THE MUSEUM IN OUR MIDST

LECTURE BY PROFESSOR KOJO FOSU, UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA, PRESENTED AT THE OPENING OF THE GHANA NATIONAL MUSEUM EXHIBITION 17TH DECEMBER 2014 AT ACCRA.

Mr. Chairman, Museum Director, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, please sit back, relax and watch the slides, so that you can also make your contribution.

Professor Asihene complained in the Cultural Heritage exhibition catalogue in 1968 that, and I quote "when people talk about art in Africa, (of which Ghana is a part), my own, the art of painting has barely any place in their thoughts." Prof, we assure you that we have found the missing link, so please rest in perfect peace. [Shall we have a minute silence in his memory... THANKS].

NEOLITHIC CAVE PAINTINGS

Findings by P.L. and P.J. Carter indicate that about 6000 years ago, precisely about 4000 BC, Neolithic Ghanaian artists created abstract geometric drawings (plate 1), and schematic drawings of equestrian or horse riding figures which are aligned in a manner that suggests horse racing. They decorated the cave walls of their habitat with paintings of visual narratives of human and animal activities executed in natural earth and vegetable pigments.

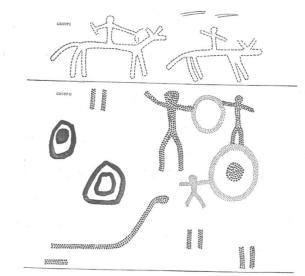


Plate 1: Abstract geometric drawings and schematic drawings of Ghanaian Neolithic paintings

This composition (plate 1) shows a group of three human figures together with a snake, painted in dominant red polka-dot costumes which give an impression of a circuit act. Without any base line, the figures appear balanced in illusionary suspended rhythmic floatation. At the Tan-Piok cave in Jilik within the Gambaga escarpment, in the Upper East region of Ghana, my M.Phil. Students at UEW, in May of 2011, saw this cave painting which (plate 2) shows a large looming male figure painted in white. He has a broad chest and narrow hips. The figure wears a pair of

boots and presented hierarchically. The theme seems to suggest a dramatic initiation ceremony or a recount of a 9^{th} century story of a light skin Arab recruit for the Moslem Jihad crusaders or even a 16^{th} century European slave trader.

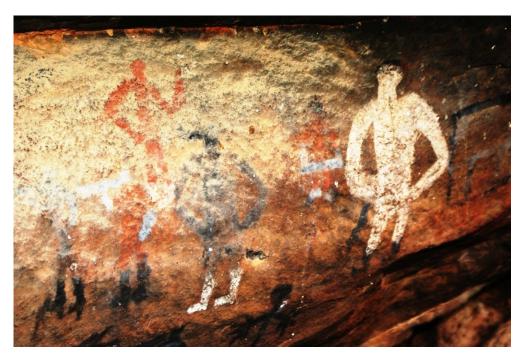


Plate 2: Ghanaian Neolithic Stone Age cave painting, found in Tanpiok site, Jilig, Northen Ghana.

The Ghana National museum houses examples of 19th century provocative drawings of symbolic Adinkra fabric decorations. Take *Gye Nyame* Adinkra symbol (Plate 3), for instance. It was a visual interpretation of Akan divine reality. The concept was enshrined in a maxim, which stated that:

The panorama of creation
Is from time immemorial
No one lives
Who knows its Beginning
No one lives
Who knows its Ending
Except God.



Plate 3: Gye Nyame motif

Rattary (1927), Glover (1969) and Ofori Ansa have together listed a total of about sixty of these symbols visually interpreted from proverbs and maxims on issues pertaining to other realities of governance, leadership, bravery, survival, family solidarity, morals, beauty and love. When designed together, they create beautiful decorative motifs. The symbol (plate 3) features a mirror reflection of two distinct horn-like shapes, pointing opposite vertical directions, but also linked together with undulating line of projections and indentations in opposite positions. Curiously, there are eight projections on each side of the design, counting from either side of the two vertically curved shapes, which seem to reveal ethnic Akan worldview of the ideal state as constituting eight clans.

[I am sure you know it all. Please can two people in the audience give one example each to reflect any of the realities mentioned above].

PAINTING IN COLONIAL GHANA

Colonial Gold Coast was one of the most stressful periods in Ghana's cultural history. The subtle disruptive mechanizations of slavery, Islam, and Christianity which had undermined the values of ethnic cultures, finally resulted in the official adulteration of the socio-cultural institutions that sustained the promotion of ethnic art. The final blow was the establishment of Islamic and Christian religions and the formal education from the late 1880s to early 1900s.

It meant that Ghana's future artists were trained away from the local Afrocentric apprenticeship centers. Henceforth they were trained in the Missionary and Colonial Eurocentric Training Colleges and Secondary schools. There ensued, in these institutions, art training that encouraged students to disrespect and disregard the significance of their ethnic art tradition and the institutions that promoted them. Both Kofi Antubam and Amon Kotei, both former art students of Achimota school, had stated in public, their initial disdain for those graven objects which Meyerowitz insisted that his students cultivated in their works. In fact in colonial Ghana, citizens who continued with the practice of indigenous socio-cultural customs were infidels to Moslems and pagans to Christian colonialists.

ART IN CONTEMPORARY GHANA

By the time of Ghana's independence these same Achimota students had become Ghana's pioneer contemporary artists. Fortunately, they had developed a cross-cultural art tradition resulting from a harmonious blending of African conventional style of disproportions, harmony and rhythm with European artistic convention of realism, proportion and perspective, to achieve a unique hybrid style of contemporary art tradition. In this tradition, an accurate and proportionate figure, simultaneously could display disproportionate features that allow the work to be appreciated both intrinsically and conceptually. In Antubam's mural painting at the former Ambassador hotel (plate 4), European art convention of accurate proportions are employed to depict the human figure, yet all the heads are detailed in the idealized ethnic Akan oval-shaped

models. The contours of the messengers' calves are exaggerated and the legs of the load carriers are abstracted in order to create illusions of fatigue.



Plate 4: Kofi Antubam. 1957. *Distemper.*, details of the Ambassador Hotel mural.

Grace Kwami's diminutive *Village Scene* figure (plate 5), composed in calm accurate disposition, recalls the assuring sense of dignity, projected in the characteristic motherhood images familiar in the portrait statues of the ethnic classical art tradition. E.V. Asihene produced a dense and compact figure in a painting, titled, *Libation* (plate 6). The painting is shown in convincing static action, which bears close stylistic affinity to the classic ethnic art tradition. However he applies contrasting colour tones to position the exposed upper torso, the unstable head, the strained neck and shoulder muscle pull to distinguish it as a figure defined in contemporary artistic style.



Plate 5: Grace Kwami. 1960. Village Scene.



Plate 6: E. V. Asihene. 1965. Libation.

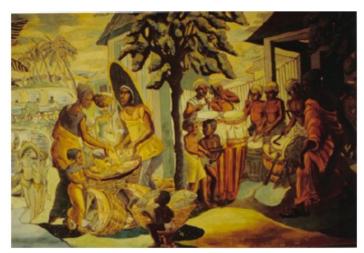


Plate 7: Kofi Antubam. 1957. untitled, details of the Ambassador Hotel mural.

The presentation of foliage in Antubam's untitled mural (plate 7), Asihene's *Day Break* (plate 8) and Bartimeus's *Rocky Hill at Nsawam* (plate 9) possess similar literally depiction of landscape scenery. Branches and leaves distinctly stand out in disproportionate relationships to emphasize the pristine beauty of the environment in three dimensional illusions. Yet, in spite of all the conceptual undertones in their compositions, the works of the pioneering artists, overwhelmingly, are overshadowed by modern expressive qualities. Other archetypical works of the early contemporary period from the late 40s through 60s include paintings of Phillip Amonoo (plate 10) and Bartimeus.



Plate 8: E. V. C. Asihene. 1990. Day Break.



Plate 9: Bartimaeus. 1987. Rocky Hill at Nsawam.



Plate 10: Philip Amonoo. 1976. Palm wine Drinkers.

THE EXPERIMENTALIST EXPRESSION FROM ABOUT 1940S-1960S.

Within the pioneering years emerged also the experimentalists. They comprised the sculptors Oku Ampofo, Vincent Kofi, Saka Acquaye and the painter Kobina Bucknor. Their focus was to produce artworks that were in consonant with the stylistic trends of the classical ethnic art traditions of West Africa, especially, those of the Yoruba, Dogon, Baule and Akan. Kobina

Bucknor, the only painter in the group, used earth colours to paint Ghana's life and culture in his "sculptural idiom style which he claimed was inspired by the "silent wooden sculptures of Africa" (Bucknor, 1976). The expression of the sculptural idiom, he said, "required the ability to capture the abstractions of the sculptural form, isolate the essence of the sculptural inspiration, digest what the inspiration presents and transform it into individual creative expression" (Bucknor, 1975). As such Bucknor freely experimented with the aesthetic concepts of Ghana's ethnic art traditions to interpret the past in the present without any inhibitions. Thus the rigid and severely distorted sculpture figures, which constituted his direct source of inspiration, were stylized into graceful lines of rhythm in his paintings. Examples include At the Fish and Vegetable Market (plate 11).



Plate 11: Kobina Bucknor. 1971. At the Fish and Vegetable Market.

In this painting all the faces are mask-like, the necks are serpentine and reduced to mere rhythmic lines. *Libation* (Plate 12) is a beautiful composition in rich earth colour contrasts depicting a mask-faced human figure, draped in linear decorative apparel, surrounded by similar other figures whose mask-like faces bring memories of old Africa in communication with spirit beings in a mystic spirit world. A sense of rhythmic movement is well captured in this *Calabash Musiga* (plate 13). Gestures of the huge central figure with sticks in hand, deceptively create an illusionary impression of an active live performance.



Plate 12: Kobina Bucknor. 1968. Libation.



Plate 13: Kobina Bucknor. 1971. Calabash Musiga.

MODERN ART TRADITION

Modern art tradition in Ghana demonstrates an orientation towards creative visualization of the immediate environs of Ghana in modern perspectives without prejudice to the past art cultures which the current artists have inherited. Amon Kotei, Ablade Glover and Ato Delquis can easily be identified as painting artists, who have made the switch from dogmatic themes of the purely cultural narratives for nostalgia to current Ghanaian lifestyles via modern approaches to painting style. For example, Amon Kotei used pure colour combinations of complimentary and/or contrasting hues to capture moods (plate 14), attitudes and actions as well as define body

contours and shapes of voluminous female figures, which appear to be inspired by Accra Makola women or appear to be paying homage to them.



Plate 14: Amon Kotei. 1971. Painting of mother and child.

The colorful costumes worn by Glover's near realistic statuesque figures recall fashion parade of modern beautiful females with attitudes of pride (plate 15), elegance and savoir faire, rather than images of remote and past ancestors. His females, are distinguished by their up-turned heads, forward thrust smooth shining black tonal faces and puffed lips on elongated necks, framed in straight forward looking concentration and upright stance (plate 15).

But oh my gush! Glover has created so many wonderful distinctive styles with his palette knife. For instance, on closer observation, his blobs of crowds of abstract images (plate 16), carved out with the palette knife, dissolve into disorderly composition. Yet a distant observation of the same images reveals a bird's eye-view perspective of an organized composition. The projection of his colour contrasts creates an appearance of imaginary interplay of brilliant colour movements. The illusions exude sensuous desire to expect more of the same images. This is because the apparent semblance of the type format of his compositions deceives as series of visual episodes that create emotional urge to view its entirety.



Plate 15: Ablade Glover's modern beautiful females.

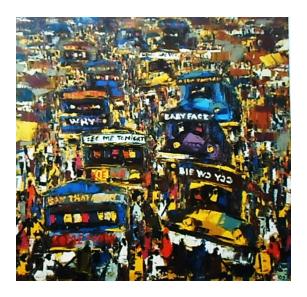


Plate 16: Ablade Glover's abstracted crowed scene.

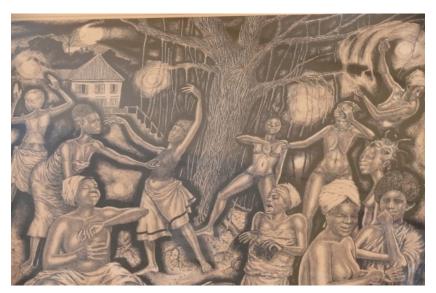


Plate 17: An example of Delaquis crowded scenes.

In the spirit of this same painting genre, Delaquis (plate 17) also produced thematic paintings of social events of modern relevance, such as, his *Bamboo Disco* that can be identified with modern youth culture. However, it is important to note that both Glover and Delaquis have created iconic crowded market and lorry park scenes, described by Glover as "orderly disorderly." These series are my favourite. Actually these multitudes of crowded market and lorry park scenes recall similar environmental conditions existing in current Ghanaian urban centres. They arouse imageries of average compound house living conditions in present day Ghana as well. In short Glover and Delaquis paint today's modern Ghana, employing personalized modern artistic conventional style of accurate proportions and perspectives, which are in synch with the current aesthetic orientation of Ghanaians, both in content and in context, though not necessarily in function.

The impact of the Kotei/Glover/Delaquis oeuvre was so huge that for almost two decades, from the 1970s to the 1900s and thereafter, all manner of thematic art compositions, featuring crowded market and lorry park scenes in modern art styles dominated the Ghanaian art market. Today, the enduring inspiration of the Kumasi Expression that they helped to foster, manifests in the exciting new personalized direction it engineered in the creative hands of other painting artists of the generation, such as, Bon (Benjamin Offei Nyarko), R.T. Ackam (plate 18), Betty Acquah and Ofosuhene.



Plate 18: R. T. Ackam. Obi nkyere komfoba kosua.

FRELANCE EXPRESSION

Freelance artists are those prolific artists who dare to make a living by their artworks rather than join the academia as most of their colleague artists. These artists include Larry Otoo who paints contemporary urban folk life and music. He paints them in combinations of vivid colours that capture immediate attention. The colours are intensely brilliant and occasionally loud, yet friendly. The paintings of another freelance artist by the name of Wiz Kudowor explore shapes manipulated in structures of triangles, squares, circles and spirals



Plate 19: Wiz Kudowor. 2000. Draped Figuration I.



Plate 20: Wiz Kudowor.

Creation and Muses of Antiquity.

to create patterns juxtaposed in varied configurations. Sometimes these configurations create illusions of human figures in rhythmic motion, as in *Draped Figuration I* (plate 19), or illusion of wavy landscape. In certain instances, figures suddenly emerge from under spread to the surface with shock effect. On other occasions they are fused with remote countenance of peeping Nok-inspired icons to create illusions of constant agitation of shifting patterns (plate 20), or a gathering of spirit beings engaged in spiritual surveillance, which brings back memories of ancient African belief in ancestral spirit world, or just placed in different segments of some of his compartmentalized compositions as embellishments to highlight space and create illusions of movement. *Awakening* is an example. Indeed Wiz Kudowor's paintings offer complex visual challenges to behold, decipher and enjoy. No wonder he is a hot cake in the international art market.



Plate 21: Kofi Agorsor. 2010. Universal Demand.



Plate 22: Kofi Agorsor. 2010. *Universal Attraction*.

Kofi Agorsor is another one of the freelance artists. He is a priest artist, who creates provocative semi-realistic contorted female figures awash in a network of colourful bright mosaic-like patterns. The figures are portrayed almost in the nude, with only

G-string underwear, in suggestive poses such as *Rooms are Never Empty, Universal Demand* (plate 21) and *Universal Attraction* (plate 22). They appear erotic but not vulgar. A sense of immediacy, is suggested by the quick brush stroke applications in his abstract paintings. Examples are slides of *Mathematics, Healthy Life* and *Knowledge Kingdom*. They reveal surface qualities that recall design patterns of Kente textiles. His third artistic style is characterized by carefully graduated shades of organized groups in meticulous colour harmony as *Market* (plate 23). It is a composition of diverse crowded scenarios intended to keep the eyes busy. For an example, there is a flying tie wearing male figure standing next to a baby carrying woman i the first row; whiles other group of women carry their on their heads in the middle of the crowd against a distant background in perspective, of a bunch similar group of figures tightly packed under market sheds. All the figures are arranged in frontal poses.



Plate 23: Kofi Agorsor. 2001. Market.

MIXED MEDIA EXPRESSION



Plate 24: El Anatsui's bottle top cloth.

El Anatsui's sensational bottle top cloth (plate 24) is the shiniest example of the rising trend of art creation from non-conventional materials, such as discarded and found objects that are enriching, yet, creating a brand new challenge to the aesthetic direction of Ghanaian art history. Other artists in this category include Tagoe-Turkson who uses worn out 'Charlie worte' sandals to create what Darpoh calls "functional realism" (2014). Through the process of "interlay, interlace, interlink and interfusion" old discarded 'charlie worte' sandals are reorganized to fit existing support materials like Water Lily, which is a redecorated existing polluted water body in discarded 'charlie worte' sandals to transform it into an illusion of fresh colourful Water under a new environmental mandate. Curio Kiosk is another of Patrick's installation of an old frame of dilapidated kiosk, which suddenly has attained a celebrity status, due its instant rise to aesthetic drawing power through realignment of colourful disused 'charlie worte' sandals on its old structure. Dorothy Amenuke whose soft sculpture installations probe into how "space consumption" can influence life patterns on human emotions and behaviour (plate 25), Appianing's leather paintings, Yamoah's banana/plantain stem paintings (plate 26) and Elija Sofo's discarded pure water sachet (plate 27) to address a multitude of themes in multiple ensembles, which he calls a "kaleidoscopic display of natural colorations on discarded materials."



Plate 25: Dorothy Amenuke's *Dreaming is a map*.



Plate 26: An example Yamoah's plantain stem painting.



Plate 27: Elija Sofo. 2013. Marching Bond.

THE PLACE OF OUR MUSEUM

I know that the museum has its own agenda for promoting itself. But as the elders say "Enam dodow nnsee nkwan", literally translated in English language as extra meat/fish do not spoil the soup. So here are my humble suggestions, with apologies. The ideal thing to do is for the government to build a National Museum of Modern Art in Ghana. Short of that, the present National Museum is obliged to operate in a manner that would allow every Ghanaian the opportunity to be exposed to these invaluable treasures. The Museum can collate with curriculum developers to include a one hour Ghana-centered Art Appreciation course in the syllabus from KG to tertiary levels. It will expose Ghana's precious creation to the children early in life to love and cherish them.

I am of the opinion that art departments of the universities should create a chair for a professor emeritus, who will be charged to write Ghana's Art History, or the museum can hire a part or full time Art Historian of professorial status to provide scholarly publications on their acquisitions, including Art History of Ghana. It will help a great to achieve the aim of these suggestions. Every child must be familiar with, at least the names of 3 of their favorite Ghanaian artists and their works, by the time they graduate from Primary level. It is one way of developing a spirit of patriotism. To design an outreach programme entitled, "Museum School lectures" that will be structured along the school syllabus. Trained docents/lecturers in the various regional and district museum must be empowered to carry the museum to all KG, JHS and SHS in Ghana through this approach.

Art students in SHS and tertiary levels must be given official permission to visit the museum, at least, three times a term/semester, in order to complete museum related academic assignments. The national museum must begin to collect, document and exhibit almost all the works of the famous artists producing and contributing to modern art tradition in Ghana. Regional and district

museums must collect, document and exhibit works of artists in their areas of operation. Every end of year the collected works would be juried and the best sent to the national museum.

All exhibitions must be treated as major events. At least one month must be allowed for publicity through all communication media. I understand only one week was allowed for this exhibition. It is not enough. As for the general public the more noise they hear from the museum, the more they are attracted to their events or visit there to see exhibitions of new findings, visionary artworks, new artistic breakthroughs, exchange visiting exhibitions and so on.

And as for money, the government will sing its popular "there is no money" refrain, so will the schools and tertiary institutions always claim insufficient budget allocation and yet there is always money. The government has all of our monies. If it claims to have no money then there is something seriously wrong with its fiscal policy.

THANK YOU