

Documenting the Birth of an Art Tradition: The Case of Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba.

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ABSTRACT

Every community needs a standardising body to regulate and prod its exuberance and flare for the arts and aesthetics. A guiding watchman that sets the tone of the visual perceptions and interactions of its people. Promoting the classic symbols of a society that is evolving with dynamism. An authority that can engender the kind of facelift that draws quality visitors that will keep it relevant as well as retain the cream of the land from exiting indefinitely. Asaba, the Delta State capital is strategically located on the banks of the river Niger. It has as a community, for decades yearned for higher institution, especially a degree awarding institution. This cry and longing finally came to fruition in 2021 when Dennis Osadebay University (DOU) was established alongside two others in Delta state. Since its inception, DOU, particularly through its Department of fine and Applied arts, has traced a laudable history in its short existence through its Fine and Applied arts department. What began as tentative steps has quickly evolved into significant strides. The study adopted a qualitative, descriptive methodology with a case study approach. It relied on historical records, institutional narratives and contextual narratives to document the inception and growth of the Fine and Applied Arts department.

Keywords: Asaba, Visual, Literacy, Aesthetics, Art Department

1. Introduction

On 27th August, 1991 Delta State of Nigeria was carved out of the former Bendel State and parts of the former Rivers State in Nigeria. It used to be an integral part of the former Mid-Western Region and later the defunct Bendel State. Asaba is the capital city of Delta State of Nigeria (NigeraGalleria, 2021). It lies strategically along the west bank of the famous River Niger, across the historic Niger Bridge from Onitsha. It is believed to have been founded by Nnebisi in the 19th century. It was once the colonial capital of southern Nigeria and a renowned trade centre that hosted the Royal Niger Company between 1886 – 1900 (Asaba, n.d.). The city which previously had nine (9) quarters ‘*Ahaba ebo ite nani*’, made up of settlers from different places was believed to have been eventually founded on the basis of five (5) quarters named after the five grandsons of Nnebisi, namely – Umuezei, Ugbomanta, Umuagu, Umuaji and Umuonaje (Association, n.d.). Asaba had existed since its inception as a state capital without a degree awarding institution of higher learning. The closest it came was the presence of the Federal College of Education and the Anwai campus of the Delta State University, Abraka; but these were not full-fledged university degree awarding institutions.

Dennis Osadebay University was among the three Universities instituted by the Delta state government under the executive governorship of His Excellency Dr Ifeanyi Okowa in 2021. Fine and Applied Arts started as a program in the Faculty of Environmental Sciences in March 2022. The department started with only one staff and two students at inception. Edna Ojieh, a dynamic painter was the first teaching staff who welcomed the pioneer students – Peter Oghenefega Asoro and Emmanuella Somtochukwu Mokwenye who are now set to graduate in a few months. She officially resumed duty on the 22nd of February, 2022, although lectures commenced about a month later. She was the pioneer acting Coordinator at the time and had to make numerous sacrifices, going the extra mile and learning on the job to enable the department take shape and gain root (Ojieh, 2025). From the first official day of resumption, Professor Christopher Chukwuji of the Faculty of Agriculture briefly served as acting

Dean of before being succeeded by Professor Godwin Idoro of the department of Building, University of Lagos, who was on sabbatical. For the first eight months, OJIEH was the sole lecturer in the department, teaching all the departmental courses apart from General Studies. Since it was a foundation class, practical work was minimal, except in the basic design areas. She introduced the students to elements and principles of art and this helped them create designs in textile as well as relate with sculpture, painting and other fields from this simple basic foundation (Ojieh, 2025).

Emphasis on this foundational aspect provided a solid boost to the students' subsequent learning experience. In the course of development, Mr Godspower Efih (15th September, 2022), a versatile sculptor described as "one-man sculpture squad", joined the department. He was soon followed by Dr Chika ThankGod (3rd November, 2022), a seasoned studio graphist and advertising specialist. Thereafter, Mr Partrick Idiakporvwie (22nd November, 2022), a committed ceramist and potter, became part of the team. Completing this initial cohort was the incumbent Acting Head of Department, Dr. Chuka EBODILI (4th January, 2023) – a ceramist, art historian and administrator (Ojieh, 2025).

2. Developments in the Department

In another wave of employment, the department welcomed Miss Rina Onyeme (13th June, 2024), a graphics and digital media designer; Mr Uchekukwu Ogum (2nd September, 2024), a graphic designer and professional digital photographer; Mrs Nora Ebikefe (23rd September, 2024), a textile designer; and another digital graphics designer Miss Abigail Ogunyega (17th December, 2024). At Dennis Osadebay University, art is taught art with both personal and professional commitment, enabling students to develop a deep and genuine appreciation for the discipline. Many of the students are groomed from ground up, as a significant number had never formally studied art but possessed a strong passion for it (ThankGod, 2025).

At the time, there were few or no facilities to support teaching – no facilities, studios, materials or equipment – yet the department managed to ensure students received adequate and standard instruction. Today, however, a number of positive developments have taken place: the presence of a vibrant team of lecturers, a functioning studio and open space for practical work, an office for acting Head of Department, offices for other lecturers, and some basic equipment and furniture. The contributions of senior teaching staff, who have served on sabbatical or contract appointments, have also left valuable and lasting footprints on the department, its staff, as well as its students. Among the first of these were Dr. Harrie Bazunu (9th January, 2023), a distinguished sculptor from Delta State University, Abraka; Prof. Antonia Okogwu (1st October, 2024), a dedicated professor of sculpture from the University of Port-Harcourt; Prof. Kingsley Osewiyio Emeriewen (2nd April, 2025), a leading authority in metal arts; and Prof. John Amifon (10th January, 2024), who brought with him extensive industry-based experience in advertising, photography, and general graphics. At present, the department retains two professors who have been outstanding in their contributions. Notably, Professor Antonia Okogwu has proven to be a formidable force as well as a strong mentorship figure. Her role in guiding departmental staff in research publications, art exhibitions and dynamic approaches to creative art instruction are peculiar (ThankGod, 2025).

The call to duty for the department of Fine and Applied Arts was both swift and compelling, leaving no room for complacency. A landmark moment came when the Indigenous Cultural Center, Asaba – located within the Miriam Babangida Leisure Park and Film Village, directly opposite the university campus at Anwai, invited the department into a professional institutional partnership. This collaboration found expression in the center's maiden indigenous Art Festival 360, held in the last week of September in 2024. The festival not only showcased indigenous creativity but also positioned the department as a vibrant cultural stakeholder within the state and beyond, marking a defining milestone in its early history.

The Vice Chancellor, fully aware of the aesthetic and visual literacy role of the university and of the department in particular within Asaba, approved the department's participation. The outing, which

took place from the 26th–29th of September 2024, featured an exhibition of forty-six (46) studio works encompassing a wide range of genres, including painting, sculpture, cartoons, clip art, drawings, ceramics, textiles, architectural models, and a selection of mixed-media pieces. The festival provided an invaluable platform that showcased and amplified the creative talents of both staff and students to a diverse audience, including seasoned members of the public from across the country. It underscored the quality of creativity that Dennis Osadebay University embodies, while affording students their first real exhibition experience. Beyond exposure, it created opportunities for students to interact with established artists, learn innovative methods and mediums in indigenous arts and crafts, and engage in traditional recreational games-an avenue for relaxation, social bonding, and cultural exchange.

The quality of the works attracted national attention, leading to multiple interview requests with both staff and students, serving as a powerful testament to the department’s excellence. The event held great promise for further disseminating the remarkable progress and creative achievements emerging from Dennis Osadebay University.

In table 1 below is a list of the first ever staff and student visual art exhibition team from Dennis Osadebay University’s Fine and Applied Arts Department and their exhibits.

Table 1: A list of fine and applied arts departmental staff and students that participated in the first ever art exhibition

S/N	NAME	DEPARTMENT	DESIGNATION
1	Stephen Ogodi	Fine and Applied Arts Department	Student
2	Joyce Emuewem	Fine and Applied Arts Department	Student
3	Favour Onyute	Fine and Applied Arts Department	Student
4	Vairagi Chukwudebe	Fine and Applied Arts Department	Student
5	Godspower Efih	Fine and Applied Arts Department	Staff
6	Charles Ogodi	Architecture	Staff
7	Chika ThankGod	Fine and Applied Arts Department	Staff – Curator
8	Chuka Ebodili	Fine and Applied Arts Department	Staff

FACULTY OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Dennis Osadebay University Asaba



In Collaboration with
Indigenous Art Center Asaba

PRESENT
A Maiden Art Exhibition
@
THE INDIGENOUS ART
FESTIVAL 360
{26TH -29TH SEPT. 2024}

CURATED BY: Chika ThankGod

Vairagi Chukwudebe
PAINTER

Chuka Ebodili
CERAMIST

Stephen Ogodi
CARTOONIST

Charles Ogodi
ARCHITECT

Godspower Efi
SCULPTOR

Favour Onyute
GRAPHIST

Joyce Emumwen
TEXTILE DES.

Chika ThankGod
GRAPHIC ADV.

Figure 1 Exhibition Brochure/Poster



Figure 2 TITLE: Finally...
MEDIUM- Charcoal/Embossed Card
SIZE- 16 x 20 inches
DATE- 17th August 2024
ARTIST- Chukwudebe Vairagi (400 level sculpture Student)

This charcoal drawing on embossed card captures the satisfying feel of a suspense eventually gratified. It share the full joy of an expectation achieved and secured. The phone focus is the global symbol of access to every imaginable form of information and news. The link and harbinger of tidings, both good and bad. Finally is a savouring of a refreshing feedback and the black and white monochrome tones press home the fact that there are only two divides to a news – good or bad! In this case it was finally a happy ending.



Figure 3 TITLE: *The winner takes it all*
MEDIUM – *Felt and Ink on Cartridge Paper*
SIZE- *16 x 11 Inches*
DATE-*5th December, 2022*
ARTIST – *Stephen Ogodi (400 level graphics student)*

The winner takes it all is a felt and ink cartoon sketch on cartridge paper. It clearly depicts the hierarchy, joy and technicality of sportsmanship and victory in a competition. The explicit joyful satisfaction on the winner tells it all. The anger on the first runner up is unmistakable and resignation in the other runners up shows the acceptance of their fate as a communal affair. The white background tells of the fair playing ground.



Figure 4 TITLE: Anara
MEDIUM – CorelDraw X4 (Clip Art)
SIZE- A3
DATE-15th September 2014
ARTIST - Chika ThankGod

Anara is a commonly known and used variation of eggplant usually presented to visitors as a symbol of a warm welcome. Indigenously referred to as ‘kola’ and the central focus of the introductory aspect of every meeting. This work was digitally produced with CorelDraw X4 and is a clip art. The cool but sharp gloss of the egg plant transmit a strong feeling of freshness and warm invitation to enjoy the kola served.

List of Exhibits:

TITLE- Dynamite Boss
MEDIUM-Charcoal/Cartridge Paper
SIZE- 14.5 x 22 inches
DATE- 3rd March 2024
ARTIST- Chukwudebe Vairagi

TITLE- Maiden In The Tussle
MEDIUM- Charcoal/Cartridge Paper
SIZE- 12 X16 inches
DATE- 13th September 2024
ARTIST- Chukwudebe Vairagi

TITLE- Finally....
MEDIUM- Charcoal/Embossed Card
SIZE- 16 x 20 inches
DATE- 17th August 2024

ARTIST- Chukwudebe Vairagi

TITLE- Dark Night
MEDIUM-Charcoal/Embossed Card
SIZE- 20 x 24 inches
DATE- 5th September 2024
ARTIST- Chukwudebe Vairagi

TITLE- Zubby
MEDIUM-PastelCharcoalStrathmore
SIZE- 20 x 26 inches
DATE- 25th July 2024
ARTIST- Chukwudebe Vairagi

TITLE- Onyinye
MEDIUM-Charcoal on Strathmore
SIZE- 16 x 20 inches
DATE- 10th July 2024
ARTIST- Chukwudebe Vairagi

TITLE- Tumbom Tumbom
MEDIUM- Pastel,Charcoal,Cartridge
SIZE- 22 x 14.5 inches
DATE- 5th February 2024
ARTIST- Chukwudebe Vairagi

TITLE- Behind Closed Doors
MEDIUM- Acrylic on Canvas
SIZE- 8 x 11 inches
DATE- 17th September 2024
ARTIST- Onyute Favour

TITLE- Ocular Odyssey
MEDIUM- Acrylic on Canvas
SIZE- 7.5 x 10 inches
DATE- 18th September 2024
ARTIST- Onyute Favour

TITLE- Fruits
MEDIUM- Charcoal/Embossed Card
SIZE- 22 x 14.5 inches
DATE- 30th April 2024
ARTIST- Chukwudebe Vairagi

TITLE- Vida La Vida
MEDIUM- Oil on Canvas
SIZE- 6 x 9.5 inches
DATE- 20th September 2024
ARTIST- Onyute Favour

TITLE- Cultural Phenomenon
MEDIUM- Mixed media (Fabric and charcoal on paper)
SIZE- 20 x 24 inches
DATE- 15th September 2024
ARTIST- Joyce Emumwen

TITLE- Unity In Diversity
MEDIUM- MixedMedia (FabriCard)
SIZE- 20 x 24 inches
DATE- 17th September 2024
ARTIST- Joyce Emumwen

TITLE- Spiral/Vertical(Tie & Dye)
MEDIUM- Dye on Cotton
SIZE- Medium T-Shirt
DATE- 2024
ARTIST- Joyce Emumwen

TITLE- The Biggest Ben
MEDIUM- Acrylic on canvas
SIZE- 26 x 31 inches
DATE- 15th Septmber
ARTIST- Godspower Efihi

TITLE- O-B-O
MEDIUM- Acrylic and Oil on Canvas
SIZE- 19 x 30 Inches
DATE- 5th August 2024
ARTIST- Godspower Efihi

TITLE- The Legend
MEDIUM- Oil and Acylic on Canvas
SIZE- 25 x 33 Inches
DATE- 30th September 2024
ARTIST- Godspower Efihi

TITLE- Next Move
MEDIUM- Acrylic and Oil on Canvas
SIZE- 22 x 29 Inches
DATE- 12th July 2024
ARTIST- Godspower Efihi

TITLE- Aniocha Rhythms
MEDIUM – Acylic on Canvas
SIZE- 15 x 19 Inches
DATE- 15th January 2023
ARTIST- Godspower Efihi

TITLE- Sound of The Night
MEDIUM-Acrylic on Canvas
SIZE- 24 x 18 Inches
DATE-5th March 2023
ARTIST- Godspower Efihi

TITLE- Pot of Life
MEDIUM- Fiber Glass
SIZE- 15 x 35 Inches
DATE-3rd June 2024
ARTIST- Godspower Efihi

TITLE- Crownship
MEDIUM – Fiber Glass
SIZE- 15 x 35 Inches

DATE - 5th June, 2023
ARTIST – Godspower Efih

TITLE- MIND-LODY
MEDIUM – Fiber Glass
SIZE- 16 x 25 Inches
DATE- 2nd October 2022
ARTIST – Godspower Efih

TITLE- Felicitation
MEDIUM – Graphite Pencil on Paper
SIZE- 12 x 15 Inches
DATE- 7th May 2024
ARTIST – Godspower Efih

TITLE- Mind of an Animator
MEDIUM – Ink on Bond
SIZE- 8 piece Collage
DATE- 1st June, 2023
ARTIST – Stephen Ogodi

TITLE- Spider Motion
MEDIUM – Ink and Felt on Water Colour Paper
SIZE- 16 x 11 Inches
DATE-5th July 2023
ARTIST – Stephen Ogodi

TITLE- The Winner Takes it All
MEDIUM – Felt and Ink on Cartridge Paper
SIZE- 16 x 11 Inches
DATE-5th December, 2022
ARTIST – Stephen Ogodi

TITLE- Bala Blu
MEDIUM – Graphite Pencil on Embossed
SIZE- 8 x 9 Inches
DATE - 2024
ARTIST – Stephen Ogodi

TITLE – Unidel Boss
MEDIUM –Pencil/Watercolour Paper
SIZE- 16 x 12 Inches
DATE- 6th February, 2023
ARTIST – Stephen Ogodi

TITLE- Story Board I (Boxing Ring)

MEDIUM – Ink on Bond
SIZE- 4 Piece (A4)
DATE- June 2024
ARTIST – Stephen Ogodi

TITLE- Story Board II (Eddie Black)
MEDIUM – Ink on Bond
SIZE- 4 Piece
DATE- 5th August, 2023
ARTIST – Stephen Ogodi

TITLE- Story Board III (Godzilla)
MEDIUM – Ink on Bond
SIZE- 2 Piece
DATE- 15th May, 2023
ARTIST – Stephen Ogodi

TITLE- Story Board IV (Senior Heroes)
MEDIUM – Ink on Bond
SIZE- 2 Piece (A4)
DATE- 5th June, 2023
ARTIST – Stephen Ogodi

TITLE- I did It!
MEDIUM – Graphite on Paper
SIZE- 11x 22 Inches
DATE- 5th August 2024
ARTIST – Vairagi Chukwudebe

TITLE- Okoli
MEDIUM – Graphite on Paper
SIZE- 17 x 24 Inches
DATE- 4th July 2024
ARTIST – Vairagi Chukwudebe

TITLE- Anara
MEDIUM – CorelDraw X4 (Clip Art)
SIZE- A3
DATE-15th September 2014
ARTIST - Chika ThankGod

TITLE- Nigerian Symphony
MEDIUM – CorelDraw X4 (Clip Art)
SIZE- A3
DATE-15th September 2024
ARTIST - Chika ThankGod

TITLE- The Things That Bind Us Together
MEDIUM – CorelDraw X4 (Clip Art)
SIZE- A3
DATE- 20th September 20

ARTIST - Chika ThankGod

TITLE- Mpanaka
MEDIUM – CorelDraw X4 (Clip Art)
SIZE- A3
DATE-25th September 2024
ARTIST - Chika ThankGod

TITLE- Kola in a Pod
MEDIUM – CorelDraw X4 (Clip Art)
SIZE- A3
DATE-15th September 2024
ARTIST - Chika ThankGod

TITLE- Tie and Dye (Assortment)
MEDIUM – Cotton and Dye
SIZE - Yards
DATE- 21st August 2022
ARTIST – Chuka Ebodili

TITLE- 2ICE
MEDIUM – Acrylic on Canvas
SIZE- 36 x 30 Inches
DATE- 10th September 2024
ARTIST – Godspower Efih

TITLE- Totally Sherrified
MEDIUM –Acrylic on Canvas
SIZE- 36 x 48 Inches
DATE- 2nd September 2024
ARTIST – Godspower Efih

TITLE- Shero
MEDIUM – Oil and Acrylic on Canvas
SIZE- 24 x 28 Inches
DATE-5th September 2024
ARTIST – Godspower Efih

TITLE- Bingo
MEDIUM - Bisque
SIZE- 14 X 5 X 6 inches
DATE- 5th November 2010
ARTIST – Chuka Ebodili

TITLE- Sunset in Green
MEDIUM – Acrylic on Canvas
SIZE- 12 x 18 Inches
DATE- 26th September 2024
ARTIST – Charles Ogodi

The collaboration that culminated to Art Festival 360 - unanticipated at its inception - established a bond that would catalyze initiatives with the potential to transform the city of Asaba's trajectory in visual literacy. Uba, Chukwuemeke Washington (b. 1974), curator, documentary photographer, and founder of the Indigenous Cultural Center, Asaba, was instrumental in birthing Art Festival 360. His artistic vision is grounded in indigenous knowledge systems and practices, which he regards as holistic and sacred. With nearly two decades of experience in art, history and cultural preservation, UBA, who is fondly called Uncle Wash, has curated exhibitions and organized art festivals that present diverse perspectives and stimulate critical dialogues. He holds a B.Tech in Physics Electronics Technology from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. His professional expertise includes: conceptualizing, planning and executing exhibitions from design to installation; collaborating with artists, collectors, and institutions to source artefacts; conducting research that provides contextual and interpretive depth; and designing educational programs to enhance audience engagement (UBA, 2025).

The development of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at Dennis Osadebay University cannot be fully narrated without acknowledging Uba's role in shaping its early trajectory. Following the 360 Indigenous Art Festival, he initiated a mentorship residency for a pioneer cohort of seven (7) students. The residency, entirely funded by him, provided access to materials, tools, and professional guidance. It also created opportunities for interaction with established artists who utilized the center as a creative hub.

This residency was further enriched by innovative practices such as incentivized competitions, communal workshops and most notably, training in art auctioneering - a pedagogical innovation rarely encountered in Nigerian art education. Uba also encouraged experimental projects, including public graffiti interventions at strategic city locations and heritage preservation initiatives within Asaba and its environs. These initiatives underscore the department's growing integration into Asaba's cultural

landscape, while also highlighting the potential of community-driven collaborations in advancing visual literacy and aesthetic awareness.

The latest development in this trajectory is the preparation for the 2025 Indigenous Cultural Festival 360. This edition is being organized against the remarkable backdrop of Asaba's recent election as one of the United Nations' 350 Creative Cities of the world (UBA, 2025). The selection is closely linked to the city's hosting of the renowned Film Village, which shares its location with the Indigenous Cultural Centre. In anticipation of the festival, portraits celebrating Asaba's UN Creative City designation are being produced by resident student-artists, alongside departmental staff and affiliated artists. This initiative represents yet another powerful sensitization of the city of Asaba to issues of aesthetics and visual literacy.

Adding further momentum to these achievements is the department's just-concluded maiden exhibition, aptly titled *ARISE DENNIS OSADEBAY!* Spearheaded by Professor Antonia Okogwu, the exhibition was held at the Traditional Ruler's Council, Asaba. The three-day event (April 10th–12th, 2025) showcased an impressive array of works by both staff and students, spanning installations, paintings, drawings, pottery, ceramics, clip art, digital media design, mixed media, and fabric design. The exhibition attracted wide publicity and drew a diverse audience: secondary school students, traditional rulers, policymakers, academics and members of the press. It was a significant cultural moment that challenged Asaba to recognize and embrace art, design and visual literacy as central components of a relevant society afresh. The interest, patronage and sale of works at the exhibition from within Asaba, neighboring communities and even international circles - affirmed the growing appreciation of art as a medium of communication and non-verbal language (Fine and Applied arts Department - Dennis Osadebay University, 2025)

The initial strides of department of fine and applied arts, DOU, are quickly maturing into giant strides. The department continues to receive support from various quarters within and without to ensure that the study and practice of art in Asaba contributes meaningfully to the redefinition of visual perception and creative adaptation in the city's-built environment. The designation and allotment of a strategic space with a unique topography and a traversing stream for the departmental sculpture garden and a recent donation from the Monday Onyeme Foundation, comprising fifteen (15) office tables, executive chairs, and a large firing kiln fitted with a kick wheel and accessories, signals a fruitful journey ahead. This complements earlier provisions from the university's management, which included donkeys, easels, textile-printing tables and sculpting turntables. Together, these resources provide a solid foundation for launching a formidable artistic revolution aimed at realigning the city's visual and aesthetic character.

This ongoing transformation represents a social upgrade - one that would foster symbolic and iconic literacy, bridging indigenous traditions with contemporary global cultural expressions to enhance communication and communal stability. As the Department of Fine and Applied Arts prepares to graduate its first-ever cohort of bachelor's degree students, Asaba stands at the threshold of completing a full cycle of artistic initiation – one that promises to rewrite its aesthetic and visual history in the very near future.

3. Conclusion

The Fine and Applied Arts Department of Dennis Osadebay University has quickly grown from modest beginnings into a vibrant force shaping Asaba's cultural and aesthetic landscape. Through exhibitions, collaborations and community engagements, it has positioned itself as a hub for visual literacy and creative innovation. As the department prepares to graduate its first students, a proof that Asaba's long yearning for a degree-awarding art institution has birthed not just an academic unit, but a cultural movement that promises to redefine the city's identity and global relevance.

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