

# The Display of the Hidden Qualities of the Ideal Woman in Paintings

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## ABSTRACT

Painters (artists) one way or the other are inspired by several things in their environment. It was observed that artists have several sources of inspirations, and these are previous works, works of other artists, especially, the masters, events, magazines, photographs, women, and personal experiences. Women are the most commonly used among all the sources. It became apparent that women are preferred as the major subject matter for contemporary painting artists. The measurable ideal qualities of a woman in Ghanaian culture established in this research were beauty, confidence, motherly care, hard work, thick lips, heavy breasts and dark complexion. This study was meant to be a preliminary attempt to quantify the portrayals of women in painting for a positive reason. The results of the study indicate that some changes in the portrayal of women have taken place over time, however several differences still remain. In the light of these findings, people have to be sensitive to understand the principles of art appreciation and that female images used in paintings are not meant for erotic display but rather to portray the hidden qualities of the ideal Ghanaian woman.

## KEYWORDS

*Artistic inspiration; Contemporary paintings; Ghanaian culture; Ideal woman.*

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## 1. Introduction

It is believed that the most important clue to a woman's status anywhere in the world is her degree of participation in economic life and her control over property and the productive output. Ghanaian women perform varying roles in the development of the nation. They are visually accessible and therefore constitute an unsolicited pool of models for artistic creation especially in painting.

The Women, Culture, and Development (WCD) and African feminist frameworks are particularly, important to this research as both argue for alternative methods of studying and involving women from developing

countries in their own development and cultural setting. Their approaches emphasize the importance of local structures and processes in analysing the realities of women's issues and concerns in developing countries. Both seek to answer questions about women's agency, attend to issues of difference and identity, and work for women's socioeconomic and political empowerment. African feminism portrays how women are empowered economically, socially, and politically in their local environment. It emphasizes the importance women attach to both their reproductive and productive activities and the question is can contemporary paintings also play a similar role?

The rendition of women in paintings is the subject of academic study and controversy. Recurring themes include the level of independence of female in our societies from their male counterparts, as well as their sexual objectification and sexualisation. There are a number of literatures on general art books on the depiction of the African idealism with insufficient information on the depiction of the Ghanaian woman in painting. This study is also consistent with other studies on women and visual arts such as; the conception of a beautiful female figure, as analysed by Kofi Antubam; the study of selected indigenous Ghanaian women in Visual Arts, and the physical conformity of contemporary plumb Ghanaian women, which gave less concentration to the qualities expressed beyond physical appearance.

## **2. Literature and Conceptual Perspectives**

Over the years, numerous studies have been conducted on assessing the use of female figures as subject matter in paintings. After the end of the Second World War, some artists, such as Amon Kotei, Kofi Antubam and Saka Acquaye started to fight the myth of static primitive tradition [4]. They claimed 'European' realism (broadly defined and incorporating diverse styles, such as naturalism, impressionism and expressionism) as an artistic style of their own, thus symbolically denying boundaries between themselves and their colonizers.

The prejudice was that the Ghanaian is not fit, capable, or that it is not African art to do anything that is realistic. Let us change this prejudice, and prove that the colour of our skin has nothing to do with acquisition of knowledge, which is power, and the exercise of intelligence, which is the only possession God gave to human beings to use the cultural scheme of the paternalistic white colonizers [5]. But although artists such as Kotei broke the myth of white stylistic superiority, they insisted on the distinction between black and white cultural identities. Amon Kotei is a very outstanding artist whose indigenous expertise in applying the right combination of complimentary and contrasting hues to paint images of well-endowed female figures is legendary. Some of his paintings were the "face to face", "moment of thought" "mother and child" ", slim woman" and "group of girls" etc. Kotei used his painting as a platform to throw more light on the qualities of the Ghanaian woman as serious hardworking, caring and make them appear bold and confident before the eyes to be experienced and remembered.

Figurative art works showing African tradition are produced to this day. They depict aspects of contemporary life that evoke memories of the past [4]. Svašek explained that any sign that can be interpreted as 'modern' is deliberately left out [4]. For example, in 1988, Amon Kotei made an oil painting with the title 'Market Women'. He depicted the women in what he called traditional African dresses, including colourful cloths and scarves [5]. The market women in the painting sell fish, something Ghanaian women have done for time immemorial. Kotei gives an idealistic view of present-day Ghanaian culture as being solely rooted in past traditions. This and many others show that there are distinctive qualities of an ideal Ghana woman. It is therefore, believed that, the Ghanaian woman is the balance in society. She is the pivot of humanity. Her uprightness and soundness cause the society to be upright and sound. She is a treasure for the husband, a fortune for the children, a jewel for the parents and a blessing for humanity. It has been evident that the qualities of the ideal woman are just beauty in the eyes of the beholder but vivid in actions. These attributes are dutiful tasks, sensitive to husband and children, as hope of her parents, caring and finally is balance in the society.

However, culture is also responsible for the glorification of the classical nude and veneration of physical beauty. Dankwa infers that centuries-old philosophy, religious beliefs, workplace discrimination and domestic roles on gender and sexuality perpetuated the opinion that women were inferior to men [6]. Dankwa further argues that inasmuch as women can be seen at echelon of power and moving organisations from cradle to fame, male domineering traits are still witness in workplaces [6]. Gender based discriminations and exploitations are widespread in the workplaces of women. The socio-culturally defined characteristics, abilities, personality traits, roles assign, responsibilities and behavioural patterns of men and women contribute to the discrimination in workplaces. Gender differences in workplaces are labels assigned by society in patriarchal manner. These socio-culturally assigned traits from society seems to impinge on women exhibiting inbuilt and outward capabilities.

### **3. Methodology**

Qualitative research approach was employed for this study. According to Creswell, a qualitative research is a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of the participants, asks broad and general questions, collect data consisting of words from participants, describe and analyse them into themes in a non-subjective and unbiased manner [15].

The research critically investigated selected paintings of Ablade Glover and Ben Offei Nyako, and solicited ideas on their perceptions on the ideal images of Ghanaian women. Again, the research is designed to achieve the set-out objectives. Therefore, a qualitative research approach is proposed for this study. This is because the study demands instance of a documentary analyzes and interpretations, reveal explicit and implicit meanings, resulting in a narrative descriptive account. The type of qualitative research for the study, will therefore be an evaluative case study since it involves description, explanation, and judgement.

Further the topic under investigation lends itself to a case study because the researcher sought to sample the views of 34 respondents from 4 categories of people on one main issue into details. The use of one-on-one interview approach was to probe deeply into how contemporary paintings are used to portray the ideal woman in Ghanaian culture.

The population for the study included contemporary Ghanaian painters who feature ideal female images in their works, painting lecturers, painting students and enthusiasts/connoisseurs. Non probability sampling method was employed in this study. The purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the Ghanaian painters who feature ideal female images in their works and painting lecturers for this study, since the respondents were chosen on the basis of their knowledge of the information desired. The painting students and enthusiasts/connoisseurs were conveniently selected. In all two Ghanaian contemporary painters who mostly convey female images in their painting (Ablade Glover and Ben Offei Nyako), six painting lecturers and fourteen painting students from both University of Education, Winneba and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi were sampled for the study.

Semi-structured interview checklist, observation guide, and painting imageries were the main instruments employed to collect data for the research. Since the purpose of the case study was to provide an evaluation of the information under study, an in-depth semi-structured interview were carried out with renowned painters, painting lecturers, painting students and enthusiasts/connoisseurs. Observation was also employed to complement other materials of data collection on the field.

Thematically, based on the research questions, direct quotations and interpretative techniques were employed in analysing the qualitative data gathered from the in-depth interviews, whilst Golo and Eshun's scene description (pertaining to the observed effects) were employed in analysing the observational outcome [16].

#### **4. Findings and Discussions**

This unit presents the results of the interview conducted, photographs taken and observations made on the topic contemporary paintings of the ideal Ghanaian woman. The unit comprises two sections. The first section deals with the demographic characteristics such as qualifications, positions and working experiences of the respondents, whilst the second section discusses the findings based on the outcomes of the interviews and the observations. The major themes in the research on which data were collected, presented and discussed were as follows: sources of inspiration of the selected Ghanaian painting artists, and ways paintings could expose the ideal qualities of women in Ghanaian culture.

##### **4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

The researcher considered the demographic characteristics for each of the following respondents, students, lecturers, artists and art connoisseurs.

School and gender of students indicates that 2 females and 2 males were selected from the following institutions: University of Education, Winneba, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Winneba Senior High School, Accra Academy Senior High School and 4 females from St. Mary's Senior High School, making a total of 20 students. The statistics shows that ten males and ten female students were involved in the study.

Institutions and gender of lecturers shows two male lecturers from the University of Education, Winneba, two male lecturers from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and were selected for the study.

Also, two male and two female artists who were interviewed. Two male artists interviewed were the same artists whose works were studied under the topic. The other two female artists were also interviewed in order to know how they feel about the use of female figure as themes and subject matter in paintings.

Gender of connoisseurs shows two males and two females were interviewed. The males were interviewed to find out how they see paintings made by these artists. The other two female connoisseurs were also interviewed in order to know how they feel about the use of female figure as themes and subject matter in paintings.

##### **4.2 Sources of Inspiration of Selected Ghanaian Painting Artists**

This section is discussed based on research question one which is-What are the sources of inspiration of the artists in this study? (Ablade Glover and Ben Offei Nyako (BON)). To answer this research question, semi-structured interview guides were formulated to elicit responses from students, lecturers, connoisseurs and the artists.

To ascertain the sources of inspiration of artists, respondents which were made up of artists, lecturers, students and connoisseurs were asked to come out with the possible sources of inspiration of artists. The following were the outcomes of summary of the analyses: number of paintings over time, dreams and visions, women, stories, previous works, other artists, events, photographs and magazines, personal experiences, people, religion, etc.

The outcome shows the results from the study on some sources of inspiration on the paintings of Ablade Glover and BON. The results revealed that previous works and women were accepted by all the respondents with photographs and magazines being the third highest, as the most frequent source of inspiration for the artists. Furthermore, all the respondents with the exception of connoisseurs agreed that all the other sources listed except dreams and people contributed to inspiration of the artists. Less than fifty percent of the respondents agreed on other artists as sources of inspiration for the contemporary artist. Also, 25 percent

which is 8 respondents agreed on stories as their sources of inspiration. Three among the four connoisseurs agreed that the main source of inspiration for the artist rest on his colleagues. Finally, fifteen students agreed that the artists rely mostly on pictures. The following statements illustrate respondents' responses:

Why women? I'm mummy's boy and I got a good wife I honour women because of their beautiful species and would like to project them.

They are well shaped and well-proportioned. They are rounded and have big back and breast their dark skin gives a reflected light and starts shinning as if gold has been sprayed on it most especially Winneba and Cape Coast women.

I did the study of the female anatomy and it's easier to paint the female figure than the male figure. Anywhere I find women I paint and add a background and impressions to it.

For mentors, I have many: Ablade Glover is my mentor in business. Prof. Ato Delaquis and Leroy Mitchell, my lecturers, for their academic discipline. But the one who has inspired me so much is Amon Kotei for his compositions and imaginative colour orchestration.

Those artists are fond of women and are inspired by their beautiful looks I encountered the work of Saka Acquaye Which challenged my perception of the African female. Artist are also influenced by their fellow artists and their works. The first research question sought to find out the sources of inspiration of selected contemporary Ghanaian artists precisely Ablade Glover and BON. The result indicated that all the artists draw their inspiration from their previous works and the activities of women in general as their sources of motivation to come out with new paintings. According to the results, all the respondents agreed on women, previous works and other artists as the main influences on the painting activities of contemporary painters. This is also a further indication that even though other things motivate painters, the desire to paint the female figure is paramount.

Secondly it is not even surprising that women as the source of inspiration is paramount among the sources of inspiration. It could even be seen from the analysis that seven students also agreed that the source of inspiration of an artist depends on the experiences gained. This is definitely different from the number of paintings produced over the years because the artists' experience as individual covers both childhood and adult, spiritual, social and psychological experiences. Here is a response to confirm the experience of an artist having a positive effect on his works.

At the University we had a female model for quite a long time. And so, I had the opportunity to study the female anatomy. My recollection of images during my formative years seem to be fond of women. My upbringing did re- enforce those images of courage, elegance, perseverance and positivity. I live with a family which is highly populated by females. I go with feminine agenda. That's my make-up.

However, the respondents seldom agreed on as a major painting inspiration because what artists normally sees in his day dreaming does not really influence his painting as most of them tend to change certain things and replace them with experiences when they forget or find it unimportant in their composition. Below are some the responses from the respondents:

I do not believe in hallucinations and I think things like that do not exist. What people see is what they imagine.

On the whole, memories play a major role on imaginative composition. The result of the study also shows that all the respondents excluding the artists agreed that events could also leave memories that could affect the

composition of a painter. This can be true when the artist visits occasions being organised in his environment, the artist pickup scenes and stores them in the memory. This ability to store the information has positive impact on some contemporary paintings. It is also evident that the artists interviewed do not probably value the activities of events in motion but rather when those activities appear in the form of pictures.

#### 4.3 Ideal Visual Qualities of Ghanaian Woman in Contemporary Paintings

This section discusses the ideal qualities of women in Ghanaian culture as depicted in paintings. The discussion is based on this research question - To what extent could paintings expose the ideal qualities of women in Ghanaian culture? To answer this research question, semi-structured interview guides were formulated to elicit responses from students, lecturers, connoisseurs and the artists.

To ascertain the ideal visual qualities of Ghanaian woman in contemporary paintings, respondents which were made up of artists, lecturers, students and connoisseurs were asked to come out with the possible ideal qualities of women in Ghanaian culture as depicted in paintings by artists. The following were the outcomes of summary of the analyses: confidence, thick lips, dark complexion, motherly, proportional, heavy breast, hardworking, beautiful, courageous, etc.

Result of the study indicated that eleven qualities of the ideal Ghanaian woman stated were rated in the following order as answers by the respondents. The ideal woman must be confident, astute, respectful, possess thick lips, dark complexion, well mannered, a motherly of all, well proportioned, heavy breast, hardworking, beautiful and confidence. The data gathered revealed that heavy breast, well proportioned, thick lips and dark skin, beautiful and hardworking received the greatest percentages as compared to the rest of the qualities. Thick lips were relatively recorded the lowest percentage among the qualities stated because it is considered difficult to attest that attribute in a painting. The following are sample verbatim statements of the respondents to support the five major qualities deemed to be worthy of Ghanaian woman seen in contemporary paintings.



**Figure 1.** My Princess.



**Figure 2.** Angular portrait.



**Figure 3.** Mother and child.



**Figure 4.** Daily Chore 5.





**Figure 5.** Facing the competition II.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Painters (artists) one way or the other are inspired by several things in their environment. It was observed that artists have several sources of inspirations, and these are previous works, works of other artists, especially, the masters, events, magazines, photographs, women, and personal experiences. Women are the most commonly used among all the sources. It became apparent that women are preferred as the major subject matter for contemporary painting artists.

The measurable ideal qualities of a woman in Ghanaian culture established in this research were beauty, confidence, motherly care, hard work, thick lips, heavy breasts and dark complexion. Their unstinted curves and confident poses have been the subjects of the masters and even today's artist. However not all Ghanaian women are portrayed in these paintings except women who have been seen as the epitome of beauty: healthy, fertile, and desirable. Inferences made point to the facts that, artists portray women with good intention but not as sex object. Unfortunately, most people believe them to be only for erotic reasons while this may not be true, the fact still remains that the total picture of women in general is not fully reflected in their works.

However, qualities such as respect, submissiveness and generosity were hidden inner qualities which are difficult to measure and therefore be expressed in paintings of female images.

This study was meant to be a preliminary attempt to quantify the portrayals of women in painting for a positive reason. The results of the study indicate that some changes in the portrayal of women have taken place over time, however several differences still remain. In the light of these findings, people have to be sensitive to understand the principles of art appreciation and that female images used in paintings are not meant for erotic display but rather to portray the hidden qualities of the ideal Ghanaian woman.

Frequent in-service training and workshops with the renowned artists must be organised to equip the young artists about the new techniques and innovative ways painting since the works of the masters is one of the main sources of the painter's motivation. This will help painting artists to have varieties of inspirations from several sources that will boost their paintings. They should also create different ways of capturing women who will promote their image and efforts in the societies through the paintings.

Today women are portrayed mostly in family/home settings, while men are portrayed more often in professional service/carriers, clerical, media/entertainment and business management roles. This reinforces



the stereotype image of the woman's place is in the home. These images fail to show the true range of women's roles in our societies and it is the responsibility of the contemporary painter to change that misconception through painting.

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