

Contemporary Ceramic Art of Ghana: Focus on Kingsley Kofi Broni

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Abstract

Very little information exists in the form of literary presentation and documentation on contemporary Ghanaian artists. One outstanding personality whose contribution to the development of Ghanaian ceramic art and the world of ceramics merits acknowledging, celebrating and studying is Kingsley Kofi Broni. This paper highlights his profile and contribution to academia and ceramic arts practice. It examines some of his creative masterpieces, techniques employed and the impact on his students and the younger generation of ceramic artists. The paper further examines the local and international recognition, acclamation and awards that crowned his contributions.

1. Introduction

The history of the development of contemporary ceramic art in Ghana will be incomplete without the record of the massive contribution of a ceramic gem Kingsley Kofi Broni. Most often when the roll is called on who is who of Ghanaian contemporary artists, the attention has always been on painters and sculptors. An explanation to this trend is the fact that ceramics in particular have not been the focus of more attention from art historians. It is also underrepresented in Africanist art historical literature in proportion to its importance as a form of expressive culture. In few instances where some form of published literature on contemporary Ghanaian and African artists is available, ceramic artists seem to be always absent. Students of Ghanaian art history are always quick to mention a long list of accomplished painters and sculptors like the Ato Delaques, Ablade Glovers, and Offei Nyarkos and hardly will they ever mention a name of a ceramic artist. Nevertheless Kingsley Kofi Broni's ceramic pieces are highly rated comparable to the works of the accomplished Ghanaian contemporary artists. His works exemplify highly prized treasured art rated far above the known African ceramic wares generally regarded only as vessels which serve as objects of utility in domestic setting. Objects carrying symbolic import central to social identity, economic and political status, ritual practice and belief. The thrust of this paper is to document in academic print, the personal profile of K.K Broni, reveal his skills, creative prowess and celebration of his artistry for wide readership and contribution to literary depository of African art.

2. Profile of Kingsley Kofi Broni

Born in 1945 in Ashanti village of Jamasi was a colossus figure in ceramic art. At a very tender age K.K. Broni revealed precocious talents as mature potter, which earned him the name Broni. Coming from a home of traditional potters, he started pottery at much younger age taking inspiration from grandmother who was a prominent potter. His pots were always assessed to be the best among his peers. They were so perfect, matured and were always likened to that of an imported ceramic ware by whiteman, which in Akan translates as Broni hence the name Broni. K.K. Broni had an unusual educational background, starting his ceramics education and career by pursuing a special pottery course at the Art Department of the then College of Technology now Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. Upon recommendation by the Head of the Art Department Mr. David Dopson, a Scottish sculptor, K.K. Broni had the opportunity to study in the Pottery Training Centre at Abuja, Nigeria. According to Harrods (2013) this pottery centre was set up by the British colonial government. The initial goal for its establishment was to introduce stoneware pottery to Nigeria, as a bridge between the traditional hand built low fired wares and full industrialization. For Broni he was sent to Abuja to study glaze formulation and pottery making however, he benefited immensely from Michael Cardew. After three years training (1962-1965) he had a golden opportunity to travel to Britain with the assistance of Michael Cardew and David Dopson.

In Britain he first settled at Emmis Technical College for general certificate of education advance level in pottery craft and painting. He later moved to the College of Art in Staffordshire for pre degree (foundation) programme since Emmis Technical College has no facilities for ceramics. Broni then proceeded to North Staffordshire Polytechnic now Staffordshire University (Department of Three Dimension Design-Ceramics) and completed BA degree in 3-Design in 1971. He again enrolled at the University of Birmingham, School of Education for Post Graduate Diploma in Art Education in 1972. His quest for further studies in ceramics found him in America Universities, first to California, Berkeley Campus for Masters of Arts in Design. At Berkeley he studied and worked with a well-known potter Peter Voulkos. On completion of his MA degree in Berkeley, he enrolled in the California State University at Santa Barbara for Master of Fine Art. Broni was again privileged to under study another brilliant and influential potter Michael Arutz. For his excellent craftsmanship and superior creative skills, he benefited from a special dispensation which enabled him to pursue and successfully complete

the two higher degrees within one year in 1974.

3. Professionalism and artistic innovations.

K. K. Broni's close to three untiring decades of teaching ceramics at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi impacted greatly and influenced the development of modern ceramic art in Ghana. He is credited to have introduced solid building (modelling) of ceramic forms, a forming technique that requires scooping of the modelled piece and reassembling it. Prior to his appointment, the ceramics section has established a very strong tradition of ceramic design which was creating hollow vessels and other ceramic forms using slabs. These were mainly traditional pots of varied shapes incorporated with Akan symbols particularly the akuaba shapes. These were often treated with manganese and iron oxides coatings. It was the legacy of the late W. C. Owusu, a pioneer lecturer of the ceramics, and was popularized by James Kwame Amoah and Kofi Asante both retired lecturers of the ceramics section of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. His approach was completely different from the existing tradition of pottery production. He was a ceramic artist whose life was radically shaped through encounters with some British and American renowned ceramic artists during his schooling abroad. This experience was a preparatory and learning process that nurtured him, better in understanding and heightening his appreciation of the forces of nature and his surroundings. He has been described as one artist who follows the path of synthesizing tradition and modern ceramics, outstanding for his profound experimentation (Obode, Odoh and Onuora, 2016). K.K. Broni's ceramic art is a reflection of his passion for observation of the environment, mastering and experimentation with his prepared clay, complexities of glaze and firing techniques. He drew his inspiration from nature, the immediate environment with its inexhaustible range of forms, structure, colour and texture. His favourite subjects have been from natural object motifs, which are reproduced with startling realism. His bone form series in (fig.1) show expert execution of natural objects with well formulated clay bodies and firing techniques.

K.K. Broni's creative skills was not only limited to realism and perfect shapes, he was also a master in abstraction and distortion. He believed the distortion of the form gives it a more natural quality. This idea is clearly shown in the fish and birds forms (figs 2 and 3) respectively. Typical examples are the birds and fish forms executed from manipulation of various thrown shapes. Fish forms were derived from expertly thrown flat wares with its flaps pushed inside from two sides leaving a little space to depict the mouth. Small projections on each side of the bend as the eyes of a fish.

Broni's approaches to ceramic design and forming styles are deeply linked with his idea that the ceramic medium can be transformed into any form, and should not be pigeonholed by any tradition or history. He again believed that ceramic artists should have absolute control and mastery on the medium and the capacity to transform it into whatever shape they want. These ideas were expertly imbibed in his students and made them to realize their potentials and to bring eloquence through their creative works. Many of whom are now lecturing in various educational institutions in the country, including the author.

He built his unmistakable ceramic pieces with unlimited techniques. These included sculpting, draping, throwing, stamping, squeezing and any other applicable means to create a wide range of desired effect. Broni was keen to abandon traditional forming techniques for new ones through exploring and experimentation. He often employed unorthodox procedures in his creative endeavours. Broni could create cracks, fissures, and distort a shape or pour slip onto a neat thrown or modelled piece with the aim of achieving a desired effect. He also uses parts of the body like stamping with the foot, squeezing or twisting with fingers or even sitting on a modelled piece with his butt in the nude to create a desired impression. Provencal (1991) describes this production technique bizarre since all parts of the body are used. He also employed varied tools to create all sorts of textures. A careful observation reveals some of the impressions he made are from tree barks, wood grains, hard scrubbing brush or brooms on the surfaces of clay.

There are also manipulation and addition of clay for decoration while the pieces are at the formative stages. The results of all these is that his works are always enhanced by clarity, narrative qualities, and distinctive surface decoration. In all, he built a massive repertoire of exciting and unique ceramic forms. The thematic range of Broni's ceramic works is extremely varied. He developed several remarkable ceramic forms, some of which include bones, tea bread, anthill/termite cave, rocks, tubular, cylindrical, sea shells, *ahina* (water pot), mushroom, medicine (juju pots), fruits, traditional food bowls, and many others. These aforementioned works look abstracted and hyper realistic in forms. Several variations of these forms were produced thus making it extremely difficult to give titles to individual ceramic pieces. Instead Broni's works were classed based on the forms such as tea bread forms or rock forms in (Figs 4 and 5.)

An outstanding characteristic of these works is the sense of aesthetic with regards to surface treatment. His pieces blend techniques and colour to create wonderful effect that are simply a delight and amazing to behold. Broni's works were subjected to glaze and engobe treatment that best suit the form and the purpose of the pieces. His well formulated glaze recipes and subsequent glaze application portray depth and vividness of colour. He employed several glaze application techniques in the most decorative manner. Poured pattern glaze technique in

(Fig 6) accomplished by first glazing the inside of the pot, then showing colour contrast by pouring darker glaze pattern over a pot that was first completely glazed with lighter shade. Other glaze applications are: crater glaze textures in (Fig 7) and matt effect in (Fig. 8). A good deal of his works were decorated with matt glazes, and engobe treatment, reinforcing Broni's assertion that too glossy a surface detracts from the natural quality and beauty of the pieces. The preference for antique and matt effects was also a deliberate attempt to present his works as close to nature. There could be no better surface enhancement for such works as the rocks forms, anthill/termite cave forms in (Fig.9). One contribution worth noting is his re-design of some traditional pottery items into modern forms. The popular traditional water pot (ahina) is one such item that has been completely transformed in terms of structure, surface embellishment and function (Fig. 10)

Broni's expertise in ceramic design was not limited to only the creation of ceramic forms. It extended to the field of monumental art (ceramic mural). He was credited with the design and execution of monumental composition of forest scene in ceramic mural on the administration block of Forest Research Institute of Ghana at Fomesua. This is a unique project that depicts a realistic impression of a thick forest scene with a waterfall. It was modelled on clay slabs, cut to pieces and then mounted on the wall. It is perhaps the one work that Broni executed with a sketch. Application of glazes on the tiles was expertly executed by a painter to portray a real effect of a tropical rainforest scene showing a blue sky and various shades of greens of the vegetation (Fig 11). This large scale project reflects excellent artistic process and shows advanced proficiency in technical execution. It is indeed regarded as the largest product of monumental and decorative glazed ceramic mural in Ghana. Broni had a great passion for ceramics and sees his art as a way of life instead of means to earn a living. He was never confronted with the situation of choosing between paying attention to the classic style of his works and their economic viability. His priority had always been to create to satisfy his artistic instinct. He so cherished his works to the extent that he was never ever going to trade some of his pieces for any price. Nevertheless some of his works take pride of place in many private and public art collections in and outside Ghana. He had amassed one of the most important and perhaps the largest collections of unique and treasured ceramic art works in the country. It is estimated to be over three hundred mainly his own works and a few best works of his students.

Broni provided other useful services by way of demonstrations and meaningful technical advice to many traditional pottery communities. The purpose of such interventions had been to up-grade the production techniques, improvement in design and the quality of traditional pottery. He also provided free consultancy services to many ceramics graduates who ventured into ceramic industry particularly those in the export of earthenware pots.

4. Honours and International Exposures

Broni made significant contribution to Ghana's contemporary ceramics development by way of exposing it to the world. He was more or less a cultural ambassador who showcased Ghana's rich cultural heritage through ceramic art exhibitions to the outside world. He exhibited in many local and international exhibitions. His contribution to the world of ceramic art was recognized and acknowledged by many. He was a recipient of many local and international awards. Prominent among them are the 1991 Leisure award of Ghana in which Broni was reputed to be the best ceramic artist. In 1986 two notable German institutions, the Free Masons *ZUR KOENIGLICHEN EICHEN* and St Katharine Parish in Osuabruock conferred awards on Broni as one of the most prominent ceramic artist in the world. An accompanying citation of one states, "the greatest variety of his works reflect the ties between traditional African art and modern forms of expression and portray in a vivid way, a picture of ceramic art in Ghana".

5. Conclusion

The name Kingsley Kofi Broni will forever be remembered in the art history of Ghana more particularly in the history of ceramic art practice. He has been Ghana's most renowned ceramic artist as well as ambassador for Ghanaian and African art. His background from Ashanti village of Jamasi, to the Abuja, Nigeria for practical training in pottery and through to Britain and American Universities for studies greatly refined his ceramic art career. His productive career in ceramic art exemplifies the transition from traditional pottery to modern ceramic art in Ghana. K.K. Broni's career as teacher and artist broadened the scope of modern ceramic practice. This was evident in his development of new subject matter, varied and exciting ceramic forms, rich surface embellishment with complex glaze and non- glaze treatment, and limitless forming possibilities. His rich legacy of artistic achievement is having dramatic impact on succeeding artist generation and will continue to influence ceramic art practice into the future. Broni may have passed away but his creative spirit will be around us for years to come.

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Figure 1. Bones



Figure 2. Fish



Figure 3. Birds forms



Figure 4. Tea bread forms



Figure 5. Rock



Figure 6. Poured pattern glaze



Figure 7. Crater glaze textures



Figure 8. Matt effect



Figure 9. Engobe coating



Figure 10. Pots



Figure 11. Ceramic mural mounted on the administration block of Forest Research Institute of Ghana at Fomesua