

The Ceramics Studio-Planting and the Enviro-Economic Challenges: Own-Story

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Abstract

Reading about all the made-easy ceramic techniques facilitated by access to the most modern facilities in the developed economies, makes it easy to appreciate how much other people put in to remain in the race. Ceramic production is hard work; there is no pretence about it. However, when the ceramist has to lift both ends by himself, matters become more complicated. He then becomes both the drummer and the dancer. The above scenario seems to have taken root in many developing or under-developed economies where scarcities of one thing or the other intrude into raw material sourcing. In this paper, the writer aspires to exhume some of the under-lying facts and highlight a number of environmental challenges, which tend to stretch thin the resilience and the bounce-back capacity of those who work in such economies. This own-story seems to endorse breaches of conventions and re-interrogation of long-standing and accepted clichés in its survival bid.

Keywords: Ceramics Production; Throwing wheels; Raw materials; PHCN; Production machines

Introduction

The writer gained admission into the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1974 to read Fine and Applied Arts. From the very first day, he ‘knew’ he was going to major in Painting even when a senior student majoring in Ceramics took interest in him. This senior student always encouraged him to work hard, reminding him that the only way to make it is to always be found in the studio. This interaction brought the two closer. The writer recalls his following this senior to the ceramic studio to watch him work. This watching swung around the writer’s earlier decision to major in Painting in favor of Ceramics. He began to see Painting from a distance and finally settled for Ceramics. “Shanka”, the writer’s senior friend, whose real name was Joseph Amalu, was claimed by a car accident one year after his National Service in 1977. The loss of this senior friend shook this author and left him with the determination to push forward in the spirit of his decision and in the spirit of his interaction with Shanka.

This paper aims at highlighting, inter alia, how ‘concrete decisions’ may, after all, be founded on shifting sand of circumstances rendering them tentative, no wonder this writer emerged a Ceramist instead of a Painter after altering his initial plan. It also sets out, paradoxically, to prove that dogged determination garnished by clarity of vision can stand the seductiveness of circumstances. It, therefore, encourages professional artists, and in fact, other professionals to be prepared to take responsibility of their decisions in spite of the resistance raised by various circumstances. It prepares those who

endure for a far-flung reward facilitated by a combination of knowledge, resourcefulness and improvisation. Excuses offer themselves everywhere along the pathway that leads to success. They also present as factors that will ultimately guarantee the erosion of a well-articulated vision. The compass of resoluteness slowly but invariably creates a visible bypass which meanders its way to the finishing line where success begins.

The methodology of this ‘teaching’ resonates in the testimony of own-story. It does this by plotting the contour of successes and failures and lastly, successes. It emphasizes the threats and ways out, the loss and eventual recovery of hope and the long range of increasingly troublesome terrain at the end of which stood a light of victory. The paper, in order to equip other professionals, captures the tears of pain, the agony of weepings, the anguish of helplessness as well as the uncertainty of the future from where the crown of victory was woven.

The Post-Shanka Legacy

The general temperament of work in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts was high and this kept all serious students, including the writer, on their toes. In the ceramic studio, the writer imbibed the lesson of extra-hard-work ‘sung’ into my head by Shanka and has remained a very hard worker, but this was fine-tuned along ceramic lines by that single contact. The facilities in the post-Shanka ceramics studio were operational but old and had little life in them. These facilities included electric throwing wheels, electric kilns, blunger and a horizontal pugmill. Unavailability of funds for replacement, in alliance with lack of spare parts threw a serious challenge for the class and those after the class. The class did not however witness the final nailing of their coffins because, through periodic maintenance interventions the same facilities ushered the class into graduation. By the reason of hindsight, it must be said that the struggle for survival in those rough times prepared the writer for the futuristic reality of ceramic production in an austere and uncertain economic terrain.

Setting up a Pottery Studio

The writer emerged from that crucible equipped with a dogged determination to succeed both as a ceramic teacher and as producer. After the mandatory one year national service, he got a job in a higher institution, Auchu Polytechnic, where he taught ceramics and drawing. About that time, the government of Nigeria was mounting consistent pressure on owners of private studios to give them up, that it was illegal to own such private studios along with a lecturing job. Not only was it so in the ceramic area but also in other professions including medical practice. Based on this, a decision needed to be taken—to completely step in, or to completely step out. Stepping out seemed more attractive, and this was done.

The writer imagined that he had taken everything into consideration in setting up and managing a ceramics production studio. One of the first things to consider is: “how deep one’s interest is”, (<http://pottery.bout.com>). In *How to Set up a Pottery Studio*, the same source talks of space availability. Also in *A Guide to Setting up a Modern Ceramic Studio*, the source advised the use of fairly straightforward [familiar] and inexpensive equipment and tools, (<http://wwwsuite101.com>).

Before the stepping out in 1985 after a five-year period of lecturing in that institution, the writer imagined that that was one of the possibilities before him. Before then, he had had some art exhibitions, and established a production reputation among a fast-growing clientele. He knew the loss of access to the school production facilities and materials was certain in the event of stepping out. His well-meaning friends, in their sincerity, worked hard to dissuade him but his mind was made up. Having given resignation notice to the institution, he began to procure a few basic production machines to facilitate his take-off and growth. Two electric kilns and two electric Wenger bench wheels were purchased. Ready-made glazes and glaze materials also formed a part of the initial procurement consignment. The resignation notice period overlapped the time of total relocation away from Auchu town, where the institution was located.

The Challenge to Remain Afloat

After three months of notification period, this author finally withdrew his services from the higher institution and employed himself. Working in the studio, which was a three-bedroom apartment gave him a sense of fulfillment but the loneliness and uncertainties were intimidating. These two extremes were difficult to resolve. To worsen matters, according to this writer, every service or duty waited for him. Such jobs as clay digging and transportation from the deposit to the studio, slaking and washing, dewatering and kneading demanded his attention. Each of this community of jobs is tedious as implied by Paquette and Brown (2005). They also have no shortcuts. It became clear that, although much work was done, not much seemed to be accomplished. It proved impossible to be alone in the studio. The difficulty in so doing defies all levels of management. Apart from the formal schedule of duties, the informal and unscheduled activities also rally round and demand attention. Wilson, (2006) in his *Mud Mamas II* agrees with the above when he wrote “Studio assistants became part-time babysitters while I rushed through things the assistant and I would have done together”. Once in a while, the writer former students were brought in to help but that was at their convenience now because their academic programme and my business plans were almost parallel.

Salaries had ceased to come in for obvious reasons, and responsibilities started to mount. Month-ends stopped ushering in their succour, rentals were piling up and production materials were steadily depleting. It was a time to be frantic. The beauty and the uniqueness of the wares camouflaged the financial mess being experienced. Distress became a constant next-door neighbour by night and by day. Time to start losing weight had come and the future looked visibly bleak. The threat of failure hovered over and threatened ceaselessly and the mental concentration which was a facility to lean on began to dissipate. NEPA (National Electric Power Supply, now PHCN, Power Holding Company Of Nigeria) was doing her best but that best was so bad that their power could no longer fire the electric kilns. The above happened in so quick a succession that between June 1985 and December of that same year, (six months after), it was clear that if no radical decision was taken, and quickly too, the entire struggle would sink. By this time, the writer’s financial status was so dry that it can be described as “Battery Low”. ‘Never say die’, became the appropriate motto. Time had come to sit down and consider a radical option—to completely relocate. This relocation was to a place about 200 kilometres away, notable for its constant power supply at the right voltage. The this

“good” option came on board with its unsavoury implications. The cost of renting a house, not to talk of the fiscal implication of transportation to this new haven was staring the writer in the face. The need was not just to secure a new residence to live in, but also to secure another to house the studio. The studio needed to be adapted to suit the machine demands. New clay deposits needed to be found, tested and put to use.

Rummaging through this monument of implications, the silent wish was that the electricity supply would improve radically in order not to initiate the relocation. Instead of just waiting, it was clear the time to take practical steps had come. The NEPA technicians advised that three single-phase meters be installed. The argument was that in case of a phase failure, one of the other two could be accessed since my machines were single-phase machines. This helped but not enough. One could only swap the phases if one was around to effect it. What if none of the phases was on? The arrangement was unproductive.

While still hoping the power situation would improve, the decision to engage a former student for pay was effected. She was taught the hand-building part of the production programme and clay preparation. She did well initially but soon became full of reasons. She eventually eloped without a word. All the time and training invested on her became a serious loss. Other alternatives came to mind—to go across the road routinely to purchase ready-made clays. There was none anywhere. The possibility of procuring ready-made plaster moulds and change to casting procedure to speed up production in a one-man studio did not also exist. This was because ready-made moulds were also nowhere, not a single place. An idea came up—to buy P.O.P bags and make personal moulds. A good idea indeed, but product adulteration {of P.O.P} left a long trail of victims. Available resources were too scarce to take such a risk. At this point it was clear new ideas had exhausted and that no other possibilities could be located anywhere. ‘Nothing can be worse.’

LEAP Before You Look

Instead of looking before leaping, the writer found it far more convenient to *leap before looking*. He challenged the financial involvements and took off damning the consequences of relocation. The new location initially seemed uneventful. However, decisions began to be taken not in small measures, but in bulk. This meant taking very bold steps at a time. This posture opened doorways along unsuspecting areas into the numerous production challenges that faced survival. A sense of well-being overtook the struggler bringing with it an inexplicably relaxed atmosphere. The general mentality in a long time, began to coordinate. Laughter welled up within. At this point, the attitude became “*either I succeed or I succeed, “either I make it or I make it”*”. With this clarity of vision before the writer, he was ready to soar into the firmament above, reach out, and grab his victory.

New Studio Profile and New Challenges

Taking the bull by the forelegs (not by the horns) the monster was brought down. The machines were installed with enthusiasm. Preliminary preparations were made and production programmes fine-tuned. Two employees were engaged in quick succession

and were taught how to throw two hundred flower vases or mugs in eight-hour working day. They were, before then, taught clay preparation and kneading and later handle-pulling. Production volume expanded and as celebration time was seen to be approaching, three other “monsters” appeared on the scene; 1).the accelerated depletion of glaze materials which was a function of the multiplication of the production volume, 2).power voltage drop due to increased power demand by other business concerns, 3).lack of sources of spare part replacements.

The mental readiness to confront any problem prepared the writer ahead of this. The ‘monsters’ were like paper tigers or mere scare-crows. The depletion of raw materials was resisted by fresh purchases. Locating the unadulterated materials or their local equivalents was not easy but the risk was run. The ones that could not be located processed was procured as raw stones. They were manually crushed and incorporated into glazes which was compounded in the studio. The power voltage drop and the lack of spare parts affected both the electric kilns and the electric throwing wheels. The kilns were unable, at that point, to give their services and therefore were abandoned. Sourcing local equivalents of the imported raw materials places some knowledge demands on the producer. Chris Echeta, (2012), in his *Ceramic Studio Practice: Foundation Knowledge for Aspiring Ceramists*, says:

The choice of materials and equipment should be wisely made. All materials which have local equivalents should be swapped with their local counterparts for obvious reasons—cost and availability. This area calls for a thorough understanding of production materials... (Echeta 2011).

In order to escape the tyranny of electricity unavailability or insufficiency, some bricks—firebricks and red bricks for back up were purchased. A gas kiln, 24 cubic feet in volume was designed and built by this author with its fire-throwing gas burners. The gas kilns and burners project was a major project, more so, when these were not taught kiln building in the University. Daniel Rhodes’ book on Kiln Design and Construction was a major fall-back resource. That was the first attempt and it worked.

For the electric throwing wheels they naturally also withdrew their services. Own-made manual wheels were resorted to and they were very effective. The numerical turn-over was not in any way sacrificed as a result of change of throwing wheels. The wheels, however, have over the years been redesigned and reconstructed for better visual presentation and production effectiveness.

Having designed and constructed home-made throwing wheels and gas-fired 24ft³ kiln much bigger than the combined volumetric capacities of the electric ones, the pressure of failure was lifted. The good news was that these facilities were no longer electricity-dependent. The studio had to dictate its production pace and volume not NEPA. The employees jumped to six with the corresponding product turn-over. Sales were sometimes prompt and at other times slow but the studio was definitely out of the woods. The production and sales ambition has always been to make the expressway and to stay on it.

Conclusion

The environmental challenges in certain economies are more austere than others where almost everything can be bought off the shelf across the road, including prepared clay. There is absolutely no regret whatsoever going through the woods. If for nothing at all, the scenario brought out the best and unexpected determination and creativity to plod on even when water became thick with mud. It also highlighted the indispensable tripod 'M' relationship, a trio of Man, Material, and Machine' (MMM) in resolution of product generation. One had to be a quadruple—the management, the production manager, the raw material procurement officer and the sales representative. This writer needed to be all these for two main reasons; 1). Funds were in short supply for engaging someone else, and 2), nowhere to buy many things and one had to produce one's needs by one's self. In any case, for one to succeed, one must at that struggling stage, put one's eyes in every area of production and marketing.

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