



Research Paper

Adopting the Ibiebe Alphabets and Ideograms as Motifs for Structural and Decorative Designs in Ceramic Production

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ABSTRACT

The Ibiebe alphabets and ideograms are signs and symbols developed by one of the most renowned artists in Nigeria, Bruce Onobrakpeya as a kind of symbols or thoughts in Urhobo, treated in a decorative way. These alphabets and ideograms have been adopted by several artists in the design and execution of art works, especially in the two dimensional art areas of Painting, Textile and Graphic designs. This paper aims at deriving motifs and patterns from selected Ibiebe alphabets for structural and decorative designs in ceramics production and it anchors on both aesthetic and functionalism theories. This is due to the fact that the wares to be designed, when eventually produced as ornamental wares, will serve as flower vases and will add beauty to the environment.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Man from the beginning has been expressing himself universally and solving his daily problems through his works of art. In creating these works of art, he draws inspiration from his environment as a member of the same environment.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria provides an environment that inspires the artists from the area with motifs, forms, themes and contents for self-expression. With the impact of petroleum oil exploration and exploitation which has impacted negatively on the environment, it is necessary that artists from the region derive and develop visuals to express themselves. According to Edewor(2016: 137-138), "Many artistic visuals have been generated to express the immediate and long term socio-economic and political effects of oil exploration and exploitation assault on host communities".

In his Master of Fine Art Thesis in 2001, Umoh, John went into the creeks of Niger Delta to study the knots of the crayfish harvesting net, *Isigh* which he developed into motifs for structural and decorative ceramic design which also carried content to speak to the public. Umoh (2017: 180). Oyelola(2006: 3-6) states that the African continent is rich in symbols, both pictographic and ideographic. He goes on to state that these symbols oftentimes conveyed references to people, animals and events in the form of practical advices, proverbs and prohibitions, magical spells and blessings.

As stated earlier, Africa is rich in symbols, thus, Oyelola adds that the Egyptian hieroglyphs were formulated in 1300 BC, and goes on to mention symbols such as the Akan of Ghana on gold weights and Adinkra funeral cloth, the Uli symbols of the Igbo and the Nsibidi pictographs of the Ekpe society of the Efik-Ibibio.

It is worthy of note that these symbols were not just created, developed and left to waste, but artists from the continent have over the years developed and used them in the creation of their works of art. In addition to the symbols mentioned above, more pictographs and ideographs continue to emerge giving the artists enough to choose from. Among such are the Ibie-ka Ideographs by Edewor, Nelson and the Ibiebe alphabets and ideograms created in 1984 by Bruce Onobrakpeya, an experimentalist of high reputable standard. See figs 1 and 2.

On the origin of Ibiebe Alphabets and Ideograms, Singletary (2996:1-2) states,

“ During 1983 and 1984, Bruce Onobrakpeya had time to think and draw from many of his works. One thing that came out of that period was a series of doodles. He goes on to say that “ Thus evolved a complete set of forms which he now calls, Ibiebe orideograms which help to bring a kind of symbols or thoughts in Urhobo, treated in a decorated way.

Bruce Onobrakpeya was born in 1932 and trained at the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, Zaria. He has taught in several secondary schools including Saint Gregory College, Lagos. He was also Artist-in- residence at several institutions in USA, Zimbabwe and in Nigeria. He is the initiator of the Harmatan Workshop series, an artists forum which has been running since 1998 in Agbarotor, DeltaState, Nigeria.

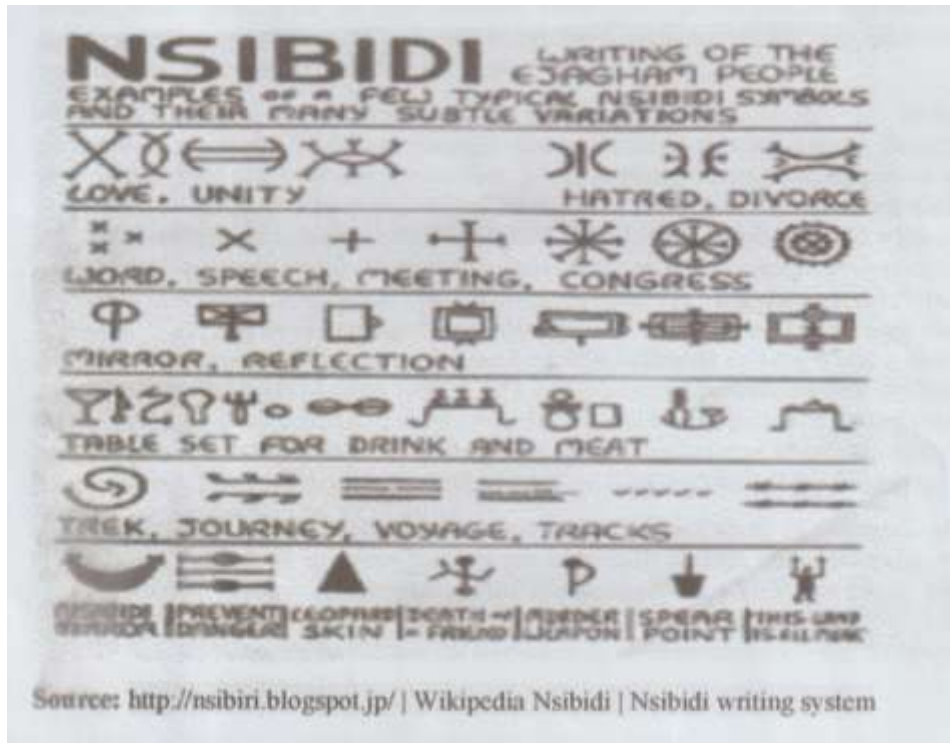


Fig. 1. Nsibidi writing system

Source : <http://nsibiri.blogspot.jp/WikipediaNsibidi|Nsibidi writing>

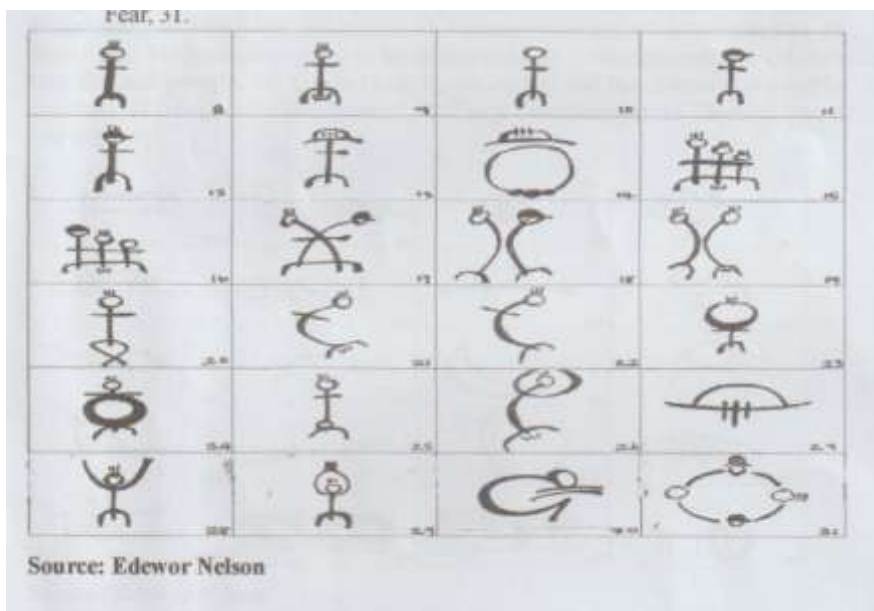


Fig. 2. Ibie-ka Ideographs

Source: Edewor, Nelson

The Origin of Ibiebe Alphabets and Ideograms

As the hieroglyphs is to Egypt, the Akan and Adinkra are to Ghana, the Uli is to Igbo, the Nsibidi is to Efik-Ibibio, so is the Ibiebe and Ibie-ka are to the Urhobo. According to Oyelola (2006), Bruce started experimenting with graphic symbols in 1984 when he was artist-in-residence at the University of Ibadan. He added that Bruce formulated a complete system of rendering in Graphic form, the sound of Urhobo language and also involved ideograms for the desiderata of the Urhobo culture.

The ideograms center around the major features of the Urhobo culture which include, Ufuoma (peace), Idolo (wealth), Olovwe(longevity) and Omakpokpo(health) which are all intimately linked. The interesting aspect of these ideograms is that viewer will bring his or her imagination to bear on their meanings. See fig 3.



Fig. 3. Ibiebe Alphabets and ideograms
Source: Bruce Onobrakpeya: Ibiebe Alphabets and ideograms.

Developing Ibiebe Alphabets and Ideographs as Motifs for Structural and Decorative Designs in Ceramic Product

Ceramics is a three dimensional art that involves structural and decorative designs. Design can be said to be the creation of detailed plan of something. It involves planning and making something in a skillful or artistic way in terms of form or structure, emphasizing it's features such as strength, appearance, convenience and efficient functioning. It involves inventing, contriving, devising, planning and re-planning to create something in material deposits to solve human problems. Akpan, E and Etuk, U (2000:79) says that art is concerned with sublimity, grandeur, loveliness, charm, neatness, appeal, glamour, perfection, sharpness, refinement, gorgeousness and utility among others. It is therefore the responsibility of the visual artist to design and redesign using symbols around him and creating more to meet these qualities of art. Chapman (1992:293) defines design as the plan, organization or arrangement of the visual elements in a work of art. In another word, Gilbert (1998: 226) supports the definition by saying that design is the organization of the visual elements of art such as line, shape, light, colour, value, texture, space and possibly, time and motion in such a way as to satisfy the artist's expressive intent. Omuaru (2002: 171) says that " Design is the planning, arrangement and composition of art elements through the guidance of art principles to produce a work of art. The ceramic artist does just this but goes further to take into consideration, the structure of the work of art to be produced. Structural design remains, a guiding principle whenever a work of art is to be created for instrumental use. Structural design therefore is concerned with the actual structure of a work of art. In ceramics, it takes into consideration, the foot, height, width, thickness, weight, stability, spout, lid, handle, gallery, joining and other features that aid successful firing and proper functioning of the piece. Though structural design provides some decorative ascents in what is referred to as structural decoration to the work of art, it's main function is to give strength to the work as a three dimensional piece. It is different from decorative design which does not form part of the structure and does not contribute to the functioning of the piece, thus the piece can do without it.

Decoration is an attractive, embellishing and ornamental items or features attached to something to make it look beautiful and attractive. It is to enhance the beauty and aesthetic value of a work of art. It is worthy of note that though the structural design features add some decorative ascent to the piece, their removal affects the proper functioning of the piece, but the piece can function perfectly well without decorative design.

Udoma (2009: 35) opines that “The uniqueness of an artistic statement lies in its limitless boundaries. An artist is the primary determinant of his own limits” Art therefore is a continuous process involving designing and redesigning to make statement and to solve life’s problems in material deposits. This statement is supported by Ekanem (2000: 13) who says that the visual artist must master the traditions and the unwritten laws and aesthetics of his public; yet in approach, he must be sufficiently heuristic, inventing and re-inventing, if he must remain relevant. Umoh² says that the society wants to see new things each time an artist puts up an exhibition, therefore he must be able to satisfy the eyes with creative and beautiful things that add value to people and environment.

Going by the fact that the visual artist has the capacity to imagine, imitate, arrange and rearrange, design and redesign, create and recreate to solve problems and to add to the environment where nature has failed to reach, it is the primary aim of this paper to select few Ibiebe alphabets and ideographs as derivative symbols and redesign or use them as motifs for structural and decorative designs in ceramic production. This paper does not intend to give new interpretations to these alphabets and ideograms but to adopt and highlight the interpretations as documented by the originator.

Selected Ibiebe Alphabets and Ideograms

Below are the few selected ideograms as derivative designs and motifs and the sketches derived from them for ceramic production. see fig. 4



Fig. 4. Selected Ibiebe Alphabets and Ideograms.

Illustration: Umoh, J.J

Medium: Pencil and ink on paper.

Year: 2021.

1. Obọ hwor ‘obọ.

Interpretation: This means that one hand washes the other or cooperation. It is the case of “ Iron sharpens iron”. Two sketches, A and B have been derived from this alphabet. While sketch A has flat foot, sketch B has three short legs. They consist of oval structures , vertically placed to function as flower vases. The oval structure is divided vertically only on the surface by incision into two equal parts with other features of the alphabet placed horizontally to add decorative ascent to the piece. The vertical line indicates strength, the two halves show individuality, the horizontal lines bring the two halves together for a common goal, while the dots signify the things they share in common. See fig. 5



Fig. 5 a and b

2. Ewewu khr ‘ orere-e.

Interpretation: A joyful cry brings people together rather than scatter them. Our lives and testimonies should draw people to God rather than send them away. This pictogram is developed as a motif for structural design of an ornamental ware. It consists of a broad base for stability which grows vertically signifying strength. It multiplies itself by three vertical structures which signifies the guests attracted to the Joyful cry. In this design, the structure is created strong enough from the base with two belts as the celebrant to carry the guests on top. See fig. 6



Fig. 6

3. Wo vw’ obo kon, wo vw’ ehun kon.

Interpretation: Prayer for material wealth ,prosperity and many children. The pictogram is developed into a motif for a structural form, though with some decorative ascents. It has a base broad enough for stability and a second structure which progresses vertically and opens gradually at the top to carry a bowl. The base

which is an inverted bowl represents the one who prays, the vertical structure shows the hands lifted up while the bowl on top is to receive the released blessings. See fig. 7



Fig.7

4. Idolo

Interpretation: Wealth. The symbol is developed into a motif for a structural form which among other functions can serve as a flower vase. The design consists of an x shape broad base for strength and stability. See fig 8.



Fig. 8.

5. Obora mre ren-n j' Oghene maron-n

Interpretation: Whatever we do not encounter is not created by God. Condolence at bereavement or misfortune. It is to say that God created, has, knows and does everything and he allows and disallows according to his perfect plan and purpose for mankind.

The pictogram is developed for structural design with its other features adding some decorative ascents to the piece. The design consists of a cylindrical base vertically placed for strength to carry the weight of the top. The cylinder spreads at the top into a trough or heart, large enough to carry messages of condolence, comfort and encouragement. See fig. 9.



Fig. 9.

6. Opharan (Omopharan) yi t' ologen –

Interpretation: It is the small palm shrub that grows into a tall palm tree. This is to say that the young shall grow. This calls for truth, faith, patience, encouragement and hardwork. The ibiebe symbol is redesigned as a motif for a structural form. It consists of an x- shape base vertically placed for stability and strength to carry another cylindrical structure, about half the width of the base. There are some projections or growths on the cylinder signifying the palm fronds. The piece can serve as a flower vase or a lamp shed if the cylindrical structure is wide and deep enough to carry an electric bulb. See fig. 10.

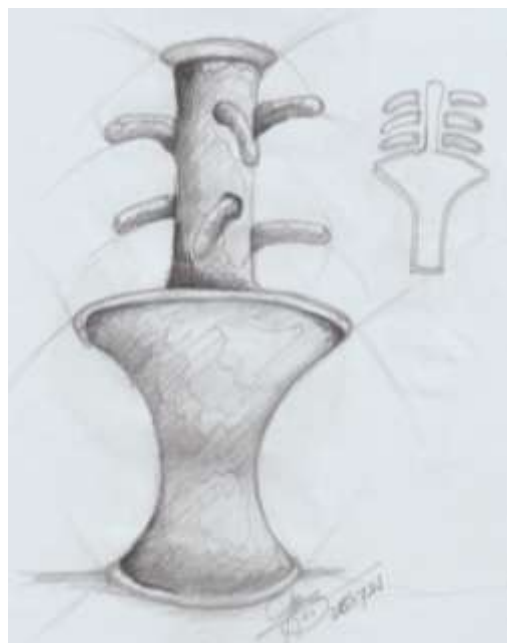


Fig. 10.

7. Okhọ di t' asan ọrhọrha ko kpar' ọwọ ọvo kpenu

Interpretation: When the chicken reaches a new place, it first stands on one leg. Strangers must study the customs and ways of life of a new place before doing anything. A song learner does not sing with style.

The structural design here has a balanced base which forms the leg. There is an oval form, horizontally placed on it, but manipulated upwards into two narrow, but open ends of different heights depicting the head and the tail. See fig.11.



Fig. 11.

8. Ede ror ' avwerhe r' ukọkhọ a cha mr' ọkhọwwo g' iye-e

Interpretation: When one considers the good taste of an egg, one will not have chicken for sacrifice. Exercising discipline in order to save for tomorrow.

The structural design derived from this symbol consists of a conical structure which narrows into a vertically placed cylindrical form. There are some egg-shape forms in relief on the conical base of the piece. See fig. 12.

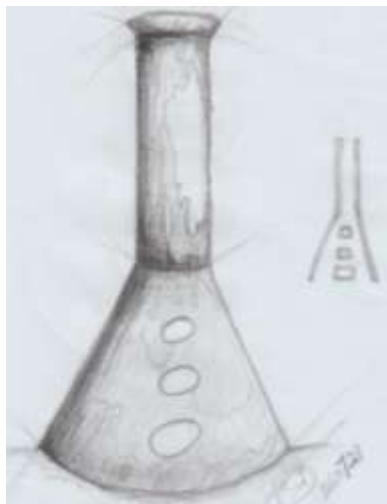


Fig. 12.

9. An Ibiebe pictogram with name and interpretation not stated, though it resembles a parasitic element which is a good example of an unfriendly friend.

It forms a structural design which consists of a cylindrical structure, vertically placed with three legs spread as roots to create stability. There are two structures coiled around the cylinder as climbing shrubs on a tree as parasites, dependents and unfriendly-friends. See fig. 13.



Fig. 13.

10. A pictogram with name and interpretation not stated, though it resembles unity or togetherness and the bond that binds people together. The design consists of three or four cylindrical structures , vertically placed together with their ends bent to create the foot for stability. The three structures are bound together with another structure as rope which represents whatever brings two or more people together for a common goal. See fig.14.



Fig.14.

11. Oto siobq n' emu k' owwan

Interpretation: The land will increase blessing for you. Prayer for the fertility of the soil and gains in one's undertakings.

The pictogram lacks the features to stand freely in the round, as such, it is developed as motif for decorative design. In this case , a vase is created and the motif, used for decoration. See fig. 15.

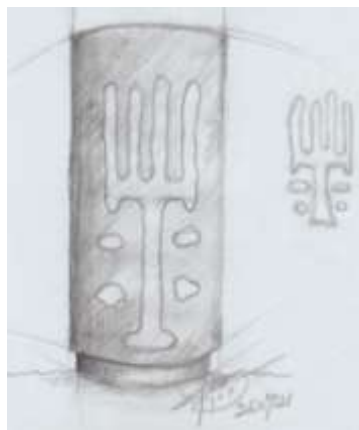


Fig. 15.

12. Oninihwere mue ubiento eni hwa akon a noye mu' eni hwa akon

Interpretation: The giant ant lifts the hair of an elephant with its teeth and declares, it has lifted up the elephant.

The pictogram lacks the features to stand by itself as a ceramic ware, except as a motif for decoration. A ceramic ware is designed to fit the shape of the motif and the motif used for decoration. See fig. 16.

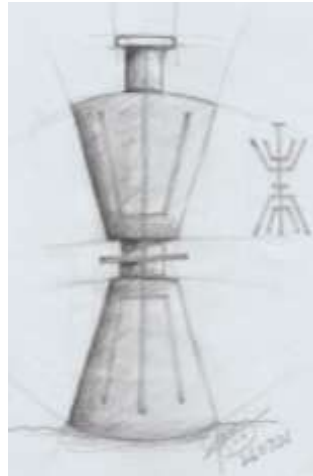


Fig. 16.

13. A pictogram with name and meaning not stated. The symbol lacks the structure to stand on its own. A vase is created and the symbol is used as motif for decoration. See fig. 17.



Fig. 17.

14. The name and interpretation of this symbol are not stated though it forms an interesting motif for structural design. Three shapes are involved in this design which requires proper arrangement to create an interesting ceramic ware. It consists of a conical base, one cylindrical structure in an inclined posture and the second cylinder of different height and shape is vertically placed on it to create a flower vase. See fig. 18.

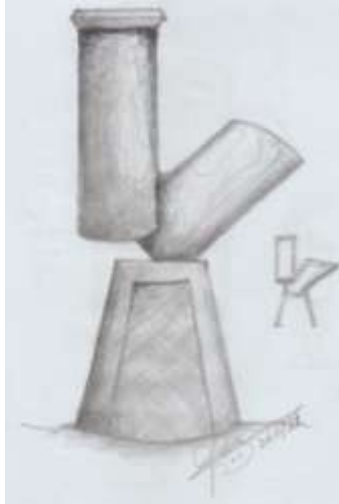


Fig. 18.

15. The name and interpretation of the ideogram are not stated. The motif derived from it is for both structural and decorative designs. The structure consists of a vertically placed cylinder with three horizontally placed ones of different lengths. See fig. 19.

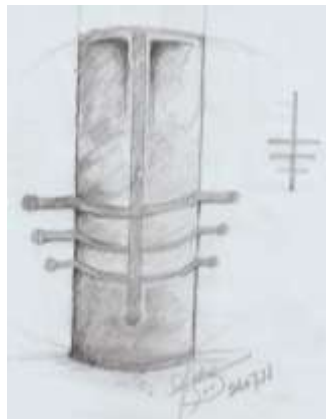


Fig. 19.

16. The name and interpretation of the ideogram are also not given. The motif derived from it is for a structural design with some decorative ascents. It consists of a spherical or oval structure with a mouth, just as the traditional water pot. It can be with or without a neck and with flat or conical foot. See fig. 20.

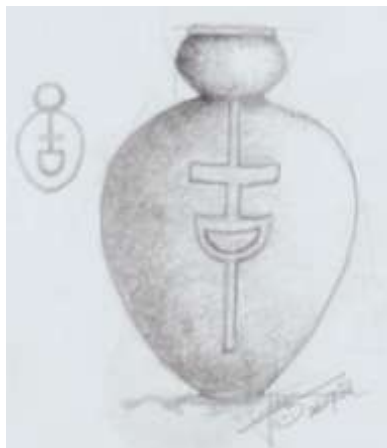


Fig. 20.

17. The name and interpretation of the ideogram are not stated. The motif derived is for a structural piece. It consists of an oval shaped structure with a funnel shaped mouth, supported by two inclined structures at both sides. See fig. 21.

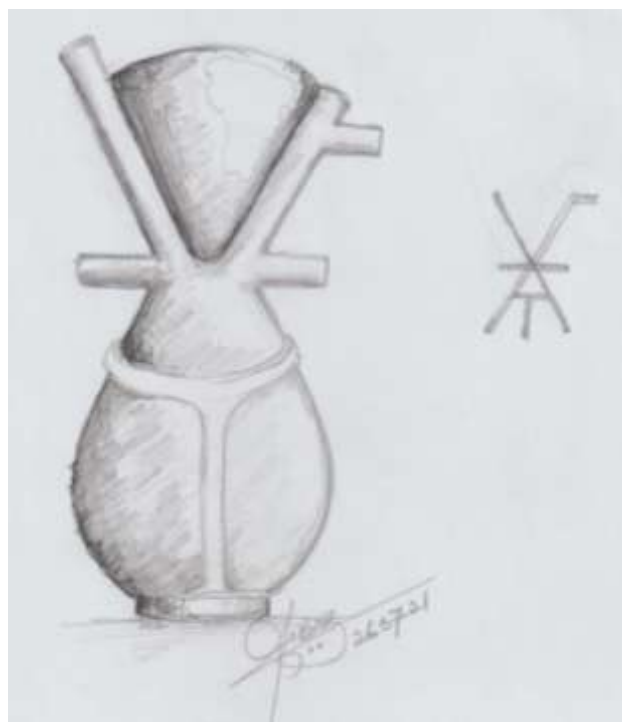


Fig. 21.

II. CONCLUSION:

Art is a continuous process of imagining, imitating, conceiving, perceiving, inventing and re-inventing, designing and redesigning, producing and reproducing with concepts drawn from the environment in which the visual artists dwell. These, the artists do to create tangible works of art for instrumental uses and ornamental wares to beautify the environment.

Bruce Onobrakpeya, an African experimentalist has drawn his inspirations from the culture and tradition of Urhobo and has over the years, invented and developed the Ibiebe alphabets and ideograms with their interpretations just as the Hieroglyphs, Uli, Adinkra, Akan and Nsibidi to add value to art, life and environment. It is worthy of note that all the ibiebe alphabets and ideograms can be developed into interesting motifs for both structural and decorative designs in ceramics just as they have been used in the three dimensional art areas. This paper has therefore made a critical study of the symbols and has adopted few of them as derivative symbols for structural and decorative design motifs. It has also gone ahead to make sketches of wares to be produced, mainly as ornamental wares of flower vases and lamp shades.

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