

COLOUR AND AESTHETICS: AN APPRECIATION OF COLOURED BIRDS IN PAINTING

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Abstract

This paper has focused on the appreciation of colours found in birds as they seek to inspire visual artists in painting with their beautiful outlooks of colours and patterns. Birds also known as Aves according to Grill (2014) are a group of endothermic vertebrates characterized by feathers, toothless beaked jaws, the laying of hard-shelled eggs, a high metabolic rate, a four-chambered heart and a strong yet high-weight skeleton. They live worldwide and range in various types and different sizes. Storer (2014) states that colours found among birds are caused by pigments and structure. Colour according to Ocvirk, Stinson et 'al (2006) is the most universally appreciated element that appeals to children and adults instantly. Aesthetics according to Scruton (2014) is the philosophical study of beauty and taste. It is closely related to the philosophy of art, which is concerned with the nature of art and the concepts by which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated. Colour is one of the most expressive elements because it affects our emotions directly. In recent times artists across the globe comprising European and African Contemporary Nigerian artists have been inspired by birds as their subject matter with much aesthetic beauty found among these wonderful creatures. The paper has also reviewed some of the most beautiful birds across the globe and reviewed paintings of colourful birds by some European and Nigerian Contemporary Artists.

Keywords: Birds, Colour, Painting, Visual and Aesthetics

Introduction

Garrett (2009) states that birds also known as Aves are a group of endothermic vertebrates characterized by feathers, toothless beaked jaws, the laying of hard-shelled eggs, a high metabolic rate, a four-chambered heart and a strong yet high-weight skeleton. (Gill, 2014). According to Garrett (2009), birds are animals with feathers and wings. They live worldwide and range in various sizes. The writer further states that feathers are feature characteristics of birds. They facilitate flight, provide insulation that aids in thermoregulation and are used in display camouflage and signalling. There are several types of feathers, each serving its own set of purposes. The writer maintained that feathers are epidermal growths attached to the skin and arise only in specific tracts of skin called pterylae. Therefore, since birds are lightly visible and common animals, humans have had a relationship with them since the dawn of man and since then have kept them as pets and for other economic domestic purposes.

However, birds are fascinating species of animals to come across as some of the birds are colourful showing their bright and brilliant appearance. Colourful birds have however, been appreciated by several artists to a point that it has been appreciated in paintings by individual artists. Artists have derived inspiration from various themes ranging from nature to objects (man-made) and to life to mention only but a few. In recent times artists across the globe both European and African contemporary Nigerian artists have been inspired by birds as their subject matter with much aesthetic beauty found among these wonderful creatures.

Colour

Colour according to Ocvirk, Stinson and eta'l (2006) is the most universally appreciated element that appeals to children and adults instantly. Colour, an object appears coloured because of the way it interacts with light. The analysis of this interaction and the factors that determine it are the concerns of the physics of colour. The physiology of colour involves the eyes and the brain's responses to light

and the sensory data they produce. The psychology of colour is invoked when the mind processes visual data, compares it with information stored in memory, and interprets it as colour.

Nassau (2014) sees colour as the aspect of any object that may be described in terms of hue, lightness, and saturation. He further stated that in physics, colour is associated specifically with electromagnetic radiation of a certain range of wavelengths visible to the human eye. Radiation of such wavelengths constitutes that portion of the electromagnetic spectrum known as the visible spectrum he further mentioned.

Colour is also seen as the aspect of an object that may be described in terms of hue, lightness and saturation. Colour according to Ocvirk, Stinson et 'al (2006) 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. When one views a work of art, one does not have to rationalize what we are supposed to feel about its colour, instead, we have an immediate emotional reaction to it. It has the following properties: Hue which is the name for colour (Red, yellow, blue etc), and intensity which deals with the quality of light in the colour i.e. how bright or dull a colour is and the value of how light or dark a particular colour is. Colours are classified in numerous groups but the most important group of colours is the primary set of colours which are red, blue and yellow. These colours are mixed together to achieve the secondary set of colours. It is observed that colour plays the most important overall role in art because it determines whether or not an artwork looks beautiful or can be appreciated.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics as defined by Scruton (2014) is the philosophical study of beauty and taste. It is closely related to the philosophy of arts which is concerned with the nature of art and the concepts in which individual works of art are interpreted and evaluated. Aesthetics can be defined as a branch of philosophy concerned with the essence and perception of beauty and ugliness. Aesthetics also deals with the question of whether such qualities are objectively present in the things they appear to

qualify, or whether they exist only in the mind of the individual; hence, whether objects are perceived by a particular mode, the aesthetic mode, or whether instead the objects have, in themselves, special qualities aesthetic qualities. Philosophy also asks if there is a difference between the beautiful and the sublime.

Review of Natural Colourful Birds

When it comes to beauty in terms of colour and patterns which are natural, birds are the most talked about. Birds have a range of different types of colours perceived naturally on their feathers and the way they are created. We have birds like Green Wing Macaw Parrot, Stork-billed King Fisher, Peafowl, Painted Bunting, Keel-billed Toucans, Rainbow Lori Keel, Northern Oriole, Flamingo, Hyacinth Macaw and Golden Pheasant amongst others. Birds according to Davies (n.d) arrived comparatively late on planet Earth. He stated further that many scientists are convinced that birds evolved from the dinosaurs and that numerous finds in recent years have seemed to support the hypothesis that birds descended from two-legged, running dinosaurs called theropods. These sets of birds have naturally been embedded with a variety of colours and patterns. These colours and patterns are found on the feathers of the birds. Feathers like the scales of reptiles, and those on the feet of birds, feathers are made of keratin, a fibrous protein also found in hair. Feathers vary considerably in structure and function. For this paper, only five were selected and reviewed. This bird includes;

The Green Wing Macaw Parrot

The term Parrot is applied to a large group of gaudy, raucous birds of the family Psittacidae according to relevant literature. Parrot also is used in reference to any member of a larger bird group; several are astonishingly imitative of many sounds, including human speech. (Kalhage, A 2020).

Figure i below are beautiful parrots also known with the name of Ara chloroptera. It is said to have been found in green lands and forests. These gorgeous parrots are winged better than Macaws and they possess yellow-bared eyes which enhance its beauty. They have colours like brilliant red, blue a touch of green and a little black on the beak with red as the dominant colour.



Figure i: Green Wing Macaw Parrot, **Source:** <https://www.nairaland.com> and Kalhage, A. (2020). <https://www.thesprucepets.com/greenwing-macaws-390834>

The Stork-billed Kingfishers

The Stork-billed Kingfisher is about 90 species of birds in three families, noted for their spectacular dives into water. They are worldwide in distribution but are chiefly tropical. These vocal, colourful birds are renowned for their dramatic hunting techniques. Typically, the bird sits still, watching for movement from a favourite perch. Having sighted its quarry, it plunges into the water and catches the fish usually no deeper than 25 cm (10 inches) below the surface in its dagger-shaped bill. With a swift down stroke of the wings, it bobs to the surface. It then takes the prey back to the perch and stuns the fish by beating it against the perch before swallowing it. Many species also eat crustaceans, amphibians, and reptiles according to reviewed literature.

The colours visualized on the body of the birds are Red on the beak, light yellow, a little touch of purple and blue remaining the dominant colour.



Figure ii: Stork-billed Kingfisher, **Source:** <http://www.nairaland.com> and Bird Society of Singapore. (n.d.). Stork-billed Kingfisher. <https://singaporebirds.com/species/stork-billed-kingfisher>.



The Keel-billed Toucans

Toucans are among the noisiest of forest birds; their repertoire includes loud barks, bugling calls, and harsh croaks. Larger species perch high in the canopy and utter loud calls that are accompanied by ritualized movements of the head and bill. The vocalizations act as rallying calls that attract groups of birds to good foraging sites. These sounds also seem to function in species recognition, as similar species of toucans that live in the same habitat have unmistakably different calls. (Elbridge 2023)

The Keel-billed Toucans in Figure iii is also known by its scientific name (*Ramphastos sulfuratus*), Keel-billed Toucans is a native bird of Belize

according to reviewed sources. This comes in plenty of colourful bills and is said to be a fearless bird. It can easily survive in storms and thunders and remain in its nest for days and months when weather is unfavorable. (Seltz, 2023). The visualized on this bird are a little touch of purple, orange, green, blue, red and yellow with the dominant colour black.



Figure iii: Keel-billed Toucans, Source:
<https://www.nairaland.com> and

[Keel-Billed Toucan Rainforest Alliance \(rainforest-alliance.org\)](https://www.rainforest-alliance.org)

The Rainbow Lorikeets

According to reviewed literature, the Rainbow Lorikeet is among the 53 species of medium-sized vocal and exceptionally colourful parrots of Australia and New Guinea that feed on pollen and nectar. They have brush-tipped tongues that help sweep food into the mouth. They also eat small insects and are important pollinators of many trees, including coconut palms. Lories have shorter tails but are similar and belong to the same subfamily. The rainbow lorikeet (*Trichoglossus haematodus*) is among the most spectacular and variable of the group, with 21 races scattered over the southwestern Pacific. Most races of this 150-gram (5-ounce)

species have red bills, blue heads, green wings, and black feet, though the colour and pattern of the chest, neck, and belly vary dramatically. Screeching, chattering flocks feed in the upper canopy and nest in hollow trees, sometimes in the company of flocks of other fruit- and nectar-eating species. At night they gather, sometimes by the thousands, in communal roosts. (Miskelly 2015)

In the dry scrub of southern Australia, breathtakingly colourful purple-crowned lorikeets (*Glossopsitta porphyrocephala*) gather in small nomadic flocks to eat fruit, pollinating the flowering mallee in the process. Along with a deep purple cap, the head has red-and-yellow cheek pads. The chin and chest are sky blue, and the green wings are ornamented with red, blue, and green on the undersides. Its colourful body and charming eyes are enough to keep us intact with its beauty. The tourists love to save its beauty in their camera memories. The colours visualized on this bird are yellow, orange, and blue, purple, red with green dominating the entire body.

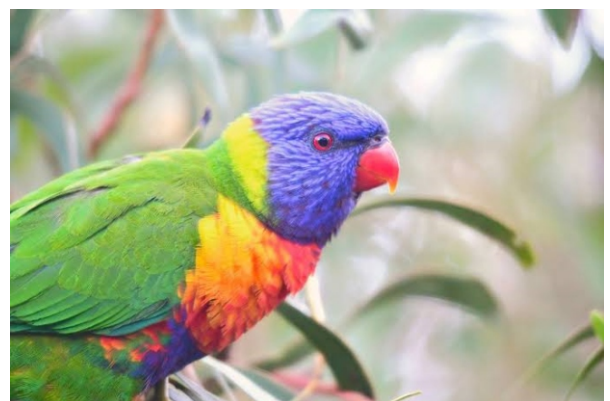


Figure iv: Rainbow Lorikeet: Source:
<https://www.nairaland.com> and

Kalhagen, A (2021). [Rainbow lorikeet Online \(nzbirdsonline.org.nz\)](https://www.rainbow-lorikeet.org)



Figure v: Hyacinth Macaw, **Source:** <https://www.nairaland.com> and <https://lafeber.com/pet-birds/species/hyacinth-macaw>

The Hyacinth Macaws

Schueman (2024) posits that the Hyacinth Macaw are the largest parrot in the world by length, the hyacinth macaw measures one meter (3 ft 3 in) long from the tip of its tail to the top of its head. According to an anonymous article reviewed online source, state that the Hyacinth Macaw are the common name of about 18 species of large colourful parrots native to tropical North and South America. These brightly coloured long-tailed birds are some of the most spectacular parrots in the world. Macaws are classified in the genera *Ara*, *Anodorhynchus*, *Cyanopsitta*, *Primolius*, *Orthopsittaca*, and *Diopsittaca* in the family *Psittacidae*. Its brilliant red, yellow, and blue plumage contrasts with a bare white face that may blush when the bird is excited. Flying with distinctive slow wing beats and their long tails trailing, scarlet macaws are most often seen flying to and from roosting and feeding sites in pairs, family groups, or flocks. These gregarious birds can often be heard calling in flight, emitting loud metallic screeches (Rafferty, 2024).

From the birds reviewed, almost all the birds from Figure i-v possess a group of primary colours such as red, yellow, and blue and secondary colours such as orange, green and purple. Also visualized on some of the birds are little touches of neutral colours such as black and white. However, the birds have similarities in terms of colour and patterns.

Colour and Aesthetics

Aesthetics play a very important role when it comes to beauty most especially in the field of art,

particularly in artworks. Danto (2008) sees aesthetics as 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 birds reviewed above, one may ask if these colours visualized on the birds are deliberately painted by human beings. However, nature has a way of doing things beyond human knowledge. Looking at the birds from Figure i-v, they are however, a combination of primary colours such as red, yellow, and blue and secondary colours such as orange, green and purple respectively. Also, light tones of complementary colours such as bluish green and yellowish orange amongst others are visualized. Neutral colours like black and white added contrast to their brilliance.

Review of Colourful Painted Birds

This paper has reviewed the paintings of five European artists and three contemporary Nigerian artists who have used colourful birds as a subject matter in executing their paintings. These paintings are however achieved by different types of mediums, colours and techniques used.

As mentioned above, when it comes to beauty in terms of colour and patterns which are natural, birds are above all other things. Most artists derive inspiration from subjects like birds because of the love and passion they have and to some it may be because they love birds and love to have them like pets. According to Kalhagen (2018), it is no surprise that many potential bird owners want a bird that is friendly, gentle, and well-suited to being a companion pet. These traits are even more important for anyone with little or no experience caring for pet birds. It is easier to bond with and care for an animal who has a natural disposition for being friendly and affectionate than one who is frightful and aggressive.

The colourful bird paintings under review have highlighted the following key elements; Colours (Medium) and Techniques used. Storer (2014) has stated that colours found among birds are caused by pigments and structure. Buffs, red browns, dark browns, and blacks are caused by melanin pigments synthesized by the bird and laid down in granules. Yellows, oranges, and reds come from carotenoid or lipochrome pigments; these originate at least in part from the food and are diffused in the skin and feathers. Porphyrin feather pigments occur in birds but less frequently than melanins and carotenoids. Blue colours in feathers are structural, based on a thin, porous layer of keratin overlying melanin pigment. Most greens result from the addition of yellow pigment to the structural blue colour. Iridescent colours result from the thinly laminated structure of the barbules and are enhanced by underlying melanin deposits. (Storer (2014).

Colours and Techniques

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 an object that may be described in terms of hue, lightness and saturation. Colour according to Ocvirk, Stinson and eta'l (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. When one views a work of art, one does not have to rationalize what we are supposed to feel about its colour, instead, we have an immediate emotional reaction to it. It has the following properties: Hue which is the name for colour (Red, yellow, blue etc); intensity which deals with the quality of light in the colour i.e. how bright or dull the colour is and value how light or dark a particular colour is. Colours are classified into numerous groups but the most important group of colours is the primary set of colours which are red, blue and yellow. These colours are mixed to achieve the secondary set of colours.

There is no doubt that all the birds reviewed by these artists used their individual palettes according to their emotions and based on the colour of the birds without exaggerations. Bright tones of colours comprising primary colours (Red, yellow and Blue) and secondary colours (Orange, Purple and green) were employed in the paintings in figures vi, viii and ix. In the painting titled "Colourful Bird." Figure vi is a painting by Steven Ponsford. This painting shows an adorable bird executed with watercolour on paper. In this painting Ponsford introduced the use of bright colours such as Blue, Yellow, Orange and Red visualizing the true nature of this beautiful hummingbird inspired by nature. The painted birds in the painting are occupied by the picture plane of the entire paper surface. In another Untitled painting in figure vii by Frank Gonzales has been executed in Gouache on paper. It is another painting probably a humming bird in motion with colourful backgrounds of circles painted with tinted colours such as bright purple, light Blue, light brown, light green, grey and white respectively. The bird is left in motion against the patterns created with the circles in the background.

Another Untitled painting in Figure viii by Monica Gabehart is a painting of a Cock executed with oil on canvas. In this painting, the standing and gazing Cock is visualized with brilliant colours such as Red, Maroon, Yellow, Orange, Purple, Blue and Brawn. The Background is dominated by different shades and tints of green in various tonal gradations. Figure ix is a painting of two parrots by Jennifer Jubenville executed with watercolour on paper.

The painting shows the brilliant use of primary and secondary colours. The combination of these colours by Jennifer has depicted a realistic painting of these parrots. The likes of yellow, Blue, Green, red, purple, and orange in their different tonal gradation presented the parrots in a front and profile position.



Fig. vi: Steven Ponsford, **Title:** “Colourful Bird”
Medium: Water Colour on Paper, **Size:** 10 inches x 5 inches, **Year:** 2009.
Source: <http://steven-ponsford.artistwebsites.com>



Fig. vii: Frank Gonzales, **Title:** Untitled
Medium: Gouache, **Size:** Unknown, **Year:** Unknown
Source: www.pinterest.com



Fig. viii: Monica Gabehart, **Title:** “Cock”
Medium: Oil on Canvas, **Size:** Unknown, **Year:** Unknown.
Source: strathmoreartlist.com



Fig. ix: Jennifer Jubenville, **Title:** Untitled
Medium: Water Colour, **Size:** Unknown, **Year:** Unknown. **Source:** www.pinterest.com

"White Chicken II" in Figure x is a painting by Bruce Miller executed with oil on canvas, a lonely white chicken presented in white colour against a colourful background of green grasses. Figure xi is a painting titled "The Fight over Supremacy" by Godwin Tom Sunday executed in oil on canvas. This painting features two fighting cocks against a plane wall background with white, grey and light brown highlighting their shadows on the foreground. In the foreground also see the reflections of Blue, a little touch of purple and brawn. The two cocks share some similarities in colours such as red, and yellow and the dark brown and white. In the painting titled "Dialogue I" in Figure xii by Seyi Odukoya is executed in oil on canvas. The painting depicts two white cocks in a dialogue as they work past each other gazing at one another. It is a unique painting concept of depicting dialogue among humans using birds. The colour employed seems to be a limited palette of just white, gray, black and red almost a monochrome at first glance. Figure xiii lies an Untitled painting by Ayeola Ayodeji Abiodun executed in oil on canvas. It is a painting of two colourful hummingbirds gazing opposite at each other on two tree branches. The two colourful hummingbirds seem to be in a very colourful forest with trees. The colours involved here are blue, red, purple and brown



Fig. x: Bruce Miller, **Title:** "White Chicken II"
Medium: Oil on Canvas, **Size:** 8 x 10 inches, **Year:** Unknown. **Source:** www.brucemillartist.com



Fig. xi: Godwin Tom Sunday, **Title:** "The Fight over Supremacy" **Medium:** Oil on Canvas, **Size:** 100cm x 70, **Year:** 2017. **Source:** www.thesparkng.com



Fig. xii: Seyi Odukoya, **Title:** "Dialogue I"
Medium: Oil on Canvas, **Size:** 30 W x 24 H x 1 inches, **Year:** 2014. **Source:** www.saatchiart.com



Fig. xiii: Ayeola Ayodeji Abiodun, **Title:** Untitled
Medium: Oil on Canvas, **Size:** Unknown, **Year:** 2014
Source: www.awizzy.net

Conclusion

Naturally, birds are very colourful species of living things that are appreciated nationwide. It is not farfetched that colours play a very important role when it comes to aesthetics. In appreciating birds in terms of colours and their beautiful patterns, elements of design such as colour, value and tone are elements that must be appreciated. Birds must have been at least incidental sources of food for humans since their origin and still are in most societies. Besides being a food source for human beings, birds are also used by human beings as massagers as they are used to deliver massagers (Letters). Many birds are kept as pets like the finches and parrots are especially popular and easy to keep.

Colours as stated by Storer (2014) in birds are caused by pigments and structure. Buffs, red browns, dark browns, and blacks are caused by melanins, pigments synthesized by the bird and laid down in granules. Yellows, oranges, and reds come from carotenoid or lipochrome pigments; these originate at least in part from the food and are diffused in the skin and feathers. Porphyrin feather pigments occur in birds but less frequently than melanins and carotenoids. Blue colours in feathers are structural, based on a thin, porous layer of keratin overlying melanin pigment. Most greens result from the addition of yellow pigment to the structural blue colour. Iridescent colours result from the thinly laminated structure of the barbules and are enhanced by underlying melanin deposits. It is clear from this statement that colours are naturally embedded in birds hence creating an aesthetic sensation when viewed. It is pertinent according to Boyes (2019) to know that colours play an important role in our lives and those different reactions are shown to different bird colours. We see birds with most colourful and incredible plumage. For many years, according to him, scientists have known how feather colour such as red or yellow is achieved. He maintained that these colours come from pigments in food the birds eat, meaning that they are diet-based.

There is also the need to note that there may be two main reasons for their colourful birds' feathers and

markings. First, birds use their colours to attract mates and intimidate competition. And secondly, they use them to provide protection from predators. Bird plumage colours are a result of either pigment or the light reflecting off feathers. Pigments are chemical compounds found in the feathers and skin of birds and the main source of bird different colours. Pigments according to sources absorb some wavelengths of light and reflect others with the reflected light reaching our eyes and stimulating the receptors of our retinas. The longest wavelengths are seen as red and the shortest are seen as violet. Unique to birds and their dinosaur ancestors, feathers have evolved into impressive biological structures that come in a surprising diversity of colours and forms.

It is however, recommended that visual artists should also engage in drawing inspiration from other types of pet animals to make more discoveries as to why and how animals possess certain colours perceived on them. There is also a great need to study the colours found on these animals and to create paintings through the process.

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