

# Painting: Is It Indigenous to Ghanaian Culture?

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## ABSTRACT

Painting could be said to be well grounded in all cultures worldwide. This is underpinned by the vast record of cave art as globally represented, even though this phenomenon does not seamlessly continue into some ancient traditions that followed. In the face of the above however, to find the traditional period of a people one has to identify the geographical area of this group in order to consider the autochthonous art practice of the place so as to determine its cultural beginnings, extent, and forms of art explored. In the case of Ghana, one observes that, art historians usually site the beginning of painting at the time when colonial educational training of the arts was begun in Achimota from the 1900s. The study was conducted using historical review and analysis, unstructured interview guides as well as participant and non-participant observational techniques in a descriptive design at Sirigu, Ahwiaa and Ntonso, revealing the forms of painting that existed in the country before the introduction of formal training by the colonial masters. The result showed that Ghanaians traditionally practiced different kinds of painting, long before the colonial art training programme was introduced. We feel it should be of concern for any people to be able to tell, not only how, and why but also when they started doing the things that matter to their existence and cultural heritage.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.2 Background

Cave art stands as evidence in the cradle of almost all cultures, preventing any one people from claiming hegemony over the art of painting. And considering one art as higher above the other, as f. i, seeing painting higher than sculpture, is a futile argument. Because then, cave art should have begun from some other form of art (lower art) to refine toward painting (a higher art) and not differently. These conclusions were drawn by anthropologist who had their own biases towards certain races as primitive, and therefore considered without normal human intelligence, some claiming that "... in the field of art, an African is not capable of reaching even a moderate degree of proficiency" (Oloidi, 1981). These were the people who stretched their competence to pioneer a new field of Art History (Okpeho, 1987); (Hartt, 1976). The issues of primitivism, and even sub humanity vexed deep (Wingert,1962), stirring various racial and cultural challenges precariously shrouded in injustices and domination that led to inflamed passions and even violence. In the name of anthropology, a body was dissected after death and parts preserved in a bell jar (Farrington, 2005:16). Perceptions in similar vein later underpinned certain terminologies such as 'third world' and 'developing nations' etcetera.

### 1.3 Problem Statement

One observes that, art historians usually site the beginning of painting in Ghana at the time when colonial educational training of the arts was begun in Achimota from the 1900s. As a result many are led to believe that Western mode of canvas painting is all there is to painting in the Ghanaian Culture. However several ethnicities are known to indigenously practice one form of painting or another. The research therefore intends to provide answer to this deficiency.

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## 2. Literature

Selecting African art initially as objects of curiosity, it later caught the attention of European artists with sweeping influences through Europe at the turn of the century and later in America, at the time when western art had waxed stale seeking for new directions, having been saturated with the naturalistic 'baggage' from the post renaissance era. The culture of Africa and its art was condemned as primitive, simple and backward, and yet certain artists saw it in different light, as in the words of Henry Moore;

*I was particularly interested in the African and Pacific sculptures and felt that primitive was misleading description of them, suggesting crudeness and incompetence. It was obvious to me that these artists were not trying - failing - to represent the human form naturalistically, but that they had definite traditions of their own (1981).*

The story was told of Baudelaire's encounter with an African piece; One day the poet Charles Baudelaire visited a naval officer who had recently come back from the south sea with a number of strange objects. While Baudelaire was examining a small carving, the naval officer, eager to draw his attention to something else, referred to the object in Baudelaire's hands as "merely a negro totem." Instead of putting down the carving and turning to what the officer wanted to show him, the poet raised his hand and said, "take care my friend, it is perhaps the true God." (Flam & Deutch, 2003).

This conceived bias as profusely displayed by the officer above was deeper enough to have likewise blinded the anthropologists and later instructors including art historians from opening up to appreciate the entire body of Ghanaian art practice, not to mention the detailed appreciation of particular art forms. Unfortunately as a result, wood sculpture, (only one of the practiced art) was nominated to stand above the rest. Of course it is easier and desirable to haul away large quantities of sculpture pieces at one expedition than to spend quality time trying to understand a large stretch of meaningless traditional wall paintings of some socio-religious significance, or look for "funny" paintings from the most unlikely supports. The first offer material satisfaction, the easy path chosen by many, and the second is cognitive, transcending the mundane. It is easier to 'take' than to 'think'. Concentrating on divers collectible forms, other vital art practices within the culture were overlooked.

Colonial Education - art training in Africa could be understood as two different programmes rolled out by the French and English colonial powers within their colonies. The French, specifically Belgium and France were the first to begin this training for the local people. Three schools sprung up in the Republic of Zaire, formerly known as the Belgian Congo between 1944 and 1951 (Mount, 1973).

Pierre Romain-Desfosses and two other founders were eager to train Africans who would paint without European influences, so they only provided them with canvas, paper, and paint with the lone rule of non-repetition. Desfosses believed by so arranging, his students would be able to produce pure African art devoid of all foreign influences. (Kasfir, 1999). Hardly did he consider that the very elements of the school's foundation defeated the essence of the expected outcome.

In the English West Africa, the oldest school was the art department of the University of Science and Technology, whose establishment dates back between 1909 (Asihene, 1978) and 1936 (Mount, 1973) in Accra-Achimota. It was after about twenty years that two other schools started in Nigeria; the art department of Ahmadu Bello University at Zaria, and Yaba Technical Institute in Lagos. The Oshogbo workshop school started in the 1960s.

The director of the art department in Achimota was H. V. Meyerowitz an experienced sculptor and designer, whose wife was also an artist. His three years art and craft course included modelling and traditional wood carving, mural painting, basketry, pottery, weaving, lettering and wood engraving. These courses were introduced into the country without relating them to similar forms already being practiced informally or formerly, towards a synthesis with what existed, as if to say Ghanaians had no art. Contrary to this view, mural painting was copiously being done by several ethnicities in the then Northern territories of Ghana. Wood carving was heavily being practiced in the southern part of Ghana, pottery and basketry was being practiced in various forms throughout the country at the time.

In 1946 Meyerowitz died and Makendrick, a Scottish painter became the head of department of art. When enrolment increased the following year, the school's expansion caused relocation to its current premise in

the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. S. V. Asihene became the new director after Makendrick resigned in 1961.

Indigenous African education was effectively ingrained into all levels of the society making it progressive, rigorous, and in phase with the pre-colonial realities of the people. Walter (1972) dilates on the relevance of African pre-colonial education as closely linked with the social life, serving both material and spiritual purposes of the society, without separating between production and education, or manual and intellectual. African pre-colonial education had formal sections for the people, and in their function, they maintained a direct connection with the purpose of the society. Colonial education on the other hand would be geared towards the obvious, disciplines that maintain the subjugation of the people to their (colonial) advantage. It is not untrue to state that “colonialism and education are two main ways through which European powers perpetuated underdevelopment in Africa (Nwanosike and Onyige, 2011).” Nwanosike and Onyige defined colonialism as “the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.” In this context, how can colonial powers claim to setting up educational programmes mainly for the development of the colonised? In line with obvious interests, the Achimota art course which formed part of the educational programme of the Crown was focused upon as it were leading savages to learn the rudiments of ‘seeing’ (western art), “...in guiding them in a new discipline (Mudimbe, 1998)”, without the time or space to study the local art of the people.

Long Before the Berlin conference through which the geographical borders of African countries were unfairly determined, the whole Western Africa of which Ghana forms part was loosely referred to as Guinea (Dvidson et al, 1970), and the Gold Coast laid in the domain of Upper Guinea (Reindorf, 2007:17). The Author further tells us that the Phoenecians visited Africa as early as 600 BC followed by the Carthaginians about forty years later. Of the Carthaginian expedition, he records of how two African, women full of hair, were captured by the crew and later killed because they fought so ferociously. A subsequent analysis revealed that the sailors had rather messed with chimpanzees, and not their purported African women. Clearly, these early foreign contacts to the West coasts of Africa were too casual to affect the people’s culture in any meaningful ways.

The most consequential move against Africans by their colonial masters probably, was her arbitrary geographical partitioning. National borders in Africa largely, just define political boundaries rather than geographical or ethnic ones. What went on in Berlin in 1884/1885 did not inure to the good of the continent; the greed-motivated conference that presumptuously partitioned Africa did really cost her, and Africa still pays for it. It is common to find ethnic groups, even close families with members torn behind border demarcations in adjacent countries. The Nankani and Kassena people of northern Ghana for example, in the wake of the demarcations realized they had to source their art materials beyond their local borders, something that was previously accessed locally in their own land. They also have relatives (some even immediate families) caught behind the border in Burkina Faso as a result. The Lobi people live in a triangular region within the boundaries of Ghana, Burkina Faso and Cote d’Ivoire; while the Toucouleur, by way of their semi-nomadic lifestyle, move back and forth between Senegal, Mauritania, and Mali (Courtney-Clarke, 1990: 20). Travelling towards the eastern part of Ghana, one finds many Anlo people in the Volta Region, who have close relations living across the border in Togo. Towards the west of Ghana, the eastern part of Gyaman land in present Cote d’Ivoire was seeded to the British by the French (without informing let alone consulting the *Gyamanhene*) in 1892 to become part of the Gold Coast (Arnaut, 2004).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

A Descriptive design was employed for this study. This design was chosen because it offers the best opportunity of retrieving information that will adequately demonstrate nature or forms of art and their corresponding media.

#### **3.2 Sampling and Sampling Procedure**

The sample size was basically organized in the three locations with the constant check of the need to deal with an achievable numbers for extraction of information (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Thirteen (13) people in all were interviewed in the field.

Eight (8) persons were contacted in Sirigu, two (2) at Ahwiaa and three (3) at Ntonso. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were all used. The localities and some experts were purposively selected and other experts were sought by snowball through referencing by other experts.

### **3.3 Research Instruments**

The study was conducted using historical review and analysis, unstructured interview guides as well as participant and non-participant observational techniques in gathering of relevant data.

### **3.4 Data Transcription and Analysis**

The analysis of data was commenced only after the bulk of information had been rehearsed over and over again for an overall familiarity of the data to be managed manually. Transcription followed for clarity as well as for the purpose previously stated. After the transcription of the material, emerging themes were identified. Examination, comparison and categorization of data continued until no new categories of the subject under study emerged. The theories of knowledge were used to support these thematic categories as they were analyzed, described and eventually interpreted in this presentation.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 Defining the Traditional Period**

In defining the emigrational and traditional period, the present discussion attempts to delineate the period of history that demarcates the boundary of the traditional era and the inception of colonization. Maté (1966: 4) has it that the "movement of the ancestors to this country started about the middle of the thirteenth century and continued up to the early part of the sixteenth century at the latest." He believed that most of the ethnicities of the country had settled by then, the author further relates that the coastal occupation takes place at "about A.D. 1400." and that, "the Twi –speaking people were the last Akan section to enter the country in about A.D.1550." Reindorf, gives a similar account pegging his date between AD 1400 and 1700. The earliest among these groups to run as organised states were the "Adansi, Akwamus and Denkyiras." The Ashantis were the last to set up a state which grew to become the most powerful kingdom in the country. This statement creates credible scenery of the migration of the aborigines into Ghana to their present respective settlements. He provides time boundaries which range from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. It could not, however, be possible for a people as organised as these migrants to have lived and planned of settlement without a tradition and culture governing their conducts and way of life. It could be deduced that the period of the Traditional era in the 'Ghanaian traditional setting' run prior to, or during the thirteenth century sweeping down through the sixteenth century. This period is further affirmed by Anquandah (1982 : 96); "The period A.D. 1000 to A.D. 1400 seemed to have witnessed the emergence of the earliest towns and principalities with centralised political authority" the author further explains that "...at Bono Manso, two main periods of town development have been distinguished. The first spanning the thirteenth century and the fifteenth century."

The assertion, however, made in the previous statement is endorsed in this statement above. It therefore becomes clear that the Akans and for that matter the various ethnicities of Ghana had a way of life (including their art), before the advent of European colonisation. This period which defined a set pattern of the early inhabitants of the land could be identified as The Traditional era, the period when African culture and traditions had not been influenced nor acculturated by that of the West. The period ranging from A.D. 1000 to A.D 1400 as mentioned here further, could safely be defined as the era of Ghanaian traditional society.

Anquandah (1982), affirmed this fact by making reference to Bowdich (1819 : 34), in his Mission from Cape Coast Ashanti land, he stated that in 1817, Bowdich thoroughly overwhelmed by the magnificent welcome ceremony accorded him at Kumasi, related "...More than a hundred bands burst forth at once on our arrival with the peculiar airs of their several chiefs; ...then yielded for a while to the soft breathings of their long flutes which were truly harmonious and pleasing instrument like a bagpipe was happily blended...."

This statement reveals the advent of the Europeans on the Ghanaian shores. It clearly portrays an imagery of the rich tradition and culture which was of a great astonishment to the missionary. This is evident of the fact that the Traditional era was within a period that prevailed long before the Europeans docked on the West African shores. This statement as mentioned above was made in the 17th century precisely in 1817. It

was not made to describe the commencement of a culture in a teething stage, but rather to affirm an existing culture and tradition with thrust, which has grown with richness and purpose in its function.

Lovejoy (2000), avers that "although the antiquity of kin-based societies is not known, linguistic, cultural, and economic evidence indicates that such structures were very old. ...the earliest examples reveal that matrilineal and patrilineal distinctions were already well formed by the early sixteenth century". Cole and Ross confirm that "The presence of stone-age man probably inhabited the land now known as Ghana about half a million years ago, and archaeologically, knowledge of agriculture and pottery is set about 2000-1500 B.C. (1977: 4)." This is evident that the traditional era of the Ghanaian traditional society existed long before our common era in modern history. The traditional era through archives of recorded history could be viewed through the time span of A.D.1000 to the early 16th century (Davidson et al, 1970). This could be seen as the period when the cultural life of the people could be said to have well settled and developed in all aspects.

#### **4.2 Autochthonous Paintings**

Autochthonous Paintings practiced in Ghanaian traditional art include murals in the North, Upper East and Upper West among the Kassena-Nankani at Sirigu and other ethnicities, Body painting among the Krobos of Somanya, Gas of Accra, and Hearth, floor and interior wall painting among the Akans, Sculpture and stool painting among the Ashantis - in Kumasi, and calabash painting among the Ewes of Tetekope. Art as currently practiced among these ethnicities, stretch from the traditional era, mostly with very minimal changes or none at all. Asihene (1978:79) agrees that "Painting in Ghana is as old as wood carving" However Antubam, (1963) admits "Maybe it is true that painting is not a traditional form of culture in Ghana," further arguing; " but what is wrong with making use of a borrowed medium of art to express what is within one." Whiles Asihene regards painting as rooted in the Ghanaian culture, Antubam considers it as a cultural implant that could however, be mastered for one's own purpose, and the two views are not same.

#### **5. Conclusion**

It could safely be inferred from the discussion above that the art of painting, paint and pigments were not implanted into Ghanaian culture from another, but have thrived since Palaeolithic times till now; just as wood sculpture has been an integral part of Ghanaian art form right from the dawn of history.

To the question as to whether the African is capable of reaching a moderate degree of proficiency, the impact of modern art on the world, (albeit a progressive front that cut the colonised from their past), as kindled by African art remains a well grounded evidence

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