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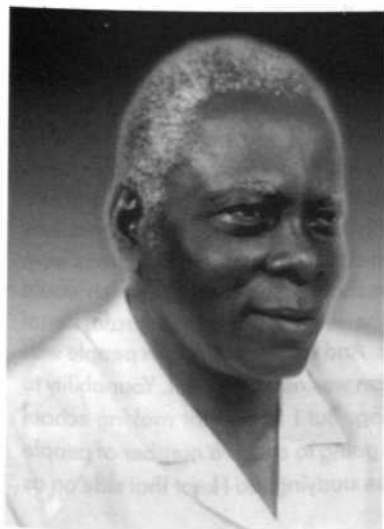
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More to Art than Exhibition

On November 10, 1999, Guest Editor, dele jegede, had a discussion session with Yusuf Grillo at his residence in Ikeja, Lagos. The range of subjects is wide, covering curriculum, professional development of artists, history, as well as patronage of the arts. Since this interview was first conducted, there have been changes in the leadership of some of the government organizations that are discussed here. Those changes have however not diminished the tenor of the points that this interview focuses upon.



GR: Who is Yusuf Grillo and what is your legacy?

Yusuf Grillo: The first part of it has been so publicized. A man who is approaching 70; born in Lagos, bred in Lagos. Most of my life I spent in Lagos. The very first time that I went out of Lagos I went to Zaria. It was then the Nigeria College of Arts Science and Technology (NCAST), later Ahmadu Bello University (ABU). That was to study art. That was 1956. After doing the diploma course and the education course (one year), I came back to Lagos. I went to Zaria on a Federal Government scholarship. Things were very easy those days. Before the completion of my course, I had known where I was going to work because it was all arranged by the Federal Ministry of Education. So I was posted to King's College, initially. Hardly did I resume at King's College than Paul Mount who was at Yaba College of Technology (YCT) asked that I be

brought back to YCT. I had been at YCT as a student under Paul Mount and before Paul Mount and all through my course at Zaria I kept going back during vacation to YCT to draw and paint and study a little more. And towards the end of the course I found myself helping Paul Mount. Maybe that informed his request that I be brought to YCT, coupled with the fact that he was then preparing to leave Nigeria. So, from 1961, the latter part of 1961 (it is convenient to say 1962 because it was right at the end of 1961, till I retired in 1987)—I taught at the Technical Institute, then Yaba College of Technology.

GR: When did the transition take place?

Yusuf Grillo: It happened in 1966 when Yaba College of Technology (YCT) had a governing council. It used to be run as a branch of the Ministry of Education. It started as Technical Institute, I think, in the 40s if not earlier, because important people like the late Sir Manuwa and Michael Okpara attended the place before and during the Second World War. I think there was a brief break during the war because the place was used as an army camp. The pre-medical students then, Sir Manuwa inclusive, had to go to Achimota College, Ghana, to continue. So it started as far back as the 40s. It was one of the reasons why, when we got the semi-autonomy and YCT was being governed by a Council, we drew upon the assets of the College. And I found myself in a position where I could be very beneficial to the council, knowing a bit of the history of the college. It went that far back. So, we claimed that where the West African Examination

Council (WAEC) is now—the quarters next to the WAEC, the army hospital, trade center, the whole of that area—belonged to the Technical Institute. But by this time, it had been taken by so many other agencies. Well, the army was still using the army hospital. But we still made the point that all this belonged to the old Technical Institute which was now, according to the letters of the law, transformed into YCT. And so it was that I found myself back at YCT in 1962 facing the problem which I had foreseen: of trying to model the art courses at Yaba to something which would be acceptable to the youths at that time. This was because I had been part of the agitation at the old NCAST, (Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria), that wanted



Yusuf Grillo's Studio, Lagos.
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autonomy from the University of London and didn't want the NDD [National Diploma in Design] which was being given to us [students]. That was the qualification in Britain, at least at that time. And that was what we were going to get. But the students said no. They wanted something which was more Nigerian. So, I foresaw that that was going to happen at Yaba, particularly because at that time, there was no properly structured course. Which I considered an asset. Because what Paul Mount was doing was giving opportunities to people who wanted to study whatever they wanted to study. If you want to come and draw, come and draw. So we had from people of school age, to wives of ambassadors, to civil servants. Just come and do whatever you want in art. You want to sculpt, go there; you want to paint, go there. Which I think was a very great asset. And this I continued when I took charge at Yaba. But I couldn't overlook the problem that the youths had; they wanted at the end, something—a paper—which says particularly that this could be equated to some of the things which their mates in other areas were doing. So I started proposing to the Council that we should have a course which would equate to what was generally known then as the intermediate of a professional qualification. A course that would run for two years. And we were taking in people with school certificate. Prior to that, the initial qualification was not important. Your ability to do whatever you wanted to do was the main thing. But I knew that making school certificate the minimum qualification for entry was going to cut off a number of people who were talented and who would want to continue studying. So I kept that side on as

either part-time, or day release, or single subject courses. We provided for all those. We began to grow. Things began to evolve. Way back then, I foresaw it, that the intermediate thing was naturally going to lead to the national diploma. So we got somebody on board: Eve de Negri. A very good painter from Britain, and who had a flair for fashion design....

GR: Was she British or Italian?

Yusuf Grillo: She is of Italian descent but British nationality. And she proposed the starting, initially, of a dress-making course, mainly for girls who were unable to go beyond the secondary school and who found themselves doing nothing. The only option then was going into secretarial studies: typing and shorthand and so on and so forth. So she said, look, many of these girls who were around, some of them could be talented in making dresses and so on and so forth. So we started the dress-making course, which naturally developed into fashion design course. And just like in the art counterpart of it, it went to school certificate and so on and so forth. But again we kept the dress single subject course. That people who don't have this could still come and get to do this or that. And it had paid off.

GR: Now, you left in 1987. Looking back, it's been 12 years now. What is the Yaba pulse in art? How do we identify the art department? The Yaba school: how would we place it within the contemporary stream?

Yusuf Grillo: That is a difficult point. Mainly because I am one of the people who do not like to catalogue or to pigeonhole a set of artists or a group of artists coming from a particular background as identifiable with a particular style. I know that I might be speaking against what is generally perceived. And what is perceived is natural: that if you study under some masters, studying in a school, where the direction in the school is this way or that way, the products are definitely, at least to start with, going to go that way. But I've been trying all my life, perhaps a little too prematurely, to make students realize that nobody, no school, no master, no teacher, can tell you what to do. The teacher can only give you the basic tools. He can impress you with his own mastery of the media which he uses; he can show you how to draw, which is something that is objective. He can show you how to paint, in as objectively a way as possible. Objectively meaning that he tells you that to apply paint on canvas, you don't just take a piece of cloth and paint. You still have to prepare the canvas, prime it, size it and so on and so forth, and in putting the paint on the canvas, you have to thin it down so that it can flow; you use brush, you use this, you use that.

GR: The technical know-how...

Yusuf Grillo: Exactly. If you want to get a tone of this, you can mix this color with that, you can get that and so on. All these things can be taught. The drawing can be taught. That you use your eyes. You know what is vertical, what is horizontal. What is big, what is small; what is slanting, and so on and so forth. People can be trained to do that. But where it comes to style, in my own dictionary, it's something which has to evolve. Initially, people coming out of a particular school may display what they have learned from their masters. Their masters have impressed them with their own paintings. They've seen the colors which this man uses; how he composes the pictures. The type of subjects... even the subjects which he paints, and so on and so forth. And they can be so impressed, so taken by that that they naturally begin to do that themselves. But beyond that, the student will have to search himself: "I've now acquired this mastery of the media. I can do this, I can do that. What is it that I have in me to say to people? What do I really want to say, or what can I say?" It is then that the journey starts.

GR: And that's where we part ways.

Yusuf Grillo: That's when we part ways. I've given them examples of so many so-called schools which in no distant period fragmented into different areas. The Impressionists. At the start, they were all taken up with this idea: "Oh yes! This is fantastic. This is how to capture light. This is not painting in the studio, in the classical way and getting everything right and so on." But, looking at nature: capturing nature,

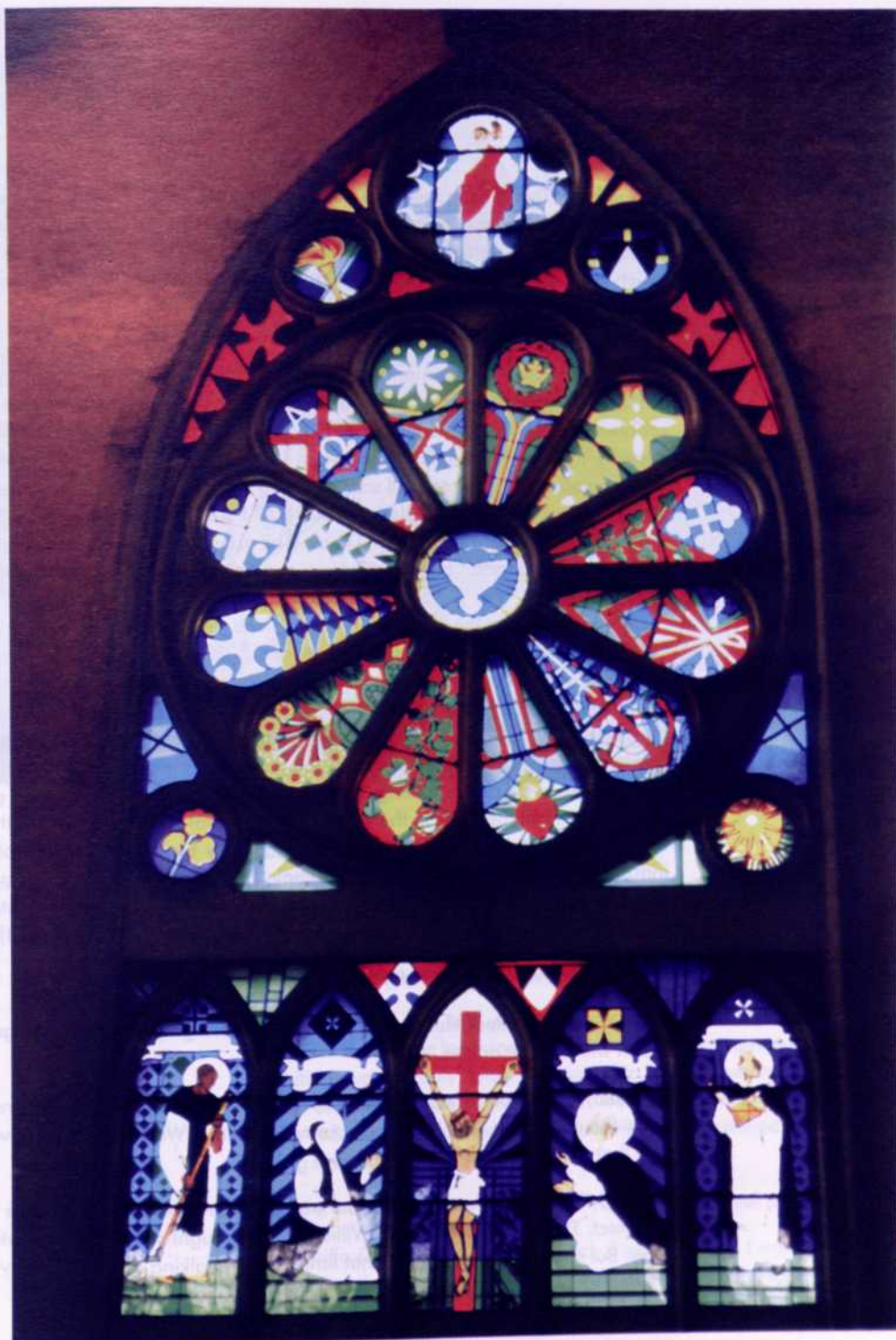
capturing light, using colors which are fresh and so on and so forth. So the Impressionists started like that. But very soon, Pissaro went his way; Seurat went his way. An extension of the same thing. But now with their own individuality coming out beyond that which they started with. There are examples like that. That is why I will hesitate that you can identify Yaba—or products of Yaba—in this way. Nsukka, for instance, has Uche Okeke as their mentor. And because Uche Okeke was so interested in the Uli tradition, Uli tradition or Uli influence in painting and drawing became almost synonymous with Nsukka. But you will find that, even now if one looks very closely at it, you will find that there are Nsukka graduates who started off that way who are beginning to chart their own course. And that is just how it must be.

GR: We're going to go into other areas, among these will be patronage. In your particular case, how has that been? How has patronage shaped the tenor of your work? In what ways will you say that patronage has contributed to the evolution of whom you've become? And how in general do you see patronage regarding the work of today's artists?

Yusuf Grillo: I have been lucky. And I can say that many artists of our own generation have been lucky, in that we came into the field at the time we did. When there was nothing, excepting, say, Ben Enwonwu. There were no artists of note. Because of this, we met, in the early sixties, people around us who were very, very thirsty for the artistic work of Nigerians.

GR: Who were those people?

Yusuf Grillo: Mainly expatriates at that time. Expatriates in universities, professionals, architects—particularly architects—and other expatriates, professional and so on. They mainly formed the core of our patronizing public at that time. Gradually, Nigerians began to show interest. And a few Nigerians, and again, mainly professionals, particularly architects. It is not difficult to see why architects would be because they too began to show interest. I've been particularly lucky. I trained primarily as a painter. In my early years of practice, most of my paintings were very quickly acquired by patrons. And it spurred me on to do more and more. As I began to teach, and some of my students began to practice, I began to see in concrete terms how, out of ten students, perhaps two of them will show that they have something to say in painting or in sculpture. And you can see that these two will go on to do something in painting or sculpture, or whatever. But you have the remaining eight, who have acquired the mastery of their crafts: they can draw satisfactorily, they can paint, they can design, they can do most of the things which the layman will want an artist to do. They can paint portraits. It may not be an inspired portrait. But they can get a likeness. They have the ability to do it. So, the problem of those eight began to weigh on me. Gradually, I began to see (as it should be), that the student artist should not be made to think that until he is an exhibiting artist, or already doing a commission of a painting or a mural, or this or that, that he hasn't achieved anything. That we must begin to show them that art is useful in many more ways than the gallery or the salon. So, I began in my teachings (and even it has affected my practice) that we have to show people, we have to show the artistic world, that it is not only the gallery or the museum that can sustain. So, we began to show that in the publishing houses, in the design of a book, in the illustration, in the design of a jacket, for those who are in Graphic Design. We were lucky we had a lucky break during that time, when somebody from Bata Shoe Company came to the office and introduced himself as a design manager in Bata. At that time, I thought maybe he just wanted to buy a painting. He said he wanted to interview some students who were graduating because he wanted to recruit. I said, "Into Bata?" He said yes. I said what sort of things do they do? He said well, quite a lot of things. But the specific areas in which he wanted them then was to sculpt leather. To get design or the mold onto leather and so on and so forth. But he said that that was just one part. That happened to be his immediate need then. But that the whole design of a shoe itself and so on are by artists. So it was just a very lucky break. And I used this example for many many years. Because we sent some boys there who did very well. And in building, in furniture, in so many other things, I began to emphasize that those areas too are important. It led me to what I wanted to introduce but couldn't



Yusuf Grillo's stained glass work, St Dominics Catholic Church, Yaba
© dele jegede

towards the end of my stay there, which was industrial design proper. We have subjects now, or we had before I left, in industrial design. Things like textiles, ceramics, and so on and so forth. But studying industrial design from scratch was what I was planning to do. Even for that reason I went for a course myself, in Germany and in Britain.

GR: When was that?

Yusuf Grillo: That was in the early eighties: either 82 or 83. One of the courses was assisted by the Goethe Institut. The college paid part of my way through and Goethe Institut assisted in attaching me to this and that. Also in Britain, I went to colleges which were offering me industrial design, particularly the Royal College of Art.

GR: How long was this for?

Yusuf Grillo: About seven months or eight months. That was preparatory to starting this course. I saw the problems, that getting teachers was going to be one of the problems. Because even I couldn't claim to be competent in teaching industrial design. Actually, I got deflated in Germany when I went to their council of industrial design. And the secretary of the council said, "Nice to see you Mr. Grillo. I understand you're going to start an industrial design course..." I said yes. And he said, "Are you an industrial designer?" I said, "Well, I know a bit about it. We do textiles, we do ceramics and so on and so forth." He said, "But you as a person, are you an industrial designer?" I answered that "I'm a painter, basically. But I have a flair for this; I'm good in mathematics and in the sciences. And I can see the link. I design houses." He said, "Well, I'm sorry Mr. Grillo. Industrial design..." (He was very skeptical about artists coming into industrial design; they just mess things up!) He said, "We prefer people start as engineers, or start as mathematicians, and go into industrial design, rather than artists coming in." He said they are too flighty; they design things that cannot be produced, or that can be produced at exorbitant cost; just not economical. He said, "In any case, we'll arrange things for you." He put me in my place, and I got to know that he was right. Because in the various colleges that I was attached to, things which we don't even think about as artists are actually the main bedrock of their own industrial design. You want to design a chair, you start from the man who is going to sit on it. They have a course called ergonomics. And that is one of the first things they do. That this chair has to be something ... it's not just a beautiful [object].

GR: Whereas we look at it from the aesthetic point of view.

Yusuf Grillo: Yes. Beautiful curves and a nice flaring...you know...things going up which will hurt the ankles.

GR: Okay. Still on patronage. In your own case, who were your own patrons? We were on to the early days. The Nigerian scene at that time. Who were those few Nigerians that then came in at some later date?

Yusuf Grillo: I did say architects. There was Kola Bankole, architect. There was Egbor, architect. There was Justice Fatai Williams, who bought some of my paintings at that time. But some of my patrons at that time... We're talking about the early days now.

GR: In the sixties...

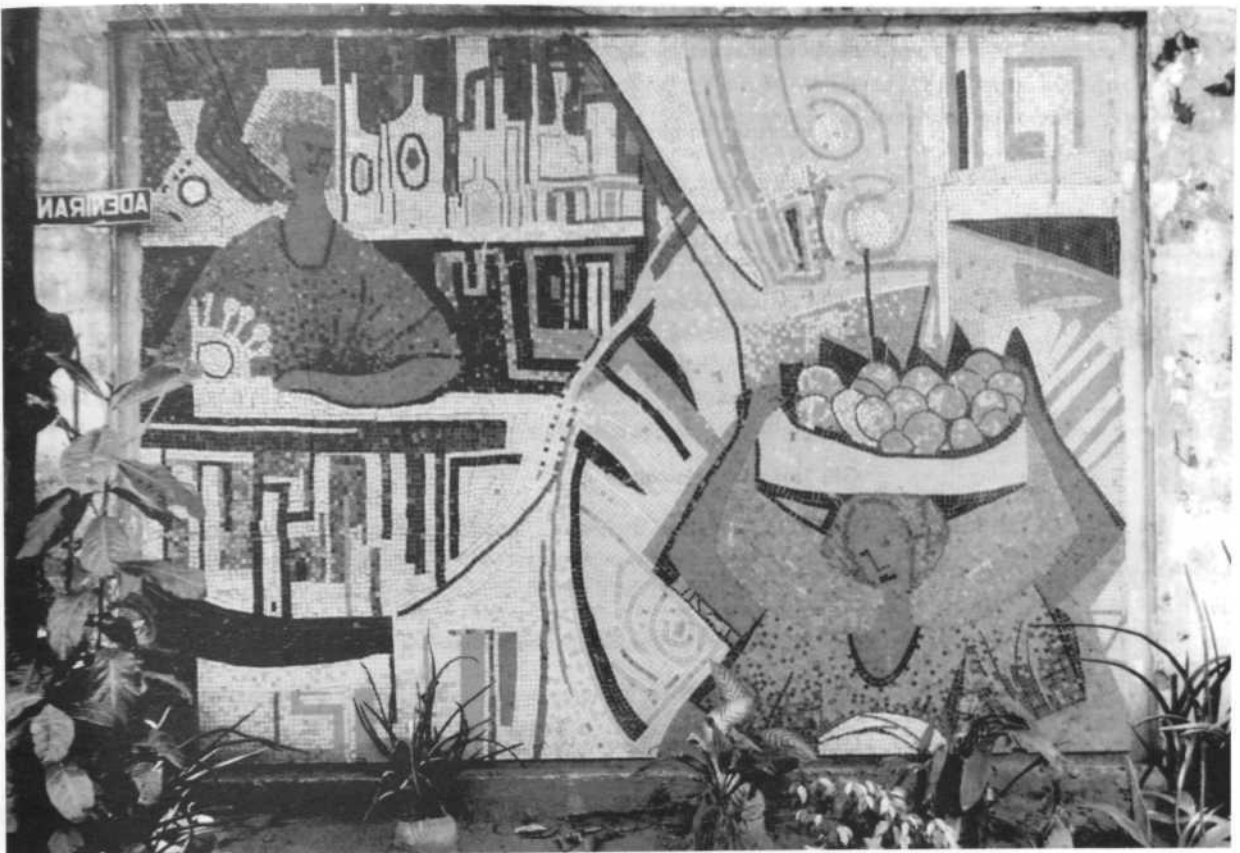
Yusuf Grillo: Yes. If you call a Briton who naturalized as a Nigerian a Nigerian, Mrs. Majekodunmi. She's one of my biggest patrons. Some of the ambassadors ... Fabunmi I think they did it for their official position; they wanted to go abroad and they wanted to take something. These are some of the few.

GR: Now, you had some solo shows. When was your first solo show?

Yusuf Grillo: The first solo would be in 1962.

GR: So how many solos altogether have you had?

Yusuf Grillo: I'm very bad about keeping record of these things. But talking very off the cuff, I will say about six.



Mosaic Frontage of Adeniran Ogunsanya Shopping Centre, Surulere. © Uche Iroha

GR: When was the last solo?

Yusuf Grillo: Again, I can't be precise. But it would be in the seventies.

GR: Why is it that you've not had any since then?

Yusuf Grillo: Well, as I told you, my approach and my philosophy began to change. Mainly because I was teaching. And I was trying not to get students to feel that having exhibitions was the only thing. I continued to have shows in groups, with other people and so on and so forth. Right up till ... well, we had one only last year in Zaria; The Zaria Art Society. I kept working as a painter. But I removed the emphasis away from having shows.

GR: So it was deliberate, as a part of your philosophical position.

Yusuf Grillo: Deliberately. And as I said, it was because I was teaching, and I wanted to show that there were other things. And I began to do the things which people began to identify me more with from that time.

GR: Which were...

Yusuf Grillo: Murals. Working with architects. And then later working on churches, church windows ...

GR: Okay. That in fact was what I wanted to get into. You are known today for a variety of things. As a multi-dimensional person. A painter, muralist. And for your stained windows. And your sculptures also. Now, for somebody who trained in Zaria as a painter, how did that come about?

Yusuf Grillo: Well, we were lucky. I kept saying we were lucky when we studied. That we had the type of course which opened doors to all media. We did painting, sculpture, ceramics, everything, for two years. And after the two years, we were able to continue

in whichever area we wanted of the subsidiary. So you found that some of us who considered ourselves good in, say, sculpture, would intentionally go for painting, or vice versa.

GR: Because you already knew something about this, you wanted to ...

Yusuf Grillo: Yes. You thought you were able to progress on your own on this, by taking it as a subsidiary. But you needed to learn more about that one. So it was like getting the better of two worlds. So that was how it happened. Apart from that, I was able to learn from other sources. For instance, we never touched an item of mosaic when we were studying. We didn't even know what mosaic was. But I got in contact with an architect very early in my career who said he wanted a mosaic mural for the Independence Building at Tafawa Balewa Square. And I told him, "You know, I haven't touched mosaics." But he said, "But there's nothing to it. It's in design. You've seen ... Look in books and you'll see mosaic designs."

GR: This was an architect.

Yusuf Grillo: Yes. An architect. These things come in colors. You buy the various colors. Do your design, and you set these things according to your design. And that was how it happened. So it was something which came from an external source.

GR: So which was your first mosaic design?

Yusuf Grillo: That was the Independence Building. It was completed in 1963.

GR: The building itself or the mosaic? The building itself was for the independence.

Yusuf Grillo: No no no. It was started before the independence. But it wasn't completed for the independence.

GR: You've since done how many?

Yusuf Grillo: Oh, many, many.

GR: Give me an idea where and when.

Yusuf Grillo: Soon after the independence building, I did one in Kaduna: New Nigerian Newspapers; City Hall; Adeniran Ogunsanya Shopping Center. Unfortunately, at times, I find that these things are so many I don't know where they are any more. There are so many of them.

GR: The stained glasses that you did for the churches. How did that come about?

Yusuf Grillo: Again, it was through an architect.

GR: When was it?

Yusuf Grillo: The first one was in the seventies. The same architect. Robin Atkinson. He was a very great patron of mine. He bought many of my paintings.

GR: What nationality?

Yusuf Grillo: Briton.

GR: So he was resident in Nigeria then.

Yusuf Grillo: Yes. Actually, he acquired Nigerian citizenship.

GR: Where is he now?

Yusuf Grillo: He comes and goes. I haven't seen him in a few years. But he has a house at Campbell Street.

GR: I think I know the place. Do you have an idea of his own designs?

Yusuf Grillo: His first designs are in the University of Ibadan; he did the Trenchard Hall. The first buildings in University of Ibadan (when it was University College of London, Ibadan) were done by them. He belonged at that time to the firm of Fry Drew Atkinson. But he became the only resident architect of the partnership. Fry Drew are husband and wife, and Atkinson is the guy.

GR: I thought you had a mural. Did I see a mural in one of the halls at UI?

Yusuf Grillo: Yes. I did two. But unfortunately, they were done on board. We thought at that time that that board was very permanent, because it looked so hard. It was one of these boards that were made from compressed chips, but given a very hard surface.

GR: So, with time, it started deteriorating ...

Yusuf Grillo: Well, with moisture. I did one in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, and one in Sultan Bello Hall.

GR: Now, still on stained glass. Which were the churches that you have ...

Yusuf Grillo: The first one was Presbyterian Church, Yaba. But since then there have been many. One of the latest and perhaps the biggest so far is still at Yaba: St. Dominic's Catholic Church, Herbert Macaulay Way. It's very big, too. One of the most successful I would say. That was two years ago.

GR: So that's the most recent.

Yusuf Grillo: Not the most recent.

GR: Which is the most recent?

Yusuf Grillo: The most recent, I'm working on some of them right now. But the most recent that was completed, I think, is in Ilishan, in Ijebu.

GR: So, you've done stained designs far and wide.

Yusuf Grillo: Oh! Some of the ones I'm doing now are in Oko, in Anambra State. That's the home village of former Vice-President Ekwueme.

GR: Okay. How did they get in touch with you?

Yusuf Grillo: Oh, they got to see some of the ones I've done, and then they enquired.

GR: How far has your work gone in that regard? Church designs ...

Yusuf Grillo: All over the country. It's all over the country.

GR: Some would ask, you as a devout Muslim, getting into liturgy and all of that. How have you been able to overcome that? Because I know that you're dealing not only with design but also with subject matter. Do they give you ideas? If so, do you improve on the ideas or how do you go about it?

Yusuf Grillo: You would be surprised that in many cases I give them ideas. I don't see anything to overcome by Muslims in Christianity. I think they are the same. I think it's just human, either misunderstanding or intentional, distortion that introduced this compartmentalization. I think that they are exactly the same, as far as I am concerned. The two religions stemmed from Abraham. The Christians say Abraham is the symbol of faith. (Apere Igbagbo). The Muslims, too. The father of Islam is Ibram. And all the prophets of Christianity are the same prophets of Islam. Jesus in Christianity is Yisa in Islam. The birth of Jesus is the same. Both in the Koran and in the Bible. The teachings of Jesus, which have been by Jesus himself (you know, such a wonderful person, perhaps the most wonderful person we've ever heard of), condensed everything into only two commandments: God is only one, and you must worship God and love God

with everything you've got. Your head, your heart, your soul ... give the whole of yourself to God. Worship God. That's number one. The second: love your fellow man as yourself. There are no more. Those are the only two commandments. We come to Islam. Even though you have so many commandments, dos and don'ts, they all add up to those two. There's nothing beyond those two in all of them. It's either your service to God, the prayer, five times, the fasting, and so on and so forth—all channeled to accomplishing that particular objective. Then, love your fellow man. So you don't steal his things, you don't covet his wife, you don't tell lies against him. It's all the same.

GR: So the designs then are taken ... you contribute or sometimes they give you ideas in executing them? How does that go? When they come to you, give us a scenario. They come to you and then what?

Yusuf Grillo: Some come to me. Depending on who comes. It's easy when somebody else is donating the glass to the church. Because usually those who come don't know much about even the scriptures. They say, this is St. John's Church. They say what shall we do? And I tell them. St. John was this, was that. It's better to take something which is related to St. John. They say it's St. Luke's. I'll say they'll have to do something to show that he was a doctor in his time; that St. Luke was a doctor who became converted to this and so on. So, there's a glass I did for a church in Ilesha. It's St. Luke's Church. And the people who came were surprised, that it has to have something do with medicine. So the snake, just like Moses raised snake in the wilderness so shall the son of man be raised so that whoever believed in him shall not perish. I said that would be a very good theme for St. Luke because he was a doctor and this is the symbol of medicine and so on and so forth. So they took it to their pastor, and said, oh yes, that's a marvelous idea. So, it happens like that. In some cases, they tell me that oh, they would want the Last Supper. Or, they would want the Ascension.

GR: The technical aspects, how do you overcome those?

Yusuf Grillo: That is something which has to be explained. Stained glass in its exact definition is very difficult to practice here. I've only done one in my life. And that was at the National Theater; it's at the VIP lounge. That's the only true stained glass which I've done. And it had to be done in Britain. I had to go to Norwich to work with the people there and do that. Because stained glass itself in the true sense of the word is glass, ordinary glass, which is easily breakable, on which you draw and paint, just like you paint on canvas. But you paint with specific media, after which [the glass] is then put in a kiln and heated. So it becomes permanent. That is stained glass. But what I've done more would be called collage or... glass collage ... colored glass collage. But because stained glass is the popular name for it

GR: But that indeed is adapting to the peculiarities of our own environment.

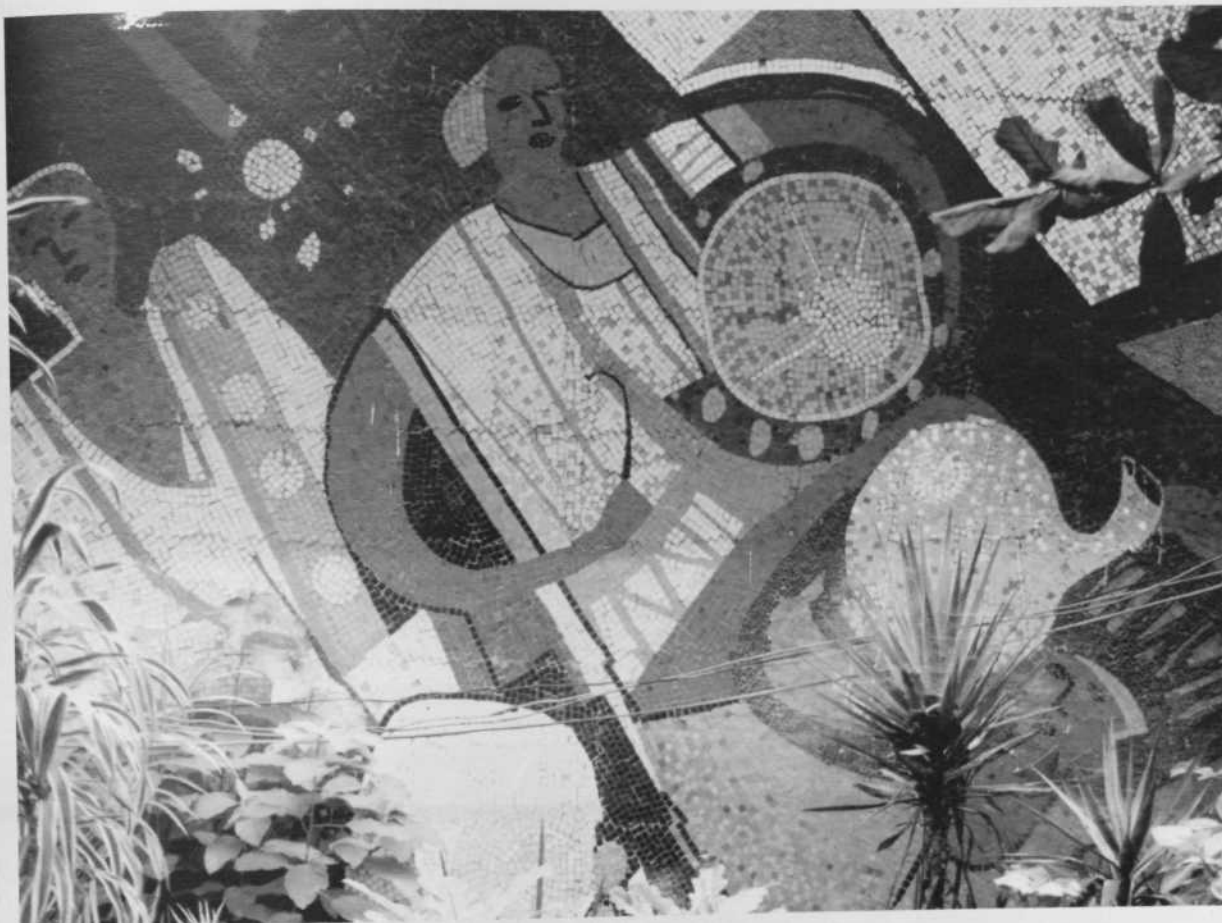
Yusuf Grillo: Sure.

GR: Are they actual glasses or perspex?

Yusuf Grillo: At times I mix both. There are times I've used glass and there are times I've used perspex. I find that most of the clients prefer perspex, mainly because it doesn't break easily, and some of the perspex come in good colors ... very suitable colors. There are times when I've had to use proper glass because of the subtle color.

GR: How do you do that? You then apply colors through the glass or what?

Yusuf Grillo: No, no no. Well, there are times, very rarely, I paint on glass. I have glass painting inks. But I don't do that much. I do it only to emphasize one or two things. I just use the glass, cut them into shapes and assemble them just like I assemble the painted glass.



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GR: Still on patronage. What is the situation today? Compared, for example, to your own time. You did say a while back that (I'm summarizing now) patronage started essentially with expatriates. How has the situation changed today?

Yusuf Grillo: Well, the situation is very different now. Things have changed in the country. There was a time when there was so much money around and people were actually trading in money. You had finance houses; investment and loan this or that and all that. Put ten thousand naira in this place today, fixed deposit. Upfront they pay you so much ...

GR: Which you can also roll over ...

Yusuf Grillo: Exactly. So that became the vogue sometime ago until the bubble burst. And now it is the opposite of it. But during that time, the very smart connoisseurs went into art patronage, art gallery and so on, and they were able to talk to some of these people in finance houses, in the new generation banks and so many other things. That for your image you need to acquire works of art. So, there was a temporary boom in art patronage.

GR: Around what time would you put that?

Yusuf Grillo: This would be up to the middle of the eighties. A little beyond the middle of the eighties. Say between the beginning of the eighties and the middle—approximately—the latter part of the eighties. So you found exhibitions here and there. And nearly all works in an exhibition, whether good or bad or indifferent, being bought by this bank or that bank or the other bank. Banks themselves were

sponsoring exhibitions, printing beautiful catalogs for them and so on and so forth, that very quickly, all too quickly, the opposite started. But I think in the end there is nothing which doesn't have its good or the bad part. It had created a new breed of patrons. Because whether by design or accident, some people found themselves having to buy works of art, or having works of art bought for them. So we now find that there are many more Nigerians who are genuinely interested in art now. Some of them today may not be able to afford the type of things that are [being sold]. Even the prices are now coming down. In the time that I was talking about, you hardly found a piece of painting that was sold for less than one hundred thousand naira. But now, people are beginning to charge a little less.

GR: Now, the other areas that we'll now get into have to do with the administration of the arts: policies, government, NGOs and all of that. The cultural policy, the creation of the Councils for Arts and Culture, the National Gallery of Art: how have government policies impacted the visual arts?

Yusuf Grillo: Well, if we start with the easy cases. Take the National Gallery of Art. I think it is a very good introduction. It started as an arm of the Department of Culture. But, gradually, it has been acquiring a quasi-autonomous body, which we hoped would be the case. But it's not quite there yet. Because the director, Dr. Dike, is still primarily a ministry official and is taken to this thing or that at will by the minister. And I happen to know that even in the administration of the gallery, he's not all that free. I think if the National Gallery will be allowed to go a step further: have its own board of governors or its own ...

GR: It doesn't have one?

Yusuf Grillo: I don't think it has one. I think it's the ministry. It's the ministry and Dike. Dike may have advisers. But it's not formally constituted. And definitely it doesn't have its own funds. It's the ministry fund which is voted and if it's not used, reverts back. Until it becomes truly autonomous, with its own bank account, its own managing council to manage it and so on and so forth, I don't think we will get the full benefits from it. But in the limits of what is available, I think the present director is trying to do as much as possible. I know that they still continue, within their limits, to acquire new works. He has this annual lecture which he has been going at for a few years now. And he promised me that this is going to continue. So as far as that is concerned, I think it's okay. As far as the National Council for Arts and Culture goes, I don't know. I think the problem is getting the right person into the right offices. It is almost now taken for granted that the Council for Arts and Culture is for nothing other than traditional dances, crafts, boat regatta, wrestling matches. Of course these things are important, and they must be catered for. But where they become the dominating event, I don't imagine that the Council for Arts and Culture thinks that it has any obligation to the visual arts. I think of that old suspicion between the ministry, then Ministry of Information and Culture, the Council for Arts and Culture, and even the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. The old suspicion still persists, maybe a little subdued but the germ is still there. And until this thing is properly defined—since they are all arms of the same government—until it is very well-defined and they see themselves as working together, we won't get anywhere. But we blame the government, and I think we should. Whatever blame we give to government and the people in charge of this administration, whatever blame we heap on them I think they deserve it. But I think we as artists have a share of the blame. Take the Society of Nigerian Artists. If it had developed to a force which we thought it was beginning to become—if it had developed into a force which gives the lead to government, and which government cannot ignore, which government has to consult about these things—I think we wouldn't be in the situation that we are in today. But I find that the average artist is too selfish, too much wrapped up in himself, or is too ready to blame others for something which he himself is guilty of, something which he is part of the guilt

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That the
Society of
Nigerian
Artists, which I
still maintain
is perhaps the
only viable
platform for
artists in
Nigeria, until it
is beefed up
and
strengthened,
we will get
nowhere.

which he should share. Until the average artist begins to see that we have to shape our own destiny, I don't think that we can continue to blame government. For instance, there was a time, and you know it, when the Society of Nigerian Artists was such that the Department of Culture had to consult with it. Even when the Government was thinking of sending an exhibition round the world ...

GR: You were the president, the founding president in 1963, until 1980, when it moved to Benin. Professor Wangboje became the president. Then of course there was the lull. And then I came in in 1989, and things began to happen again. I had to bow out in 1992. Since then, I am not sure whether we have moved substantially beyond ...

Yusuf Grillo: No, we haven't. We haven't. I think it is a pity. I think if the momentum with which you revived the slumbering society when you came in, if that momentum had picked up... Because I remember that you gave us the constitution, which was registered, for the first time... And we were in a position when we could really do things ...

GR: In fact I remember we had to drag you to one of our meetings to go meet with the minister [Lamba Gwam] on major issues. And even the creation of the National Gallery was one of the major things that we worked for.

Yusuf Grillo: Exactly. So, if that momentum had been kept up, I'm sure we won't be in this situation. We share part of the blame. I had an opportunity some time ago when I was one of the judges for a competition sponsored by Winsor and Newton, the art materials manufacturer. I think they were having something for the millennium, all over the world. And there was this competition. So Nigeria also was part of it. Some works were collected, and I was leading the panel of adjudicators. So in addressing the participants and some of the invitees to the announcement of the competition, of the jury, I was speaking to the young artists there. That, look, this is good that Winsor and Newton for once has brought you together. But for Winsor and Newton, you from Port Harcourt, you from this, you wouldn't know this man from Lagos, that man from Ibadan and so on. And I said, this is a shame. And we shouldn't wait for Winsor and Newton or anyone else to bring us together. That the Society of Nigerian Artists, which I still maintain is perhaps the only viable platform for artists in Nigeria, until it is beefed up and strengthened, we will get nowhere. I was able to make that point at that event. And I do hope that the new generation will ...

GR: We have a structure in place now that people will build on. Because what we were concerned with primarily was the structure. And I think it's in place. We had it registered. It can sue, it can be sued. We have a constitution, we have a seal.

Yusuf Grillo: It can acquire land and....

GR: We were going for the secretariat. The things are there. We will look at it again and see if we can get some of the young ones mobilized again to pick it up from there.

Yusuf Grillo: What we need is somebody really dedicated like you and I and Bruce and others who have contributed to head this thing and move it forward.

GR: That is very critical. And also speak to government. Not somebody who is going to be in the pocket of government, who is going to be cowed by a minister's coughing and that kind of stuff.

Yusuf Grillo: Definitely.

GR: But if we may move on. I want us to look at the contemporary scene as a whole. Essentially I am looking at a recent development: Africa 95, the one that was sponsored

by Whitechapel in Britain. I personally felt uncomfortable with the way it came out; the thing that got me worried was what I thought was some (and it may not be a deliberate thing) some kind of lacuna, when it comes to Lagos. The whole of Lagos was a vacuum in the catalog. And realizing that catalogs go a long way, much longer than the shows themselves, I was wondering if you have any reaction to that. People go to publications: what is written, what is said and what is not said. In this case, I am worried though by what is not said. What is your reaction?

Yusuf Grillo: Well, I got to know of this rather late. Just like you say, I was disappointed. Because I thought anybody who is attempting something as global as that ought to be more global in his vision. Perhaps, as you say, it may not be deliberate. But there is definitely a lapse. And I think, perhaps, if the organizers had chosen somebody who is a little more conversant with the whole scenario more than just specific areas, we would have had a more evenly distributed attention. Definitely, I agree with you that more of some parts of the country were aired than the others. And that's a pity particularly for such a very important event. It is again one of the problems which I think not having a strong Society of Nigerian Artists has caused, because if there was a very strong Society of Nigerian Artists in place, there was no way such a thing would have been organized without involving the Society. And since the society would be catering for the whole of the country, this type of lapse would not have arisen.

GR: In rounding up this discussion, I wonder if you have any additional issues that you may want to speak to.

Yusuf Grillo: Well, I can't think of any specific area right now. I only hope that the teaching of art will be given more prominence particularly in the primary and secondary schools. Because I think some, if not most, of the problems which contemporary artists of our times had, or are still having, are traceable to the fact that the broad cross section of the public is not appreciative of art. But I hope that in future we will find that the average boy or the average girl grows up knowing what a gallery is. In the primary school, that the average child will grow up knowing the works of Bruce Onobrakpeya and other artists. Even in secondary school, I hope that the child will grow up and is able to begin drawing or painting even if he is going to become a doctor or an engineer. That he is still able to draw; he is still able to paint, as one of the subjects in school. That we would have a population, in the near future, of educated people—rounded, educated people—who will be appreciative of the arts, and who will make the lives of the artists of their time more tolerable. Right now, if an artist is lucky, he finds good patronage. If not, he may be in one little town somewhere, where, unfortunately, he is unable to meet the right type of people; and some of the beautiful things he may be doing will just be there. He may be discouraged, and pack it up to do something else and so on and so forth. So, that's one of the areas which I think the government will take seriously, apart from, of course, doing its best to promote the arts at the level of the artists themselves. I also hope as I said earlier that the artists would learn to be their own best friends. GR