

# A Symbolic Decorative Wall Plaque for the Sunyani Palace

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## Abstract

The gold/silver/coppersmithing industry is one of the longest established trades in Ghana. The industry offers employment to many people engaged in it and it plays a vital role in the socio-economic development of the nation. However the industry concentrates largely on the production of jewellery/filigree fashion accessories works like necklaces, anklets, tie pins, brooches etc. using precious metals like gold, silver and diamond and non-precious metals like copper and brass to the neglect of fabrication of large articles like trophies and wall plaques which could also be a promising and rewarding trade. The idea of producing a wall plaque for the Sunyani palace in the BrongAhafo region came into mind after the research team had had some interactions with the chief, queen mother, some elders and few natives of the town. Investigations revealed that though the town's emblem and the history surrounding how the town got its name 'Sunyani' revolves round a hunter and an elephant, in the area of artifact very little was known. It was in the light of this that the researchers decided to produce a wall plaque for the palace to be used to preserve the story surrounding the town to generations yet unborn as well as use it to create awareness about the need for the gold/silversmithing industry to venture into other viable smithing activities. The descriptive method of research under the qualitative method of research which uses interview and observation was used to gather, analyze and interpret data gathered. The purposive and simple random sampling technique was used to sample views from the interviewees and the face-to-face unstructured interview was used as data collection instrument. Possible recommendations like creating more awareness among gold/silversmithing about the need to venture into other profitable smithing activities and the introduction of Metal Product Design into the curriculum right from J.H.S to the tertiary level among others have been suggested.

**Keywords:** Wall plaque, artifacts, embossing, chasing, annealing, modeling, repousse

## 1. Introduction

A gold/silver/coppersmith is someone who fabricates or makes and repairs items in gold, silver and copper. However in the Ghanaian society there is no clear distinction between these three trades, all three trades can be practiced by one person depending on orders placed by their clients or demand by their target market which comprises of the high class, middle class and those at the lowest end of the ladder. As earlier stated the gold/silver/copper industry places more emphasis on the fabrication of jewellery/filigree metal products to the neglect of decorative artifacts like metal wall plaques, probably because of the tedious work involved in fabricating such artifacts. The researchers however believe that entering into the production of metal wall plaques and other large smithing articles could also offer better job prospects to the smithing industry in Ghana in addition to what the industry is already fabricating.

Edusie (2004) asserts that artifacts represent the beliefs, values, attitudes as well as the history of a group of people. In this study a metal wall plaque which is an art product is going to be used to tell a story of the indigenes of Sunyani. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1999) a plaque is a flat piece of stone, wood, metal, etc. usually with information on, fixed on a wall, in memory of a person or an event. To the Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1983) a plaque is an ornamental brooch especially the badge of honor made in metal, clay or ivory used for decorations, on wall or in an article of furniture to be used to identify a site or commemorate an individual or event, it states further that a plaque may also be an inscription usually of a metal tablet placed on a building or a post. The Oxford English Reference Dictionary (1995) also supports the argument on plaque as an ornamental tablet of metal or porcelain which is especially affixed to a building or wall in commemoration of an event. Thorndike (1993) goes a step further that a wall plaque is a decorative or an ornamental tablet of metal, plastic, clay or wood intended to be hung up as a wall decoration or to be attached to something such as a piece of furniture. Thus the researchers are of the view that a wall plaque in any form or medium is an artifact that is used to tell a story about a person or an event. The first step in fabricating a wall plaque is the designing aspect. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1999) defines design in general as a drawing or outline from which something may be made and in art, as the arrangement of lines, shapes or figures as decoration. This assertion is supported by Adu-Akwaboa (2001) that design is arrangement of accepted elements following certain principles. In other words design is the careful organization of the elements which include dots, lines, shapes, colours, textures, form, tone and light backed by the principles of design which include balance, contrast, emphasis or dominance, proportion, movement, rhythm, pattern, variety, and unity in a

coherent whole. Thus without a proper layout or plan one cannot come out with a good artifact. The main techniques that were used in fabricating the plaque were embossing and repousse.

Newman (1981) explains embossing as the technique of producing a relief decoration by raising the surface of the flat metal with the aid of a mould to create design. Newman (1981) argues that embossing and repousse techniques are almost the same but the only difference between the two is that, in embossing a mould is used to produce the relief design but in repousse hammer and punches are used to form the raised pattern from the reverse side of the metal without using a mould.

### **Brief History of Sunyani**

Sunyani is the capital town of the BrongAhafo region of Ghana. The story of the town revolves round a hunter and an elephant. According to Arthur (1972) Nana BoahenKorkor a hunter, his sister and followers from Amakom (Kumasi in the Ashanti)) settled near the Tano river (Tanoso) after a misunderstanding ensued between him and some family members. Whiles there he was joined by another hunter Bofotia who was working for him as a hunter.. One day Bofotia went for a hunting expedition, killed a big elephant and buried the husk at the spot where the animal was killed. When the elephant was killed settlers from different hamlets came for portions of the elephant so they named the place “Asondwea” (the spot where elephant was killed and dismembered). Later new settlers joined Nana and his people at Tanonso and fearing they would outnumber and overcome them, they moved to settle at ‘Nsankronsuano’, whiles at Nsankronsuano a war ensued between them and some settlers from the surrounding towns. The war was known as the “Abirimuro war” in which Nana and his people fought on the side of the Golden Stool. After the war Nana and his people left Nsankronsuano to settle permanently at Asondwea where Bofotia killed and buried the tusk of the elephant, and Asondwea was later corruptly changed to Sunyani which has now become the permanent name of the town.

### **2. Materials and Methods**

The descriptive method of research under the quantitative method which explains variables just as they are, was used to analyze and interpret data. (Best 1981, Ndagi 1984). The population for the study which consists of all elements in a well-defined collection of a set of values was made up of the real natives of the Sunyani town (Nkpa 1997). The purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used to sample views from the interviewees. The purposive sampling method which targets certain key individuals for a study was used to sample views from the king, queen mother and some elders from the royal clan (Amenowode 2001) whiles the simple random sampling technique where the population for the study is homogenous in nature was used to sample views from some natives from the town (Nkpa 1997). The main data collection instrument was face-to-face oral interview and the researchers asked the questions and recorded all responses personally. (William 2001), and to buttress data gathered through the interview, a critical observation was also done. (Nkpa 1997). The main techniques that were used in fabricating the piece were embossing, chasing and repousse. Embossing a piece of work demands the use of different kinds and types of tools and materials one can think of. Brette (1990) argues that a tool is a device which is used in making items in the studio or workshop. In this vein all the implements used in the fabrication of the wall plaque are classified as tools and the tools should be useful to the artist in his/her working processes. For the purpose of this study tools used included the underlisted:

Hand sheers: For cutting for cutting metal parts

Knives and custom-made bamboo tools: For modelling design in clay

Tongs: For holding metal during annealing

Rubber and wood mallet: For embossing and straightening the metal sheet

Custom-made carved wooden punches: For forming the design

Hammer: For hitting the curving tools

Chasing tools: For chasing out intricate parts of the design to stand out well

Saw frame: For trimming out edges of the finished piece

Hand files: Used for making the edges of the piece smooth

The main equipment used was the furnace that was used in annealing the piece

Materials used included: copper sheet, steel wool for highlighting certain parts of the work, sand papers in of different grains angle iron and mild steel rod for framing the piece.

### **3.2 Preliminary Work**

The idea of designing and fabricating a metal wall plaque for the Sunyani palace was natured as a result of a careful observation and survey of some already existing wall plaques. Investigations revealed that almost all the wall plaques found around some parts of Accra and Kumasi were in painting, relief wooden and clay sculpture pieces and a few metal ones. On a visit to the Sunyani palace by the research team the story was not different. The few decorative pieces found at the palace had little to tell a complete story about the myth surrounding how the town got its name, so the researchers decided to fabricate a decorative wall plaque to be used to tell a story about the town.

### **3.3 Designing**

First thumbnails were made depicting the theme and the best one was selected and developed into a suitable design that was used in producing the plaque.

### 3.4 Sketch Model

It is always important to choose a suitable material to make a model that will serve as a guide in the execution of the final work. Therefore clay was used to model the design using the additive and subtractive method of modelling.

### 4. Working Procedure

Embossing was the main technique that was used in fabricating the piece.

As earlier stated, first the design was modelled in clay and then curved in wood (negative mould) which was used to emboss the positive relief design.

Before embossing the metal sheet which was very hard to work with, was annealed (heated) in furnace at red heat temperature to make it malleable enough to withstand the tension from the blows of the mallet and the wooden curved punches and the annealing process was done as and when the need arose.

Next the curved wood mould was placed on a flat concrete floor specially made for embossing and the flat sheet of metal was placed on it, and with the help of the specially curved wooden punches, rubber and wooden mallet, the raised design pattern was formed. After embossing, the intricate parts of the design were chased and repoussed with the help of the chasing tools to bring out the form of the piece well. Next the saw frame and hand files were used to straighten the rough edges. To make the surface smooth, different grains of sand paper were used and the steel wool was used to highlight certain parts of the piece to give it a final finish and the piece was finally framed.

### 5. Interpretation of the Wall plaque

The wall plaque was made (embossed and chased) using a copper plate. The measurement of the final piece is 30\*23.

The plaque is telling a story about how the name "Sunyani" evolved. The design depicts a hunter killing an elephant. The elephant is an emblem/symbol which serves as the binding force of the people of Sunyani.

### 6. Main Findings of the Research Team

The main findings of the study have been summarized up as follows:

- In coming out with a wall plaque of this nature it is advisable to acquire the metal one intends to work with before one comes out with the designing aspect, this is because the research team went through a lot of challenges before getting the desired size of the copper plate to work with and this was a bit frustrating, the reason being that all metals behave differently depending on the nature of work is being used for. Aluminum for instance cannot be embossed very deep, when working much pressure is exerted on it, it can easily tear easily, brass is too hard to be embossed, depending on the size of the piece, silver and gold may be too expensive and copper the preferred choice of the research team is malleable (easy to anneal) and can be embossed very deep when properly handled and somehow tension friendly but it is not readily available in large sizes like the size the researchers worked with (30\*23 inches).
- Secondly the study revealed that the tendency of the metal getting brittle is high when it is not properly annealed, therefore the metal must be heated to a red temperature hot before working it.
- Again during embossing and chasing there is the tendency of certain parts of the metal tearing if proper care is not taken, therefore as earlier stated the metal should be annealed well and handled with care when working it.
- Lastly the method used in fabricating the wall plaque was very involving and challenging but in the long run it can help boost one's patience, persistence and confidence level in life.

### 6. Recommendations

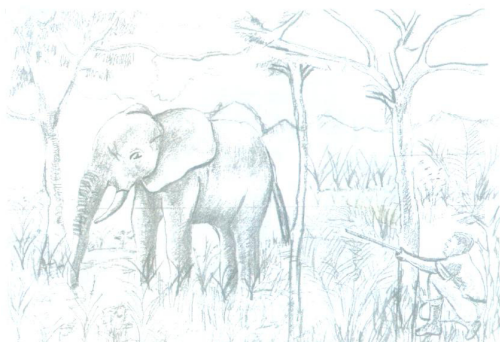
In view of the vast potential in the use of metal in fabricating metal wall plaques in addition to other mediums like woods, clay, paintings etc. the following recommendations have been suggested:

- There is the need to include Metal Product Design in the curriculum at various levels of study of study especially from the Junior High School to the tertiary level.
- Secondly more awareness should also be created to the viable prospects and job opportunities that the metal design industry can offer to the country and the world at large through metal trade shows and exhibitions, seminars and the media.
- Lastly there is the need to encourage metal product design as not to dwell solely on the production of jewelry pieces household and farming implements but move from their comfort zones to explore other viable and profitable ventures that they can exploit to their advantage in the metal trade.

### 7. Conclusion

The fabricated plaque has indeed created the awareness as to how embossed metal wall plaques can also be used as an addition to other mediums like clay, wood, painting etc. to decorate interiors and exteriors of building.

Finally the wall plaques will serve as a memorial which will tell a story about how the name of the Sunyani town evolved as well as beautify the courtyard of the Sunyani palace.



**Plate 1: Design Depicting Theme**



**Plate 2: Clay Modelling Process**



**Plate 3: Final Clay Model**



**Plate 4: Curved Wood Mould**



**Plate 5: Embossing Process**



**Plate 6: Chasing and Repoussing Process**



**Plate 7: Final Piece before Framing**



**Plate 8: Final Piece after Framing**



**Plate 9: Annealing Process**

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