

In Search for Definition: Investigation into the Concept of Art in Ghana

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Abstract

Art, though considered as a universal language, is used and understood by different cultures in ways peculiar to them. In other words, how a particular society uses their artistic language may differ in certain details, despite the fact that it may finally conform to certain standards within universal artistic expressions. This realization creates definitional challenges in determining what *art* is and what is not. In this presentation, we make an attempt at analysing the various contexts within which the term *art* translates into indigenous Ghanaian ways of life in their multifaceted manifestations. In doing so, we delve into the different concepts and linguistic expressions used in denoting and connoting the term 'art' in multi-ethnic Ghana. Through this, we come into terms, that there is no collective word for the word 'art' in the Ghanaian context. Consequently, there is very little to distinguish among terminologies such as *Art*, *Design* and *Craft*. 'Art' is 'Design' and 'Design' is 'Art'. Art is 'Craft' and 'Craft' is 'Art'. Provided the art, design or craft meets the purpose for which it was made, it is considered as *good*. Therefore, every object accepted as art, design or craft, is *good*. To the Ghanaian, art is a way of life manifested through creative expressions that solves the problems of the society. It is through having the right perceptual thoughts about the art of a people that better global art education full of beneficial exchanges could be fostered.

Keywords: art, design, craft, definition, cultural nuances, creative expression

Introduction

Art making and production is universal to all cultures. It manifests in the life of peoples of the world. The making of artworks since time immemorial have been greatly influenced by specific cultures of its producers. In other words, the culture of artistic production of a people stems from their way of life, ideas, understanding of their environment, uses and functions of the art.

People create artworks for several reasons. Artworks created may entertain, educate, edutain, inform and inspire. No matter the underlining reason informing the creation of an artwork, many a time, the artworks created are based on the cultural aspirations, beliefs and practices, and philosophical thoughts of a people. For example, if a society holds in high esteem, values of societal customs and traditions, they produce artworks that project those values for enculturation purposes, amongst others. In this circumstance, an outsider who is not

accustomed to the culture of that society is likely to have uncompromising perceptual stance in his/her quest to understand the artistic actualities or soundness of an artwork created. This brings to the fore, the question of what *art* is.

In this presentation, we lean on our practical and experiential orientation to discuss the question of what constitutes art in the Ghanaian context and how the Ghanaian understanding of the concept of art shapes their artistic practices and everyday life. Through photographs of everyday artistic life of a section of the public, and artworks from contemporary Ghanaian artists, we shed some light on the semantic purview of the term *art* in the Ghanaian context.

What is art?

Perhaps, one big question in the study of art remains defining the term *art* itself. This is because the question of ‘*What is Art*’, ‘*What is the nature of Art*’ and ‘*What is the definition of Art*’, amongst others, is central to philosophy of art. These important questions guide the thought process for academizing the arts. Answers to these questions help in straightening the path towards a thorough understanding of artworks produced by a particular culture or society, and by extension, play critical role in ascertaining a common definition.

At this point, to assert that the evolvement of art as a discipline over time has equally affected its definition is trite and banal. The evolutions in *art*, the cultural orientation and approach to art have indeed added to the woes of finding a common definition to it. All cultures make and produce artworks, which are usually influenced by their cultural precepts and artistic worldview. For a particular culture to arrive at what *art* is, their views or definition of art would be largely influenced by their artistic worldview. This has contributed to the difficulty in arriving at a definition for art that does not relegate the art of other cultures to the background. Though all the actors in the art fraternity—the audience, curators, editors, critics, art historians, contribute in determining the direction and definition of art (Fisher, 1993), it would be good to consider the views of the actors in the art fraternity from different geographical backgrounds and cultural milieu to contribute in defining or searching for what constitutes art. This is because, what a particular society considers as *art* may differ from that of other cultures.

By studying developments in contemporary art, Abijian (2012) categorized plethora of definitions offered on *art* into two – *conventionalist* and *less conventionalist* definitions. Abijian explained the conventionalist definition to cover Danto’s (1981) reference to institutional dimensions of art which includes how art changes over time and its relational properties in relations to art history, art genres, amongst others. According Abijian (2012), the *less conventionalist* definitions focus on a wider and more traditional concept of aesthetic properties that includes art’s pan-cultural and trans-historical characteristics.

Apart from Abijian’s categorization, other definitions offered considered the subject matter, history, aesthetic interest and art genre to qualify as art. For instance, during the period of the

renaissance, an artwork's ability to copy nature as closely as possible gives it artistic credence. Artists at the time were striving for higher degree of realism. As such, subject matter including sunsets, flowers, and human figures featured prominently. Artworks that failed to capture the tenets of realism were not appreciated. At the time, African artworks were full of abstractionism. Per the Western canon of art at the time, the artworks that were *abstract* were not considered as *art* at all. They were labelled as crafts. However, the twentieth-century art movements brought a renewed wave of art which included surrealism, dadaism, expressionism, cubism, impressionism, realism and abstractionism. The inclusion of abstractionism in the art movements brought that kind of works into the Western worldview to be accepted as art. In this case, the evolutions in art helps in shifting its definitional perspectives, whereby the definitional perspectives are virtually dominated by Western ideology of what is considered as art.

Based on given definitions overtime, Gaut (2000) in his cluster theories offered ten characteristics which should feature in a work of art. They are positive aesthetic features; expressing emotion; intellectually challenging; Complex yet coherent; and complex in meaning; relating to individual's perception. It must also show creative imagination; show high sense of skill; be part of an established artform; and a product of an artistic intention. The cluster theories outline qualities something should possess in order to merit the term *art*.

Are these art?

Based on the discussion on what constitutes *art*, let us turn our attention to Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4. Figure 1, depicts a picturesque view of two fishing wooden canoes docked at the shores beside a coconut tree. The canoe at the fore looks worn out while the other beside it is painted in white and blue colour scheme with emblematic details that gives semblance of the logo of the Chelsea Football Club. The two emblematic designs are centrally placed and flanked on the left with the inscription '10: 37', and the right side showed the inscription 'Blue Net', bounded with yellow colour. There are four upright poles fixed to the canoe. This canoe, found at the Winneba fishing shore of Ghana is owned by a subsistence fisherman. The decoration of the canoe in the symbolism of Chelsea Football Club is suggestive of the owner's overt support for the club for which reason he commissioned an artist (or much possibly, himself) for the painting decorations on the canoe. Painting decorations on canoes found at the shores of Ghana is a common practice among fisherfolks. The fisherfolks create various art forms not just to decorate their canoes, but most importantly to register their natural affections for something, affirm their slogans, philosophies, beliefs, proverbs, aspirations, amongst others. The fisherfolks seem to derive the psychic energy for their fishing occupation in those designs. In other words, no matter the simplicity of the images on the canoes, they seem to serve both as a morale boosters and sources of identity and pride. Could these designs be termed as *art* or *craft*?



Figure 1. Canoe at Winneba Shores decorated with Chelsea colours and logo. Image Courtesy of Authors.



Figure 2: Back of a vehicle with inscription, 'Let Them Say'. Image Courtesy of Authors.

Figures 2 and 3 show the inscriptions *Let Them Say* and *Abe Pe Show* respectively. *Abe Pe Show* literally means locally brewed alcohol from the palm tree can easily get you tipsy. To the observer, these are mere (sometimes incoherent) texts and for that matter no brainer to be called art. However, the drivers and owners of these vehicles have peculiar narratives connected

to these texts, and that render those *little* inscriptions *big* images of credence. Sometimes, the texts could be maxims, proverbs, appellations and or proclamation of beliefs and practices. They also serve functional and decorative purposes.



Figure 3. Back of a vehicle with inscription, 'Abe Pe Show'.



Figure 4. Abstracted image of a bird and its offspring painted in earth colours from Sirigu in Upper East, Ghana. Image Courtesy of Ghana National Museum

There are centrally placed bird-like figures in varying sizes bounded by a rectangular encasement (Figure 4). The rectangular encasement is composed of alternating triangular shapes in undulating black outlines. Rendering the triangular shapes in the reds, black and white colours in forming the borders create high contrast of shapes and colours. The treatment and varying sizes of presentation of the bird-like figures suggest a mother and its offspring. The entire rendition and presentation style pay tribute to the classic wall painting and decorative techniques practiced amongst the people of *Sirigu* in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The presentation style may look infantile or naïve to an outsider, yet aesthetic pleasure, conceptual exploratory verve, multilayered narrative, functionality and philosophical underpinning of this creative expression remains unsurmountable in the artistic worldview of its originating culture. It was produced to serve the needs of society and they place high value on it. Could this painting (Figure 4) also be considered as *art* or *craft*?

Approaches to aesthetics

With Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4, different audiences or viewers may react to them differently. Their reactions to a large extent depend on their aesthetic experience, perceptual skills, cultural background and geographical location. This is to say that aesthetic experiences or appreciation is subjective, and therefore not universal.

There are varying approaches to aesthetic appreciation and interpretation of the arts. Aesthetic appreciation and interpretation of the Arts is not global. Cultural traditions and personal experiences play major influences. No one's approach is the correct one. There is no one aesthetic answer. There are several.

The concept of *Art for art sake* and *Art for life sake* throws more light on the aesthetic interpretational disparity of artworks. *Art for art sake* as propounded by Immanuel Kant hinges on the belief in the existence of only pure beauty, devoid of content, created for its own sake, based only on its intrinsic qualities. This concept according to Kant gives a distinctive intellectual interest and holds the mind's attention so that the only concern is the contemplation of the artwork as an end in itself. Simply put, it is the outward beauty of a visual or a performing art that makes it an art.

Arts for life sake attaches strong affiliation with the functionality of the object or image, its semiotic power, conceptual orientation and contribution to secular and non-secular activities of humans. The semiotic power of African arts (whether visual or performing) are inherent in the artistic forms no matter how simple they may look or ordinary they may be perceived. The simplicity has something to do with exploration of artistic mediums found in the immediate environment of the artist, and philosophy behind it.

Ghanaian Concept of Art

There is not one way approach to art making in Ghana. Likewise, the creation of artworks is based on some precepts such as functionality, purpose, education, externalizing beliefs and practices, cultural nuances, philosophical thoughts and satisfaction of individual's creative impulse.

Ghanaian indigenous concept of beauty does not overly concern itself with the outward manifestation of an artwork, but the ability of the work to serve its intended purpose. Once the purpose for which it was made is met, a work is considered good. The Akan say, 'What is good is beauty'. Artwork offers ways of experiencing the world. So, in experiencing the world through art, premium is not placed on the outwards of the work but the innermost joy or satisfaction in accomplishing an intended purpose for which it was created. This is the sense of beauty amongst the people.

Ghanaian Art Canons

Precolonial Ghanaian art, and by extension, African art is noted for their conceptualizations, symbolisms, formalistic conventions, improvisations, communicative, communal and functional characteristics. From about 800 AD to the mid-19th century, artworks paid allegiance to these characteristics. Artworks were produced to serve societal concepts and ideas for the common good of the society. Works created shared symbolic association of the societal concepts and values which made it easy to be internalised by the people (Figures 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10). In addition, artworks created followed certain forms to accentuate the intended message of the artwork. For example, the head is considered as the seat of wisdom and therefore portrayed bigger without recourse to accurate proportions. Sometimes, the part performing a particular activity is exaggerated (Figure 5). These stylizations are what are referred to as formalistic conventions.

Through improvisation, artworks may be created with artificial and natural materials, related and unrelated, local and foreign which create visual excitement. The improvisation helped in dematerialization of art. Besides, the works created may have communicative, communal and functional characteristics (Figure 7, 9 and 10). The works carry an intended message, done for use by society and also serve as everyday functional objects.



Figure 5: Wooden carved sculpture showing typeform.



Figure 6: Wooden carved sculpture depicting a proverb.



Figure 7: *Ahenema* Royal sandals depicting a proverb.



Figure 8: *War millinery* used in northern Ghana.



Figure 9: *Abusuakruwa* (Family bowl). Courtesy of Ghana National Museum.



Figure 10: Assortment of carved wooden ladle. Courtesy of Ghana National Museum.

So, when these artworks received negative bashing as *primitive, fetishistic, idolatrous, perverse, folk art* (Rubin, 1984) by the colonialist, Henry Moore (1981) thought otherwise. He said:

‘I was particularly interested in the African and Pacific sculptures and felt that “primitive” was a misleading description of them, suggesting crudeness and incompetence. It was obvious to me that these artists were not trying—and failing—to represent the human form naturalistically, but that they had definite traditions of their own.’ (p. 11)

Characteristics of Contemporary Ghanaian Art

With the advent of formal school education in the 1900s, the introduction of Western concepts of Art education featured prominently in the school curriculum. Learners were exposed to Western artistic canons of accurate proportions, realism, perspective, foreshortening, amongst others. From the training through school education, three major categories of artists emerged. The first category, according to Prof Ernest Victor Asihene, the then Dean of College of Art, were those who works with fresh unsophisticated and unbiased source; the second is the copyist artists who tap his ideas from European source; and last is the artist who imbues his creations with his/her cultural nuances though s/he may borrow from other sources (Cudjoe, 1968 as cited in Essel, 2014).

The third category of artists contributed to shaping the trajectory of Ghanaian art in the contemporary artworld. Their works showed hybridity, experimentations, modernist tendencies, freestyle and individualism. The works of the pioneering artists (Fosu, 2008) such as Vincent Kofi (Figure 11), J.C. Okyere (Figure 12), Kobina Bucknor (Figure 13 & 14) were exemplary. The doings of these category of artists influenced the succeeding generations including Kofi Setordji (Figure 15).

Vincent Kofi, for example, was noted for his wooden sculptures which incorporate African concept of proportions in a modernistic style. His figures are imbued with exaggerated and distorted configuration of forms that pay homage to African sculptural sensibilities.



Figure 11: Vincent Kofi. *Sankofa*. Wood. 49 x 17 x 11 inches.



Figure 12: J.C. Q. Okyere. *Unknown*. Acrylic on canvas. 1956.
Courtesy of Ghana National Museum

Okyere makes a metonymical visual presentation of the Ghanaian ideals and values placed on womanhood by his symbolic rendition of what appears to be three palm trees in human figural characteristics. The trees take the form of feminine figures depicted with heavy bulbous buttocks and rounded breasts. The lower parts of the tree-like and feminine form receive short horizontal strokes that add to defining the palm-like characteristics of the trees. Two of the tree-like human

figures of the left of the painting wear realistic facial details, and beaded in the ears. In creating variety, Okyere varied the posture and physiognomy of the figures with one facing the viewer with the back with the two others faces the viewer. The figures wear palm branches and fronds as flashy coiffures. With this painting, Okyere questions the stereotypical thought that Ghanaian women are totally neglected in the society, and that sexism is the order of the day, as dishonest. His presentation is a testimony of the long-held thought of women as enigmatic figures in society. The palm three symbolizes strength, power, abundance, supremacy, fruitfulness and profitableness in Ghanaian cultural and philosophical thought. The symbolic association of Ghanaian women with the palm tree as objectified in the artistic presentation of Okyere is a confirmation of societal values and premium placed on women.



Figure 13: Kobina Bucknor. *Calabash Musiga*. Acrylic on board. 33 x 96. 1971s.
Courtesy of Ghana National Museum



Figure 14: Kobina Bucknor. *Libation*. Acrylic on board. 66 x 33. 1968.
Courtesy of Ghana National Museum

Kobina Bucknor is noted for his personalized artistic accent which he calls *sculptural idoms*. For example, his representation on the subject of libation (Figure 14) ‘exudes a pool of invited ancestral heavyweights in dramatic invocatory arrangements depicted with intercessorial somatic forms of oval shapes and visual rhyming colours.’ He ‘ushers the central figure into a sanctimonious conjecture in a way that appears to be observing the formulaic opening addresses that characterize libation pouring — a call on God, Mother Earth, deities and ancestors in that order before proclamation of any supplications. With this painting, Bucknor gives an annotated visual description to the

perceived hour of spiritual visitation whenever and wherever libation is poured. He saves viewers' time and energy for imaginative perception about the figural activity yet focus their minds on the varying expressive facial details of the multiplicity of masks that engulfs a centrally placed human figure clothed in a colourful toga-like tapestry.' (Essel, 2014, p.44)

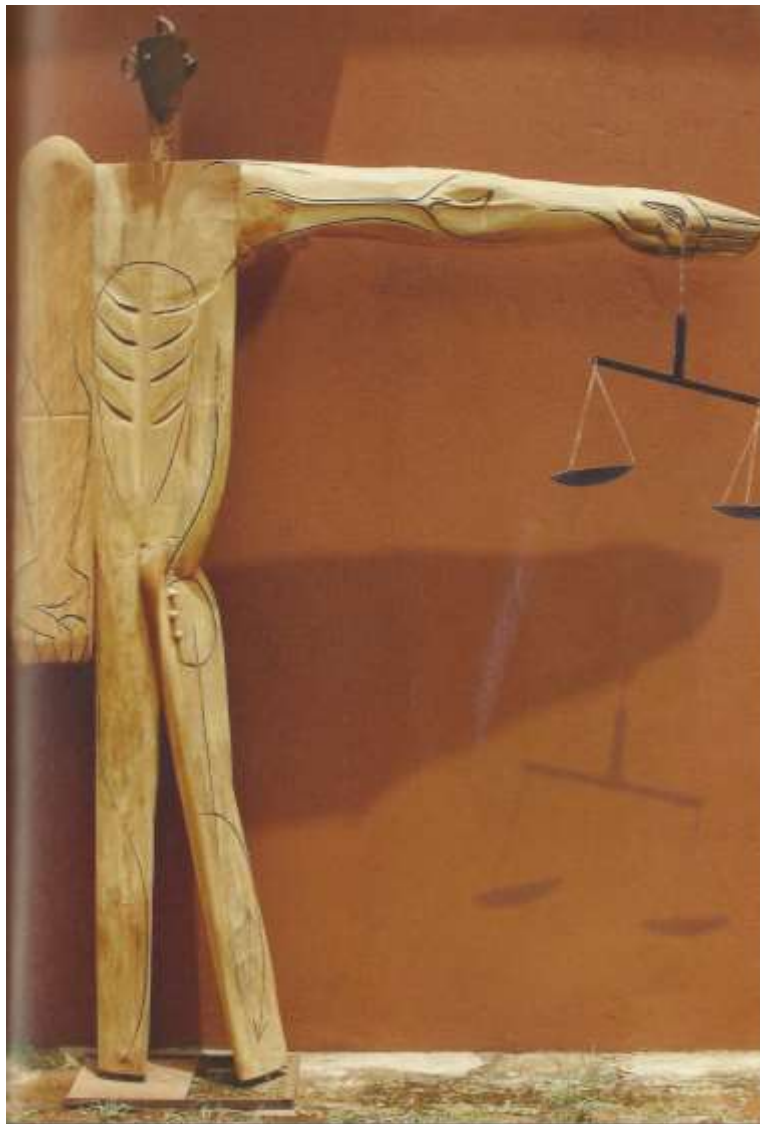


Figure 15: Kofi Setordji. Justice. 2004. Wood

Evidently, the contemporary Ghana artists namely, Kofi, Bucknor, Okyere and Setordji resorted to their cultural roots from artistic inspiration in their creations despite the contemporary touch of their artworks. It is also important of note that the early Ghanaian art were created by artists trained in indigenous formal apprenticeship education which was a system of art education in Ghana before the advent of Western art education. The indigenous artists who created the

works have their own artistic traditions (Antubam, 1963; Fosu, 1975; Asihene, 1978; Rubin, 1984; Fosu, 1994).

Ghanaian Expression for Art

Having delved into the aspect of the worldview of Ghanaian art, let us focus on our attention on semantic expression of the word *art*. Ghana is ethno-multi-linguistic nation with over ninety languages. Amongst the languages, the Akan constitutes the largest ethnic majority among the multi-ethnic population of Ghana according to 2021 Population and Housing Census.

The Akan expression for design is *Adwine* or *edwindze*. The expression '*dwin*' denotes using the power of the mind to create something. It is the fruit of creative thinking to create designs. *Dwimfo* means a designer. The Ewes, one of the ethnic groups in Ghana, use the expression *adbu* which means design. Amongst all the ethnic groups of Ghana, there is no word for the term *art*. Art is not distinguished from craft. Crafts are considered as design and therefore, art. In terms of Ghanaian indigenous philosophy of art, craft is not separate from art. Collingwood (1958) distinction of art and craft is not applicable in the indigenous Ghanaian philosophy of art.

Conclusions

Art is a language used and understood by particular cultures in ways peculiar to them. How a particular society use their artistic codes or language differs. Though art is considered as a universal language, there are peculiarities. This is justified by the fact that what constitute art is influenced by time, place, culture and history.

There is no collective word for the word 'art' in the Ghanaian context. Art is expressed as 'design' and vice versa. No difference between 'art' and 'craft'. Art is design. Design is art. Provided the art or craft meets the purpose for which it was done, it considered as GOOD. The Akan say 'What is good is beautiful.' To the Ghanaian, art is a way of life manifested through creative expressions that solves the problems of the society.

The determinants for definitions for Ghanaian art has not got so much to do with its superficial presentation. It has everything to do with inherent beauty that manifests in their functionalities and or cultural representation. To the Ghanaian, art has no material limitations, tool limitations or skill limitations. One's abilities in art are measured by their ability to solve the immediate creative problems around them and art must be produced when it is needed, because artefacts are mostly functional. Therefore, art is created for the community (*and sometimes by the community*), making the art creation process fluid, diverse, eclectic, and to a very large extent, democratic. The beauty of an artefact is measured by its successful functions in the society. It is art, if it is culturally and philosophically functional, and it is f culturally and philosophically functional, if it is art.

Considering the dichotomies between Western and non-Western approaches to art in terms of philosophical thoughts, artistic conceptual orientation and cultural exegesis or nuances is crucial in forming perceptions about the arts of a people. It is through having the right perceptual thoughts about the art of a people that better global art education full of beneficial exchanges could be fostered.

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