

UNVEILING THE ARTISTIC LEGACY OF PA THOMAS ABIRERO: A WELLSPRING OF INSPIRATION FOR ASPIRING ARTISTS

¹Anthony Eleh and ²Olohor Patricia Ikpide

Corresponding email: ikpideop@dsust.edu.ng,

Department of Fine Art and Industrial Design,

Faculty of Environmental Sciences,

Delta State University of Science and Technology, Ozoro

Abstract

This article examines the artistic legacy of Thomas Awaghoha Abirero, from Ozoro in Isoko North Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. It explores how his diverse body of work serves as inspiration for aspiring artists. Through detailed analysis of nine selected works in sculpture, graphics, textiles, ceramics, painting and sign writing, the study reveals Abirero's exceptional versatility and technical mastery across multiple artistic disciplines. The research employs formal analysis and cultural interpretation to examine works which include "Hunter With His Catch", "Acrobatic Display", "Centre of Attention", "Burden and Grace", "Traditional Mask", "Chieftaincy Beads", "Traditional Hand Fan", "Sign Writing", and "Flower Vase". Each piece demonstrates Abirero's ability to blend indigenous Isoko cultural knowledge with contemporary artistic expression while maintaining aesthetic excellence and social relevance. The findings reveal that Abirero's work operates on multiple levels simultaneously, which are aesthetic, functional, spiritual and cultural, serving as both cultural documentation and philosophical statement. His journey from collaborative work with Chris-Michael Ogholie (1910–2008) through military service to establishing his own successful studio in Lagos exemplifies artistic resilience and entrepreneurial vision. The study identifies eight key dimensions through which Abirero's legacy inspires emerging artists. These are: versatility across media, cultural preservation with contemporary relevance, narrative power, entrepreneurial application, technical excellence, symbolic depth, collaborative values, and adaptive resilience. The study contributes to expanding art historical discourse beyond elite production to recognise vernacular artistic practices that document linguistic patterns, economic systems, aesthetic sensibilities and social values within Nigerian communities.

Keywords: Artistic Legacy, Aspiring Artist, Inspiration Functional works, Cultural Preservative, Aesthetics

Introduction

Awaghoha Thomas Abirero hails from Ozoro, in Isoko North Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. He attended Roman Catholic Primary School in Ozoro and graduated in 1959. According to him, he was born into the arts; his uncles, Mr Ede and Umunina, were practising artists who inspired him. Mr Awaghoha Thomas Abirero later joined Chief Chris-Michael Ogholie in his studio; Chief Ogholie was a well-known artist, who was popularly regarded as the father of art in Ozoro. The duo met through politics, as at then Chief Michael Ogholie was a chairman of a political party known as the National Congress for Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) in Ozoro community. It was during this period that Chief Ogholie discovered that Mr Thomas Abirero was a good artist when he saw some of his works. He then asked him to join him in his art studio so that they could work. In 1965, both artists

collaborated and designed the Roman Catholic signpost in Ozoro, and they were also involved in the production of other aspects of artworks such as painting, weaving, beadwork and carvings. Thomas Abirero learnt carving from Chief Ogholie, and was later contracted by one Chief Lambert to carve a walking stick for him, and to the amazement of his master (Ogholie), he produced a walking stick with his own distinct style. It was a walking stick with a double-headed face decorated with intricate designs.

In 1967, the Nigerian Civil War had started, and the Biafra Army arrived in Ozoro; there were tensions all over the community, and this crumbled business activities, and by 1968 Mr Thomas Abirero enlisted in the Nigerian Army. He joined as a Battalion artist and was taken to Brigade Military Barracks in Asaba. He later became a Military Police Officer in 1972. He was sent on a training course in 1974, and by the end of the training he was posted to Sokoto. While in Sokoto, he was assigned to design the signpost of the Officers' MESS. In Sokoto, he attracted so much patronage from sign writing but was later transferred to Lagos. While in Lagos he continued with his art practice, and he noticed that he was making more money from his artworks compared to his earnings in the military. He then decided to resign voluntarily and established an art studio along Oloyo Drive, before Alaba International Market, Lagos. He delved into wood construction work, where he made furniture with artistic styles and designs embedded in them. According to him, one of his major collectors then was the management of Bovatine Hotel in Lagos. He also produced woven fabrics for tables and chairs, designed wares, and erected billboards, portraits and decorative paintings. He was equally a good sculptor, who carved and moulded human figures.

Geographical location of Ozoro in Delta State Nigeria

Ozoro is the present headquarters of Isoko North Local Government Area of Delta State, which is in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Ozoro is one of the two administrative towns in Isoko. Oral history holds that the people of Ozoro migrated from Benin in the present Edo State, as claimed by the Ozoro Council of Edio. Its population, made up mainly of farmers, civil servants and traders, is now heterogeneous, characterised by anonymity, mobility and transparency with formal relations; therefore, it is an urban area, estimated to be about 186,000 (NPC, 2006). Ozoro is an urban area structured into five administrative quarters, all centred towards Ala Square, with a roundabout at its centre. The roundabout is elevated to form a large base for a monumental sculpture that is marked off with a highly decorated iron fence to further define the remarkable layout (see Figure 1: Map of Ozoro).

Pa' Thomas Abirero as an Inspirational to Aspiring Artists

The works of Thomas Abirero when carefully studied could be classified into some of the major areas of specialization in art; namely, sculpture, graphics, textile, ceramics and painting among others. The works as displayed below had shown a masterly finishing. In Plate 2, the artist Abireroposed in his studio doing what he knows how to do best.



Plate: 2 Picture of Pa, Thomas Awaghoha Abirero
photograph by Eleh Anthony, 2025

Abirero's sculpture "Hunter with his Catch" is a wood carving depicting a male figure kneeling on his left leg while his right leg is slightly straight resting on a wood work attached to the wall carrying a small bush animal (his catch) on his shoulders which symbolises a successful hunting venture. The figure is wearing traditional attire of a short skirt with pattern of decorative lines and a stylised hair style which portrays the typical Yoruba wood carving traditions.



Plate 3: "Hunter With His Catch"

The work is a three-dimensional work which features the human structure with earthy colours from the original wood materials, which creates a warm and organic aesthetic. Abirero's "Hunter with His Catch" depicts everyday life, occupation, ritual and identity in a stylised form; it is also very expressive. The elongated neck and idealised proportions are consistent with traditional African sculptural conventions that prioritise symbolic representation over strict anatomical realism (Cole, 2012). The Hunter is a culturally significant figure across many Nigerian communities, where they symbolise bravery, provision and mastery of ancestral skills. The culture is reflected by the carefully carved details on the attire and the equipment for hunting, which include the cutlass and a locally

fabricated lamp. The dynamic pose of one leg stepping forward suggests movement and purpose. This is a common technique in African sculpture to convey vitality, known in art criticism as formal dynamism (Blier, 2015). The placement of the animal over the shoulder serves as both a storyline and compositional balance, which creates a diagonal line that highlights the piece.

"Hunter with His Catch" is a successful work both aesthetically and culturally. Aesthetically, the sculpture showcases a mastery of wood as a medium, balanced proportions, purposeful stylisation and expressive detail. Culturally, it preserves and celebrates indigenous knowledge, which portrays the hunter as a respected figure who is tied to survival, courage and tradition. The strength of the sculpture lies in its ability to blend narrative content with artistic abstraction. It avoids excessive realism; instead, it focuses on symbolic power and cultural storytelling. In this way, Abirero continues the lineage of African master carvers whose works serve as both documentation and artistic expression.

Abirero's "Acrobatic Display" depicts a vertical composition of three carved human figures which are balanced on top of one another. The lowest figure is firmly grounded and supports the second figure, which is well positioned on its shoulders. The second figure leans forward and extends its arms to enable the third figure to balance its posture. The figure is round and smooth, without detailed facial features. The figures are intertwined and fitted on a round base, which is also positioned on another triangular wooden base with the inscription "Courtesy".



Plate 4: "Acrobatic Display"

The sculpture employs a rhythmic vertical composition and simple abstract forms which are characteristic of African sculpture traditions. African artists commonly use stylisation as a means of focusing on symbolic and emotional expression over realism (Cole, 2012). The interconnected positions of the figures create a strong sense of upward movement and balance. This shows that the sculptor has a mastery of weight distribution and wood carving techniques. The arrangement of the bodies shows the interdependence of the structures, whereby each figure's position is essential for the whole work to be stable. This also mirrors the aesthetics of Isoko mud sculpture, which communicates both social and religious values. The smooth surfaces and rounded limbs emphasise fluidity, while the compact composition reinforces unity and co-operation.

The inscription "COURTESY" suggests that the sculpture is more than an athletic depiction; it also conveys a moral lesson, symbolising mutual support, respect and interdependence, which are values that are profound in many African cultures. The sculpture also reflects the Isoko belief in communal upliftment, in which individuals rise by supporting one another. The upward progression of the figures symbolises striving toward collective achievement. Through this abstract sculpture, Abirero universalises the message, which makes it applicable beyond the context of traditional life.

The work is a demonstration of Abirero's excellent craftsmanship; the figures are proportionally delivered, with good balance and polished surfaces which indicate careful finishing. The vertical arrangement creates a visually dynamic structure that captures movement and tension. The inscription "COURTESY" reminds the viewer of the importance of treating one another with respect. The stylised, faceless figures reinforce the universality of the message, which makes it accessible to diverse audiences. Abirero's work is evidently meaningful, as it is a fusion of aesthetics, technical skill and cultural messaging which places it within the lineage of African sculptural traditions that are didactic, uplifting and preserving of shared values.

Abirero's "Centre of Attention" is a sculptural assemblage that combines wood carving and photographic imagery to create a deeply symbolic visual statement. The artwork features two stylised alligators carved in relief, positioned on either side of a centrally placed framed photograph of a man, most probably the artist himself.



Plate 5: "Centre of Attention"

Their mirrored postures create a sense of stability and reference while their inward facing orientation portrays the theme. The smooth surface quality of the carved wood, combined with the flat surface of the photograph, produce a contrast of textures which has enhanced the visual interest of the work thereby combining traditional wood carving and the modernity of photography.

The brownish tones of the wood align with traditional practices in the South-South Zone of Nigeria particularly the Isoko people where it often serves a memorial or spiritual purpose rather than purely aesthetic ones (Okeke-Agulu, 2023). The Alligators are known as apex predators with powerful jaws and armoured skin. They represent raw strength, protection and the abilities to defend one's boundaries without aggression unless provoked. It

is a family of the crocodilians that represents a balance of earth and water, symbolising the ability to navigate between physical and spiritual realms.

The integration of photography into sculpture reflects a hybrid artistic approach, increasingly common in contemporary African art, where artists merge indigenous forms with modern media to preserve memory and assert identity (Kasfir, 2021). In Isoko cultural context, elders play a central role as custodians of history and tradition; thus the photographic image functions as a site of remembrance and continuity. The Alligators in the artwork do not merely frame the image; they venerate it, which implies that the subject's life embodies ideals worthy of protection and collective attention. By immortalising a human subject through both traditional wood carving and modern imagery, Abirero bridges generational divides and asserts the relevance of indigenous values in contemporary society (Oguibe, 2020).

The work stands as an example of how local artistic practices from communities such as Ozoro in Isoko North, Delta State, can engage global conversations around memory and identity without losing their cultural relevance. Abirero's work serves as an important model for emerging artists by demonstrating that meaningful contemporary art can be rooted in local history, lived experience and indigenous symbolism, while still embracing new materials and methods.

Abirero's "Burden and Grace" is a relief sculpture that presents three female figures carrying water pots on their heads, supported with their left hands with their right hand placed on their waists except for the figure on the right who flinged her right hand. There is another hand with stretched out fingers at the left edge of the work while a seemingly small hut appear at the upper edge of the work with some shrubs at the far end suggests a forest. Two of the figures are wearing beads while the one at the back had no beads. Again, the three figures tied wrappers with a short top which tends to reveal their tummies and all figures are stylised, with no detailed facial features.



Plate 6: "Burden and Grace"

The surface treatment of the work is textured, with visible modelling marks that enhance the tactile quality of the relief. The figure's rigid posture suggests the weight of responsibility and endurance which is typical of the Isoko woman who most of the time carries a lot of family responsibilities, ranging from farming, trading, among other businesses just so she can assist her spouse in training their wards through school. The artwork introduces a duality in such a way that while the physical load signifies hardship, grace suggests spirit, strength, dignity, and divine sustenance. This aligns with African philosophical perspectives that view suffering and perseverance as pathways to moral growth and communal respect (Gyekye, 2021). The upright stance of the figure, despite their burdens, visually reinforces resilience

rather than defeat. The work demonstrates Abirero's ability to translate ordinary lived experiences into enduring visual metaphors.

The relief sculpture is a reflection of human condition within traditional African communities, where endurance is not merely imposed but often embraced as part of one's duty to family and society. The figures' calm expressions and balanced posture implies acceptance and inner strength, suggesting that grace emerges through perseverance.

"Burden and Grace" speaks to contemporary social realities in Nigeria, where economic pressures coexist with faith, hope, and communal solidarity. The work therefore functions as both a cultural document and a philosophical statement on how individuals carry life's weight with dignity (Okeke-Agulu, 2023).

Abirero's carved wooden mask is placed on a two-dimensional yellow background with stylised facial features which are characteristic of African masquerade tradition. The mask is brownish with Prominent facial features such as; rounded eyes with carved eyebrows, a broad nose, and full lips rendered in a naturalistic manner. The mask has a crown and elaborate headdress with geometric features and pattern, including what appears to be an interlaced or knotwork designs that suggest cultural symbolism or status indicators. There are two rectangular ear panels or side pieces that extend outward, which creates a visual field and this adds dimensional complexity to the composition. The panels depict elaborate hairstyles, ceremonial ear ornaments, or other cultural elements. A vertical element extends upward from the crown, possibly serving as an attachment point or representing a ceremonial implement.

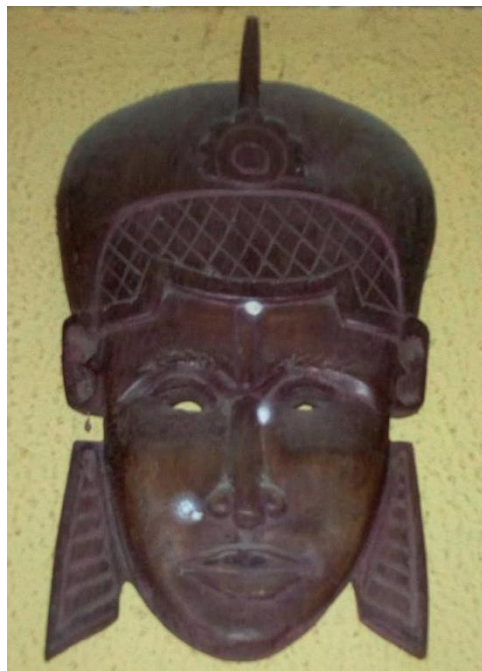


Plate 7: "Traditional Mask"

The mask is a demonstration of African Sculptural traditions that strikes a balance with naturalism and abstraction. It is reminiscent of the "Umanwo", a name of one of the masquerade dances which is reflective of the Ozoro Culture, the home town of the artist. The Traditional Mask portrays the interconnectedness of the visible and invisible realms of the spirit behind the mask. It symbolizes a specific spirit or ancestor with elaborate headdress, suggesting elevated status or authority. The opened eyes, unlike many masks with closed or downcast eyes, suggest active presence and watchfulness potentially indicating a protective or

judicial function within ceremonial contexts. The side panels extending from the face announces the mask's presence beyond the physical realm which symbolizes the influence of the spirit behind the mask. Abirero's mask is a demonstration of craftsmanship and cultural knowledge. It also serves both ceremonial and ritual purposes. The mask symbolizes not merely individual artistic achievement but participation in collective cultural production where the artist serves as custodian and interpreter of tradition (Ben-Amos, 1976). The mask stands as evidence of sophisticated artistic traditions that predate and exist independently of Western aesthetic systems, challenging art historical narratives that marginalise non-western artistic production.

Abirero's "Chieftaincy Beads" depicts two-dimensional beads which are accessories to ceremonial beaded regalia rendered on what appears to be a cream-coloured wall surface. There are about three distinct beads in a dark brown and red colours and boldly outlined. Some of the beads seem to be dropping from a point as if hung on a wall and some appear firm and circular or oval shaped. The lines depicting the outlined beads are repetitive which suggests the texture and dimensionality of beaded strings, creating visual rhythm through the accumulation of parallel lines.

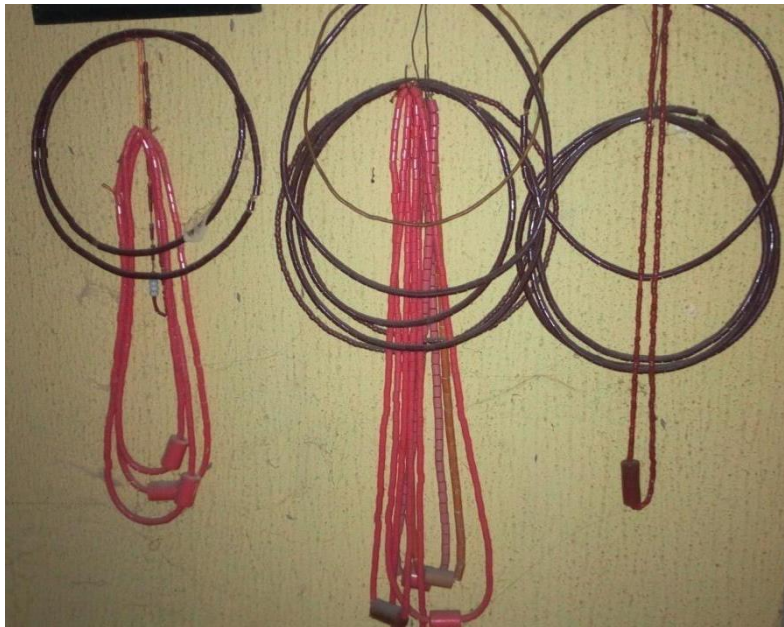


Plate 8: "Chieftaincy Beads"

The work portrays the relativism of documentation, design and cultural preservation. The work suggests the materials or elements and objects of ceremonies of cultures through two-dimensional representation. The use of line to suggest three-dimensional beaded forms demonstrates understanding of how repetition and accumulation create visual texture and implied volume. The choice of red colours for the bead representation carries cultural significance as regards Isoko and broader African contexts where coral beads, which appear red, portray the Chieftaincy titles and ancestral connection. Similarly, the "Igbe" worshipers, which is common among the Isoko and Urhobo people of Delta State, use these beads during worship and other ritual performances. By rendering these objects in red, Abirero signals their cultural importance, ceremonial and spiritual functions.

Chieftaincy Beads in Isoko culture function as markers of authority, lineage and spiritual legitimacy. Traditional rulers and high-ranking chiefs wear elaborate beaded regalia

during ceremonial occasions, with the style, colour and quantity of beads which indicates their specific rank and ancestral connections (Poynor, 1976). By depicting these objects, Abirero engages with systems of power, tradition, and cultural continuity that have survived despite colonial disruption and modernisation pressures.

The work can be interpreted as an act of cultural preservation through visual documentation, participating in long traditions of artists documenting cultural practices. From early ethnographic illustrators to contemporary African artists engaging with heritage, visual representation has served as both preservation strategy and interpretive act (Forster, 2013). “Abirero's Chieftaincy Beads” demonstrates how art serves cultural continuity, operating as simultaneously aesthetic object, educational resource, and cultural archive. The work's value extends beyond formal qualities to include its function within systems of knowledge transmission and cultural preservation.

Abirero's “Traditional Hand Fan” presents an elaborate construction which combines textiles, decorative embellishments and symbol inscriptions. The Fan features a white fabric base, likely cotton or similar material, stretched across a supporting structure to create a roughly circular or shield-shaped surface. The perimeter is edged with luxurious white fur or feather trim that creates a dramatic halo effect, significantly expanding the Fan's visual presence and suggesting movement even in stillness. The central surface bears the inscription, “THE OWHENA OLOGBO OF OZORO” prominently displayed at the centre.



Plate 9: “Traditional Hand Fan”

There are three decorative floral elements in contrasting colours which are gold, brown, turquoise blue, and pink strategically positioned around the text, creating visual balance and chromatic interest. A braided or woven border in red and gold tones frames the inner edge of the white surface, separating the decorated centre from the furry perimeter. The handle

appears to be wrapped in white material, creating continuity with the Fan's overall colour scheme while maintaining functional practicality. The construction demonstrates mixed-media craftsmanship, integrating textile work, appliqué or embroidery, decorative trim, and structural engineering to create a functional object that serves ceremonial and symbolic purposes beyond mere utility.

The "Traditional Hand Fan" is an example of the aesthetic principle of hierarchy in connection with royal and ceremonial arts which is very common with titled men/ women in Isoko Culture. The white, pink and gold colours are also symbolic of Igbe cult worshippers common among the Isoko and Urhobo ethnic groups in connection with their aesthetic and spiritual association portraying purity and divinity. The feather border serves both aesthetic and symbolic functions. Materially, it creates textural contrast with the smooth fabric surface and adds kinetic potential which is the slightest movement that would animate the perimeter, thereby creating visual drama during ceremonial use.

Abirero's "Traditional Hand Fan" with the inscription "THE OWHENA OLOGBO OF OZORO" which translates to "(the great gynaecologist of Ozoro)", suggesting the business or trade of the one who is in custody of the traditional fan. An "OWHENA" in Isoko tradition, is someone who takes care of women who are looking for the fruit of the womb. They tend to be spiritually alert as well as physically alert. This helps them get direction as to how to administer herbs to their patients and at the end get positive results. With this knowledge, they always purify themselves to ensure their herbal medicines go unhindered. This could be suggestive of the white colour which are symbols of authority and aesthetic preferences.

This particular fan appears to have been used in installation ceremonies, festivals, judicial proceedings, and other occasions where chiefly authority requires material manifestation. Each use reinforces both the object significance and the legitimacy of the governance system it represents. Abirero's fan succeeds admirably in its primary functions which is identifying authority, projecting presence and embodying cultural values. The design effectively balances symbolic communication with aesthetic appeal, creating an object that commands attention while remaining legible in its meaning. From conservation and cultural heritage perspectives, the fan symbolizes an important material culture requiring preservation. Such objects document governance systems, aesthetic traditions, and craft knowledge that might otherwise be lost as social structures transform (Kreps, 2003).

Abirero's "Traditional Hand Fan" stands as a testament to the ongoing vitality of African material culture and governance traditions. The work successfully integrates aesthetic excellence with social and therapeutic function, creating an object that operates simultaneously as art, political emblem, cultural archive, and ritual implement. Its preservation ensures future generations can study and appreciate the sophisticated material cultures supporting African political and spiritual systems.

Abiero's "Sign Writing" is a presentation of a text-based composition executed on a green coloured background which is mounted within a wooden frame that is displayed on a wall of probably a studio space of the artist. The sign features a hand-lettered text arranged in four lines which read thus: "THOMMY ABISCO" on the top line, "ART" on the second line, "customers suggestion may be of a good help, on the bottom two lines. The lettering is carried out in cream, red and white colours with decorative flourishing flanking the two top lines. There are small triangular pennants or bunting which are visible, strung across the top of the frame that seems to add a festive appearance to the work. The text contains what appears to be intentional and unintentional orthographic variations: "THOMMY" for "Tommy" or possibly "Thomas", "ABISCO", possibly "Abirero" and "customers" without

apostrophe. These variations raise questions about linguistic choices, literacy contexts, and the relationship between oral and written communication in the sign's production.



Plate 10: "Sign Writing"

This work exemplifies what scholars of visual culture terms "vernacular typography", which means, lettering produced outside professional design systems, emerging from practical need and individual expression rather than formal training (Triggs, 2011). The hand- executed quality signals authenticity and personal investment, contrasting with mechanical reproduction's standardisation. In contemporary Nigerian visual culture, hand painted signage persists as both economic necessity and aesthetic choice, creating distinctive urban landscapes (Stoller, 1996).

The composition employs hierarchical text arrangement to guide viewer's attention and communicate meaning layered across multiple registers. The proper name occupies primary position, establishing identity and ownership, while the emphasised "ART" is a pointer to the profession of the individual, "Thomas Abirero" and collective engagement of the "customers". The concluding statement operates as a philosophy or mission statement, articulating values of collaboration and openness to external input.

Colour usage in the work demonstrates strategic emphasis; the predominant white lettering provides clarity against the green background, while the red "ART" creates focal point and visual interest. The green background suggests a chalkboard connecting the sign to educational contexts and the authority of written instruction. The decorative elements atop the "THOMMY ABISCO" and pennants bunting, transform functional signage into celebratory display. These embellishments situate the sign within broader practices of African sign writing where text and decoration integrate to create visually engaging surfaces (Wendl, 1999).

The sign operates simultaneously as identification, advertisement, and philosophical declaration. The name "THOMMY ABISCO" establishes individual or business identity, claiming space within the commercial or social landscape. In Nigerian contexts where artisanal workshops and small enterprises proliferate, such identification markers serve crucial navigational and economic functions (Barber, 2007). The concluding statement; "customers suggestion may be of a good help" articulates remarkable business philosophy emphasising collaborative production and customer agency. Rather than positioning the artisan as sole authority, the text acknowledges customers as knowledge partners whose input enhances outcomes. The philosophy reflects African economic traditions emphasising relational exchange over purely transactional commerce (Guyer, 2004). The sign's language reflects what Blommaert (2008) describes as "grassroots literacy" which is writing practices that are emerging from practical needs rather than institutional training, carrying its own logic and effectiveness despite divergence from standard conventions.

Abirero's "Sign Writing" succeeds in its primary communicative purpose that has to do with, identifying the establishment and articulating its operational philosophy. The text remains legible despite vernacular execution, demonstrating that effectiveness in communication need not depend on professional polish or standardised conventions. The sign exemplifies what design theorist Papanek, (1971) celebrated as "real world" design which are solutions emerging from actual needs using available resources and skills. The work raises important questions about preservation, documentation, and valuation of vernacular material culture. Such everyday objects typically receive minimal scholarly or institutional attention compared to "fine art" or traditional craft (Attfield, 2000). Yet vernacular signage, documents linguistic practices, economic systems, aesthetic sensibilities, and social values deserving preservation and study. The "Sign Writing" documentation in this analysis contributes to expanding art historical canons beyond elite production. This work ultimately portrays how everyday objects embody complex meanings, demonstrates creative problem solving, document linguistic and economic practices and articulate social values. Abirero's "Sign Writing" deserves recognition because of its vernacular character which provides authentic evidence of how people create meaningful environments using available resources, skills, and aesthetic sensibilities. The sign stands as both functional object and cultural text, rewarding close attention and thoughtful interpretation.

Abirero's carved wooden "Flower Vase" is a distinctive heart-shaped form elevated on a circular pedestal base. The vessel is executed in richly toned wood with warm brown colouration showing visible grain patterns that suggest either a natural patina or applied finish. The front surface bears raised relief text reading "THE LOVE OF GOD", arranged in three lines, with "LOVE" receiving particular emphasis through larger letter size. The text is integrated into the carved surface rather than applied separately, indicating relief carving technique where surrounding material is removed to leave raised lettering. The Vase currently holds an arrangement of artificial flowers in purple, white, and lavender tones, providing chromatic contrast against the warm wood. The heart shape creates symbolic resonance with the textual message, forming a unified visual and conceptual statement.



Plate 11: "Flower Vase"

The pedestal base provides stable support while elevating the vessel, lending ceremonial or devotional character to the overall composition. The wood surface shows smooth finishing with subtle texture variation across the carved relief areas. The object sits on a dark surface with decorative patterns, suggesting domestic or religious display context. The photograph captures the Vase from a frontal perspective that emphasises both the heart form and textual inscription, indicating these elements constitute the work's primary communicative features. The carved vase operates at the intersection of functional craft, religious art, and decorative objects. Formally, the heart shape is one of the universally recognised symbols in human visual culture, transcending specific cultural boundaries while carrying culturally specific meanings (Vinken, 2000). Abirero's choice of this form creates immediate emotional and spiritual resonance before viewers engage the textual content. The integration of text and form reflects increasing textuality in contemporary African material culture. While precolonial African art privileged symbolic and iconographic communication, colonial education introduced literacy that artists subsequently incorporated into visual practice (Barber, 2007). Religious messages in particular proliferated across African material culture as Christianity became indigenous and visual culture adapted to express faith commitments (Meyer, 2004).

The phrase "THE LOVE OF GOD" carries specific theological resonance within the Christian doctrine, referencing divine love's centrality to Christian cosmology. "THE" suggests not merely love directed toward God but God's love as theological concept and experienced reality; what Christian theology terms *agape*, unconditional divine love for humanity (Nygren, 1953). The Vase functions as material embodiment of faith, transforming abstract theological concepts into tangible domestic objects. In contexts where religious practice permeates daily life rather than confining to designated sacred times and spaces, such objects serve as constant reminders of spiritual commitment and divine presence (Meyer, 2010). The Vase's placement in domestic settings would continually assert God's love as foundational reality shaping household existence. The object can be interpreted as visual testimony which is a public declaration of Christian faith and theological conviction. In Nigerian contexts where religious identity constitutes a crucial social marker, material culture displaying religious affiliation performs important identity work (Marshall, 2009). The Vase is more or less an announcement of the household's Christian commitment to residents and visitors, establishing the moral and spiritual character of domestic space. The heart form invites interpretation beyond Christian symbolism. Hearts signify romantic love, familial human experiences. By combining heart shape with divine love message, the Vase suggests continuity between human love experiences and divine love, making abstract theology emotionally accessible through familiar symbols. This strategy reflects inculturation processes where Christianity adapts to local cultural idioms (Shorter, 1988).

Abirero's "Flower Vase" has another meaning aside from being a flower holder. Flowers are symbols of beauty, life, growth, and natural blessings across cultures. Fresh or artificial flowers in the vase create a living tableau where natural beauty frames and reinforces the theological message which is God's love manifesting through creation's beauty. From material religion perspectives, the vase exemplifies how religious practice involves physical objects, bodily practices, and sensory experiences rather than purely intellectual belief (Morgan, 2010). The integration of text and form represents thoughtful design synthesis. Rather than treating text as mere surface decoration applied to arbitrary form, Abirero unifies verbal and visual meaning; heart shape and love message reinforce each other, creating coherent symbolic statements. This unity of form and content reflects design principles advocated by theorists from the Bauhaus to contemporary practice (Droste, 2002). From religious studies perspectives, the Vase represents broader patterns in African

Christianity's material culture, the proliferation of religious objects for domestic display, the textualisation of religious messages, and the adaptation of local craft traditions to Christian content (Hackett, 1998).

Abirero's "Flower Vase" demonstrates how Christianity becomes materially embedded in African contexts rather than remaining purely textual or institutional religion. The work symbolizes successful integration of craft skill, religious expression, and functional design. The Flower Vase serves its intended audiences effectively while demonstrating cultural creativity and adaptive tradition. Though modest in scale and materials, the vase embodies significant cultural patterns which have to do with religious indigenisation, craft continuity, domestic devotion, and material testimony. The work deserves recognition not as a minor decorative craft but as a culturally meaningful object worthy of serious attention and interpretation.

His Works as Inspiration to Aspiring Artists

Pa Thomas Abirero's artistic legacy serves as a profound wellspring of inspiration for aspiring artists in multiple dimensions:

Versatility and Mastery Across Media: Abirero's work demonstrates exceptional versatility across sculpture, graphics, textiles, ceramics, painting, and sign writing. His ability to master diverse artistic disciplines shows emerging artists that creative excellence is not confined to a single medium but can flourish through exploration and experimentation.

Cultural Preservation and Contemporary Relevance

Through works like "Traditional Mask," "Chieftaincy Beads," and "Traditional Hand Fan" Abirero demonstrates how artists can serve as custodians of cultural heritage while remaining relevant in contemporary contexts. His art bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, showing aspiring artists that indigenous knowledge and contemporary practice can coexist harmoniously.

Narrative Power and Social Commentary: Works such as "Burden and Grace" and "Acrobatic Display" reveal how art can communicate complex social values, moral lessons, and everyday realities. Aspiring artists learn that meaningful art transcends mere aesthetic appeal to become a vehicle for cultural storytelling, philosophical reflection, and social documentation.

Entrepreneurial Spirit and Practical Application

Abirero's journey from military service to establishing his own studio demonstrates the viability of art as both vocation and livelihood. His sign writing work and furniture design show how artistic skills can be applied practically while maintaining creative integrity which is an essential lesson for artists seeking sustainable careers.

Technical Excellence and Craftsmanship

The "masterly finishing" evident in Abirero's sculptures, from "Hunter With His Catch" to "Centre of Attention," sets a standard of technical excellence. His attention to detail, understanding of materials, and commitment to quality craftsmanship inspire emerging artists to pursue mastery in their chosen mediums.

Symbolic Depth and Layered Meaning: Abirero's ability to embed multiple layers of meaning in works like "Flower Vase" (which combines religious devotion, functional design, and cultural symbolism) teaches aspiring artists that successful artwork can operate on multiple levels simultaneously as aesthetic, functional, spiritual, and cultural.

Community Connection and Collaborative Values

His sign writing stating "customers suggestion may be of a good help" reflects a philosophy of collaboration and openness. This approach shows emerging artists the value of community engagement and co-creation rather than isolated artistic production.

Resilience and Adaptability

Abirero's ability to continue creating through Nigeria's civil war, military service, relocation, and changing economic conditions exemplifies artistic resilience. His story inspires aspiring artists to persist through challenges and adapt their practice to changing circumstances.

Conclusion

Pa Thomas Abirero's artistic legacy proves that authentic, culturally-rooted artistic practice can achieve both aesthetic excellence and social relevance. His work demonstrates that artists can honour tradition while embracing innovation, serve their communities while building sustainable careers, and create beauty while preserving cultural memory. For aspiring artists, particularly those from Ozoro, Isoko, and broader Nigerian contexts, Abirero's legacy affirms that local knowledge, indigenous techniques, and vernacular expressions possess equal validity and value to globally-recognised artistic traditions. His life's work stands as testament to the transformative power of dedication, versatility, and cultural commitment in artistic practice.

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