dehydrated onion products provide popular flavorings for soups and stews. Recent scientific studies indicate that onions may confer health benefits because they are rich in antioxidants, molecules that may have anticancer properties.

Onions raised in warm areas are planted as winter crops and are milder in taste and odor than onions planted during the summer in cooler regions. Yellow Bermuda and white Spanish onions are among the mildest cultivated onions. Onions are easily grown from seed that may be either field-grown directly or planted in beds to produce small bulbs, or sets. These are commonly dried and shipped to gardeners and commercial growers. Onions are adaptable to temperature and can be planted year-round as long as the soil is rich and moist. They are sown four to six weeks before the last frost in the spring or are planted in late summer for a fall crop. The crop is allowed to ripen in the field until tops begin to bend and break. The bulbs are then pulled up and spread or hung in a dry area to cure. Once dry, they are normally stored and shipped in slotted or open-mesh bags to keep them dry enough to prevent sprouting. It is recorded that the United States commercial production of onions at the beginning of the 21st century exceeded 3,000,000 metric tons according to reviewed literature.

According to Pardee (2009) Onion, common name for any of a genus of biennial herbs, of the lily family, native to Asia but cultivated in temperate and subtropical regions for thousands of years. The true onion is a bulb-bearing plant. Its long, hollow leaves with thickened bases make up most of the

bulb. The white or pink flowers, which are borne in umbels, have six sepals, six petals, six stamens, and a solitary pistil. In the varieties known as top onions, the flowers are supplanted by bulblets, which may be grown to obtain new plants. The plant contains sulfurous, volatile oils that give it a characteristic pungent taste; one component readily dissolves in water to produce sulfuric acid, which may be produced in the eyes and induce tears.

In contemporary art (art of today) artists have over time derived inspirations from different sources as mentioned above without being limited to other forms of expression. Vegetables have since been inspired by some European and African artists. European artist like Jan Van Kessel the Elder (1626-1679) was inspired to paint fruit and vegetable market with a young fruit seller which was painted between the year 1650-1660. Michael Naples was also inspired to paint a Single Cherry on oil on ¼ boards 4" x 5". It showed the reflective quality the cherries have in the painting not to mention the reflective surface the cherry was sitting on. It is evident that vegetables ranging from onions, okro, and garlic amongst others have become a source of inspiration for visual artist

Onion (*Allium Cepa*)

Onion is a common name for any of a genus of biennial herbs, of the lily family, native to Asia but cultivated in temperate and subtropical regions for thousands of years. There are various types of onions found across the globe namely; they are Bermuda onion, Boling onion, Chives, Cipollini onion, Cocktail onion, Egyptian onion, Green onion, Leeks, Maui onion, Pearl onion, Picking onion, Red onion, Red wine wing onion, Texas supper sweet onion, Shallots, Spanish onion, Vidalia onion, Wall a Walla sweet onion, Welsh onion, White onion and the Yellow onion. For the purpose of this paper, three basically types of onions will be briefly discussed. These are the Red, White and Yellow onions. The major types of onion found in Nigeria are the bulb onions and the spring onions.

In Nigeria hundred percent (100%) of onions in the country are produced in the Northern part of the country. Northern farmers have been doing their best to address the demand and close the gap, but there is still more supply to be achieved. This makes the red onion a very attractive commercial investment for the Nigerian market at the moment since local production is not enough.

It is also believed that the importance of onions in the Nigerian diet cannot be under-emphasized. One of the most popular uses of onions is as a spice in various local delicacies and soups. There are various types of onions as mentioned above. The red is the most popular one in the country and it is of great commercial value for farmers that cultivate it.



Figure.1. White, Yellow and Red Onions, 2020, <https://shiftinglight.com>



Figure 2. Green, Yellow and Red Sliced Onions, 2020, <https://shiftinglight.com>



Figure 3. Red Onions, 2020, <https://shiftinglight.com>

The Red Onions

Red onions are cultivars of the onion with purplish-red skin and white flesh tinged with the red. They are most commonly used in the culinary arts, but the skin of the red onion has also been used as a dye. These onions tend to be medium to large in size and have a sharp flavour and eye-watering qualities.

The White Onions (Sweet Onions)

Standing second in versatility is the papery skin and fleshy white onion. 'White onions are cultivars of dry onions which have a distinct light and mild flavour profile. Much like the red onions, they have a high sugar and low sulphur content and thus have a relatively short shelf life. White onions are used in variety of dishes such as that of the Mexican and European origin. Their uses in dishes often relate to their mild nature, they are often included in dishes to provide a light, fresh and sour taste to dishes and are often added uncooked to dishes such as salads. This type of onion is also called sweet onions

Yellow Onions (Brown Onions)

The yellow onion has a papery yellow skin colour and white flesh. They are among the most versatile variety, used for making curries, chutneys and pastas. When your eyes are watering, the most and the pungency of the onion is high, you know you are chopping a yellow onion. Cook it a little longer, and the onion loses its astringency, turning into a light golden brown colour with a sweet taste. If the recipe does not mention the type of onion, use yellow onions as they are perfect for caramelization, cooking down or for sweating. The yellow onion is a variety of dry onion with stronger flavour. They have a greenish-white, light yellow or white inside; its layers of papery skin have a yellow-brown or pale golden colour. It is higher in sulphur content than the white onion which gives it a stronger, more complex flavour.

Health Benefits of Onions

Another important thing to note as contained in reviewed source about onions is the health benefits the onions have. According to a revealed literature, the onions have other benefits such as;

i. Antibacterial Action which according to research mainly conducted in labs has shown that onions may kill a wide range of bacteria. In one experiment, onions and garlic extracts inhibited the

growth of several microbes. Garlic extract also reduced bacteria in the mouths of human volunteers.

ii. Cancer Risk Reduction another health benefits eating onions and garlic may reduce your risk of cancer. Italian researchers found that those who ate the most onions were the least likely to have cancer of the colon, throat, and ovaries. In another study, researchers found that men who ate the most vegetables of the allium family were the least likely to have prostate cancer. Researchers believe that antioxidants are responsible for the cancer-fighting properties of onions.

iii. Another health benefit of the onions is the digestive health. Onions according to research contain fructooligosaccharides, substances that act as prebiotics. They pass through the small intestine without digesting. In the large intestine, they feed the healthy bacteria. Diseases ranging from diabetes to colon cancer and depression have been tied to a lack of healthy gut bacteria.

iv. Bone Health is another likely benefit of onions and may play a role in preventing osteoporosis. Both the animal and human studies have supported this idea. In one study, researchers surveyed women near or past menopause about their onion intake. After the researchers controlled for other factors, they found the women who ate onions daily had greater bone density. This result is encouraging because older women are most at risk of osteoporosis. Besides being rich in antioxidants, (Nutrition) onions contain a fair amount of Manganese, Vitamin B6, Vitamin C, Biotin and Copper. The basic nutritional profile is almost exactly the same for white, yellow and the red onions.

Colour and Aesthetics

Colour is a physical phenomenon of light or visual perception associated with the various wavelengths in the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum according to an unknown source. Colour is also seen as the aspect of object that may be described in terms of hue, lightness and saturation. Colour according to Ocvirk, Stinson and et al (1998), (2006) and (2009) is the most universally appreciated element that appeals to children and adults instantly. Colour is one of the most expressive elements because it affects our emotions directly.

Aesthetics play a very important role when it comes to beauty most especially in the field of art particularly in art works. Aesthetics is being interested in how something looks or feels. It could also mean the pleasant, positive or artful appearance of a person or a thing. Aesthetics being a branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of art, beauty and taste and with creation and appreciation of beauty, colour also in art is the key elements of aesthetic appreciation.

There is no doubt that colours play a very important role in our lives as we live with colours, sleep on colours, wear colours, and as far as having our homes painted with colours. From the onion bulb forms in painting reviewed below, one may ask these colours visualized on these onions are deliberately painted by human beings. However, nature has a way of doing things beyond the human knowledge. Looking at the different type of onions from figure i-iii, they are however, a combination of colours such as red, yellow, white, green and purple respectively. Also light tones of complimentary colours such as purple and yellowish orange amongst others are visualized. Neutral colours like black and white are added contrast to their brilliance as related to the reviewed paintings from figure vi-ix.

Onion Bulb Forms in Painting

One of the best ways of finding inspiration as an artist is looking at other artistic works and learning from them. And the more you paint, the better you become, the more you are able to look at other artists work and decipher what they were doing and their thought processes behind what they were doing.

Inspiration (from the Latin *inspirare*, meaning to breathe into) is an unconscious burst of creativity in literary, musical, or other forms of artistic endeavour from the mind of the world's most creative humans. Inspiration (Religion) shares the same opinion with as it states that spiritual influence that allows a person to think, speak, or act in a way that transcends ordinary human abilities. It can also refer to a wide variety of religious experiences including the presence of a creative "Spiritus" (Spirit) responsible for the inspiration.

Creative visual artists have over the years been inspired to paint various forms of vegetables

ranging from leaves (Lettuce), Stalks (Celery), roots (Carrot), tubers (Potatoe), flowers (Broccoli) and bulbs which is the onions either individually or as a combination of both in a composition in painting. To understand the onion bulb form, one will need to know what form is and how it is used in the visual art in general. They may be several definitions of forms in art, but however, we can see form as an artist's way of using elements of art, principles of design, and media. Form as an element of art is three-Dimensional and encloses space. Like a shape, a form has length and width, but it also has depth. They are either geometrical or free-form. It could also refer to objects that are three-Dimensional in nature or and have length, width, and height. These forms can be achieved through painting, drawing, sculpture, textiles, ceramics and graphics amongst other forms of the arts.

The onion bulb has an interesting form that has a short, modified, underground stem surrounded by usually fleshy modified leaves that contain stored food for the shoot within. This paper has selected four European artists namely; Julian Merrow-Smith, Rick Nilson, William Merritt Chase and Julie Ford Oliver who have both been inspired to paint onions as their sources of creative inspirations. Their paintings have been as well reviewed below.



Figure iv, Julian Merrow-Smith, *Onions*, Oil on Board, 19cm x 13cm, 2014, <https://www.shiftinglight.com>

Julian Merrow-Smith (1959)

Julian Merrow-Smith is a British painter living in Provence in south of France. His paintings have been exhibited in Britain, France and the United States. He has twice been selected for the BP portrait Award (2017 and 1999) at the National



Figure v, Julian Merrow-Smith, Onions in a white bowl, Oil on Board, 20cm x 14cm, 2016, <https://www.shiftinglight.com>



Figure vi, Julian Merrow-Smith, Midnight Onion, Oil on Gessoed Card, 16cm x 14cm, 2010, <https://www.shiftinglight.com>

Portrait Gallery, London. Julian's expression of the onion bulb forms in figure iv-vi above has shown an impressive use of form and space. Its rendition of colours in figure iv above "Onions" portrays a composition of three onions executed in their original brownish purple against a gold-grey foreground. This painting shows a darker colour at the background in the painting. In figure v above titled "Onions in the bowl" executed in oil on board shows a composition of onions appeared to be numbering about four (4) in the bowl. It shows that Julian expressed himself with the yellow onions bulbs. The composition has features colours like yellow and little touches of brown on the onions and a background that looks darker in light than the foreground with shadows cast of the plate of the onions. But in figure vi above titled "Midnight Onions" shows just an onion bulb form in its realistic rendition executed in oil on Gessoed card.

This onion bulb is achieved with purple with a brown foreground against a dark blue background suggesting a night scene. It has also shown a high level of contrast in the painting.



Figure vii Rick Nilson, Three Onions, Oil on Panel, 15cm x 20cm, 2012, obxfineart.blogspot.com

Rick Nilson (n.d)

Rick Nilson another European painter that has expressed himself with the onion bulb in painting. In his painting titled "Three Onions" executed in oil on panel shows a composition of three different types of onions namely; the yellow onion bulb executed with pale yellow with a touch of white, the red onion bulb achieved with reddish purple and touches of purple with white and behind lies the white onion bulb carried out in white all against a grey background. The entire colours featured in this painting composition comprises of yellow, brown, red, purple, white and black forming the shades and grey colours respectively.



Figure viii William Merritt Chase, Just Onions, Oil on wood panel, 53.34 x 65.25 cm, 1912, www.collections.lacma.org

William Merritt Chase (1849-1916)

William Merritt Chase was an American painter, known as an exponent of impressionism and a teacher. He is also responsible for establishing the Chase School, which later would become Parsons School of Design. He was born in 1849 and died in 1916. In his painting titled "Just Onions" above is a composition of vegetables (onions) in a white flat coloured plate, a jug and a big jar for holding milk with two types of onion namely; four red onion bulbs and four yellow onion bulbs and what appears to look like an orange tomato. The whole composition is over shadowed by a dark foreground and a background. The use of space here was evenly utilized. The colours involved this painting includes; yellow, red, purple, orange, brown, grey, white used at highlighted areas to show the effects of light and their shades.



Figure ix Julie Ford Oliver, Red Onions, Watercolour on Acid free Paper, 16cm x 14cm 2013, Art Talk, [https://: www.juliefordoliver.blogspot.com](https://www.juliefordoliver.blogspot.com)

Julie Ford Oliver (n.d)

Julie Ford Oliver was born in England and received a classical art education before coming to America. Working as an illustrator for the next twenty-eight years provided her the opportunity to work in many different styles and media. Julie's painting in figure ix above titled 'red onions' is executed with watercolour on acid paper. It is a composition of two red onions with their leaf's stems painted in green. The painting looks like a complete was painting technique but its rendition has shown a realistic approach.

The paintings by these various artists share some common similarities in terms of the realistic approach both artists showed in the rendition of the paintings. The use of the following colours namely; red, purple, white, brown, and some dark shades of grey, black and blue were all achieved by both artists. Julian's paintings of his onions from figure iv-vi above were more realistic in rendition than the other artists. Rick Nilson, William

Merritt Chase and Julie Ford Oliver's paintings were more or less impressionistic in renditions. It was also observed that none of the individual artists used colours outside the natural colours imbedded on the onion bulb order than the natural colours of the onion bulb to give it its originality and the realistic forms of appearances.

Conclusion

It is not far-fetched that vegetables like carrot, onions, garlic and tomatoes amongst others vegetables have formed some basis for artistic inspiration and expression. Creative inspiration is beyond every imagination. It is evident that art is inspired by everything the artist observes and sees deem fit for a creative and painting inspiration. Painting from nature entails a lot of themes that could be from the artist's environment like sea scapes, landscapes, floral vegetation to mention only but a few. It is also evident that vegetables like onions, carrot, cabbage and spinach amongst others have been inspired and painted by several visual artists.

One begins to imagine: why would mere vegetables be sourced and used for painting expression? Could it be because of the colours or their forms that makes them look very attractive? Or some other hidden elements and principles of design imbedded in it? In as much as the onion bulb is a short, modified, underground stem surrounded by usually fleshy modified leaves that contain stored food for the shoot within, it will also be interesting to see the painting of the onion bulb form to go just beyond painting the onion bulb in a realistic rendition form but also be explored and experimented in painting. This could take the onion bulb form from it being in a realistic form to abstract or other forms of non-representations, stages of painting. From the paintings of the onion bulb form reviewed above, it shows that these artists were inspired by the onion bulb forms which were all executed and rendered in their realistic forms. To some visual artists, vegetables may have very interesting elements of designs (line, colour, shape, form, value and texture) and principles of designs (balance, perspective, rhythm, variety, unity, emphasis, contrast, repetition, proportion, movement and dominance) that could have inspired them in painting. It is therefore, recommended that visual artists should spread their tentacles of ideas as they also look into exploring and experimenting into some of these vegetables that carry these interesting art forms and elements into painting either from a realistic approach to a non-realistic form (Abstract, Diffusion, Illusion, Stylized forms amongst other).

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