

Afro-Ghanaian influences in Ghanaian paintings

Kwame Amoah Labi

This paper investigates the culturally-inclusive philosophy of teaching modern art in Achimota School established in Accra, Ghana, in 1924, as a co-educational institution by James Emmanuel Kwegyir Aggrey (b. 1875 – d. 1927) one of the first members of staff and Vice-Principal (1924-1927), together with Rev. Alexander Gordon Fraser (b. 1873 - d. 1962), the first principal (1924–1935) and Sir Gordon Guggisberg (b. 1869 - d. 1930), Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Gold Coast (1919–1928). This paper discusses some of the histories and receptions of modern and contemporary Ghanaian and African art by non-Euro-American voices. These including non-African voices are used to critique the origins of Ghanaian easel painting based on the Achimota School philosophy and its legacy in the colonial and immediate independence era to more recent paintings. This is addressed through the works that marked two different historical periods of Ghanaian painting - modern (both colonial and postcolonial from the 1940s–1970s) and contemporary (from the 1970s to the present) - rather than a detailed portrait of individual painters and their works.

Early Ghanaian paintings are difficult to find and evidence of early exhibitions and their critical receptions are poorly documented at galleries and museums with the result that there is a paucity of meaningful engagement with art in the texts by Ghanaian scholars on the subject. The few collections with easel paintings made before the 1970s include those that were at the Centre for National Culture Art Gallery,¹ others currently in the storage room at the Artists Alliance Gallery, and photographic reproductions in the catalogue for *Pioneers of Contemporary Ghanaian Art*, a 2009 exhibition of paintings made largely between the 1940s and 1970s.²

It will be argued that what occurred in the development of modern and contemporary Ghanaian painting is similar to what the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz calls transculturation.³ According to this theory, transculturation occurs when two different cultures come into contact and in the process the colonized learns, borrows, modifies and reinvents from the colonizer. While Gold Coast students in the nineteenth and opening decades of the twentieth century could not control what the colonizers and their teachers transmitted to them

¹ This display has been dismantled and the works packed with the intention to display them at the Du Bois Centre, Accra.

² Kojo Fosu, *Pioneers of Contemporary Ghanaian Art*, exhibition catalogue, Accra: Type Company Ltd., 2009.

³ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, New York: Knopf, 1947.

through education, they were given the opportunity to study traditional art, and determine its place in the future of modern art in Ghana.

Thus, this paper sets out to demonstrate the importance of art in the local cultures and practise of artistic assimilation prior to colonization, and efforts to encourage art students to also learn from their cultural heritage, and to incorporate these insights into novel Western modes of art making, such as easel paintings. This resulted in the production, between the 1940s and 1970s, of landscapes and portraits largely based on nostalgia for traditional cultural practices. This has developed since the 1970s into an art practice that reflects Ghana's traditions, modernity and postcolonial contemporary culture. It will be argued that out of these complex threads contemporary Ghanaian painters consciously draw upon and adapt traditional values, symbols and concerns as springboards for a new genre of paintings, with some remarkable achievements.

Modern and contemporary African art debates

The late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries marked a period of significant global events in Europe and America, which affected life and cultural practices in Africa. For example, in 1884 fourteen European countries namely Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, The Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway and Turkey, plus the United States of America, negotiated the geometric boundaries in the interior of Africa at the Berlin Conference. Afterwards, colonisation of some African countries by some of these European nations marked a new phase in its relationship with the rest of the world.

During this period art works made in Europe were referred to as modern art and art historians grouped them under the label of modernism. In art modernism may be referred to the period beginning with European enlightenment in the eighteenth century and the rise of modern nation states, colonial and imperial expansion.⁴ Richard R. Brettell suggests 1846 and proposes 1848, 1855 and 1863 as other possible dates for the beginnings of modern art. Socio-political forces were paramount in the development of modern art according to Brettell.⁵ Marilyn Stokstad,⁶ writing later observes that the art of the mid-nineteenth century under the label of modernism connoted a rejection of conventions and a commitment to radical innovation or in other words a progressive formal innovation. Thus artists sought to engage in a process of experimentation and rediscovery of new possibilities in creativity. Similarly the early Ghanaian art students carried out a series of experimentations with their traditional art forms through the new European technique of easel painting as part of their curricula in formal western education. Traditional experts in brass casting, and woodcarving, and a celebrated potter Michael Cardew were invited to teach Achimota School students so that they may be exposed to both African and Western traditions. Crafts were part of the school curriculum. In their assignments they were encouraged to carefully look

⁴ Donald Preziosi, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 580.

⁵ Richard R. Brettell, *Modern Art 1851 – 1929*, Oxford and New York: OUP, 1995, 5-6.

⁶ Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, New Jersey: Upper Saddle River, 2005, 1020 – 1021.

around them and incorporate ideas from their heritage and environment. Through this the students discovered new possibilities in traditional art and their heritage that could be incorporated into modern art and create a unique one. Thus Ghanaian modern art was not entirely a rejection of old traditional art conventions as happened in European modernism but a strategic philosophy and method of carefully selecting and blending Ghanaian heritage and European techniques developed through the Achimota art school to produce a Ghanaian modernism. By the mid-twentieth century, discourses on the subject were considered 'postmodernism' and framed modernism within fixed historical parameters⁷ though there may be other views.

Interestingly, the history of modernism, as recounted purely from Western perspective, often tends to ignore the plurality of cultures, and objects of the culture that produced it.⁸ By the end of the 1970s a great deal of the art being produced was widely considered as postmodern reflecting a rejection of the mainstream modernism, a recognition of artistic pluralism and an acceptance of a variety of artistic styles.⁹ Modern and postmodern art have since come to denote stylistic trends, movements, philosophies and periods.¹⁰

In contemporary art historical discourse there is a notion that Africa and modernity are mutually exclusive. Today it is no longer possible to confine the concept of modernity to Europe. While this narrative precludes any influence from external sources and rather celebrates Picasso and other European avant-garde artists for their appropriation of African conventions, Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie reminds us that at the same period in Africa's history artists were also 'reconfiguring their art by appropriating European conventions to produce an African modernism'.¹¹ In spite of these developments institutional art history has written African art out of its twentieth-century art. Therefore Salah Hassan's call for a critical analysis of African modernist experience in art to help in creating an understanding of the works of African artists is critical. He points out that 'Of all the categories of African art, modern art, especially that of Western-trained artists has received least attention from art historians and scholars'.¹² Some progress has been made, however, as evidenced by a stream of new journals, books and international Biennials focusing on the subject,¹³ and a significant number of student theses.

While the teaching of modern art in the Gold Coast introduced West African art to the realm of academic inquiry, a systematic and scholarly documentation of

⁷ Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, 1998, 580.

⁸ Salah Hassan, 'The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics', *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, Cambridge and Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999, 224.

⁹ Stokstad, *Art History*, 2005, 1129.

¹⁰ Richard G. Tansey & Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, Tenth Edition, Fort Worth, Philadelphia: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 2009, 924.

¹¹ Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, 'Art History's Inscription of Modern and Contemporary African Art', *Visions of a Future: Art and Art History in Changing Contexts*, eds., Hans-Jorg Heusser and Kornelia Imesch, Zurich: Swiss Institute for Art Research, 2004, 129.

¹² Hassan, 'The Modernist Experience in African Art', 1999, 215.

¹³ Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, Bologna, Damiani, 2009, 10.

Ghanaian painting has hardly begun, and indeed remains an uncharted territory. It is therefore necessary to develop a framework to broaden the discourse as Ghanaian painters continue to adopt a variety of new subjects to interpret their cultural and political past and modernity. Ghanaian art scholars will therefore have to contend with already established genres and its contested territories, and position themselves within these to gain relevance in the discipline. In the process they will find themselves engaged in a struggle for existence with connoisseurs, patrons and academics' regulation and classification strategies proposed by Olu Oguibe.¹⁴ One interesting observation is how modern and contemporary Ghanaian painters have been able to steer through this contested territory, fabricate an identity and create authenticity to validate their works.

Ghana's quest for modernism should not be interpreted as a 'passive' reception of foreign influences. Kofi Antubam (b. 1922 –d. 1964),¹⁵ Ghana's pioneer modern painter and sculptor, articulated how to engage European conventions in his theoretical treatise on Ghanaian art in the process of searching for a national identity. Antubam is philosophically saying 'Forward with progress' which he explains as a quest for a firm foundation upon which Africa can be opened to new global trends in art while remaining mindful of its African traditions in order to progress:

One only needs to accept the principle of assimilation as an unavoidable vital force in the development of a people to be able to appreciate the point that the Africanness in the new African personality of the twentieth century cannot be expected to remain what it was from creation. It will have to be a new personality or distinctive identity which should be neither Eastern nor Western and yet a growth in the presence of both with its roots deeply entrenched in the soil of the indigenous past of Africa.¹⁶

Antubam argues that African culture must recognise that in order to develop it must open itself up to new ideas and not remain the same. However, it must also not depart from its roots and contexts within which this development is taking place. The path must have its own uniqueness different from others and must take into consideration its own histories, experiences, beliefs, narratives, technologies, knowledge systems, institutions and ways of life. Ghanaian culture is not static and the way forward must be unique from others by firmly rooting it in the indigenous past of Africa.¹⁷ The development of a modern idiom of African art was closely linked to the newly independent African states' search for an identity.¹⁸ Antubam became a leading visual advocate of the concept of the 'African personality'

¹⁴ Olu Oguibe, 'Art, Identity, Boundaries: Postmodernism and Contemporary African Art', *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, eds. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999, 20.

¹⁵ Kofi Antubam, *Ghana's Heritage of Culture*, Leipzig: Koehler and Amelang, 1963.

¹⁶ Antubam, *Ghana's Heritage of Culture*, 1963, 23.

¹⁷ Antubam, *Ghana's Heritage of Culture*, 1963, 23.

¹⁸ Hassan, 'The Modernist Experience in African Art', 1999, 224.

promoted by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president. Since Antubam's pioneering work, Ghanaian scholars have barely produced any such comprehensive work. Publications and analysis of events that followed the early independence period of how the new nation state was negotiating its new identity show deliberate efforts at achieving this. Some scholars who have worked on the period have argued that the art was a rejection or reaction to British colonial rule. This must be seen within the context of the general nationalist movement and struggle for independence and on several occasions argued for the inclusion of traditional institutions into the various political organs and arrangements towards increased participation in governance.

Maruska Svasek's 1997¹⁹ article on artistic identities and styles suggests students worked either according to public dictates or against public expectations.²⁰ She discusses works done during the different political and economic periods through the reactions of the Gold Coast people towards the colonial government, and strategically using existing stereotypes to locate themselves in local and global art throughout the post independence period. Svasek suggests contrary to an examination of the literature, that the colonial art teacher's image of their students' culture limited the artistic freedom of the students of Achimota²¹ forcing them to create art in a style of their ancestors in an attempt to 'civilize the primitives'.²² Regrettably, Svasek's interpretation of the invitation of successful traditional craftspeople to Achimota to teach traditional art to mean compelling them 'to create art in the style of their ancestors',²³ and by introducing them to western education was to 'civilize the primitives' is rather unfortunate and misleading. As shall be demonstrated later, these were to act as a launch pad to Ghana's own interpretation of modern art as this was deliberately and carefully thought out in the school curricula and philosophy and executed by the founders of the school. Svasek disregards Achimota School's strategy of blending Western techniques and African art into the school's curriculum. She misinterprets Aggrey's philosophies in Achimota School, which included inviting traditional art specialists to teach craft in order to stimulate student creativity in new mediums, all of which are well documented. The fare-mentioned Nkrumah supported Aggrey's ideas that Africans should develop and modernise by deconstructing warped Eurocentric ideas, and revive and restore Africa's values by acknowledging and respecting African arts in the academy well beyond mere curiosity. Nkrumah believed that African modern art should express traditional African values and not imitate Europeans.²⁴

¹⁹ Maruska Svasek, 'Identity and Style in Ghanaian Artistic Discourse', *Contesting Art, Politics and Identity in the Modern World*, ed. Jeremy MacClancy, Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 1997, 28 – 61.

²⁰ Svasek, 'Identity and Style in Ghanaian Artistic Discourse', 1977, 50.

²¹ Svasek, 'Identity and Style in Ghanaian Artistic Discourse', 1997, 31.

²² Svasek, 'Identity and Style in Ghanaian Artistic Discourse', 1977, 31 - 32.

²³ Svasek, 'Identity and Style in Ghanaian Artistic Discourse', 1977, 31.

²⁴ Kwame Botwe-Asamoah, *Kwame Nkrumah's Politico-Cultural Thought and Policies: An African-Centred Paradigm for the Second Phase of the African Revolution*. New York: Routledge, 2005, 65.

There is a difference in style, methodology and approach between Atta Kwami's 1996 and 2003²⁵ sketchy historical exposés and Svasek's more structured account and analysis. Kwami limits his discussions largely to short summaries of mainly college trained contemporary artists whereas there are other works prior to and after the 1970s to guide a more careful analysis of Ghanaian modern art.

Kwami later demonstrates succinctly extensive western influences in popular contemporary art rooted in Ghanaian traditions and beliefs. His work in 2012 argues that 'traditional' and 'modern' art cannot be separated into distinct styles and has explored different approaches in examining the subject of how Ghanaian art has responded to modernity from 1951-2007 being late colonial period to the recent past in Kumasi. In many cases he views tradition as a process of handing down to newer generations. He supports his thesis by citing several examples of art works that float between a synthesis of the past and present influences and trends in art such as photography, advertising, graphic design, and other European techniques, and traditions in Ghana's history and culture.²⁶

Two situations seem to emerge. Svasek who argues that early post independence art was either against public dictates or against traditional expectations leads one. We are not sure of what the public dictates were but we know that Nkrumah was championing the African personality supported by Antubam through public art works, exhibitions of traditional art and regalia, and orchestrated spectacles which were not supported by all Ghanaians. Janet Hess'²⁷ article makes interesting reading on Nkrumah's deliberate employment of art in the establishment of a political hegemony but with some resistance to this particularly with the representation of his portrait on the Ghana stamp. What happened was based on the ideas of Antubam and Nkrumah who hold the view that in creating a new national identity and cohesion art should play an integral role built upon traditional foundations. Kwami demonstrates the variety of works and different public receptions including some that were against traditional expectations but also had public following in his work 'Kumasi Realism'. While some were contrary to traditional expectations the book suggest that contemporary art in Kumasi aims at meeting urban public needs different from traditional art. It can also be inferred that it is some of these new modern art works which departed from or supported popular urban public dictates and tastes. Some were against traditional public expectations but in line with public narratives and expectations as Michelle Gilbert (2003, 2006) and Christiane Falgayretes (2003) clearly demonstrate in their works on street popular art, which I shall return to later.

From Svasek's perspective there is some confusion between opposing British colonial rule and western education on one hand, and struggle for independence

²⁵ Atta Kwami, 'Writings Between a Patch of England, the Sahel and Forests of West Africa,' *Metronome*, 1, 1996, 38-39.

_____. 'Ghanaian Art in a Time of Change,' *L'art du Ghana à l'époque des Mauvances Contemporaines, Ghana hier et aujourd'hui (Ghana: Yesterday and Today)*, Paris: Musee Dapper, 2003, 285-319.

²⁶ Atta Kwami, *Kumasi Realism, 1951-2007, an African Modernism*, New York: Columbia University Press/Hurst & Company Publishers Limited, 2012.

²⁷ Janet Hess, 'Spectacular Nation: Nkrumahist Art and Resistance Iconography in the Independence Era', *African Arts*, 39: 1, Spring 2006.

and the establishment of an identity on the other. Her suggestion that Ghanaians rejected everything European and thus affected the works of artists can be challenged. Such categorization needs rejection based on the evidence that leading Ghanaian scholars did not advocate a complete rejection of everything European. As amply demonstrated from Antubam's text above, it was to encourage manage the inescapable acceptance of foreign ideas while maintaining local traditions, which has had a long history in the Gold Coast in the expansion of ethnic groups and empires, establishing political order, and this culture was expected to play a role in the creation of a new African personality.

Christiane Owusu-Sarpong²⁸ suggests that in the nineteenth century the Asante had perfected the tradition of incorporating techniques, objects and symbols from other cultures. A good example of this is the brass casting technology, learned from the Mande craftsmen called Numu, from Mali.²⁹ Ross and Garrard³⁰ have highlighted this incorporation of foreign ideas, materials, and objects into Akan art and regalia, especially in metal works. Raymond Silverman³¹ concludes the Akan were ever willing to enrich their material culture from foreign sources.

In as much as Robert Rattray expressed his fascination of Asante art he also articulated his disquiet on the progressive acculturation the craftspeople were involved in and cautioned that European culture should not be embraced blindly.³² Similarly the Ga through trade had also adopted from their neighbours. Other art histories such as the art of the Akuapem Guan ethnic group, Fante *asafo* flags and *posuban*, shrine monuments, are clear manifestations of adaptations and reinventions from other cultures.³³ The Akan and others did not reject traditions as the European modernists did but assimilated and reinvented from other cultures.

This form of local adaptations from other cultures prior to colonization seems to resonate with some contemporary African art scholars who agree with the idea of artistic integration, and support Antubam's views on the need to root Africa's modernity within its traditions. A Sudanese painter, Ibrahim El-Salahi, stresses this 'Africanness' saying he maintains Sudanese motifs in his art.³⁴ Hassan quotes a similar idea from Amir Nour, a Sudanese-born sculptor who agrees with Antubam that:

²⁸ Christiane Owusu-Sarpong, 'From Words to Rituals,' *L'art du Ghana à l'époque des Mauvances Contemporaines, Ghana hier et aujourd'hui (Ghana: Yesterday and Today)*, Paris: Musée Dapper, 2003, 38.

²⁹ Timothy F. Garrard, *Akan Weights and the Gold Trade*, New York: Longman, 1980, 12-14, 24, 99-102, 103.

³⁰ Doran H. Ross and Timothy F. Garrard, eds., *Akan Transformation: Problems in Ghanaian Art History*, Museum of Cultural History Monograph Series, 21, Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, 1983, 8, 14.

³¹ Raymond A. Silverman, 'Akan Kudu: Form and Function', *Akan Transformations: Problems in Ghanaian Art History*, eds. D.H. Ross and T.F. Garrard, Los Angeles: UCLA, 1983, 8.

³² Cited by Owusu-Sarpong, 'From Words to Ritual Objects', 42 from Robert Rattray, *Ashanti*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, The Clarendon Press, 1923 (1969), 12.

³³ See Kwame A. Labi, 'Akanization of the Hill Guan Arts', *Research Review*, 18: 2, 2002, 1-21, 'Criminalizing Art: The Struggle Between Fante *Asafo* Companies and the British Administration on The Gold Coast (1844 – 1957)', *Baessler – Archiv*, 50, 2002, 1-16 and 'Fante *Asafo* Flags of Abandze and Kormantse: A Discourse between Rivals', *African Arts*, Winter 2002, 36: 4, 28-37.

³⁴ Hassan, 'The Modernist Experience in African Art', 1999, 224.

There is nothing wrong with using technology. But the forms have to come from within the society itself – from the traditional background ... You cannot have a culture that is isolated from the rest of the world. Cultures have always developed by being fertilised by new elements from other cultures...³⁵

Hassan suggests that because of the negative connotations associated with the term 'modernism' in western intellectual circles, 'modern' is more suitable for such new artistic expressions, because it symbolises the experience and practices that the art forms embody. He explains 'To call it modern distinguishes it from the merely contemporary; and where contemporary refers to time modern refers to sensibility and style, and where contemporary is a term of neutral reference, 'modern' is a term of critical judgement'.³⁶ He, however, agrees that modernism in the African context, just as elsewhere, similarly entails a self-conscious attempt to break with the past and search for new forms of expression. The discussion in this work provides an analysis of strategies in introducing western painting during the period of European modernity. This is different from traditional conventions in producing art thereby making many modern drawing and paintings express a rejection of the old traditional conventions of three dimensional representation and production, but also show strong adaptations from folklore, traditional activities, adornment and symbolic representations as inspiration for a new genre reinterpreted in a new medium. The works of the Ghanaian modern painters are consequently informed by their past and present, and through their perceptions and responses to colonialism, modernity, post colonialism and identity.

Ghanaian participation in twentieth-century art discourses is limited. The late Oku Ampofo (b. 1908 – d. 1998), a medical practitioner who studied art at the night school of the Edinburgh School of Art under sculptor Norman Forest, spearheaded and encouraged the creation of modern art with a Ghanaian flavour and organized the first modern art exhibition. His contribution on Akwapim Six guild³⁷ is informative. Kojo Fosu's *20th Century Art of Africa*,³⁸ with biographies of African artists extending beyond Ghanaian painters, is a fundamental resource on African modern artists. Of relevance to this work is his 2009 text in the *Pioneers of Contemporary Ghanaian Art* catalogue³⁹ and contribution in his 2004 article on contemporary art in Ghana.⁴⁰ Some narratives on modern art in Ghana are framed in the genre of Euro-American interests in untrained street artists: Chernoff's 1977⁴¹ work on Andrews Ofori Danso, Christine Kristen 1980 article on sign painting⁴² and

³⁵ Hassan, 'The Modernist Experience in African Art', 1999, 222.

³⁶ Hassan, 'The Modernist Experience in African Art', 1999, 223.

³⁷ Oku Ampofo, 'The Akwapim Six', *Akwapim Handbook*, ed. David Brokensha, Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1972.

³⁸ Kojo Fosu, *20th Century Art of Africa*, Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation Ltd., 1986.

³⁹ Fosu, *Pioneers of Contemporary Ghanaian Art*, 2009.

⁴⁰ Kojo Fosu, 'Contemporary Art in Ghana', *Transition: Samtidskunst Fra Ghana*, Copenhagen: Ulandssekretariatet, 2004, 83-97.

⁴¹ John Miller Chernoff, 'Andrews Ofori Danso of Ghana', *African Arts*, 10: 3, April 1997, 32-35.

⁴² Christine Kristen, 'Sign-Painting in Ghana', *African Arts*, 13: 3, May 1980, 38-41.

Doran Ross⁴³ photo essay of different artistic works by non-college trained professionals' art works outside their workshops to attract clients follows a similar trend in new interests in popular street art.

A fairly recent catalogue *Ghana: Yesterday and Today*⁴⁴ published to accompany an exhibition addresses Ghana's art traditions and its modernity. It is organized around traditional art genre, its receptiveness to other cultures, and the changes and aspects that still persist in the first eight essays in the catalogue. It is then followed by what I consider a transitional essay by Atta Kwami on the introduction of western formal art training, and brief notes on some of its products from the College of Art. The last three essays are on contemporary art by a Ghanaian in the Diaspora, and the other two on popular art. What the first group of essays make clear is the Akan culture of adoption and assimilation perfecting the skill of incorporating the art of conquered peoples. This forms a critical foundation and a historical basis for Ghanaian receptiveness to modern art and Ghanaianizing it through the subjects and subject matter they address in their paintings.

Although Ortiz was interested in studying how both the colonized and colonizer were changed through their mutual experience, I shall also apply 'transculturation' to explain how either dominant, subordinated or marginalized groups make inventions from materials transmitted to them by a governing metropolitan culture or from a conquered people. For example, Phyllis Peres⁴⁵ suggest that in a critical sense transculturation counters not only the colonial or dominant practices presumed in acculturation but also uncomplemented fusion or creolization. Mary Louis Pratt maintains that transculturation is a phenomenon of a 'contact zone.' She uses this phrase to refer to the space in which people who are geographically, culturally and historically different and separated come into contact with their paths now intersecting and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion and inequality.⁴⁶

Drawing from the initial argument of artistic and cultural assimilation the essays in the catalogue demonstrate European and foreign influences on different types of Ghanaian art. This historical and cultural dynamics of pre-colonial Gold Coast and independent Ghana provides a critical contemporary relevance to frame and define modern art in Ghana. The two last essays demonstrate quite well Ghanaian receptiveness to varying degrees of adaptations as Falgayrettes-Leveau⁴⁷ and Michelle Gilbert's⁴⁸ contributions on popular art by self-taught artists

⁴³ Doran H. Ross, 'Artists Advertising Themselves; Contemporary Studio Façades in Ghana', *African Arts*, 38: 3, Autumn 2004, 72-79.

⁴⁴ Christiane Falgayrettes-Leveau and Christiane Owusu-Sarpong, eds., *Ghana: Yesterday and Today*, Paris: Musée Dapper, 2003.

⁴⁵ Peres Phyllis, *Transculturation and Resistance in Lusophone*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997, 10.

⁴⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London: Routledge, 1992, 6-7.

⁴⁷ Christiane Falgayrettes-Leveau, 'Almighty God, the Inspired Artist,' *L'art du Ghana à l'époque des Mauvances Contemporaines, Ghana hier et aujourd'hui (Ghana: Yesterday and Today)*, Paris: Musée Dapper, 2003, 333-351.

⁴⁸ Michelle Gilbert, 'Shocking Images: Ghanaian Painted Posters,' *L'art du Ghana à l'époque des Mauvances Contemporaines, Ghana hier et aujourd'hui (Ghana: Yesterday and Today)*, Paris: Musée Dapper, 2003, 353-379, revised and published as 'Things Ugly: Ghanaian Popular Painting,'

demonstrate how untrained street artists receive modernity and foreign culture including fantasy, myth, Chinese and Hindu images, seductive and violent imagery and local superstitious beliefs and accounts of occultic and witchcraft narratives, and in Gilbert's work paraded announcing a concert party performance.

Ghanaian art today extends beyond street artists in kiosks often producing repetitive copies from books, video covers, and popular portraits of politicians, musicians or sportsmen and women. It includes works of skilled metal artists, sculptors, graphic and textile designers, installation artists and many more demonstrating new innovative techniques and original creative works which attracts collectors and galleries, and a wide range of local and international patrons. To devote two essays to self-taught and street artists in such an important endeavour is unrepresentational of Ghana's contemporary art culture and the extent of the changes occurring. Kwami's brief narrative accounts and sketchy summaries of trained painters contributes in making a case for the dynamism in the techniques, styles, philosophies and the contexts of production and the place of trained artists in the history of Ghana's modernism.

Aside from these popular themes, acknowledgement of the formally trained artists, such as Carol Magee's 2010 article on Papa Essel, are few.⁴⁹ Essel harnesses Ghanaian traditional values, symbols and proverbs to create a niche. His work draws on the aesthetics of Ghanaian *adinkra*, a plain cloth with stamped symbols representing Akan proverbs and beliefs to address the problems of war, race, spirituality, the gold industry and diasporic life.

Kojo Fosu's⁵⁰ three contributions on contemporary art mainly on trained artists are worthy of mention here. Among the vast unpublished works on Ghanaian paintings are several student theses of the College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) including Ebenezer Essuman Donkor,⁵¹ Kwaku Sekoame Kotoku,⁵² Abraham Henry Lemaire⁵³ and Robert Joseph Mettle-Nunoo⁵⁴— collectively written from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. Journalists, connoisseurs and art patrons including Ama de-Graft Aikins⁵⁵

Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics, ed. Sarah Nuttall, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006, 340 – 371.

⁴⁹ Carol Magee, 'Social Fabrics; Gold Mining, Diaspora, and Word and Image in the Paintings of Papa Essel', *African Arts*, 43: 4, Winter 2010, 8-19.

⁵⁰ Fosu, *20th Century Art of Africa*, 1986, 'Contemporary Art in Ghana', 2004 and *Pioneers of Contemporary Ghanaian Art*, 2009.

⁵¹ Ebenezer Essuman Donkor, *The Development of Easel Painting in Ghana (Pre-Independence to date)*, unpublished B.A (Art) thesis, College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, 1989.

⁵² Kwaku Sekoame Kotoku, *Art Education in Ghana Before and After the Coming of the Missionaries*, unpublished post-Graduate Diploma in Art Education thesis, Art Education Department, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, 1981.

⁵³ Abraham Henry Lemaire, *Innovations in Easel Painting in Ghana*, unpublished B. A. (Art) thesis, College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, 1989.

⁵⁴ Robert Joseph Mettle-Nunoo, *Achimota School – Its Contribution to the Arts in Ghana*, unpublished B A (Art) thesis, College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, 1978.

⁵⁵ Ama de-Graft Aikins, 'Wisdom 'Wiz' Kudowor – A Profile,' *African Encounters: Modes of Expression*, 2005, 1, http://www.africa-encounters.com/artist_overview.aspx?=3, accessed January 30, 2010.

have produced newspaper articles, exhibition brochures and catalogues. Artists such as Ablade Glover, Ato Delaquis, Wisdom Kudowor,⁵⁶ Robert Aryeetey⁵⁷ and Victoria Sophia Adoe have all produced exhibition brochures. These sources of information including those that appear in *Art Focus*, journal of the ArtHaus and Nubuke Foundation⁵⁸ and its regular newsletters encourage initiatives on art discourses. Some scanty information on artists and galleries also appear in the electronic media⁵⁹ including the Artists Alliance Gallery Website.⁶⁰

This minimal scholarship by Ghanaians is similar to situations in the discipline in other African countries and has received public criticism. Rasheed Araeen conveys concern for this lack of scholarly intellectual participation by criticizing as well as encouraging Africans to engage in a more rigorous discourse with theoretical underpinning. The lack of recognition of the works of prominent African artists such as the South African Ernest Mancoba's *Composition* (1940, oil on canvas), is a concern, which Araeen believes needs redress.⁶¹ Araeen's rather pessimistic view of Africa as one which 'remains precarious, confused and depressing' because it lacks its own intellectual resources within Africa and has been unable to develop its own modern institutions can be criticised for lacking substantive evidence contrary to the successful academic achievements by Africans in other disciplines and professions. Without these, he argues, scholars are unable to conduct their own research and engage in knowledge production, which would provide a framework capable of interpreting the work of artists. Admittedly African scholars face a myriad of problems including minimal governmental support, funding challenges, access to publishing houses and current literature. This failure has compelled African scholars, particularly art historians, to look to the West⁶² thereby creating a knowledge divide between Africa and the West. This has, however, not denied the continent of intellectual resources in art and related disciplines capable of addressing these challenges and entry into the critical discourses. In spite of these challenges, a few on the continent and some in the Diaspora are currently engaged in this scholarship. Araeen challenges Africans that 'This task will have to be performed by Africans themselves... Without addressing this challenge now, Africa cannot claim its unique achievement that surpasses anything realised by the rest of the colonised world'. Finally he observes that Africa needs '... a body of new philosophical ideas capable of ... exposing and confronting the interpretation of modernity so that it becomes a toll for the liberation of humanity, not only in Africa but also universally'.⁶³ Roland Abiodun in his article

⁵⁶ Wiz Kudowor, exhibition catalogue, Artists Alliance Gallery, La, Accra, 2003.

⁵⁷ Robert Aryeetey, Wiz Kudowor, exhibition Catalogue, 2001.

⁵⁸ www.nubukefoundation.org, accessed 26 February 2013.

⁵⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contemporary_art, accessed June 29, 2010 and Ama de-Graft Aikins, 'Wisdom 'Wiz' Kudowor – A Profile,' 2005.

⁶⁰ <http://artistsallianz.com/artists.php>, accessed 26 February 2013.

<http://www.artistsallianz.com/home>, accessed 26 February 2013.

⁶¹ Rasheed Araeen, 'Modernity, Modernism, and Africa's Place in the History of Art of Our Age', *Third Text*, 19: 4, 2005, 417.

⁶² Araeen, 'Modernity, Modernism', 2005, 413.

⁶³ Araeen, 'Modernity, Modernism', 2005, 417.

'African Aesthetics'⁶⁴ makes interesting suggestions on how to introduce new methodologies to interpret African art, explore new ways of establishing meanings, interrogate the multidisciplinary aspects of art production and use, and come out with new content taking into consideration existing knowledgeable informants and elders, ethno linguistics, religious beliefs, philosophy and contextual usages in a new scholarship. This can only be achieved when the discipline is introduced at the undergraduate level either as a major or a minor in combination with other disciplines. What exists in many African universities south of the Sahara are selected art history courses taught alongside studio art majors. The content, structure, methodological approaches, faculty and graduate training programmes need strengthening. Both students and faculty need to engage more with other scholars in debates, seminars, at conferences both on the continent and outside to encourage academics to conduct research, participate in discourses and knowledge production and dissemination of their findings.

The concerns about Ghanaian intellectual participation in art, and Araeen's observation, have prompted the examination of Ghanaian painting as my entry point to African modern art discourse. In 2006, *African arts* published a special edition on 'Art historical perspectives on African modernism'⁶⁵ and in the view of the guest editor Chika Okeke-Agulu, 'the tenor and rigor of these essays ... suggest a coming of age of modern African art history ... a clear determination on the part of emerging scholars in this field to take seriously the challenges of a defining period of the twentieth century (art) history of the continent'.⁶⁶ But how many of the six contributors were Africans or from the African Diaspora made contributions to this edition? Were they invited or not, did they know about the edition or were their scholarship not of the journal's standard?

Aggrey's philosophy of combining the black and white keys on the piano by drawing on intellectual strengths from different cultures lays a critical philosophical foundation to teaching art in Ghana and modern scholarship. Unfortunately Nkrumah's suggestion to encourage research in the arts and disseminate African centred knowledge in his African Genius speech in 1963⁶⁷ to encourage art scholarship has received minimal attention in the narratives of modern Ghanaian art discourses. The effect of this philosophy of drawing upon local knowledge and resources is evident in Ghanaian modern paintings thereby creating unique art and opportunities to research and disseminate these findings at conferences, workshops, symposia, in catalogues of international exhibitions and Biennials. Unfortunately these have not been forthcoming in the scholarly texts available at these fora, and in bookstores and libraries.

As recounted earlier to understand Ghanaian art trajectory is to recognize the complexities in which different art works from other cultures were assimilated and reinvented and how this culture has affected the reception of Ghanaian modernity.

⁶⁴ Roland Abiodun, 'African Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 35: 4, Winter, 2001.

⁶⁵ *African Arts*, 39: 1 Spring 2006,

⁶⁶ Chika Okeke-Agulu, 'The Challenges of the Modern: An Introduction', *African Arts*, 39: 1 Spring 2006, 15.

⁶⁷ Kwame Nkrumah, speech read at the opening ceremony of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, October 25, 1963, Accra: Afram Publications, 1979.

There was no tradition of complete rejection as foreign art and regalia were incorporated, thus became part of a culture of acculturation of foreign ideas demonstrating the Akan and the Gold Coast people's strong enduring belief in traditions, and recognising the aesthetic values in the 'others' art. Hence it was quite in order to encourage students to embrace western techniques of modern art and in addition inject and infuse it with a Ghanaian flavour. Aggrey theorized this culture and advanced a critical educational philosophy to preserve African heritage to meet emerging and future challenges. This is examined into some detail below.

Ghanaian and African foundations in modern art at Achimota

Achimota School may be credited as the birthplace of training in modern art techniques in the Gold Coast. The philosophy of combining European knowledge and African values guided the foundations of art instruction and had an inescapable impact on students' ingenuity in applying this new medium. This was inspired by the black and white keys of the piano, which form the shield of the school. Beneath it is the Latin inscription *Ut Omnes Unum Sint*, meaning, 'That all may be one'. This was based on a belief that African and European strengths can be harnessed for development just as the various local cultures appropriated art from other cultures to strengthen their own political ambitions and artistic pursuits. In a spirit of collaboration both 'black' and 'white' people can work together beyond the race divide. The leading advocate of this philosophy was Aggrey.

Aggrey had certainly learned the values of Western education, during his training in the United States of America at Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina, but he remained African in his values and believed a combination of the best from the two could lead to a better product. He supported this view with his favourite saying about the piano keys i.e. 'You can play a tune of sorts on the white keys, and you can play a tune of sorts on the black keys, but for harmony you must use both the black and white keys'.⁶⁸ To train a good student, education must take into consideration the aspects that will make for a well-rounded scholar, who is knowledgeable about Western cultures and technological advancement yet does not despise local understanding and experience. As part of this drive, a museum was set up displaying ethnological exhibits consisting of drums, state chairs, umbrellas, and a large collection of horns, swords and several objects confiscated during the British-Asante war⁶⁹ in 1874.

From the outset the authorities ensured that the art teachers understood and appreciated African art. G. A. Stevens⁷⁰ was appointed in 1926 as an art instructor. His objective was to completely wean students from copying photographs and

⁶⁸ Kingsley C. Williams, *Achimota: The Early Years 1924–1948*, Accra and Ikeja: Longmans, 1962, 151.

⁶⁹ *Achimota Review 1927–1937*, Accra: Achimota Press, 1937, 92.

⁷⁰ Mr. Stevens was succeeded by Mr. P. P. Brown and assisted by Mr. C. S. Dey, who emphasized accuracy and solidity in teaching drawing. To reinforce students' intellectual understanding of art, he gave lectures on art appreciation (*Achimota Review 1927–1937*, 1937, 38). Some subsequent art teachers were Miss Joan Bardsley, Mr. Boateng, Mrs. H. A. Barker, Mr. A. P. Brown, Mr. Gabriel Pippet, Mr. H. C. Labi, and Mr. H. V. Meyerowitz.

illustrated catalogues.⁷¹ In the art room Stevens had the walls decorated with reproductions of works by Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino, better known as Raphael, Peter Paul Rubens, Leonardo da Vinci, and other European masters, as well as a few Greek sculptures and plaster casts of animals. Below these he wrote short comments illustrating the merit in each. These comments, I believe, were to give students a clear picture of the technical aspects of drawing and sculpture. One of his cardinal principles was to keep in mind and situate the teaching of modern art and contextualize the subject within the local environment. Stevens encouraged imaginative composition and creativity in his art lessons, while he taught a few definitive rules about drawing. He urged his students to use their eyes carefully in observing things around them and translating them onto paper.⁷² This approach was based on his deep admiration for African art. The most ambitious work Stevens undertook was a contract to illustrate Rattray's book *Ashanti Folk Tales*,⁷³ which he assigned to his students. These illustrations received a good review from Sir William Rothenstein, who said:

The results of Mr. Stevens' short stay at Achimota show a vitality, a happy enjoyment of nature which survive in the young African ...; do not let us weaken it by putting before the young the dreary outline of chairs, jugs, and candlesticks which are still to be found as examples to be copied in Indian elementary schools.⁷⁴

Rothenstein implied that students should have the freedom to explore their sense of creativity and improvise, and not be restricted to traditional European still-life exercises, which might not help them identify and develop their creative abilities. In the foreword to the *Achimota Review*, H. M. Grace, Principal (1935–1939) at the time, admitted that one great responsibility was:

To try to keep and develop all that is beautiful in African arts, crafts and music as well as to bring all that is best in these from outside ... The true craftsman or artist who loves to create is practical with his hands but he also has a satisfied soul for he looks on what he has created and it is good.⁷⁵

Stephens incorporated art history lessons into his teaching and held a series of lectures and seminars on the history of Assyrian, Egyptian and Greek sculptures. The topics also included early European, Renaissance, Modern and Oriental painting⁷⁶ so that the students might broaden their knowledge and situate African art within a global tradition. This education broadly combined the training of the

⁷¹ *Achimota Review 1927–1937*, 1937, 38.

⁷² *Achimota Review 1927–1937*, 1937, 92.

⁷³ Oxford University Press published this in 1930.

⁷⁴ Williams, *Achimota*, 1962, 65.

⁷⁵ *Achimota Review 1927–1937*, 1937, 1.

⁷⁶ *Achimota Review 1927–1937*, 1937, 38.

hand and eye in arts and crafts, and the education of the brain in acquisition of knowledge. 'Hand and Eye' was a technical course introduced in schools and training colleges from 1882 to provide industrial training and schoolteachers prior to the teaching of art in the country.⁷⁷

Aggrey's short stay in Achimota was influential in promoting co-operation between African and European knowledge systems and cultures as well as art, which, in his view was essential to progress.⁷⁸ It was his hope to provide education for an African student who would remain African and not be 'transformed' into a European or influenced into thinking and behaving like one. His deep affection for his people and their traditions never blinded him that change must come, and their conditions and manner of thought must change if Africans were to keep pace with modern civilization. In Guggisberg's tribute after the death of Aggrey in August 1927, he says Aggrey's dilemma was that:

[h]e felt that any changes that came to his people must not alter their personality, their spirit, their character as Africans. ... — how to give them the opportunities for acquiring all the learning, all the knowledge of arts and crafts, all the mental poise and character, that centuries of slow progress have given to the civilized nations of the world, and yet how to ensure that they retained the spirit of their ancestors and remained African.⁷⁹

Aggrey was conscious of this and mindful of the inherent creativity in the Ghanaian raised in an environment in which art was extensively used in several local contexts and occasions. He was passionate in producing a new scholar who would combine the best of Ghanaian traditions, as had been the general traditional practice in the past. In 1930, the government passed the Achimota College and School Ordinance, and Section 35 transferred the control of the school to the Achimota Council to manage. It also provided that the Governor appoint four Inspectors to assess the school in 1932, and every five years thereafter.⁸⁰ The first assessment was carried out in 1932, and according to one high-ranking official in England, the report was the most complimentary ever received by the colonial office at the time. Chapter III of the document observes that 'Achimota hopes to produce a type of student who was "Western" in his intellectual attitude towards life, with

⁷⁷ The Hand and Eye course started with technical courses in 1842 in an industrial school in Accra to teach woodwork, bookbinding, handicraft and printing (Kotoku, *Art Education in Ghana Before and After the Coming of the Missionaries*, 1981, 7–8). However, it was not until the introduction of the Education Ordinance in 1882 that formal art training, called 'Hand and Eye', started (Donkor, *The Development of Easel Painting in Ghana*, 1989, 2.). By 1918 many missionary and government-assisted schools and training colleges, were awarding certificates in 'Hand and Eye' (C.S.O.18/1/351, Report on the Education Department for the Year 1918, Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD), Accra. See also C.S.O. 18/1/350, Report on the Education for the year 1917, Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD), Accra.

⁷⁸ Williams, *Achimota*, 1962, 34.

⁷⁹ Williams, *Achimota*, 1962, 35.

⁸⁰ Williams, *Achimota*, 1962, 86–87.

respect for science and capacity for systematic thought, but who remains African in sympathy and desirous of preserving and developing what is deserving of respect in tribal life, custom, rule and law'.⁸¹ The fact that the Inspectors' experiences included education in Nigeria, Europe and Asia, a wide range of administrative knowledge of the Gold Coast gave credibility to the report.

The emphasis on African art foundations for Achimota students continued into the second half of the third decade of the twentieth century when Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz, a trained art teacher and an artist with previous African experience, took over the teaching of art in 1937. During their first term Meyerowitz and his sculptor wife Eva, also at Achimota, were sent by the school on a tour of West Africa to collect information about local traditional arts and crafts and establish contact with local craftspeople and others.

Meyerowitz laid emphasis on local art forms, which he presented as 'traditional crafts', cultivating in students an appreciation for Ghanaian and West African art and traditions,⁸² which he brought to bear in the classroom. This is commendable, as Achimota recognized the importance of giving art students a broader knowledge in the arts, especially of their immediate neighbours with great traditions and centuries of practice. Probably in lieu of field trips outside Accra for students, the school organized special courses in woodcarving in 1937 under the instruction of Osei Bonsu, the chief wood-carver of the *Asantehene*,⁸³ king of the Asante ethnic group. An Asante master weaver was also invited to teach. Following a request to the Oba of Benin in Nigeria, through the Benin Native Administration, the chief of the Oba's brass-casters guild was sent to Achimota to teach and demonstrate casting. These indigenous masters were expected to give students a firm grounding in local traditions as basis of learning modern art, and it was hoped students would then plough these European and West African techniques, traditions and aesthetics into their art in order to develop new styles. These teaching methods and the emphasis placed on traditional art made it unique and a pioneer in the teaching of modern art in the sub-region. Herbert Vladimir and Eva Meyerowitz carried out extensive research into Gold Coast and West African art, and helped develop the art school into one of the best Departments of Education in the country. By 1938, Cambridge University authorities were convinced of the quality of art instruction at Achimota and accepted it as an examinable subject for the school certificate examination⁸⁴ and graduated art students that same year.

Meyerowitz in *Achimota Review* affirms the importance of African art, and how regrettable it would be if the result of their efforts led to the admiration of only European art traditions. The training in Achimota, according to Meyerowitz, was to enable students learn from African art, to enable their eyes to see, and their hands to express African beauty. It was the hope and belief of teachers that through this emphasis on learning from African art, students' expression would be more natural. The art teachers wanted students to base their preferences on a reasoned comparison of the different traditions and not despise African art through ignorance

⁸¹ Williams, *Achimota*, 1962, 88–89.

⁸² Williams, *Achimota*, 1962, 97.

⁸³ Mettle-Nunoo, *Achimota School*, 1978, 65.

⁸⁴ Williams, *Achimota*, 1962, 74, 78.

of what it was and had accomplished.⁸⁵ Therefore local crafts such as modelling, carving and basketry were introduced as taught subjects to reinforce Achimota's desire to support an African approach to modern art. Wood and clay were considered just as important as pencils, brushes and paint. According to Mettle-Nunoo, adequate research into 'modernizing' the production of art considered to be 'traditional crafts' could only be effectively undertaken after this foundation was laid.⁸⁶ It was also believed that both African and European art provided fundamental assets and opportunities for the young student. While wood and metal sculpture, weaving and ceramics were taught, drawing and painting were considered important and still life, landscape, imaginative composition, portraits and figure drawing were all catered for.⁸⁷ Students were taught colour and its reaction to the environment. For the imaginative composition class, topics were formulated to encourage students to draw upon their local experiences.⁸⁸ The teachers held regular art exhibitions in the school and organized visits to the museum, which formed part of the curriculum.⁸⁹ When Meyerowitz died in 1946, the Scottish painter J. M. Mackendrick succeeded him.⁹⁰

The objective of training students in locally developed techniques was that, 'If the right attitude and respect were cultivated towards their own traditional arts, and were well established, the students would be in a position to appreciate the economic possibilities and the role it could play in the society'.⁹¹ Art could become an avenue for expression and creativity and contribute to the development of a new African identity. In sum, art was to offer the student an opportunity to rediscover his or her traditions in a new medium and create a new breed of artists who, though Western-trained, remained Ghanaian in their artistic expression. This led to interconnectivity between 'tradition' and 'modernity', and the relations with neighbouring countries influenced the art students to reach deep into local artistic styles for ideas and inspiration. The thematic preoccupations of modern Ghanaian painters became rich in a conceptual framework based on their traditions that inspired their works.

Building upon the Achimota foundations - 1940s – 1970s

Some of the early Achimota art students included Grace Kwami *nee* Anku (b. 1923 – d. 2006),⁹² Vincent Kofi Akwete (b. 1927 – d. 1974), A. M. Opoku (b. 1915 - d. 2000), Lydia Nanor Dede (b. 1928 -....), Amon Kotei (b. 1915 - d. 2011), who designed Ghana's Coat of Arms, and John Owusu-Addo (b. 1928). Some of these students

⁸⁵ *Achimota Review 1927–1937*, 1937, 39.

⁸⁶ Mettle-Nunoo, *Achimota School*, 1978, 65–67.

⁸⁷ Mettle-Nunoo, *Achimota School*, 1978, 80.

⁸⁸ Mettle-Nunoo, *Achimota School*, 1978, 82–85.

⁸⁹ Mettle-Nunoo, *Achimota School*, 1978, 70.

⁹⁰ Marshal Ward Mount, *African Art: The Years Since 1920*, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1973, 127.

⁹¹ Mettle-Nunoo, *Achimota School*, 1978, 65–67.

⁹² Elisabeth Joyce Court 'Da Grace Salome Abra Kwami 1923–2006', *African Arts*, 41: 2, Summer 2008, 10–11.

including Opoku, Ernest V. Asihene (b. 1918 – d. 2001) and Kofi Antubam (b. 1922 – d. 1964) were sent to art schools abroad for further training.

By 1940 there were abundant modern art works in the country, largely due to efforts by both artists and teachers to encourage its teaching. Some of these artists would gather during their holidays to work together and learn from one another.⁹³ By 1946 there were enough Western-trained artists to establish the Gold Coast Society of Artists. For the first time in the country's history, Dr Ampofo, (who, as already detailed, had returned in 1940 from medical and art studies in Britain) with the support of Antubam, organized and exhibited the works of members of the art society in 1946. Later on in 1954 a number of the Gold Coast Society of Artists came together and called themselves 'Akuapem Six' with the aims of: (a) promoting and appreciating their heritage of indigenous art; (b) promoting healthy conditions for free expression of thought through the arts; and (c) giving vent to the members' artistic and cultural expression and aspirations.⁹⁴ Realizing the need for a higher educational programme for the study of art, the Achimota Art Department and its staff were transferred to Kumasi in 1952 to form the nucleus of the Kumasi College of Technology, with a staff comprising both European and Ghanaian teachers.

It then became possible for Achimota art students and some of the art teachers from the training colleges to advance their careers in art with the establishment of the College of Art. Some of the students from the training colleges who joined those from Achimota at the College of Art to become pioneering undergraduate art students were Owusu Dartey (b. 1927), Seth Anku (d. 2011), A. O. Bartimeus (b. 1927 - d. 1988) and Fred Agyeman (b. c.a. 1920s...) – all from the Presbyterian Training College (PTC) Akropong Akuapem – plus E. K. J. Tetteh (b. 1928–d. ca. 2008) from Wesley College, Kumasi. These students were familiar with aspects of painting, ceramics and weaving. At the College of Art, the British lecturers introduced the painting students to different techniques and traditions. Mackendrick for example, taught his students to start painting from any dark colour and gradually add bright colours.⁹⁵ J. Hillocks, supervisor of the school at the time, assisted Mackendrick and taught composition and drawing. He did not like smooth paintings but thought every artist should be able to do so if required to.⁹⁶ Hillocks, referred to as a colourist,⁹⁷ taught students different styles and approaches to painting from Byzantine to Florentine styles.

The pioneering Ghanaian lecturers at the College of Art included Owusu-Addo, who taught sketching and drawing with pencil and charcoal, Opoku taught graphic art, and G. A. Obeng taught textile design, poster design and lettering. Some of the prominent artists at the College of Art who helped train and influenced today's contemporary painters included Asihene and Tetteh. Other lecturers who

⁹³ Ampofo, 'The Akwapim Six', 1972, 177.

⁹⁴ Ampofo, 'The Akwapim Six', 1972, 178.

⁹⁵ Interview with Mr. Owusu Dartey, December 2011.

⁹⁶ K. Seidou, *Theoretical Foundations of the KNUST Painting Programme: A Philosophical Inquiry and Its Contextual Relevance in Ghanaian Culture*, unpublished PhD thesis, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, 2006, 134-135.

⁹⁷ Seidou, *Theoretical Foundations of the KNUST Painting Programme*, 2006, 441.

later joined were Mary Kirby, Tom MacNair, Peter G. Reddick,⁹⁸ Leroy E. Mitchell and Seth Galevor.

The different influences of these lecturers can be seen in the paintings of Tetteh and Bartimeus who may be considered as some of the founding fathers of modern art in the country. For example, in Tetteh's *Asafo Company* (Fig. 1) the influence of Mackendrick can be seen by the general strong contrasting nature of the painting including dark bodies with the face of the drummer highlighted. The *asafo* drum is highlighted to emphasize its importance in *asafo* performances against the darker bodies behind it. Only selected clothes and body parts of the figures are emphasized. The foreground is highlighted though, but with shadows. Though bright the sky creates the impression of overcast while the rest of the *asafo* company hold their guns and weapons raised in the dark background. On the contrary Bartimeus' *In the Valley* (Fig. 2), influenced by Hillocks shows clear skies and a colourful landscape. A mixture of bright red and blue fade into the horizon, and a combination of similar colours dominated by variations of green used for the landscape. The bright skies, and the green forests of southern Ghana made their impact on him, which he combined with alternating choppy strokes in contrasting deep colours: greens, purples, reds and yellows. Bold in his use of primary and secondary colours, he was comfortable painting traditional political scenes and dignified gestures of *akyeame* (spokespersons), so as to advance the status of Ghana's kings, chiefs and community leaders.

By 1958 another art college, the Winneba Training College now University of Education, Winneba, was established to train secondary school teachers in several subjects including art and crafts. The Kumasi College of Technology became a university in 1961 and the art school became a College of Art in 1964.



Figure 1 E. K. J. Tetteh, *Asafo company*, c.a 1970s. Oil on board, 47" x 34 1/2", Accra: National Art Gallery at Du Bois Centre. Photographed by Selina Emma Laryea.

⁹⁸ Seidou, *Theoretical Foundations of the KNUST Painting Programme*, 2006, 451.

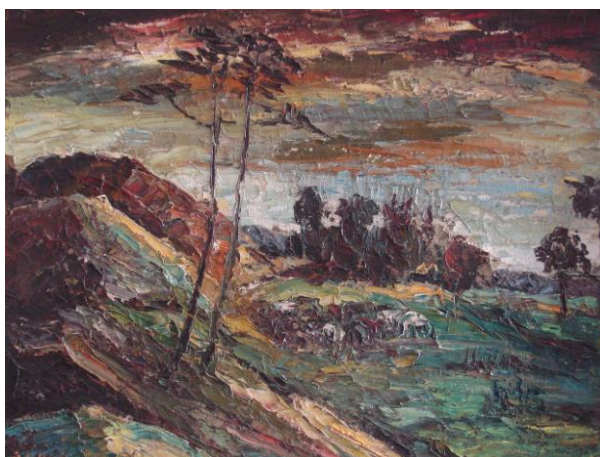


Figure 2 A. O. Bartimeus, *In the valley*, 1971. Oil on board, 24''x28'', Accra: Artists Alliance Gallery. Photographed by the author.

Expanding local cultures in modern and postmodern paintings

This formal art education produced two groups of artists – the modern painters from 1940s – 1970s and later postcolonial and postmodern contemporary painters from 1970s to present. These pioneer painters featured impressionistic and naturalistic figures similar to traditional Ghanaian works in which figurative representations are sometimes distorted. Traditional Ghanaian scenes were often captured in impasto dominated by bright and dark contrasting hues and tints of reds, yellows, yellow ochres, blues, violets, browns, greens, siennas and white.

One of the products of formal art training was Kofi Antubam who effectively combined western techniques in painting and sculpture and Ghanaian culture demonstrating a deep understanding of the Ghanaian heritage. He displayed utmost respect for Ghanaian aesthetics by laying emphasis on rounded body forms, well-formed legs and feet, particularly limbs with clear definition of anatomical contours. He highlighted traditional adornment – such as the proper draping of costumes including folds that appear in it when worn, as well as the articulation of gestures, expressions and mannerisms (Fig. 3). Through these characteristics of traditional Ghanaian life and values he thus romanticized traditional lifestyles. Grace Kwami, a contemporary of Antubam, followed a similar style of developing her figures along body contours. Her work *Avotata*, 1966, ballpoint on paper,⁹⁹ depicts this oval style but more elongated in form making it similar to Antubam's oval style. While Antubam lays emphasis on clothing and adornment, Kwami in *Avotata* portrays two women partially nude from waist down except for the ceremonial beads around their waists and a strip of cloth, which hung in their front and behind, and the beads around their necks. *Avotata* means 'To wear or adorn cloth' and the painting portrays the variety of Ghanaian adornment. While Antubam fully clothes his figures Kwami in her painting depicts them partially nude but covered extensively in beads. Both artists portray different forms of

⁹⁹ Atta Kwami, 'Antubam and his Presence', 2005, 5, http://www.trianglearts.org/sansa/documents/Kofi_Antubam_and_his_Presence.pdf, accessed Tuesday 16th April 2013.

ceremonial wear for different occasions by different ethnic groups and gender. The postures, multiple vanishing points, curves and movements suggest one style or from the same school.

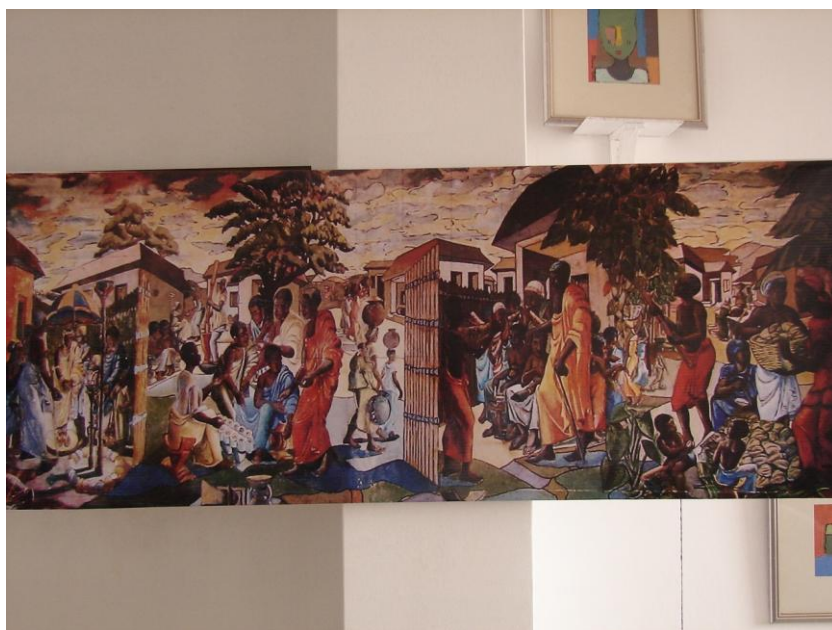


Figure 3 Kofi Antubam, 1956, Accra: Artists Alliance Gallery. Photographed by the author. This is a digital print of the 30-foot original work, previously located in the Ambassador Hotel, Accra.

The early modern painters being a group of people straddling two sets of artistic traditions—European and Ghanaian helped launch a relation between college art training and Ghanaian culture. Easel painting therefore emerged as a fruitful means for artists to work through the fraught relationship between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ thereby creating a new national self-image that suited the demands of a new age. The artists thus ‘Ghanaianized’ painting by blending Western techniques with insights from indigenous artistic traditions and culture. They began to capture Ghanaian environment mostly landscapes and outdoor cultural practises through figurative paintings. The themes included pageantry, folklore, social life and market activities. For the first time, artists had the opportunity to express their personal styles as against the established conventions based on traditional knowledge and themes — conventions that were easily understood by the community, and which artists were expected to follow. From this approach they followed the traditions of the European modernists by rejecting old traditions but reincorporated traditional values, subjects, symbols, ceremonies and aesthetics through a new medium. They introduced contemporary views in a new medium that combined European aesthetic conventions of realism, proportion and perspective with the formalist conventions of frontality that characterized traditional Ghanaian sculpture.¹⁰⁰ Several postmodern painters have emerged since the 1970s with new techniques such as impasto, impressionism, pointillism, palette knife and mixed media addressing Ghana’s modernity and contemporary culture

¹⁰⁰ Fosu, ‘Contemporary Art in Ghana’, 2004, 84.

such as urban landscapes, modern transportation, slums and, large crowd gatherings, and working of local symbols such as *Akuaba* dolls and *adinkra* symbols into their paintings.

Conclusion

Modern and postmodern Ghanaian easel paintings follow centuries old Gold Coast tradition of adoption, assimilation and transculturation, and through this have addressed Ghanaian modern and postmodern culture. Ghanaian painters interpreted and translated aesthetic and social experiences of both traditional and postcolonial contemporary culture into new idioms of artistic expression with strong links not only to her cultural heritage, but also connected to her modern culture. Ogbecchie, whose article on art history's engagement with the idea of African art's place within global dialogue which we looked at earlier, concludes by suggesting that 'modern African art is significant to any modern art narrative and the idea of Africa should now become normalised in art history as the locus of specific cultural memory'.¹⁰¹ He is hopeful that future art-historical narratives will take this complexity into question and direct their attention to this important question of modern and contemporary art practise.¹⁰² What this paper has sought to do is to introduce Ghanaian modern and postmodern painting as based on a historical trajectory of assimilation – not rejecting past conventions but reworking local themes, icons, symbol, and conventions in various ways into the new novel mode of expression – painting. As we examine Ghana's modernity, it builds upon strong traditional foundations, which gives it a unique place in contemporary art historical discourse. Just as Ogbecchie suggests that at the same time as Europeans were celebrating European avant-garde artists for appropriating African art, this work demonstrates that similarly at the same time the people in the Gold Coast were also reinventing, recreating innovations by appropriating from both neighbouring cultures and later from European conventions to produce a Ghanaian modernism. Today there is a dynamic professional modern and contemporary painters and a growing interest in Africa's contemporary art culture. Some have participated in several local and international exhibitions and Biennials.

Two different philosophies have emerged in the public domain concerning painting as an artistic practice: debates over identity, culture and personality that championed the appropriate depiction of the past on one hand, and on the other a creative re-interpretation of contemporary post-colonial culture, and modernity. Painting as an artistic practice based upon the traditions of Europe, reinforced the appreciation of Ghanaian identity and values.

Kwame Amoah Labi is an art historian at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. His interests include how museum spaces become places of debates and contemplation on cultural and technological innovations, and

¹⁰¹ Ogbecchie, 'Art History's Inscription', 2004, 141.

¹⁰² Ogbecchie, 'Art History's Inscription', 2004, 142.

how the museum can be used to bring communities together for socio-political and economic advancement. He has curated several exhibitions on this subject. Kwame has worked extensively on tackling the problem of subject and subject matter relationship in Fante *asafo* art to enhance its verbal visual nexus and dialogue as an essential ingredient in appreciating *asafo* art. Through his research in Ghana and Kenya, his attention has been drawn to the dynamic contemporary art scene. This work on contemporary Ghanaian art is to participate in the discourse on modern and contemporary art and contribute towards the writing of African art history.

kacklabi@ug.edu.gh
labikwame@gmail.com