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Original Article

‘Painting in Oils’ – Refinement of Skill and Personal Style Through the Study of Birds. Analysis of the Work of Zephania Lukamba, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

Dr. Kamau Wango, PhD^{1*}

¹ Kenyatta University, P. O. Box 43844-00100 Nairobi, Kenya.

* Correspondence Email: kamauwango@gmail.com

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Proportions,
Brushstrokes,
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The gradual acquisition and constant refinement of artistic skills in whatever genre of art are important for the ultimate development of personal styles that enable artists and students alike to fully engage in their artistic endeavours. The development of personal style in painting is particularly important in this regard and it is inextricably intertwined with the development of the prerequisite painting skill. It can be argued that there are two critical stages in the holistic development of personal skill in painting; there is the stage of acquisition of skill and the subsequent stage of refinement of skill. The stage of acquisition of artistic skill is perceived to be the period where skill is gained, attained, and consolidated including the time spent in formal art school. Consolidation of skill includes the harnessing and organizing of underlying or embedded artistic talent. The stage of refinement of artistic skill is perceived to be the period where acquired artistic skill enters the realm of refinement. Although these stages obviously tend to overlap, there is a point where one ‘feels’ by virtue of acknowledgeable work that he or she has acquired the prerequisite or commensurate skill to be able to perform specific artistic tasks and that that prerequisite skill only needs to be subsequently refined over time. The wider concept of the development of personal style itself lacks such demarcation of time and definition since it is always evolving and adapting to new challenges, innovations and environments and is, therefore, seen to be lifelong rather than time specific. In examining the featured oil paintings, this paper seeks to explore the concept of refinement of skill and determine whether or not there occurs significant visual refinement of skill within a time period of four continuous years, the time frame within which the paintings were created. The artist, who is a Masters student at Kenyatta University, undertook the paintings of birds as a matter of personal artistic interest over the said period of time and did not have prior knowledge of an impending specific study of his work in this regard. Subsequently, the level of skill, technique and personal style as displayed in the paintings were both spontaneous and authentic. In the initial

review of the paintings and other prior work by the artist, the study determined that the artists had attained the level of skill necessary to be classified as having surpassed the stage of ‘acquisition’ of artistic skill and was, therefore, no longer seeking to acquire painting skills for purposes of undertaking his work. Subsequently, the focus of the study shifted to the realm of refinement. The number of paintings featured (34), painted randomly over time, that is, without any prior reference to or inclination towards the visual interest of the study, was determined to be sufficient to extract the desired outcome. In addition, the paintings were created as a matter of the artist’s sustained personal interest in the study of various types of birds; their colours, shapes, forms, textures, and environment. Although the artist engaged in other types of paintings within the same time frame, the study, however, selected the artist’s own sustained interest in the subject of birds as a matter of consistency of subject matter and its renditions.

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INTRODUCTION

Oil painting as a medium has been in use for centuries and due to its unique versatility; it has fascinated artists throughout history and inspired them to create great paintings. It has also transcended various styles and techniques that have enabled artists across generations to find their expressive and stylistic comfort zones. Oil painting, together with its materials and tools, enables artists to have the flexibility of colour choice, use of denser and luminous colours, ease of colour mixing and application, the leeway to create memorable tonal variations, the ability to utilize a variety of brushstrokes to create textural effects, the utilization

of certain specific techniques that culminate in desired effects unique to oil painting. The acquisition and refinement of skill in painting is, therefore, often intricately intertwined with the purposeful use of oil paints as a popular medium as well as the concerted study of oil painting techniques.

Roche (2021) observes that “By adding more oil painting techniques to your artist skill set, you can enhance your range of skills in an incredibly rewarding way”. Skills in painting are a set of competencies or abilities that help one to specifically be able to respond to artistic challenges or to purposefully create art work that is expressive

and enduring. They are often referred to as a 'set' because they are utilized in artistic unison; the application of one skill is related to another which all then become collectively complementary. There is, for instance, the skill of colour choice and application where one ought to have mastered colour relationships. There is the skill of observation and minute detailing; there is also the skill of textural study and application; there is the skill of the use of colour tones and there is the skill of the utilization of painting techniques and their prerequisite materials and tools. Compositional skill is critical in the creation of any art work and paintings in particular.

All these skills are consolidated into a potent body of skills through creativity which stems from a creative mind. As observed, it is difficult to isolate one skill from another since they are applied holistically and often spontaneously but it is also possible for an artist to be proficient or more endowed in one skill as compared to another and, hence, the continuous need to harmonize their comprehension and usage. Skills in painted art are, therefore, important in order to create and execute outstanding paintings and to enable an artist to express himself or herself in the best way possible through these paintings. Just like any other skill or set of skills, painting skills need enhancement from time to time since development of personal style that emanates from these skills is a continuous process and is, therefore, lifelong. Painting skills are enhanced through continuous engagement in techniques of painting and emerging technology, improvisations, and innovations.

Skill in painting as discussed in this study also underscores the emergence of individual style; the two are intertwined. Carrubba (2016) observes that "Styles, when the term is used in a more generic sense, often describe the manner in which an artist created the particular work of art. This may be naturalistic (also called representative), idealized, classical, stylized, surreal, abstract, or non-naturalistic (non-representative)". In this regard, an

artist cannot develop his or her artistic style without the systematic engagement of specific attributable skills that bear certain unique characteristics, be they in the use of elements and principles of art or in the handling of the medium of choice. In addition, Lieu (2013) notes that "In an artist's style, there are usually defined characteristics, a specific means of handling a media, or repeated strategies in an artist's style that are consistently visible in every artwork".

Analytical Framework

Although this study features paintings of birds, the core idea was not necessarily to delve into the essence of birds themselves or their natural behavioural tendencies in their environment or what the forms may suggest. Birds happened to be a subject matter that interested the artist in his quest to apply a certain level of skill; hence the substantial amount of time he spent engrossed in achieving this artistic task, which was to paint selected birds in a realist setting. In order to achieve this artistically, however, there needed to be a painted study of the birds as they appear in their environment in which the effectiveness of applied personal skill would be interrogated. As earlier noted, this paper sought to find out whether there occurred any significant enhancement or even transformation of skill that made subsequent paintings improve over a period of four years and, therefore, yield better quality renditions of the paintings of birds.

Any work of art will always require a certain consideration of formal analysis which is a type of visual description that delves particularly on the usage and arrangement of formal elements and principles of design as applied in pictorial composition and how they all integrate to culminate in the whole artistic composition. Formal analysis, hence, focuses on the visual elements in a composition that are observable and, therefore, determinable. Since a good pictorial composition in painting, for instance, is created by skilful selection, application and arrangement of elements, then personal skill and eventual stylistic connotations

become important core considerations. Munsteberg (2008-2009) notes that “Formal analysis is a specific type of visual description. Unlike ekphrasis, it is not meant to evoke the work in the reader’s mind. Instead, it is an explanation of visual structure, of the ways in which certain visual elements have been arranged and function within a composition”. The elements that feature in any formal analysis include colour, line, shape, texture, light and dark as well as mass/space. In conceptualizing a work of art, formal analysis will include such principles as balance, proportion, rhythm, or movement. The analysis itself entails how each of these has been used and its structural effect and influence upon the composition as well as the holistic visual characteristics or appearance of the final composition or form.

Formal analysis, therefore, does not focus on the subject matter, its content, or emotive message. This paper examines the painting of birds as individual compositions where the bird itself does not elicit any message other than being the subject of artistic interest. In each rendition of painting of the

respective bird, the analysis will confine itself to the usage and arrangement of the visual elements in each composition. By extension, this will also inform the study of the essence of the prerequisite skill that produces the painting renditions. The analysis will further show whether or not there occurs any enhancement or transformation of skill over time that affects the finesse of each respective painting rendition. It is presumed that any enhancement of skill in tandem with time progression will ultimately result in better artistic representations or that lack of it will result in the retention of the original appeal of the paintings as presented in earlier renditions. This study will also identify the unique characteristics of the artist’s application of the elements, the consistency of which will entail a stylistic approach to analysis. Stylistic approach tends to identify, among many other things, indicators of uniqueness in the application of the formal elements in a work of art and is often used to distinguish one artist’s work from another based on the peculiarities of what their work entails.

ANALYSIS OF WORK



Plate 1. 'Barn Swallow' (2021)
Oil on canvas - 24 cm x 24 cm
Source – The artist

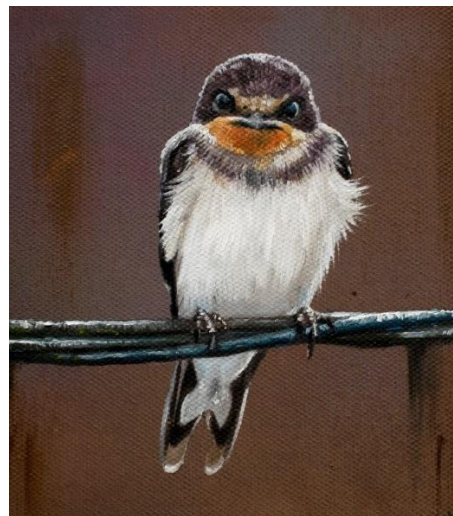


Plate 2. 'Barn Swallow' (2022)
Oil & Ink on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – The artist

'Barn Swallow' (Plate 1) is a well executed painting which shows the manifestation of skill in the application of textural effects of flufy breast feathers, a variety of brown colour tones and a good sense of composition. The background adopts the tonal colour of the bird and its perch but the dark tonal variation of the head and slightly elevated tone of the body create adequate tonal contrast that makes the bird stand out. The tonal variation of the stone base upon which the bird perches also bears the same tonal value as the background and the breast of the bird. However the bird still stands out because of the slight suggestion of shadows.

'Barn Swallow' (Plate 2) shows the same bird with white flufy breast fur but shows an indication of the use of shining natural light on the bird as well as on its barbed wire perch. The dark plain background is another addition to the painting but the fundamental visual appearance of the bird itself shows the same application of skill. The artist acknowledges that he did not 'experience' any upsurge of skill in these paintings done in 2021 and 2022 respectively other than the emphasis on the effect of light as well as the addition of the dark background.



Plate 3. 'Chestnut' (2019)
Oil on canvas - 45 cm x 35 cm
Source – The artist

'Chestnut' (Plate 3) is the first painting (2019) that shows the skill which is the focus of this paper. The artist paints the bird showing admirable detail and paying a lot of emphasis on textural effects of the feathers and breast fur. Textural effects are also applied on the dead tree trunk. The artist captures the shape and character of the bird, aspects which are essential for establishing whether there occurred significant enhancement of skill in later paintings.



Plate 4. 'Chickadee' (2021)
Oil on canvas - 25 cm x 25 cm
Source – The artist

The background is dark indicating that the idea of dark contrasting backgrounds was not introduced in later paintings as an enhancement and that it was an integral part of the initial skill. The bird also shows the onset of the use of illuminative light at this point indicating, as well, that this was part of the initial skill that the artist wanted to display.

The painting of a 'Chickadee' (Plate 4) was done two years after that of the Chestnut (Plate 3). It is

evident that even though the two paintings were executed two years apart, the level of skill displayed in the painting in *Plate 4* remains basically the same as in *Plate 3*. This is in terms of the texture of feathers and breast fur which is executed with the same thin brushstrokes and minute detail. The shape

and form of the bird are accurate and are descriptive of the referent bird. The use of tones and shadows are well incorporated in depicting the bird. The background remains basically plain but provides an adequate contrast that helps the bird to emerge in its environment.



Plate 5. 'Great Tit' (2021)
Oil on canvas - 24 cm x 24 cm
Source – The artist

The *Great Tit* (*Plate 5*) is well executed with textural effects and colour tones on the feathers and thin brushstrokes on the breast fur. The bird is studied in detail and is descriptive of the active nature of the bird. The notion of 'activeness' can be visually deduced from the nature of the pose. The artist adds an aspect of the perch which is an angled metal bar with barbed wire which together with the dark shadow, also depicts the angle from which the light is coming from. This light also reflects upon the side of the bird which leaves the head and part of the breast in the shadow. The background is a light grey which creates enough contrast to emphasize the bird since the bird itself bears a comparatively dark outline. There is no fundamental difference in



Plate 6. 'Common Bulbul' (2022)
Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – The artist

the level of skill in the painting of the birds in *Plate 4* and *Plate 5*, both done in 2021.

The *Common Bulbul* painting (*Plate 6*) shows a little shift in the way the background is presented with a sharp colour contrast and a random patch of green. This may have been an experimentation with backgrounds in the later paintings. Although the bird itself is well painted, the orange (or burnt sienna according to the artist) competes with the bird for the attention of the viewer's eye. The boldness of its use and the additional green patch which creates another contrast (Orange and green are complementary colours) are not necessarily an enhancement of the painting. The skill applied in the

painting of the bird still remains constant and unchanged.

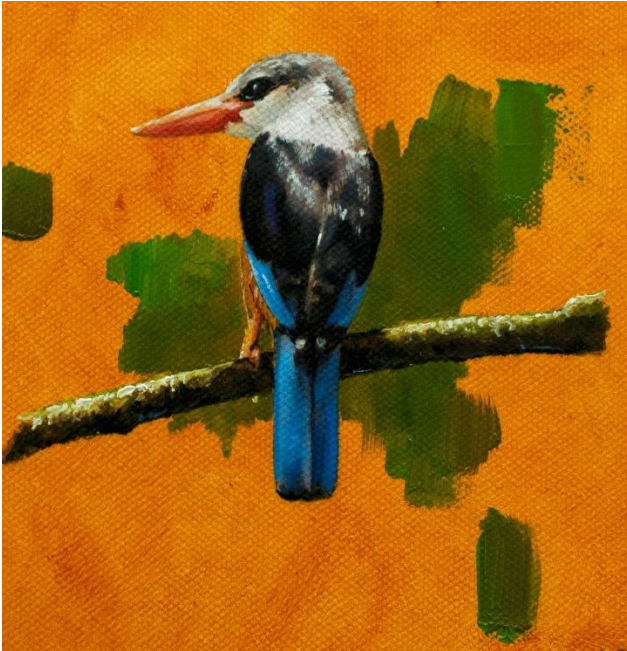


Plate 7. '*Grey headed Kingfisher*' (2022)

Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm

Source – *The artist*

The '*Grey headed Kingfisher*' (Plate 7) is a detailed study of the shape and form as well as colour as they manifest on the bird. Meticulous brushstrokes underscore the textural effects on the back feathers all the way to the top of the bird's head. The artist also uses the effect of shining natural light which is visible on the twig and on the feathers. The use of tones and shadows help to enhance the form making the bird appear three dimensional. The orange background with a patch of green is similar to Plate 6 and seems to have been an experimentation on background effects.



Plate 8. '*Hooded Robin*' (2022)

Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm

Source – *The artist*

'*Hooded Robin*' (Plate 8) depicts textural effects on the breast fur as well as other feathers and also shows the effect of illuminative light. The use of light and dark tones helps to mould the form of the bird into a rounded entity. A dark green background contrasts adequately with the black and white of the bird which helps the bird to pop out. The two birds, painted in 2022, display the same skill set and suggest that a level of skill may not be transformed within a short period of time and that any transformation may require a new impetus in the application of technique.



Plate 9. '*Kingfisher II*' (2021)
Oil on canvas - 30 cm x 30 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 10. '*Kingfisher III*' (2021)
Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*

Kingfisher II (Plate 9) is a beautiful study of the bird in action. The artist focuses on the effect of shining natural light that illuminates part of the bird and creates contrasting shadows. This is augmented by the use of a dark background which makes the bird really pop out. Textural effects are evident as an integral part of the skill displayed as well as the application of colour and colour tones. The shape and form of the bird remain accurately articulated

Kingfisher III (Plate 10) is the study of the same bird and since the paintings were done in the same year and probably during the same specific time span, they appear to be very similar in the articulation of skill. The artist sustains the skill

shown in the application of textural effects in the feathers and branch of the tree upon which the bird perches. The blue and orange colours are applied in cognisance with their respective colour tones that also show the segmentation of the feathers. The use of shadows beneath the feathers and on the branch of the tree help to emphasize the form of the bird and articulate the minute details. The contrasting colour of the dark background is consistent with the strategy to make the bird stand out by creating a stark contrast that also helps to illuminate the form. The use of illuminative light appears in one way or other in all the paintings but is particularly profound in some as illustrated in this painting.



Plate 11. 'Kingfisher IV' (2021)
Oil on canvas - 30 cm x 30 cm
Source – The artist

'Kingfisher IV' (Plate 11) is a continuation of the series of paintings of the Kingfisher bird and therefore continues the articulation of certain aspects of skill that underpin the essence of the artist's individual ability and painting style. The bird is executed in minute detail, studying the textural effect on the feathers and fur as well as the shape and form of the bird. The artist consistently shows his admirable ability to accurately portray the individual bird as it exists in its natural environment. The experimentation with the background appears to focus on the use of a palette knife and the application of contrasting plain colour rather than dark tonal contrast as evident in other paintings done within the same year.



Plate 12. 'Kingfisher V' (2022)
Oil on canvas - 15 cm x 18 cm
Source – The artist

'Kingfisher IV' (Plate 12) does not exhibit any marked difference from an earlier related painting, *Kingfisher III* (Plate 10) despite the fact that were done one year apart. The two paintings have dark backgrounds and display the same level of detail in the execution of the bird. This implies that the level of skill did not significantly change within the one-year time span and that the artist used the same 'skill tools' to execute the paintings that helped him to achieve the desired artistic task. This is consistent with the notion that once a skill has been developed to a certain level sufficient enough or significant enough to articulate a certain artistic objective or goal, then there occurs the subsequent tendency for that skill to remain constant.



Plate 13. '*Kingfisher VI*' (2022)
Oil on canvas - 15 cm x 18 cm
Source – *The artist*

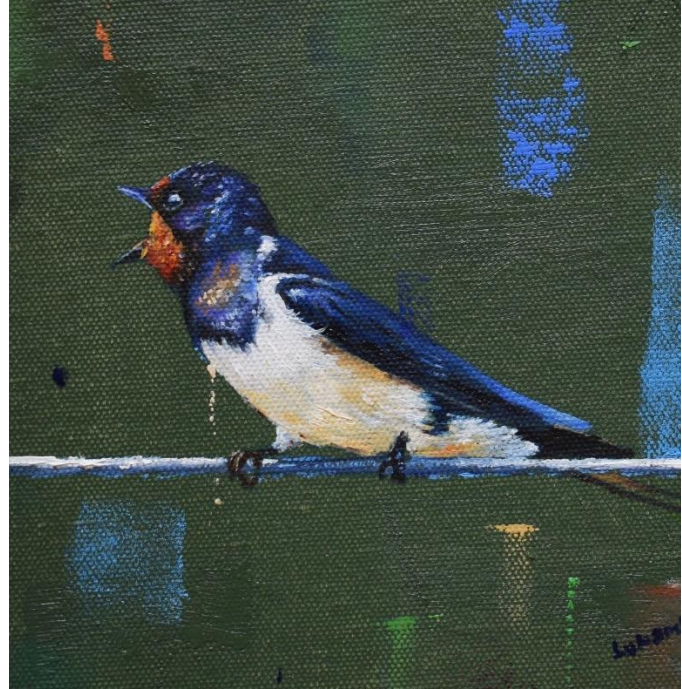


Plate 14. '*Swallow II*' (2022)
Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*

'*Kingfisher VI*' (Plate 13) is an 'action oriented' painting depicting the action of diving down for fish. This depicts the concept of movement and is suggestive of the bird's environment and mode of survival. The artist identifies the bird's beautiful colours and makes a study of their placement on the body. The breast fur is covered with light orange and accompanying textural effects that extend to the blue top of the head and feathers at the tail end. Illuminative natural light shines upon the breast and face of the bird and is enhanced by the dark purple background. The artist also captures the seemingly elongated body caused by the motion of flight which enhances the sense of movement.

'*Swallow II*' (Plate 14) is another action-oriented rendition with a good study of shape and form of the bird. The action is depicted by the wide-open beak suggestive of the chirping of birds. The study and application of bright colours is well executed with the simultaneous application of texture on the plumage. The artist also applies light and dark areas as well as shadows to enhance the form. Illuminative light effect is also applied which is enhanced by the dark contrasting background. The two paintings done in 2022 demonstrate the artist was interested in studying the action in birds to make the paintings more interesting and captivating making them different from the static pose-like images in other paintings. This interest is also evident in *Plates 9, 15, 20, 30 and 35*.



Plate 15. '*Kingfisher*' (2019)
Oil on Canvas – 80 cm by 100 cm
Source – *The artist*

'*Kingfisher*' (Plate 15) is a unique painting largely because of its subject matter. The Kingfisher dives deep into the water in search of food which is its mainstay. Subsequently, it is essentially an underwater rendition of the Kingfisher bird in action. Colours are, therefore, evident but distorted, textures are undefined since the feathers are soaking wet and the bird is in underwater motion, producing abstract bubbles. The artist attempts to depict the bird with a sense of detail compatible with its environment. The background is the plain blue of the water mass. Although this painting was executed in 2019 and is, therefore, one of the first ones, it bears the hallmarks of the articulation of developed skill which the artist subsequently utilizes in depicting birds in other drier environments.



Plate 16. '*Lilac breasted roller*' (2021)
Oil on Canvas – 25 cm by 25 cm
Source – *The artist*

'*Lilac breasted roller*' (Plate 16) is a striking painting that shows the application of beautiful colours of the bird. The colours also show their respective colour tones as well as the skilful use of thin brushstrokes to create the texture of coloured feathers. Colour is a unique element of art and design; in this case, therefore, the different colours and textures are skilfully applied simultaneously to depict the beauty and character of the bird. The form of the bird itself is studied in great detail to resemble its referent as closely as possible. The background is more of an experimentation with harmonious colours rather than the dark contrasting colours that have been used elsewhere. The bird is perched on a wide metal tube.

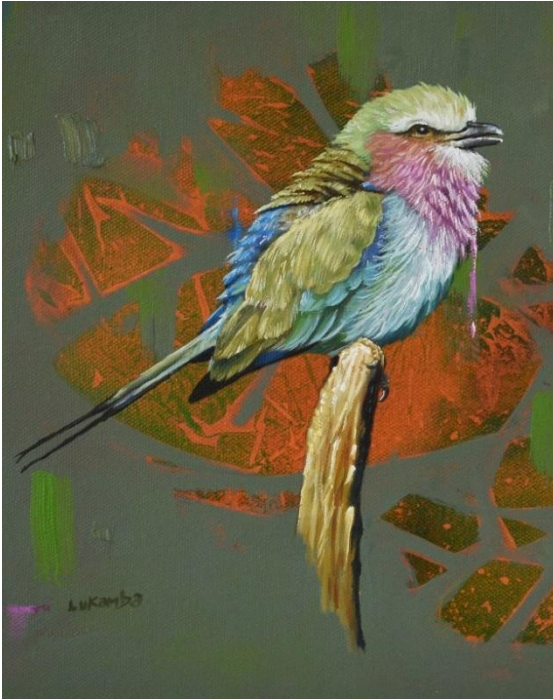


Plate 17. '*Lilac breasted roller II*' (2022)
Oil & ink on Canvas - 30 cm x 30 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 18. '*Long tailed fiscal*' (2022)
Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*

'*Lilac breasted roller*' (Plate 17) is a well-executed painting showing the beauty of textural effects on feathers as well as the use of colours and colour tones. However, the painting is very similar in execution to that of the same bird (Plate 16) although they were painting one year apart. This suggests that within the intervening time, there did not occur any profound enhancement of skill and that the artist applied the same skill set in colour choice and application, colour tones, effect of light and textural effect on the plumage, shape, detailing and composition.

'*Long tailed fiscal*' (Plate 18) by its own nature does not possess much colour since it has a white coating of breast fur and black feathers. The background is plain green in colour creating a reverse contrast to the black and white of bird and, hence, making it stand out. The study of shape and form of the bird are well articulated with adequate detailing similar to earlier paintings. It is notable that Plates 17 and 18 were painted in the same year and, hence, showing a consistency of skill.



Plate 19. '*Paradise Flycatcher*' (2021)

Oil on canvas - 30 cm x 30 cm

Source – *The artist*



Plate 20. '*Peeping fisher*' (2022)

Oil on canvas - 30 cm x 30 cm

Source – *The artist*

In '*Paradise Flycatcher*' (Plate 19) the artist follows the same approach in the articulation of his skill in painting the bird. The use of a dark background to create a stark contrast was mainly used from 2021 through to 2022 but the idea was evident in the earlier paintings in 2019. The bird is meticulously painted showing the study of the colours of the bird and minute textural effects on the head and feathers as well as breast fur. The use of tones and shadows enhance the physical appearance of the bird. The illuminative effect of natural light is particularly effective in this painting making the bird stand out beautifully as if artificial light is being directed at it. This effect is extended to the perch.

The viewer may not notice any difference in the stylistic approach between '*Paradise Flycatcher*' (Plate 19) and '*Peeping fisher*' (Plate 20) though they were painted one year apart. Although they are different, the birds happen to have similar colour compositions and textural effects on their plumage which the artist studies and captures very well. The artist also uses the illuminative effect of light in both paintings in order to highlight the presence and character of the birds. In terms of the display of skill, there is absolutely no difference in the way the two birds are artistically presented and points, therefore, to the consistency of skill. In Plate 20, the artist continues to use a dark background to make the bird pop out.



Plate 21. '*Pink Robin*' (2020)
Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – The artist

'*Pink Robin*' (Plate 21) is a captivating painting of this colourful bird. The artist again applies the main tenets that underscore his skill and style upon which he bases his paintings. The upper part of the bird, including the head, is done in a dark blue colour which is detailed with minute brush strokes and appears both silky and shiny. The same effect is applied to the breast of the bird although he uses a softer effect that denotes the pink softness of the fur and the edges of white. The rest of the feathers are done in a dark grey texture. The illuminative effect of light falling on the bird and the tree branch together with the corresponding shadows are all well executed helping to create a three-dimensional effect of the bird as well as emphasizing the beauty of the bird's form. The dark background makes the colourful bird stand out on its perch. It is, however, notable that this detailed painting was done in the earlier years (2020) and compared to later years, for instance with *Plate 17* (2022), the skill appears to have been consistent rather than transformed.



Plate 22. '*Prinia*' (2022)
Oil on canvas - 30 cm x 30 cm
Source – The artist

'*Prinia*' (Plate 22) shows comparatively little colour although the skill set is similar and the execution of the painting is well done with fine textural effects on the feathers and the breast fur. Natural light reflects upon the white fur of the bird and shines upon the tree branch from the right of the picture plane. The shape and form of the bird are well executed and although the tone of the background is lighter than in *Plate 21*, it still creates adequate contrast to bring out the form of the bird. Visually, the bird in *Plate 21* may be construed to be more striking or dramatic, even though it was done two years earlier than that in *Plate 22* indicating that the level of skill had already been developed and set by that time. It is important to note that if the painting of a bird appears more appealing than an earlier rendition, then the logical conclusion is that the applied skill did not transform.



Plate 23. '*Rufous Sparrow*' (2021)

Oil on canvas - 30 cm x 30 cm

Source – *The artist*

'*Rufous Sparrow*' (Plate 23) is a beautifully painted bird and although it lacks striking colours, it is executed with minute details showing patterned plumage and soft breast fur. The artist accurately studies the shape of the bird and continues to use tones and shadows to depict its form. He also uses an element of illumination with some natural light falling upon the bird. Although the bird as the focus of the painting stands out because of the emphasis of darker tones that cause its three-dimensional appearance, the background, including the rocky perch, blend with the colour of the bird rather than forming a contrast like in *Plate 21*. This blending of background and form that creates just enough contrast to differentiate between the two is an interesting sub-skill, akin to making out a form in a misty background. The painting was done in 2021 demonstrating that the skill was already well refined by this point in time.

In '*Scarlet Robin II*' (Plate 24) the artist depicts the textural effect of feathers and studies the colour and tones accordingly. He also studies the poise and



Plate 24. '*Scarlet Robin II*' (2021)

Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm

Source – *The artist*

character of the bird very well. The word 'character' as used in the descriptions of birds in this paper is not akin to human character, but carries the descriptive natural tendencies of the respective bird which can be visually implied. It is, of course, impossible to visually project a behavioural tendency of a bird through painting since it has no defined facial expressions or deliberate gestural poses, but it can be suggested or deduced by the poise or 'action' of the bird in a painting. For example, in *Plates 13* and *15*, the action of the two Kingfisher birds is suggestive of their natural behavioural tendency, that is, they dive deep into the water body in order to catch fish and, therefore, they are bound to be naturally swift. The poise of a bird in a painting may suggest that the bird is alert and restless as would naturally be observable. Although the background in this painting tends to blend in with the orange colour of the bird, the artist uses the black of the head and the top feathers to create a linear contrast with the background and, hence, makes the bird stand out against the otherwise similar background.



Plate 25. 'Scarlet Robin III' (2021)
Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – The artist



Plate 26. "Scarlet Robin IV" (2022)
Oil & Ink on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – The artist

'Scarlet Robin III' (Plate 25) is similar in execution to 'Scarlet Robin II' (Plate 24). The artist uses the same skill set which include similar colour application and textural effect on the plumage. These paintings were done in the same year so it is not expected that they would be different; apart from the angle of the head it is basically a repetition of the same bird. This implies that once a skill has been set to be able to achieve a certain artistic task, paintings done within the same year are not bound to display differences in skill and, hence, the one-year lapse of time is not sufficient to change the fundamentals of that skill. Subsequently, painting of the birds or, perhaps, any subject matter is bound to be similar.

'Scarlet Robin IV' (Plate 26) is part of the continuation of the 'Scarlet Robin' series and this one was done in 2022. Again, the study sought to find out if there exists any visual difference between the paintings done in different years in terms of application or enhancement of skill which is observable. It was noted that apart from the experimentation with aspects of the background, the paintings of the birds remain similar to the previous ones. The artist himself acknowledges that this is perhaps true since he did not apply any new techniques and followed the same tenets of his skill and personal style as they normally manifest.



Plate 27. "*Scarlet Robin* ' (2021)
Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 28. '*Sparrow*' (2021)
Oil on canvas - 25 cm x 25 cm
Source – *The artist*

"*Scarlet Robin* ' (Plate 27) is a well painted bird that, however, shows no difference in the application of skill from the other Scarlet Robin series. The shape and form of the bird perched on a section of a barbed wire are well studied and is consistent with the other paintings. The artist uses colour and colour tones, textural effects, and shadows to depict the bird itself and uses a dark background to create a contrast that enhances the form. Apart from the slight differences in the angle of pose, it can be said that the birds depicted in the Scarlet Robin series (Plates 27, 25 and 24), all done in 2021, are similar in execution and application of skill. In addition, it can also be said that even the painting of the same bird (Plate 26) displays no

marked difference although it was done one year down the line.

'*Sparrow*' (Plate 28) with an inverted angle of pose is painted with minute textural details of the breast fur and feathers. Sparrows lack striking colours and the artist, therefore, only suggests the light orange and greys that comprise the colours. The background is a contrasting blue colour rather than a contrasting dark tone as used in *Plate 27*; at times, certain selected colours can provide the necessary contrast to enhance a given form without that colour bearing a very dark tone and utilizing only the effect and the strength of the colour itself.



Plate 29. *'Speckled Mouse Bird'* (2021)
Oil on canvas - 30 cm x 30 cm
Source – *The artist*

'Speckled Mouse Bird' (Plate 29) is a painting of a cluster of birds where the skill involves the use of textural effects on the plumage and the use of illuminative light emanating from the left side of the picture plane and shining upon the breast fur of three of the birds. This enhances their three-dimensional illusionary effect that makes them stand out against the slightly dark background. The peculiar pose of the birds is part of the behavioural study of birds displayed by the artist in some of the paintings.



Plate 30. *'Splendid Wren'* (2022)
Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*

'Splendid Wren' (Plate 30) depicts the white appearance of the birds and the skill emphasizes the stretched-out feathers with their veins of blue as well as the textural appearance of the breast fur of both the birds. The artist also uses a variety of tones and shadow effects to enhance the forms that also enables him to create a detailed study of the birds. The white of the birds naturally shines against the background which helps them to stand out. The pose displayed by the birds may suggest some form of courtship.



Plate 31. '*Superb Fairy Wren II*' (2021)
Oil on canvas - 30 cm x 30 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 32. "*Superb Fairy Wren III*" (2021)
Oil on canvas - 24 cm x 24 cm
Source – *The artist*

'*Superb Fairy Wren II*' (Plate 31) is a pleasant painting due to its bright blue and white colouring and execution of detail which is consistent with the artist's style in bringing out the physical nature of the specific bird. The illuminative element applied on the bird helps to focus attention on the textural effects used to depict the plumage where the minute brushstrokes are well emphasized. The use of tonal variations and suggestion of shadows help to enhance the bird's form making it naturalistic and active. The background is moderately dark to create an adequate contrast to make the bird stand out as intended.

'*Superb Fairy Wren III*' (Plate 32) again demonstrates the artist's skill in depicting the shape and form of the bird, the meticulous study of detail,

particularly, the study of the textural effect of the feathers and fur. This bird has a different colour rendition to the previous one (Plate 31) although they are of the same species. The application of tones and shadows is very well articulated and it is observable that although these effects are repeated in every painting and are, therefore, spontaneous in application, the artist renders each in such a manner that every bird is captivating and draws visual attention to itself as a new artistic creation, almost as if each bird bears its own individual character. The painting bears a dark background which creates the necessary contrast that highlights the illuminative effect of natural light that, ultimately, enhances the form. Both of these paintings, done in 2021, demonstrate a well-developed holistic skill set at this point in time.



Plate 33. '*Superb Fairy Wren*' (2022)
Oil on canvas - 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*

'*Superb Fairy Wren*' (Plate 33) is the same bird as the one in *Plate 31* and is, therefore, similar in its blue and white colours as well as in the application of textural effects, tones, and other detailing. The background is, however, composed of a contrasting green colour that serves the purpose of differentiating between itself and the bird, thereby, creating an immediate visual distinctiveness. The artist repeats the use of distinct colours as a background in some of the paintings as shown in *Plates 3, 11* and *28*. The large red flower is a distractor and competes for space with the bird itself; it is not a contributory factor in enhancing the artist's skill in the context of this painting.



Plate 34. '*Swallow I*' (2022)
Oil on canvas – 20 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*

'*Swallow I*' (Plate 34) is a painting of a brightly coloured bird but seems to lack the minute textural details on the feathers that characterize earlier paintings. This is not necessarily a deviation of skill but probably a touch with a different type of brush or surface that produced an impressionist kind of effect that also helped to illuminate the perched bird. The artist, however, continues to use a dark, plain background to create the desired contrast to enhance the form of the bird. These two paintings done in 2022, still show a consistency of skill from earlier paintings but not a distinctive enhancement.



Plate 35. '*Bickering Swallows*' (2020)

Oil on canvas - 50 cm x 35 cm

Source – *The artist*



Plate 36. '*Blue Bird*' (2020)

Oil on canvas – 30 cm x 30 cm

Source – *The artist*

'*Bickering Swallows*' (Plate 35) is a good study of 'gestural action' in birds. Birds, unlike human beings are not aware of gestures or expressions since they do not pose to express them but they do engage in actions that suggest certain expressions such as excitement, irritation, or displeasure. Therefore, the use of the word 'gesture' in this context is only illustrative rather than formal. The artist studies the two birds in meticulous detail including colour and textural effects, and the faces are rendered in such a manner as to suggest active communication between them or 'bickering' in this case. The background is light and plain demonstrating that when the forms are well painted with emphasized tones and shadows as well as clearly defined edges, the contrast created is just as effective as when the background is very dark. It is notable that the skill displayed in this painting is outstanding and well defined even though it was one of the first ones, painted in 2020.

'*Blue Bird*' (Plate 36) is a superbly painted bird with fine details and a clear description of the bird's shape and form. In terms of the application of skill

on this particular painting (painted in 2020) when compared to later paintings such as *Plate 12* or *Plate 22* (painted in 2022) for instance, there is no fundamental difference on account of time. The artist uses the same skill set in the application of colours, tones, textural effects on plumage, shadows, illuminative light, and command of specific detail. The background colour remains light and although it is in harmony with the blue upper feathers, the painting of the bird itself is executed in a manner that makes it stand out from this background. The artist tended to shift to darker backgrounds in later paintings. *Plates 35* and *36* as well as an even earlier painting, *Plate 3* (painted in 2019) are important in demonstrating that once a skill has been developed to a certain extent and the artist is confident that it helps him or her to meet certain artistic tasks, it is unlikely that that skill will transform drastically within a number of years. This situation may change if there is a new task which may necessitate the application of a new technique.

Sketches/Drawings



Plate 37. 'Lilac breasted roller' (2021)
Charcoal/Pencil on toned paper – 30 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 38. 'Lilac breasted roller' (2021)
Oil on Canvas – 25 cm x 25 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 39. 'Chestnut' (2019)
Charcoal/Pencil on toned paper – 30 cm by 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 40. 'Chestnut' (2019)
Oil on canvas - 45 cm x 35 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 41. '*Kingfisher V*' (2022)
Charcoal/Pencil on toned paper – 30 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 42. '*Sparrow*' (2021)
Charcoal/Pencil /toned paper – 30 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 43. '*Paradise Flycatcher*' (2021)
Charcoal/Pencil on toned paper – 30 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 44. '*Peeping fisher*' (2022)
Charcoal/Pencil on toned paper – 30 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 45. '*Prinia*' (2022)
Charcoal/Pencil/ toned paper – 30 cm by 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 46. '*Pink Robin*' (2020)
Charcoal/Pencil on toned paper – 30 cm by 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 47. '*Barn Swallow*' (2022)
Charcoal/Pencil on toned paper – 30 cm by 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 48. '*Kingfisher II*' (2021)
Charcoal/Pencil on toned paper – 30 cm x 20 cm
Source – *The artist*



Plate 49. 'Rufous Sparrow' (2021)
Charcoal/Pencil/ toned paper – 30 cm by 20 cm
Source – The artist



Plate 50. 'Superb Fairy Wren' (2022)
Charcoal/Pencil/ toned paper – 30 cm by 20 cm
Source – The artist



Plate 51. 'Speckled Mouse Bird' (2021)
Charcoal/Pencil/ toned paper – 30 cm by 20 cm
Source – The artist



Plate 52. 'Great Tit' (2021)
Charcoal/Pencil/ toned paper – 30 cm by 20 cm
Source – The artist

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

After careful scrutiny of the work presented in this paper, the following observations became apparent. Observations in art do not always lead to concretized conclusions about the artist and his or her work but they help provide impetus towards a better

comprehension of how, in each case, the application of skills in a body of work help to make that work more visually attractive, expressive or meaningful depending on a number of artistic factors. The application of skill or a set of skills in the creation of a work of art is complex since it is viewed, often subjectively, from many perspectives but

fundamentally good skill often leads to commensurately good work. The study subsequently observed that:

In the application of certain painting skills that pertained to the representation of the painted birds in this study, the artist continuously sought to focus on a set of skills necessary for his desired outcome. These were evidently textural study, the application of colour, the effect of colour tones, the study of detail, the use of shadows, the illuminative effect of natural light that brought the birds to life, the choice of backgrounds as well as the adjunct study of the environment in which the birds exist. The artist intertwined these skills to produce paintings that showed a deliberate effort towards both sustaining and refining the holistic skill necessary to achieve all the above. Subsequently, although there is always the tendency to view skill as a holistic entity of unique artistic ability, it is probably better appreciated when broken down into the various sub-skills that the artist chooses to apply. These sub-skills are, of course, interrelated and are applied both simultaneously and spontaneously; but in the artist's mind, they are critical components that are creatively juxtaposed to achieve the entirety of composition. For the purpose of determining the artistic essence of the use of each of these sub-skills in the execution of the bird paintings, this study sought to examine each one of them as applied in the paintings and observed the following:-

Shape and Form

As is expected of any painted representation of a known living entity, it was observed that the artist keenly studied the shape of each bird that ultimately depicted its form as it exists as closely as it can be made to resemble its natural referent. In painting, sketching the 'correct' shape of a particular bird is an essential sub-skill towards the holistic painted form. Shape is, therefore, a key element and applying it correctly and getting it right in a painting is a vital skill; if the shape of a particular bird, in this case, is incorrect, then that bird is undefinable and

all subsequent detailing upon the shape, including colour and texture, become inconsequential.

Textural Study

It was observed that the textural details of the feathers and delicate fur were executed using minute, thin brushstrokes. There was also the careful textural study of other accompanying objects like twigs, barks of trees, barbed wire and other natural items which were part of the compositions. Texture as an element of art is particularly important in the study of birds and other animals because of the depiction of feathers, fur, rough or scaly skin patches, horns and other unique manifestations. But beyond its role as an element, the way in which it is rendered makes its application a skill that differs from artist to artist and can make art works essentially different yet very fascinating.

Study of Detail

The painting of individual birds was observed to be based on the keen study of the physical peculiarities that helped to distinguish each bird and give it its character. Such peculiar details as the demarcation of feathers and fur, the unique colours of the bird, the type of beak, the location of the eyes, the size of the head, the claws and body size demonstrated the skill of observing minute details without which the birds might not have been such convincing naturalistic studies.

Application of Colour

The artist showed adequate comprehension of the choice and usefulness of colours in the description of the respective birds, irrespective of the year of painting. This implied that this particular skill was used consistently and, perhaps, marginally enhanced over the years. The ability to choose and apply these colours with their uniqueness can, therefore, be attributable to the artist's skill beyond mere referencing as shown in all the paintings. However, some colours stood out more than others; for example, the birds depicted in *Plates 10, 16, 17,*

19 and 21 show the use of robust, brilliant colours and the ability by the artist to capture their unique beauty.

Effect of Colour Tones

Colours are usually applied simultaneously with their respective tones in the execution of any work of art. In this study, the painting of birds is, perhaps, better appreciated when the colour tones are isolated and viewed from the point of view of their own strength. The skill in the use of colour tones is found in their blending such that the artist is able to emphasize fullness of form, textural effects and shining effects of light, without losing the essence of colour. The painting of birds normally entails such presence of skill since certain birds have such beautiful colours yet the birds themselves have to be painted in their fullness as natural living things; without colour tones, the birds would appear flat even with colour. In the paintings, colour tones were used in all the paintings but some paintings underscored the skill more than others. For example in *Plate 17*, the artist presented different tones of blue, brown and pink colours without losing the colours themselves. These tones helped in demarcating the feathers and their positioning on the bird form yet creating a feeling of roundness that made the individual bird sprout to life. In *Plate 27*, the orange of the bird's breast is presented in a variety of tones that depict the roundness of the bird itself as well as showing spots upon which the light is shining. Tonal contrasts, hence, remain important in how the viewer ultimately views the painting and the impact it generates. To emphasize this, Boddy-Evans (2019) notes that, "Value or tonal contrast creates visual interest or excitement in a painting. A high-key painting is one in which the contrasts in value or tone are extreme, from black right through the range of mid-tones down to white. A low-key painting is one in which the tonal range is narrower".

Illuminative Effect of Natural Light

The ability to effectively show the effect of shining light in paintings is often taken for granted in many genres. However, in this study, when its application in highlighting the nature of individual birds was keenly observed, it emerged that it was not just an application but a sub-skill. This is shown in all the paintings but the effect is more profound in some of the paintings. In studying the use of textural effects, particularly on the feathers of the birds, the artist simultaneously used light to illuminate certain parts making the feathers shine and, hence, helping to enhance the form of the bird. For example in *Plates 3*, the illuminative effect of natural light is applied upon the textural effect of the feathers to create a vibrant bird. This effect is also predominant in *Plates 9, 10, 13, 19, 20 and 21*. It can be said that the skillfulness with which these light effects are applied denotes a deliberateness of execution that emanates from the hands of the artist and is, therefore, synonymous with the skill of that individual.

Use of Shadows, Light And Dark Areas

Where there is the deliberate use of light to create illuminative effects, there will also occur corresponding dark areas including specific shadows. These dark areas seen in visual resonance with the light areas, help to create a feeling of depth, roundness and solidity when applied to a given form. It can be observed that the extent to which an artist is able to effectively apply this symbiotic relationship between light and dark, determines the skill that emerges in the ability to enhance his or her painting. This effect is shown in all paintings but is particularly evident in *Plates 5 and 9*.

Backgrounds and General Composition

The paintings were all well composed with each bird resting well within the picture plane. It was observed that the backgrounds were deliberately painted in order to highlight the birds either by a dark colour tone (*Plates 10, 12*) contrasting plain

colour (*Plate 3,11,23, 28*), wash-like brush stroke effects that do not necessarily distract eye movement (*Plates 6,7*) or suggested patterned effects.

Sketches/Drawings

The usefulness of sketching of the birds as a prelude to the painting was evident and the artist took time to create developed sketches of each of the birds that enabled him to study the shape, form, nature and specificity of each bird before commencing the paintings. Sketching of any work as a prior study is always important and is an integral part of the creative journey. It helps the artist to internalize shapes, textural effects, angles of lighting, as well as light and dark areas or tones which all ultimately underscore the impact of colour application and the essence of the holistic composition. It also helps to enhance observational skills and helps the mind to focus on certain creative strong points including layout, gestural angles and types of environment. Taylor (2021) notes that, "Sketching is actually a tool that helps you to work out your composition. And you will have a better understanding of the subject of the things that you want to paint. And because of sketching, you can identify the important areas you want to include in your painting and you can bring the focus of the viewers in a perfect way".

Sketching can be divided into two broad types; *preliminary* and *developed*. Preliminary sketches lack detailing and are layouts or suggestive drawings that capture only the fundamental aspects of the subject and probable compositional considerations. Developed drawings transform into studies that delve into essential detailing, particularly the enhancement of shapes into forms, textural effects as well as light and dark areas. These are then eventually synchronized with the onset of colour application where the element of value is evidently better guided. It was observed in this study, that prior sketches were drawn and developed into drawings executed in 'commensurate detail' to the eventual paintings and were almost replicas of

the paintings themselves. An artist, as in the case of this study, may often choose to develop his or her drawings to a level that showcases a parallel drawing skill with the purpose of creating drawn studies that stand out and bear a potency of their own; rather than drawings that are executed as a preparation for painting. The well developed drawings involved studies of all the birds that were later converted into the paintings. The drawings captured in detail the the shape and form of each bird, their textural nature, suggestive tones and their compositional attributes.

Drawing is particularly important in helping the artist to work out the appropriate tonal contrasts, first in black and white to create a gray scale and then in colour to create value scales. On the need to draw first before painting, Delagrange (2021) observes that, "If you wish to paint in a representational or figurative manner, then yes, you should learn to draw first, as this will be the foundation of your painterly oeuvre". To underscore why the artist took time to draw in detail and particularly to bring out textural and tonal effects in the detailed drawings, Tanner (2017) further asserts that, "To know how to draw correlates to your ability to compose your painting. In other words, you will be more competent in the composition process; and since drawing is synonymous to seeing and thinking, we should consider drawing in the context of the painting process itself". The variety of drawings executed in charcoal/pencil on toned paper are shown on *Plates 37-52*.

Use of Elements of Art

It became apparent that in interrogating the sub-skills as outlined above, these sub-skills were, of course, in reference to or in tandem with the elements of art as they are known and applied. This indicates that the application of any element directly correlates to the related sub-skill. The significant difference, though, is that an artist may have the wherewithal to comprehend the role of an element and indeed be able to apply it on a canvas, but lack the control,

discipline or even talent required to execute it to a level that is determined to be significantly visually acknowledgeable. For a work of art to be visually acknowledgeable by an audience means that there is evidence of adequate manifestation of the prerequisite 'skill' that culminates in that work being artistically appreciated, which creates its state of 'acknowledgeability'. This is important because the mere application of an element on canvas is not an end to itself; it has to be executed or rendered in a manner that denotes a level of finesse, which ultimately underscores the level of skill. This is why the concept of the possession of skill *or* lack of it is determined by 'levels of skill' in what may be construed to be a 'continuum of skill'; the more there occurs skill of execution, the more impactful the work becomes. At times, this often spurs controversy and debate because of the intervention of subjectivity but the overall argument recurs as true.

Skill Enhancement Over Time

The paintings in this study were painted between 2019 and 2022; it was, subsequently, observed that there was evidently some enhancement of skill in the paintings done during 2021 and 2022. This was particularly evident in the refinement of the textural effect of feathers and the use of the effect of light. However, these quasi-enhancements did not appear to be adequately significant to transform the skill set as displayed in the earlier paintings. Subsequently, it was also observed that what can be termed as the 'original displayed skill' in the execution of these paintings as was manifested in the earlier paintings had already taken root at that time as seen in *Plates 3, 21, 35 and 36*. Hence, even though the artist continued to 'refine' his skill through continuous work in 2021 through to 2022, it appears visually improbable that there would have been a demarcation of time that determined precisely when there occurred a particular type of refinement. This implies then that from the point where skill is determined to have been acquired, that is, the point where an artist work is acknowledged to

continuously and successfully achieve a desired artistic task, the rest of the refinement from that point, henceforth, seems to occur intermittently rather than purposefully. This further implies that any enhancement may occur in individual pieces which does not collectively signify a new level of enhancement.

Saturation of Skill

It was observed that although there was the effort towards enhancement of skill and that this was evidently spread across the years, the overall fundamental skill in the painted birds did not seem to drastically transform. The question arises whether there does indeed occur a point of skill saturation despite constant work or touch-ups on subsequent paintings.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that:

Skill is important in achieving any artistic task. The artist succeeded in his quest to study selected birds through painting in order to depict their beauty, character and environment. In this quest, the artist displayed an articulation of skill consistent with certain artistic tenets that underscore the potency of skill as a visually acknowledgeable tool to achieve certain artistic tasks.

In the acquisition of artistic skill, this study concludes that there is a point of 'severance' from the formative realm of learning to the realm of skillfulness; that is, the point of transformation where one can say that they have acquired the prerequisite skill to perform specific artistic tasks and that they can perform these tasks skillfully and admirably. This is measurable because the displayed skill is acknowledgeable; that is, audiences can view the work and acknowledge that it harbours the visual impact necessary to 'ascertain' that the specified artistic task has been successfully achieved. In painting, this would mean that it meets

the stylistic challenge, expressive hallmark and visual appeal that makes it unique and memorable.

From the point of severance or transformation, the artists then embark on the journey towards enhancement or refinement of skill which, in this context, refers to the effort and ability to augment the already acquired skill with added impetus to make the outcome better. For instance, in the application of colour in painting, an artist may be inclined to use richer, more profound colours than before which make his or her paintings more alive and vibrant; they may wish to find new techniques to make textural effects more appealing and convincing; they may wish to emphasize the use of colour tones and shadows to enhance the feeling of depth; they may wish to enhance backgrounds as a strategy to make their work pop out; they may wish to enhance the effect of lighting in their painting to improve illumination or they may wish to pay more attention to compositional issues in their work.

Constant refinement of skill may culminate in the rejuvenation of personal style over time. In some instances this refinement, particularly upon the onset of experimentation with added techniques, may culminate in a significant shift from one stylistic approach to another. But without drastic new impetus, particularly in terms of introduction of visually viable new techniques, this shift will not occur and the skill remains constant as first acquired.

Although in this study a certain measure of refinement or enhancement of skill does appear to have taken place intermittently or purposefully, whichever the case may have been, the extent to which it was profoundly useful in further transforming the skill that was initially displayed by the artist in the first painting remains inconclusive. It can be concluded, however, that the application of a specific skill in the execution of certain personal painting styles upon a selected subject matter, that specific skill may appear to reach a point of saturation. This means that when a certain skill is

already very well defined and then it is applied to a specified subject matter, that skill appears to retain a level of consistency and may not register significant visual addition or transformation even when exposed to time. This study concludes that this is attributable to the notion of 'specified skill saturation'. This implies that the artist continuously achieved the task of the painting without having to add any extra impetus. For example, it was observed that certain paintings of different birds bore similar textural effects, precision of detail and colour applications even though they were painted in different years and even though the artist kept on adding some form of refinement along the way.

In their realist rendition, the birds looked similar in the level of detail, colour usage, study of texture on the feathers and soft breast fur. It can be concluded that the artist applied the same level of skill in the painting of different birds since it produced the desired outcome without the need to deliberately enhance it in any way. If then a certain skill in painting is used constantly to produce certain successful artistic outcomes which viewers acknowledge to continuously meet the expectations of the task, then that skill can be construed to have reached a point of saturation. However, this must not be mistaken with the general fact that the enhancement of skill does indeed manifest itself at some point due to continued work on it; it is only that the refinement that takes place may not be significant enough, within a certain time frame, to change the fundamental essence of the set skill itself.

As was observed, some of the work in this study that was done in the earlier years (2019, 2020) showed that the fundamental skill in the painting of birds had already clearly manifested itself and had, therefore, taken root. It can be further concluded that although the artist continued pursuing the same subject matter over the subsequent two years and although there appears to have been some skill enhancement in certain aspects of some of his paintings, the fundamental skill, as earlier

encountered in the first paintings, does not seem to have profoundly undergone any transformation. This is suggested, for example, when one examines the skill displayed in earlier paintings (*Plate 3*) painted in 2019 and (*Plates 21, 35 and 36*) all painted in 2020, against later paintings (*Plates 12, 16 and 22*) all painted in 2022.

From the sentiments expressed by the artist, earlier paintings (2019-2020) took much more time to complete while those that were done in later years (2021 – 2022) took lesser time. This implies that in the process of the continuous application of skill, the artist adopted some strategies that helped him gain speed although this did not necessarily enhance the skill or change the visual nature of the paintings. It can, therefore, be said that gaining of speed itself does not affect the level of skill in the execution of the paintings; it only makes it faster to accomplish which is useful for production of work.

It can be concluded that the application of elements in a painting on one hand and the use of skill on the other, have a direct visual correlation. This implies that although elements are tools that artists use in the creation of works of art and any artist picks them as a matter of practice, they may ultimately turn out to be of little consequence if they are not applied with commensurate skill. Hence, this skillful application of elements underscores their visual essence.

As observed earlier, although there occurred some element of refinement of skill over the years in the painting of the birds, it was also observed that these refinements were more or less touch-ups and were, therefore, not transformative upon the set skill or the core skill that manifested itself in the earlier paintings. Although more work needs to be done over a longer period of time to reach a conclusive determination on the matter of the probable onset of skill saturation, this study suggests that there exists a possibility of skill saturation in instances where the artist is no longer challenged to produce results beyond the achievement of the current artistic task.

For instance, in the painting of birds in this study, the artist had attained a level of skill which enabled him to successfully achieve the artistic task, which was to present a naturalistic representation of birds in their environment. The refinement of this skill was subsequently, as observed, only intermittent and not methodical and hence not comparatively impactful, mainly because the artistic task was continuously successfully achieved. It can be concluded, then, that the enhancement or refinement of skill that culminates in the further transformation of that skill may occur only if there is need to meet a new artistic challenge which might necessitate the injection of new techniques.

This study also featured developed drawings of birds that were created as artistic prerequisites of the paintings since they resembled the actual paintings but lacked colour. It can be concluded that preliminary sketches before painting remain important because they help the artist to conceptualize the nature of the paintings including such considerations as composition, aspects of detailing, value, textural effects, background or environment or any other feature that the artist may wish to take prior note of before the application of colour and the onset of final detailing. This is particularly important for naturalistic representation in certain artistic work. However, from the foregoing, it can also be concluded that skilled artists create developed drawings often as studies in their own right that depict the comprehensive study of detail in equal measure. The only visual difference between the drawings and paintings is the presence of colour and colour tones (*Plates 37/38, 39/40*). This implies that in certain tasks, the idea of preliminary sketches for any reason are rendered unnecessary and, therefore, redundant but in other tasks, preliminary sketches and more refined drawings can be very useful in the painting planning process.

Though the objective of this study was not to place the paintings under any category of style, it can be concluded by nature of the work shown that the

artist's style and skill can be described to basically fall under the influence of traditional realism because he uses the paint medium, tools, compositional attributes and precision as they are traditionally applied, with detailed referencing of a photographic source. This kind of realism is not necessarily the same as photorealism in approach since certain techniques were not apparent. The artist, though, uses his skill to paint the images of birds as close as possible to their referent source and their natural appearance. Craven (2019) describes traditional realism as "Straightforward and detached. The painter or sculptor exercises artistic skill without experimentation, exaggeration, or hidden meanings. Abstraction, absurdity, irony, and wit do not play a role because Traditional Realism values beauty and precision above personal expression". When the paintings of the birds are examined, their beauty and precision of execution is apparent and they exhibit no rhetorical inclination.

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