

Adaptation Of Stained-Glass Techniques For The Exploration Of Child Labour In Painting.

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Abstract

*Art has long served as a potent tool for social commentary, capable of transcending linguistic and cultural barriers to evoke empathy and provoke social reform. This study, *Adaptation of Stained-Glass Techniques for the Exploration of Child Labour in Painting*, reinterprets the aesthetic and structural principles of stained glass, its colour fragmentation, geometric segmentation, and luminous interplay with light, as conceptual strategies for visual advocacy. Historically used to convey moral and spiritual narratives, stained glass here becomes a metaphorical and expressive medium for addressing the issue of child labour in Nigeria. Through a conceptual and studio-based approach, the research adapts stained-glass aesthetics onto canvas using techniques of colour gradation, symbolic segmentation, and abstraction to depict the fractured experiences of working children. Drawing inspiration from Piet Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism and Yusuf Grillo's planar compositions, the study merges modernist abstraction with African social realities to reveal how beauty and moral consciousness can coexist in postmodern painting. The resulting artworks embody emotional tension between hardship and hope, transforming sacred visual language into an instrument of empathy, education, and reform. The findings affirm the potential of art as a tool for social advocacy and propose stained-glass adaptation as an innovative framework for engaging humanitarian themes within contemporary studio practice.*

Keywords: Stained-Glass Painting, Child Labour, Conceptual Art, Social Commentary, Visual

Introduction

Throughout history, art has served as one of the most profound means of expressing human emotions, ideas, and social concerns. It transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries, providing a universal language through which empathy can be evoked and collective consciousness awakened. As Dobrolyuska and Yuliya (2024) observe, "Art has the ability to transform physical or bodily modes of perception, providing new opportunities for expression and understanding." Similarly, Kakembo (2025) asserts that art has long been a catalyst for social transformation, functioning as both a mirror to society and a platform for resistance, empowerment, and reform. Keen (2025) further highlights that art, across generations, has shaped societal attitudes through movements that responded to cultural, political, and economic circumstances.

From Romanticism's emotive defiance of oppression in the 18th century, through Impressionism's commentary on industrialisation in the 19th century, to the modernist and conceptual experiments of the 20th century, art has consistently reflected and redefined social realities. Among these traditions, stained glass painting holds a unique historical and aesthetic position. Once confined to religious spaces, stained glass served as both decoration and didactic medium, illuminating

spiritual narratives and moral lessons through the interplay of light, colour, and structure. Its luminous abstraction and geometric segmentation represent a fusion of material beauty and symbolic meaning, which anticipates the visual language of modern abstraction.

In contemporary times, stained glass has evolved beyond ecclesiastical contexts. Historical Windows (2025) notes that only about ten per cent of stained glass today is produced for religious purposes; the rest now appears in municipal, residential, and commercial spaces. This shift underscores the adaptability of the medium and its capacity to convey secular, conceptual, and social themes. The integration of light in stained glass transcends mere visual depiction; it transforms viewing into an experience of illumination and reflection. Such qualities resonate with modernist and postmodernist art, where abstraction and formal structure convey meaning beyond literal representation.

Building upon this conceptual foundation, this paper adapts the mimicking of stained glass in painting as a contemporary visual language to address the problem of child labour. The fragmented and translucent qualities of stained glass, its divisions of form and colour, are reinterpreted on canvas to symbolise the fractured experiences and emotional struggles of working children. Bishop (2012) emphasises that socially engaged art often challenges dominant systems while creating spaces for reflection and dialogue. In this light, the study employs abstraction and symbolism to evoke awareness and empathy toward the persistent issue of child exploitation.

This paper situates itself within the discourse of conceptual art practices, where the idea and intellectual process behind creation often outweigh the finished object itself (Muscato, 2021). The paper, therefore, seeks to demonstrate how colour fragmentation, symbolic composition, and abstraction can be harnessed to explore the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of child labour in Nigeria. Through this adaptation, stained glass becomes not only a medium of light and beauty but also a mirror of contemporary humanitarian struggles.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to adapt the mimicry of stained glass to create a body of paintings that portray the struggles of child labour activities on canvas. While the objectives are to:

- i. create visual expressions of the hardships endured by child labourers' activities through colour fragmentation.
- ii. use mini boxes as a symbolic representation of the hours of the day in which many children are found hawking.
- iii. use different gradations of colours to express a stained glass effect on canvas.

Child Rights and Labour

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2019) defines child rights as the basic entitlements and freedoms every person under 18 should enjoy, such as survival, protection, participation, and development. However, millions of children in developing nations are denied these rights through exploitative labour. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2012) defines child labour as work that deprives children of their health, education, or dignity. In Nigeria, poverty and weak enforcement of child protection laws sustain this abuse, manifesting in hawking, domestic servitude, and hazardous labour. Anukam (1986) highlights that child labour

can involve any engagement, paid or unpaid, where a child works to alleviate adult burdens, either inside or outside the home. When overextended, such engagement becomes child abuse. Skovdal (2009) urges the need to differentiate between normal child development and harmful child labour by exploring its full dimensions. Many of these children appear malnourished and sick, while others suffer pain from beatings or assaults by gangsters. Some are sent out by parents and caregivers, often exposing them to dubious characters and dangerous activities. As a result, many child street vendors end up engaging in illegal trade, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and exploitation.

Stained Glass Techniques

Stained glass, with its rich history and intricate craftsmanship, offers a unique lens through which to examine the theme of this research: the adaptation of stained-glass techniques for the exploration of child labour in painting.

Stained-glass windows were not created merely for decoration but also served an educational role, illustrating stories that evoked emotions for both illiterate and educated populations. Verified Market Research (2024) supports this by asserting that “stained glass carries deep cultural and heritage significance, extending beyond its economic value by representing historical artistry, craftsmanship, and serving as a medium for cultural stories and religious symbolism.” This demonstrates that art has long stood as a powerful medium of advocacy, resilience, and expression across the world. Historical records show that as early as 330 A.D., the windows of the Hagia Sophia were decorated with coloured stained glass. Following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Arabic inscriptions appeared in the stained-glass windows of the monumental building, by then known as the Sophia Mosque, demonstrating how the medium adapted to different cultural and religious expressions.

Bespoke Heritage (2025) asserts that, “Stained glass reached its high point as an art form in the Middle Ages. At that time, most people couldn’t read, so stained glass windows became a way to tell Bible stories using pictures. Further explain that, starting in the 8th century, Islamic culture had a huge impact on the art of stained glass. Glass was part of the architecture, bringing both beauty and function to mosques, homes, and public buildings.” Glass production in Syria carried on into the Islamic era, with Raqqa, Aleppo, and Damascus leading the way. The focus there was more on crystal-clear or gilded glass than on coloured pieces. Later, in the 8th century, the alchemist Jābir ibn Hayyān wrote *Kitab al-Durra al-Maknuna*, which detailed how to make coloured glass and fake gemstones. He described glassmaking practices from ancient Babylon and Egypt. These methods were used to decorate mosques, palaces, and other public buildings across the Islamic world. Islamic stained glass often avoids images of people or animals. Instead, it focuses on geometric patterns, floral designs, and calligraphy. This gives artists a diverse way to explore, which both religious, political, and social institutions perceive as a reflection of cultural values.

Stalley (1999) asserts that “stained-glass windows functioned as educational media, visually narrating biblical stories for largely illiterate populations.” Similarly, Marks (1993) frames medieval stained glass in England as a series of “pictorial catechisms,” carefully arranged to teach Christian doctrine through visual sequences. Barron (2000) deepens this view by describing cathedral windows as “the Scriptures made luminous,” designed to instruct and elevate spiritually.

Panipat Press (2023) echoes these interpretations, referring to stained glass as “illuminated sermons in colour,” used to communicate moral and theological lessons. Together, these sources establish stained glass as a visual pedagogical tradition.

Conceptual Ideas Inspired by Exploration

In the twenty-first century, artists enjoy unprecedented freedom in conceptualising and executing their artworks. This process, fuelled by Postmodern and Contemporary Art ideologies, enables artists to transcend traditional boundaries and explore pressing global issues through diverse and often unconventional media. Aykanat (2014) avers that “artists generally explore everything and everywhere for ideas and materials.” The creative journey of artists, with expectations of discovery and experimentation, often leads to unexpected and innovative results. Aina (2007) contends that “there is a wider range of media available to twenty-first-century art practitioners. Artists require creative insight to engage in endless exploration, experimenting with, developing, and refining their styles. Buhari (2016) avers that “artists, by their very nature, draw from the wealth of their experiences and surroundings, interpreting these visually based on their unique ability to see. Their capacity to empathise, visualise, respond, interpret, and challenge our perception of both the physical and emotional world enriches the entirety of human existence.”

Analysis of Related Artworks

In the course of this study, fourteen artists’ works are reviewed, eighth are from paintings with segmentation or fragmentation of colours, and five are from the works that depict child laborious activities. However, for the purpose of this paper, only three will be reviewed as follows:

Painting Depicting Child Labour

Fig.1, The painting under consideration vividly depicts the realities of child labour by presenting two children on the street, burdened with the responsibility of hawking food items under the scorching sun. The central figures are an elder child assisting a younger one in balancing a tray of tomatoes on his head, while another tray containing onions, tomatoes, and other goods rests on the ground beside them. The depiction of their shadows cast against the sun serves not only as a naturalistic detail but also as a symbolic marker of harsh climatic conditions, intensifying the sense of struggle and vulnerability that defines the daily existence of working children.

This painting resonates with the research focus on child labour, as it captures both the physical strain and emotional burden associated with such practices. The children are portrayed outside the natural setting of learning or playing, thus embodying the lost opportunities for education and recreation. Instead, they are confined to the streets, forced to assume adult responsibilities at an early age. The elder child’s act of assisting the younger one in arranging the load reflects the resilience and mutual support often found among child labourers, yet it also underlines the absence of parental or institutional protection that should rightfully safeguard their welfare.

The painting further serves as a compelling form of visual advocacy. By portraying the harsh conditions endured by these children, it draws the viewer’s attention to the injustice of child labour and the deprivation of basic rights. The blazing sunlight, the weight of the trays, and the

absence of an environment conducive to learning, all communicate the severe physical and emotional toll placed on children. Rather than existing as a neutral depiction, the painting deliberately appeals for awareness and change, compelling society to acknowledge the exploitation of vulnerable children who should be nurtured and protected.

Thus, the painting functions not merely as an artistic representation but as a powerful commentary on the persistence of child labour. It symbolises both hardship and resilience, while also exposing systemic neglect that pushes children into adult roles prematurely. By highlighting these realities, the work strengthens the discourse on child rights and underscores the urgent need for collective action through policy, education, and social responsibility to combat child labour and safeguard the well-being of future generations.



Fig 1. Trying to Survive, Abiodun Oyedele, Oil on Canvas, 80 x 100cm. <https://saatchiart.com/en-in/art/painting-trying-to-survive/1405411/8405908>



Fig 2: Untitled, Ken Okoli, 2012, metal sheet and enamel paint, Our Lady Queen of Peace Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. (Photograph by: Rahila Joseph Zira, 2025)

Painting Made by Colour Fragmentation

Fig. 2, The artwork is a stained-glass style painting executed on a double-door metal sheet. It portrays the image of two human figures, male and female, positioned on opposite sides of the composition. The male figure, resembling Christ, is shown with his left hand placed on his chest while his right hand is raised with two fingers extended upwards, a gesture traditionally symbolising peace and blessing. His head is crowned with a large halo in yellow, outlined in black, which signifies glory and divinity. The female figure, who represents the Virgin Mary, stands with her arms crossed over her chest and her head gently tilted, a posture that conveys humility and calmness. A smaller halo above her head similarly indicates sanctity. The background is filled with multiple fragments of red, green, yellow, and blue colours arranged like a pattern that reflects the traditional characteristics of stained glass.

The painting makes deliberate use of line, particularly the strong black contours that divide the figures and background into separate planes, imitating the lead strips in actual stained glass.

Radiant tones dominate the work, creating both visual impact and symbolic meaning. The shapes of the figures are stylised and flattened, rather than naturalistic, while the space is shallow, as the figures appear against a two-dimensional, fragmented background. The composition is balanced through the symmetrical arrangement of the male and female figures on either side of the door. Emphasis is placed on the halos and the hand gestures, which guide the viewer's focus to the symbolic roles of the figures. The repetition of colour fragments produces rhythm, while the contrast between bright hues and dark outlines provides variety and visual interest. At the same time, the harmony of line and colour creates unity, holding the composition together as a coherent whole.

Although the subject matter of this work is religious, its relevance to this paper lies in its method of adaptation. The artist has transferred the stained-glass technique onto metal, showing that the style is not limited to church windows. This directly supports the research aim of adapting stained-glass techniques onto canvas as a medium for addressing contemporary issues such as child labour. Just as the halos, colours, and gestures in this work elevate the figures to a spiritual level, a similar use of fragmentation, contrast, and luminous colour on canvas can intensify the representation of children's suffering, resilience, and lost opportunities.

Works Exhibiting Segmentation and Fragmentation

Fig.3, the stained-glass artwork titled 'North Rose Window' is a concentric arrangement of figures, spiralling outward from the central image of Christ, introducing a sense of movement and rhythm, guiding the viewer's eye across interconnected biblical scenes. Each petal-like panel is a

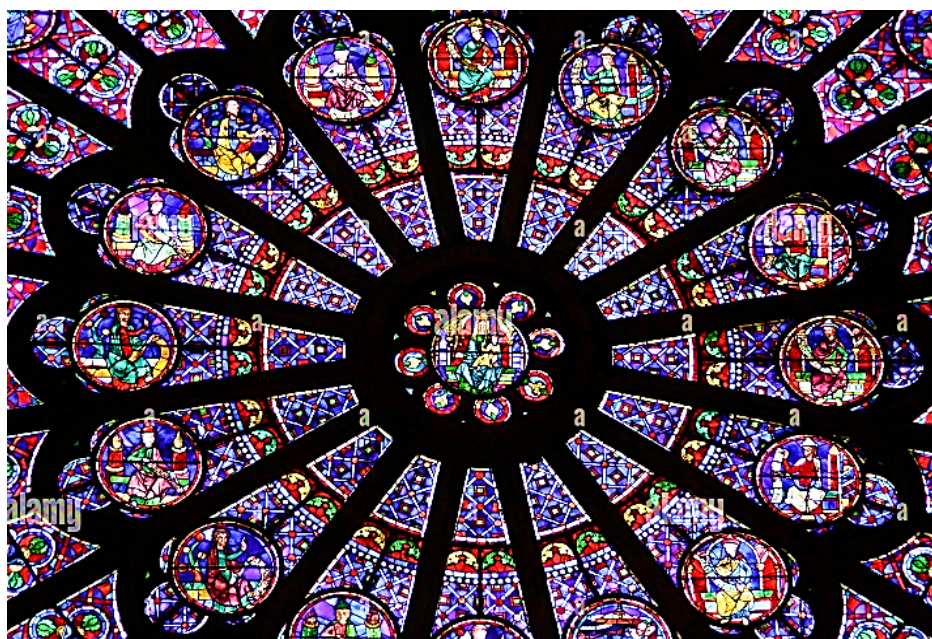


Fig 3. The Rose Window, Notre Dame, Medieval Artisans, Stained Glass, 13th Century, Approximately 13,070 cm², France. <https://notredamedeparis.fr/en/understand/architecture/the-stained-glass-window>,

carefully crafted shape contributing to an overall pattern that embodies both unity and variety, ensuring that every distinct narrative fragment supports the holistic spiritual message. The elegant

lines and precise segmentation formed by the stone mullions (tracery) reveal the structural logic of stained glass: reality is divided into smaller symbolic forms without losing form or narrative clarity. These divisions strengthen the visual storytelling, with each figure occupying a distinct space, yet all coalescing into a greater visual theology. The Rose Window's use of emphasis with Christ as the radiant focal point enhances its didactic function, inspiring and educating viewers through a harmonious interplay of light, colour, and form. Its fragmented yet unified design parallels the researcher's exploration of stained-glass techniques on canvas to depict the fractured experiences of child labourers, where rigid divisions mimic the social and emotional separations faced by exploited children. Ultimately, the Rose Window demonstrates how the elements and principles of art work together to transform mere decoration into a profound medium of spiritual, educational, and emotional communication. This research, therefore, adapts this technique by providing a foundational reference for harnessing fragmented colour and luminous light to convey complex realities, offering a powerful comparative point for contemporary painting explorations on canvas.

Analysis of Painting under Objective One

To create visual expressions of the hardships endured by child labourers through colour fragmentation.

The painting presents a solitary child figure positioned centrally, pushing a wheelbarrow that



Plate I. Silent Subjective, Oil on Canvas, Stained-glass mimic (colour fragmentation) 100x120cm, 2025.

contains two large yellow containers, representing items used for hawking or manual labour. The composition is executed in the stained-glass mimicking style, characterised by the fragmentation of colour into geometric units separated by bold black outlines. It evokes the luminous qualities of traditional stained glass, transforming the surface of the canvas into a mosaic of vibrant chromatic

planes. The artist's deliberate use of intersecting geometric patterns in the background creates a sense of spatial rhythm and movement. Radiating arcs and angular divisions seem to converge around the child, visually trapping the figure within a complex web of colour and form. The overlapping hues of red, blue, purple, and magenta in the background contrast with the green and yellow tones of the child's attire and wheelbarrow, thus isolating the figure as the focal point of emotional and narrative intensity.

Conceptually, the painting explores the emotional and physical burden of child labour through fragmented colour composition. The use of colour segmentation serves not only as an aesthetic strategy but also as a metaphor for the fragmentation of childhood innocence and the disjointed experiences of child labourers. The wheelbarrow symbolises toil, endurance, and premature responsibility, objects that replace the symbols of childhood play with tools of survival. The luminous quality of the colour scheme, reminiscent of stained-glass illumination, introduces a duality of meaning; while it evokes visual beauty, it simultaneously exposes the harsh reality of the subject.

The glowing yellows and greens may represent hope and resilience, whereas the enveloping reds and purples allude to struggle, exhaustion, and the psychological weight of hardship. This tension between light and dark hues mirrors the paradox of innocence within adversity, a recurring theme in depictions of social realities. This painting powerfully fulfils the first objective of the research by using colour fragmentation to express the emotional and physical hardship of child labour. Its stained-glass mimicry not only enhances the aesthetic quality but also deepens the conceptual narrative, positioning the artwork within a contemporary discourse of socially engaged and conceptual art. The piece thus serves as a bridge between beauty and advocacy, transforming the visual experience into a statement of empathy, awareness, and social consciousness.

Analysis of Painting under Objective Two

To use mini boxes as a symbolic representation of the hours of the day in which many children are found hawking.



Plate II. Gluttony of Parent, Joseph Rahila Zira, Oil on Canvas, 120x150cm, 2025

The artwork, composed of six rectangles filled with colourful geometric shapes, symbolically represents the hours of the day when children engage in various forms of labour, including hawking, farming, mechanic work, and guiding the blind. Each shape serves as a visual metaphor for a specific occupation, collectively portraying the cyclical rhythm of a child's working day, from morning to night. Through geometric abstraction and stained-glass-inspired fragmentation, the artist transforms the rectangle into containers of time and experience, much like the gourd functions in this research as a vessel of cultural memory. The gradual colour transition from cool to warm hues conveys both physical fatigue and emotional endurance. Formally, the artwork employs balance, rhythm, contrast, harmony, and unity to express the tension between order and oppression. Conceptually, it turns structured abstraction into social commentary, exposing the repetitive and confined routines of child labour. Overall, the work illustrates how mini-boxes and stained-glass aesthetics can be adapted as conceptual tools to explore themes of time, struggle, and lost childhood, aligning with the study's aim of merging aesthetic innovation with social consciousness.

Analysis of Painting under Objective Three

To use different gradations of colours to express a stained-glass effect on canvas.



Plate III. Untitled, Joseph Rahila Zira, Oil on Canvas, 22x35cm, 2025.

Plate 3: Is the third objective of this study, which comprises adapting colour gradations to express stained effects on canvas. Through bold black outlines and vibrant, segmented geometric forms,

the artist recreates the luminous quality and structure of stained glass. The interplay of warm and cool colours, as well as overlapping circles and rectangles, generates depth, rhythm, and transparency, mimicking how light filters through coloured glass.

The dark outlines act like lead canes, unifying the composition while enhancing contrast and brilliance. The careful arrangement of colour transitions evokes both visual harmony and emotional resonance, symbolising light, hope, and transformation. Overall, the work successfully translates the stained-glass aesthetic into a painterly medium, merging abstraction, symbolism, and conceptual expression.

Findings

During the course of this paper, the following was observed:

- A. Stained-glass painting techniques, characterised by colour fragmentation, geometric segmentation, and symbolic abstraction, effectively convey the emotional and psychological aspects of child labour.
- B. The transformation of stained-glass aesthetics from sacred architecture to conceptual easel painting was found to evoke both confinement and hope.
- C. Colour emerged as a central expressive tool: warm hues symbolised struggle and fatigue, while cool tones conveyed endurance and resilience. The use of light and transparency created psychological contrasts between oppression and transcendence.
- D. The study also established that abstraction deepens rather than obscures meaning, and that combining Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism with Grillo's geometric abstraction bridges Western modernist ideals with African realities, affirming art as a tool for social advocacy.

Contribution to Knowledge

This research makes several noteworthy contributions to contemporary art practice and scholarship:

- 1. Expansion of Stained-Glass Aesthetics: It introduced the application of stained-glass principles, traditionally used in ecclesiastical art, into conceptual painting. This creative adaptation expands the expressive possibilities of colour fragmentation and geometric composition in postmodern studio practice.
- 2. Development of Visual Language for Social Advocacy: The study formulated a new visual vocabulary that merges abstraction, symbolism, and emotional resonance to address social issues, positioning art as a medium of empathy and reform.
- 3. Synthesis of Global and Indigenous Influences: By blending Mondrian's modernist ideals with Grillo's African abstraction, the research established a hybrid framework for interpreting Nigerian social realities within a global artistic discourse.

4. Advancement of Studio-Based Research: The research validated practice-led inquiry as a legitimate academic approach, demonstrating that studio experimentation can generate theoretical and socio-cultural knowledge.
5. Enrichment of Postmodern and Socio-Aesthetic Discourse: It challenged the traditional divide between beauty and social commentary, showing that aesthetic harmony and ethical responsibility can coexist in contemporary conceptual art.
6. Educational and Cultural Value: The study provides pedagogical material for art education, inspiring artists, scholars, and students to address social issues creatively while drawing from indigenous experiences

Summary

The summary of the study reaffirmed that adapting stained-glass principles, light, colour, and segmentation, within conceptual painting enhances both expressive and communicative depth. Through the influence of Mondrian and Grillo, the research demonstrated how abstraction and luminous colour effects can symbolically portray struggle, endurance, and hope, bridging aesthetic beauty and moral consciousness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study confirmed that stained-glass techniques can effectively transform traditional religious aesthetics into conceptual tools for addressing social concerns. Abstraction was shown to heighten emotional interpretation and empathy, positioning the artist as a visual advocate for justice and awareness. By merging global artistic philosophies with African cultural realities, the research expands the boundaries of postmodern African art and reaffirms art's power as a vehicle for education, empathy, and social change.

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