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# Artwork Information Sheet 42

## DAMILOLA OPEDUN'S COMMONWEALTH



Commonwealth, Oil on Canvas, 180cm X 150cm Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University.

## INTRODUCTION

**C**ommonwealth is a powerful painting by Nigerian artist Damilola Moses Opedun. The work presents a wedding-like scene, but with a twist that makes viewers stop and think. With rich colors and carefully chosen clothing styles, the painting shows more than just beauty, it raises important questions about relationships, gender roles, and how society views marriage today. Like many of Opedun's artworks, Commonwealth combines visual storytelling with deeper meaning. It encourages us to look closer and think harder about things we often take for granted.

## THE ARTIST

Damilola Moses Opedun is an artist from Nigeria whose works speak to both the heart and the mind. From a young age, he found joy in drawing and telling stories through images. Even though his parents were separated, they both supported his artistic journey. He studied painting at the Federal Polytechnic Auchi, Edo State, earning a Higher National Diploma between 2006 and 2010. He began his full-time career as an artist in 2010. Opedun's career has taken him far beyond Nigeria. His paintings have been shown in cities such as Lagos, London, Vienna, and Arezzo. Some of his major exhibitions include Catharsis (Lagos, 2025), Show Me Who You Are (Vienna, 2024), and The Stories We Tell (London, 2022). His works have even appeared in international films and book covers. In 2023, his paintings were used for the cover of OURS by Philip B. Williams in both the UK and the US. Two of his pieces were also featured in the films Magic Mike's Last Dance (Warner Bros UK) and NZU (Disney UK).

He won the Silver Award for Distinctive Accomplishment in Pastel from the Pastel Society of America in 2017. Beyond making art, Opedun is also a mentor and a giver. In 2015, he started The Seed of the True Vine Foundation, which helps children living in Makoko, a poor area of Lagos, using art to give them hope and direction.

## STYLE OF ART

Damilola Opedun sees painting as more than just a skill, but also as a spiritual act. For him, art is a conversation between the artist and something greater than themselves, a sacred space where the unseen becomes visible. In his artist statement, he describes this as an "act of surrender, revelation, and transformation," suggesting that painting

allows him to connect with both inner truth and higher purpose (Opedun, 2024). His creative process often begins with quiet thought and prayer, letting emotion and intuition lead the way, rather than relying solely on technical control. This mirrors the ideas of artists like Wassily Kandinsky, who believed that true art comes from the soul and should speak to the spiritual in others (Kandinsky, 1912/1977).

His style combines academic drawing skills with deep, personal exploration. Over time, his work has shifted from the formal training he received at Auchi Polytechnic to something more inward, more honest, what he calls a journey of "unlearning and relearning." His paintings often deal with opposites light and dark, chaos and order, joy and sadness, and how these different forces can come together to create something meaningful. This reflects a broader tradition in African and diasporic art, where duality and contradiction are often used to express layered realities (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

Opedun uses his art to ask quiet but powerful questions about the world around us: the roles we are expected to play, the beliefs we inherit without thinking, and the unspoken rules of organized religion. His goal is to "challenge assumptions, dismantle stereotypes, and expand perspectives," allowing viewers to see beyond the familiar (Opedun, 2024). This vision of art as a tool for personal and social awakening aligns with the philosophies of artists like Obiora Udechukwu and Demas Nwoko, who emphasized art's potential to reflect and reshape culture (Oguibe, 2004).

## DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTWORK

In Commonwealth, three figures are shown in a bright and elegant setting that looks like a wedding scene. At the center stands a man dressed in a stylish lavender suit, blue vest, white shirt, lavender tie, and sky-blue trousers. His silver shoes shine, and interestingly, he is holding a bouquet of flowers, a role usually given to a bride.

On his right is a woman in a detailed lavender gown, designed in a Victorian-era fashion. She wears gloves, a blue top hat, and holds a pink umbrella in her left hand. Her right hand rests gently on the man's arm. On the left side is another woman, wearing glasses and an afro hairstyle. Her lavender dress has blue lines around the waist and a neat white border on the sleeves and hem. She holds an open umbrella and wears blue-white heels.

Though it looks like a wedding portrait, the fact that the man is with two women adds a twist. It brings to mind the idea of polygamy, a man having more than one wife. The painting's title, *Commonwealth*, adds even more meaning. It can suggest shared value, but also raises questions about who or what is being shared. In this painting, the man may not be the one in control, he could be the prize the women have won.



Damilola Opedun's *Commonwealth*, Oil on Canvas, 180cm X 150cm.

## ANALYSIS OF THE WORK

At first glance, *Commonwealth* may seem like a joyful or even playful wedding scene. But when you take a closer look, the painting begins to reveal deeper meanings. One of the most striking details is that the man is holding a bouquet, a role traditionally given to the bride. This small but important change turns the usual wedding picture on its head. It suggests a reversal of gender roles, where the man appears to be the one being chosen. This reflects wider conversations happening today about changing gender expectations and the shifting roles of men and women in relationships (Butler, 1990; hooks, 2000).

The presence of two women standing beside the man also brings to mind the idea of polygamy, a practice common in some cultures but viewed differently across the world. The way the figures are arranged looks peaceful and balanced, but the meaning behind it may feel uncomfortable or unfamiliar to some viewers. This mix of beauty and unease is a key part of Opedun's style. He uses peaceful scenes to ask serious questions: What does it mean to share a partner? Who holds power in this kind of

relationship? And who gains or loses from such arrangements? These questions touch on broader themes in African and global art that deal with family structures, gender dynamics, and modern identity (Ogbechie, 2008).

The clothes worn by the figures combine Victorian-style fashion with contemporary Afrocentric elements like natural hairstyles. This mix shows how different times and cultures overlap in the present. It also points to the lasting influence of colonialism, which still shapes how people dress, speak, and think. Many African artists today use fashion in their work to explore identity and history, using visual styles as a way to reclaim and reinterpret cultural memory (Coombes, 1994; Enwezor, 2001).

Color also plays an important role in this piece. The soft lavender gives the painting a gentle, almost dreamlike feeling. Blue tones bring calm, while the pink umbrella adds a playful or ironic note. Although the people are evenly spaced and the composition looks balanced, this surface harmony hides deeper questions about value, ownership, and choice in relationships.

Finally, the title *Commonwealth* adds yet another layer of meaning. On one level, it can refer to something shared for the benefit of all like a union or community. But it also brings to mind the history of colonialism, especially the British Commonwealth, where resources and people were often shared in unfair and unequal ways. In this context, the title could be seen as a critique, suggesting that even in relationships today, people can become commodities, valued more for their usefulness than for love (Mbembe, 2001)

## CONCLUSION

Damilola Opedun's *Commonwealth* is a beautiful and thoughtful painting that goes far beyond its surface. At first, it may seem like a stylish wedding portrait. But with every detail, the flowers, the umbrellas, the number of people, and even the title, it becomes clear that the painting is asking deep and important questions. What do we think marriage is today? Is it about love, ownership, or social image? Who holds the power in a relationship? Opedun does not give us clear answers. Instead, he leaves space for the viewer to think for themselves.

What makes Opedun's work special is how he balances beauty with meaning. His paintings are easy to look at, but they stay in your mind long after. They invite you to reflect not just on what you see, but on what you believe.

Commonwealth is more than a painting. It is a conversation, a mirror, and a challenge. Through it, Opedun reminds us that art is not just about showing the world it is also about changing how we see it.

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