

Â

In Ghanaian traditional art, the concept of SYMBOLISM has been experimented with for centuries in a wide variety of cultural spheres and media and has now become a perfected instrument in the hand of the artist.

When an Akan man and woman dance Adowa, they address each other by means of symbols. In Ghana, mourners attending funerals are clad in textiles bearing symbolic images that signify grief. Akan drums communicate secret messages which are symbolic.

Dangme traditional medical practitioners use symbolic Klama songs and literature to communicate information to one another so as to protect their stock-in-trade.

And in the absence of conventional writing, it was chiefly through traditional symbolic art that Ghanaians of past centuries endeavoured to communicate ideas of religious ideology, political philosophy, social norms and sanctions, moralistic and educative proverbs, military prowess, etc.

However, there is abundant evidence to show that Ghanaian traditional art was not merely a shorthand type of "picture-writing" but that the artists also appreciated the saying that "a thing of beauty is a joy forever."

Â

Â

The artist is essentially a creative person who is imbued with deep emotions and experiences in the form of images or icons which he strives to express through a medium. The central or core idea in the concept of art has to do with Aesthetics, which is defined as keen sensitivity towards what is "elegant" and "beautiful". The English word "art" has no precise equivalent in any Ghanaian language. Yet there is clear proof in prehistoric and historic records indicating that Ghanaians of the past 4000 years evinced a sense of aesthetics.

For Westerners, the idea of 'art for art's sake' entails a belief that a piece of art is per se a unique creation made to be appreciated and enjoyed rather than for utilitarian purposes. For this reason, works of aesthetic value produced in the past by sub-Saharan Africans were not classified as intrinsic works of art.

However, in the early 20th century, Franz Boaz, an American anthropologist, debunked this Western prejudice. In his book Primitive Art written in 1927, he spoke of "the fundamental sameness of mental processes in all races and all cultural forms so that what is important is the specific context (geographical and historical) in which art develops".

As elsewhere in the world, Ghanaian art is expressed in three forms: verbal, visual and performance. Proverbs, folklore, poetry, "drum language" may be cited as examples of verbal art. Visual art is expressed in tangible artifacts. Performance art is expressed in music-making, dancing, etc.

Authentic Ghanaian visual art finds expression in traditional architecture. For instance, Adanse traditional religion has left for Ghana a legacy of historic indigenous architecture in the form of abosomdan or cult shrines dedicated to deities. Several of them, originally

Built in the 18th and 19th centuries, are extant in an area within 50 kilometre radius of Kumasi. Examples are located at Patakro, Besesease, Adwenease, Bodwease, Asenemaso, etc.

The medium used in constructing the abosomfie is timber and daub. The style is that of four separate rectangular or square house units built round a common courtyard. The shrines are noted for their striking high relief mural art with symbolic designs depicting the rams horn, sankofa bird, and the crocodile eating mudfish.

These are typical Akan images which are short-hand or pictographic writings representing proverbs. They signify the spiritual power of the cult shrines. Here priests, inspired by traditional drum music singing and dancing, received and dealt with numerous petitions such as ill-health, litigation, female sterility, and witchcraft victimization.Â

During his one-year sojourn in Kumasi in 1817, Thomas Bowdich, leader of the British Government Cultural Mission to Asante, encountered this ornate mural art not only in traditional religious architecture but also in ordinary Asante domestic architecture. He minuted in his diary.

We were summoned to the King, Osei Tutu Kwamina, at his palace. This was an immense building of magnificent enchantment. It was characterized by oblong courts, regular squares, symmetrical arcades, entablatures exuberantly adorned with bold fan and trellis work of Egyptian character, some rooms had windows with intricately carved wooden lattice work, some having frames cased with gold foil.

The most ornamented part of the royal palace is the residence of the women having rooms decorated with carved wooden panels like early Gothic screen and arched doors with high relief drawings and red paintings.

AUTHENTIC Ghanaian visual art finds expression in Ghanaian textiles. In 1629, a Dutch trader at Fort Amsterdam, Hans Propheet, completed an annotated map of the Gold Coast in which he described Begho/Nsawkaw in Brong Region as being famous for its indigenous textiles.

Local Begho craftsmen manufactured blue-and-white narrow strip cloth which was trade-marked Begho. It was customary in 17th to 18th Century Gold Coast to tell someone who was making a bluff with an imitation cloth that weyi nye Begho meaning this is not true Begho, the cloth par excellence.

In the early 18th Century, L.F. Roemer, the Danish Trade consul resident on the Coast, dispatched a local messenger to the court of Asantehene, Opoku Ware I. The messenger returned with documentation on Asante textile industry: Some of the kings subjects were able to spin cotton and they wore bands of it, three fingers wide.

When twelve strips long were sewn together, it became a pantjes or sash. One strip might be white, the other one blue, or sometimes there were red ones among them. King Opoku Ware bought silk taffeta and materials of all colours. The artists unraveled them so that they obtained large quantities of silk threads which they mixed with their cotton and got many colours.

Ghana is noted for three historic textiles first, the stamp-decorated cloth called Adinkra; secondly, the appliqu picturesgue Cloth of the Great, known as Akunitan, and thirdly Kente. Ghana is world famous for its strip-weaving textile, Kente.

This entails the use of narrow horizontal double-heddle looms for the manufacture of long narrow lengths of cloths which can then be joined edge to edge to produce a large square or rectangular cover cloth. Strip-woven textile is also produced in Togo, Sierra Leone and among the Nufawa, Yoruba and Jukun in Nigeria. But Asante and Eweland are regarded as the Cradle of Kente and their craftsmen as the peerless masters of the craft. Ghanas kente evolved in stages:

Stage 1: 15th-16th century BANKUO Blue and white strip cotton cloth.

Stage 2: 17th century Cotton enriched with imported silk yarn inlays.

Stage 3: 18th century BABADUA simple silk cloth with colour inlays.

Stage 4: 19th century ASASIA All silk complex patterned Twill Weave

In Asante the future of the cotton and lesser silk cloths known as Ntama (the favourite of the lower and middle class population), is apparently guaranteed. On the other hand, the Asasia which is commissioned by the Asantehene and produced by the Bonwire artists with complex artistic motifs has become an endangered species.

History Professor, Alistair Lamb wrote in 1972:

It is a tragic fact that the one remaining weaver alive in Bonwire at this time who remembers the Asasia patterns is no longer capable of weaving them. A proper full-size Asasia cloth, it is said, has not been woven since before World War II even though the Asantehene Prempeh II who came to the throne in 1931 used to take considerable personal interest in cloth and even made up his own designs for Bonwire weavers to execute.

Authentic Ghanaian visual art also finds expression in the media of gold, silver and brass. Ghana is noted for its expertise in cire-perdue or lost wax casting in the media of gold, silver and brass.

For some 500 years, Portuguese Dutch and English traders imported brass wares into the Gold Coast in exchange for gold and slaves.

Local smiths melted the brass for the production of treasure vessels called Kuduo, Forowa, vessels for storage of shea nut oil and ointment and weights for weighing gold dust.

Cire-perdue casting entailed depicting a great variety of images, many of them representing local proverbs. It is estimated that the Akan manufactured some three million brass weights for the gold trade in the period 1400-1900.

The Akan also exploited their vast deposits of natural gold for the production of artistic works such as Royal sword ornaments (abosodee) and beads.

Similarly metal casters in Northern Ghana have a tradition of production of silver works of art while the Ga-Dangme ARE known for production of gold figurative ornaments.

Although Ghanaian metal smiths continue the historic tradition today unabated for the tourist market and for local consumption, the quality of cast art works is a very pale shadow of the elegant figures produced by the ancestral smiths of past centuries

Ghana is immensely blessed in diverse forms of tropical wood which haVE been exploited for the production of furniture for building and for the production of art works such as stools (asesedwa) drums (atumpane) and linguist staffs (Akyeam poma). The art works depict images or figures that serve to communicate totemic didactic and philosophical ideas.

Ghanaian art attains its climax and magnificent splendour in what is known in art history as the art of festival. over the past 100 years, Ghanaian festival art has come under the searchlight of anthropologists and art historians, and a variety of Ghanaian traditional festivals have been examined in detail, in Kumasi, Akropong-Akwapem, Peki, Elmina, Cape Coast, Accra, Winneba, Axim, Dagomba etc.

THE first Odwira celebration which received international coverage and worldwide publicity was the 1817 Odwira held in Kumasi and attended by Thomas Bowdich and the British Mission to Asante.

The Mission was immensely impressed by the splendid royal durbar, orchestral music, singing, dancing and display which he described as truly magnificent.

The typical Ghanaian festival has been described as a total work of art, at once subtle and complicated. It has a structure with component parts including visual aspects, verbal and performance aspects, all of which are unified and orchestrated into a harmonious celebration.

For most Ghanaian ethnic groups, a festival is not merely a holiday for celebration and entertainment, It is also a holyday involving religious observances and rituals designed to honour deities and ancestors and also to renew and rededicate the living.

A good example of Ghana festival art is seen in the Odwira, a five-day event celebration once a year at Akropong-Akwapem. This Odwira involves 14 distinct ceremonies, some of which occur simultaneously.

The work of art exhibited for local and foreign observers to appreciate and enjoy includes:

Firstly, the elegant and ornate arrangement/patterning of different socio-economic classes of Akwapem citizens both during processions and when seated at the durbar grounds. The hierarchical patterning depicts royals, linguists, elders, priests, warriors, executioners, members of different voluntary associations and musical bands.

Secondly, there is evidence of striking body art such as the profuse rich kente and gold ornaments of the royals, the cultural shaving of male heads, the impressive array of female hairstyles and the stamped/painted decorative motifs on female bodies.

Thirdly, the variety of REGALIA, such as sculptured stools, linguists staffs, gold ornamented swords, the hierarchy of double and single royal umbrellas, carved drums, ivory horns, etc, and finally the verbal kinetic and musical arts such as speeches, gestures prayers, drummed proverbs, royal eulogia praise songs, recitations, dances, funeral dirges and lyrics. For several centuries, among different Akan societies in Ghana, it was customary for all royal and nobility while they were alive to commission skilled female artists to manufacture facsimile terra cotta or baked clay personal portrait sculptures called Nsodia and Abusua kuruwa. These portraits were used to celebrate the funerary ceremonies of these important

personalities when they died.

These terra cotta funeral art works caught the attention of European trade, military and administrative officials who resided along the Gold Coast in the 17th to 19th centuries. They documented the production, use and religious/cultural significance of the Nsodia in past centuries.

Today, the production of Nsodia has declined due to the prevalence of Christianity and Islam and is now limited to only a few royal houses as a cryptic practice in private.

On the other hand, Europeans have always regarded such terra cotta images very highly as belonging to a class of Fine Art, and even today they are much sought-after by Western public and private museums.

Among certain ethnic groups in Northern Ghana such as the Bulsa, Koma, Sissala and Mamprusi, the practice prevailed for several centuries of producing terra cotta fine art that was used for funeral ceremonies of both royals and commoners. One art connoisseur, Herve Detavernier, recently paid tribute to the historic terra cotta art of the Bulsa/Koma:

We may reservedly celebrate the discovery of a new unique aesthetic current characterized by the exquisite portrayal in the clay medium of a complex of geometrical forms and motifs-cones, pyramids, cuboids, triangles and circles in a way unparalleled in any other culture or civilization in West Africa.

Here, we find the artists style of simplicity placed at the service of an astonishing power of expression to facilitate continuous creation of the strange and the unusual. Lancienne civilisation du Komaland est la dernier decouverte archeologique dimportance en Afrique de l'ouest.

Â