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Explanations of Freud's Psychoanalysis Theories on the Lives and Works of Some Western Artist: An African Perspective (Pp. 227-233)

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Abstract

This paper examines some of the various explanations of Freud's theories on a selected number of Western Artist and their works. It highlights the impact of his findings on the authenticity of the concept as regards, dreams, the Oedipus complex and imagery. Its objective is to prove that a number of Western European artist are governed by their unconscious mind. The method adopted to ascertain this fact is based on the theory of psychoanalysis. It is believed that this study would help to understudy the sub-conscious minds of artist as well as the impact this process has in the development of western Art.

Introduction

Psychoanalysis is a branch of psychology which was developed by the Austrian born neurologist Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth century (Adams, 2001). It deals with imagery, history and creativity (Adams, 2001). Adams (2001) stresses that psychoanalysis also focuses on the re-construction of the past and interpretation of the past to the present. It can also be described as a theory and therapeutic method based on the ideas that

mental life functions on both conscious and unconscious levels (Encarta, 2009).

In addition to this, is the belief that childhood events have a powerful psychological influence throughout life (Encarta, 2009). Psychoanalysis can be explained as a system of psychological theory and therapy which aims to treat mental disorders by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind and bringing repressed fears and conflicts into the conscious mind (Pearsal, 1999).

As regard the aspect of imagery, Adams (2001) says it can be found in dreams, jokes, tongue slips as well as neurotic symptoms which reveal the content of the unconscious mind. In a work of art, the Imagery derived from the artist is modified into a new form that exposes itself to an audience. In other words, because art is expressive it shows parts of the artists who creates it, the patron who funds it and the culture or area from whence it was made (Adams, 2001).

Some Freudian Theoretical Explanations

Freud's innovation was to recognize the unconscious psychiatric process that are different from those that govern conscious experience (Adams,2001). What he did, was to shift out of context the thoughts and feelings of an individual that are similar. Thus, rather than expressing abstract concepts, thoughts are depicted in form of images (Encarta,2009). Here, objects may then be symbolically represented by images of other objects, although both object and symbol may be vague (Encarta, 2009). It is from this process that Freud was able to understand dreams.

Freud saw the psychological phenomena of dreams as a form of protection against disturbing impulses arising from within and childhood experiences (Encarta, 2009). As a result of this technique, analysts were able to interpret dreams recognizing its underlying meaning.

Another one of Freud's theories was based on the "Oedipus complex". This theory focuses on the emotions aroused in a young child by an unconscious desire of sex for a parent of the opposite sex (Pearsal, 1999). The concept was derived from the Greek mythology of "Oedipus" who killed his father and married his Mother (Pearsal, 1999).

This study however, attempts to analyze some of the theories of psychoanalysis and its impact on some Western Artist and art forms.

Method and Analysis

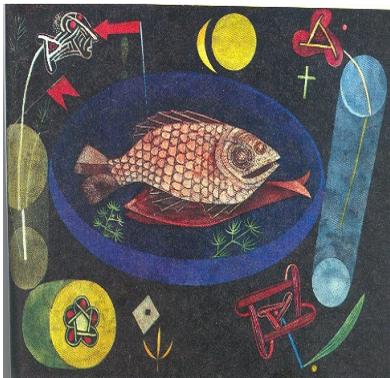
Data for the study was derived from four selected works of artist of Western European origin. Works showing evidence of psychoanalytical tendencies were specifically chosen. The following sub-theme shows the analysis of the artist and their works.

Analysis of some Western Artist and their art Forms

Instances of the Freudian theory as regards dreams can be applied to some art forms like the work of Paul Klee (1879-1940) the German-Swiss Surrealist painter, graphic artist and writer of art (Oxford Dictionary of art, 2001). Paul Klee was part of the movement called Surrealism which was based on the release of the creative powers of the subconscious mind.

A movement which drew inspiration from Freud's theories concerning the sub-conscious and its relation to dreams (Oxford Dictionary of art, 2001). A critical look at Klee's "Around the fish" (1926) shows a table garnished with fish, vegetables and other symbols. Fleming (1995), sees this as a mere surface play in Klee's world of double meanings, myths and metaphors.

Fig 1: Paul Klee. Around the fish 1926. Oil on canvas, 64.7x63.8cm. Museum of Modern Art New York. Courtesy of William Fleming. Arts and ideals, 1995



Here, the fish symbolizes Jesus while the patterns around the fish, particularly, the interwoven ones represents the medieval periods. According to Fleming (1995), the crescent and the full moon suggests the Christian calendar at lent and Eastertide. The cross tells of Christ's crucifixion while the sprigs in the jar tell of the coming of spring.

Apart from dreams, psychoanalysis addresses art in other ways, like revealing the underlying personality of the artist using the **“Oedipus complex”**. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) a Florentine artist, scientist, and thinker, is one of such individuals. He was born in the small town of Vinci in a Tuscan country side to Piero and Caterina a peasant girl (Fleming, 1995). Although considered a illegitimate child, because his mother married one of his father’s friends Antonio di Piero Buti del Vaccada Vinci (Vezzosi, 2000) shortly after his birth, Leonardo spent most of his upbringing with his father “piero”. The absence of his mother in his life may have resulted in his frequent depiction of female figures and features in most of his works. One of the most renowned works of Leonardo is the **Mona Lisa** (1503-1505). This piece depicts a painting of a woman in half length; who probably is the twenty-four year old Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo the wife of la Gioconda a prominent merchant in Florence (Stokstad, 1995).

Fig. 2: Leonardo da Vinci. Mona Lisa (1503-1505) oil on Wood (76.8x53.3cm) Musee du Louvre, Paris. Courtesy Laurie Schneider Adams, *A History of Western Art*, 2001

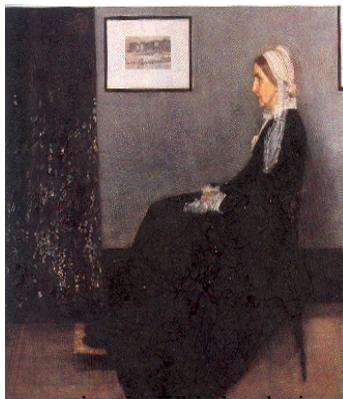


What is fascinating about the work is that, despite its feminine features, it has subtle male attributes. Analysts have critically studied this piece and observed that apart from the careful treatment given to the forms, the use of sfumato, chiaroscuro, the subtle treatment of the facial features as well as the expressive fingers and the complicated background scenes, the figure represents a connection between he and his mother. The eyes and smile show that biological relationship. It had been recorded, that at death he held this painting to himself. Small wonder, the work became highly controversial. Perhaps, because of the absence of his mother, the Oedipus

influence featured extensively in most of his works. Even his male figures seem to possess feminine attributes. There's also the connection with his sexual status, some feel that he was homosexual, thus the feminine tendencies.

There was another artist who shows similar connection between him and his mother in James Abboth Mc-Neil whistler (1834-1903). He was an American born painter and graphic artist who was mainly active in England in the twentieth century (Oxford Dictionary of art, 2001). In the words of Adams (2001), Whistler's painting of his mother titled "Arrangement in Black and Grey (1871) suggests an underpainting of a baby.

Fig 3: James Abboth Mcneil Whistler: Arrangement in Black and Grey (Portrait of the artist mother) 1871. Oil on canvas, 1.45x1.64m. Musee d' Orsay, Paris. Courtesy of Laurie. S. Adams "A History of Western Art, 2001



In other words, unconsciously Whistler depicted his childhood relationship with his mother. It is possible that he speaks about conception where colours, geometry and humanistic traits are significantly depicted.

Fig. 4: Constantin Brancusi, Bird in space (1928) Bronze unique cast. 137.2x21.6x16.5cm) Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of Laurie S. Adams. *A History of Western Art*, 2001



Adams (2001) also suggests that Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) a Romanian sculptor, of the twentieth century owes's one of his most influential works to such Oedipal readings. It was Brancusi's bird in space (1928) that showed the relationship he had with his peasant father who would have preferred Brancusi be born a girl(Adams,2001). As such, in the words of Adams (2001), the work in question can be interpreted as a phallic self image declaring its triumph over gravity and outshining the sun. In other words, it represents victory. This piece however shows that even if artist try not to incorporate their desires, needs and pains, some how these traits slip into their work and are reflected in their forms.

Result and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the works, evidence however shows that the method used in assessing these art works reveals that in some Western European art forms, the sub-conscious mind is constantly at work. And that the psychological aspect of some of their works depicts a great deal of their lives including the positive and negative sides of their personalities. From an African perspective, there is a lot of emotion and expression in their works. The works not only speak to the audience but tell us what the artist went through or felt whilst producing the art piece. Spirituality also plays a prominent role in their works as it reflects the state of their minds and hearts.

Conclusion

In this survey, we can see how psychoanalysis shows the inert properties contained in the minds of individuals. Through dreams, tongue slips or historical records certain artistic styles and concepts are born. The conception of these traits are not accidental or intentional but tied to the artist origins and foundations. Since art is expressive in nature, it tends to find its way out, either through paintings, sculpture or any other artistic form of expression. As such, certain differences are emotionally solved. Such as the "Oedipal conflict" where some artist struggle to overcome its rippling effects. Not only that is the understanding and interpretation of dreams in the unconscious, which are not always cohesive. The knowledge of psychoanalysis has in no small way, aided in its near comprehension and transfer of these dreams elements into conscious depictions, not only that it has richly influenced the content of western art as regards the various styles and movements depicted in their society.

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