

THE DISABLED AND ART: SELECTED ARTIFACTS OF GHANAIAN PHYSICALLY DISABLED ARTISTS AS A RESOURCE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Some disabled artists in Ghana exhibit a lot of rich knowledge and practical skills which are potential materials for teaching and learning. These should be documented otherwise the rich concepts and philosophies inherent in them which, among others, are perceived to depict societal problems may be lost after their death. It is the aim of this paper to identify and document the unique artistic qualities in some of the art works of selected physically disabled artists. It was the pursuit of the writers to contribute to the documentation of these works to serve as resource material for Art Education and Special Education. Through qualitative research, an enquiry was made into the artifacts of six (6) selected disabled artists in Ashanti Region. Description of ten (10) works comprising textiles, sculpture, painting, three dimensional (3-D) design, and basketry was done. These physically disabled artists were interviewed using the face-to-face method as data collection instrument. The results of the research largely confirm that the selected artifacts depict problems of the society. Also, a few of the works portray their emotions, personal nature, ideas and philosophy. It is recommended that more physically disabled persons should find life in art since art provides varying types of employment for disabled persons.

Keywords: *Artifacts, art education, philosophy, disability art.*

INTRODUCTION

It has been noticed that disabled artists are rarely mentioned in art education in Ghana unlike some non-disabled artists who have inspired and mentored other young artists to achieve greatness. It has also been observed that works of disabled artists are hardly ever documented for use as resource material for teaching and learning in Ghanaian schools and colleges. For some reasons many artists with disabilities are denied access to art schools, exhibitions and

museums. Many doors are closed to those who use wheelchairs, who have visual or hearing disabilities. For some artists with disabilities, an isolated room in their homes could be the only venue for expression. However, most artists with disabilities succeed because they follow current art trends, communicate with other non-disabled artists or solicit assistance in their promotion. They have often been ignored by critics and are not taken seriously as artists. Despite these limiting environments, many of

these artists remain undaunted. Most artists believe that talent and quality should be the most important criteria in judging their work.

Considering employment, business owners accumulate profit through the efforts of workers and since people with disabilities are viewed as less productive than others, employers usually ignore them. Therefore, disability could sometimes mean poverty (Keller, 2009). This fact could not be blamed on the disabled themselves; rather it is because businesses and communities often fail to give opportunities to disabled people. However, Garvens, *et al.* (2006) contend that treatment of individuals with disabilities in a given culture is based largely upon perceptions associated with disability in that society. Nexis (2004) also holds the view that every civilized society is measured by its desire and ability to take care of its weak and disadvantaged citizens.

For centuries, people with disabilities have served as cultural objects rather than active creators of culture and media. Generally, people with disabilities did not decide how they would be portrayed, nor did they participate in the creation of the cultural products which deal with disability. Instead, artists and authors used various disabilities to convey ideas about evil, suffering, grace and human nature. Such themes were popular among European artists. The poet and playwright, Marcus (2009), explains that disability is not a 'brave struggle' or 'courage in the face of adversity'...disability is an art. It is an ingenious way to live. This assertion seeks to explore the concept, that living with a disability, as with all living, is an art with its own aesthetics, grace and mastery. It seeks to explore the interaction of disability and the academic environment. As such, it should be a useful tool for all involved in higher education. Besides, disability is not always a liability. Many individuals with physical disabilities may have a lot of knowledge, artistic skills and competencies that could enable them contribute effectively to national development. We are of the view that the rich quality inherent in the

works of some disabled artists could be a useful document as resource material for art education. Besides, considering the fact that practical art works invariably reflect the philosophies and attitudes of the artists, disabled artists may have some important messages to carry in their works which, when documented, may give meaningful contributions to society.

Artists of such documented items may be motivated in that their affection and esteem needs may be fulfilled. Their demand for the same choices and control in their everyday lives that their non-disabled brothers and sisters, neighbours and friends take for granted may be satisfied. Through this academic intervention, disabled persons, who feel dejected, may find life in art.

Disability art

Disability art is art made by the disabled (Armstrong, 2004). Disability art is about exposing the disabling imagery and processes which aim at transforming their lives from passive and dependent beings into active and creative agents for social change. Barnes (2003, unpublished) contends that this mediated communication modifies the cognitive environment created by the artists and audience. The expression, as used in this paper, refers to the creative works of disabled artists who were self-taught, or had little or no formal training in art, or even had complete formal training, and therefore could express themselves with artistic messages such as in a belief, an idea, a sensation, or a feeling as effective as possible through a product.

Disability Art is open to interpretation and the interpretation is subjective; different people have different emotional responses to the works of art of the disabled. This could be due to their level of understanding of the disabled and their art processes. The disabled artists create arts that reflect their personal interests. Some of their works comment on issues such as poverty and loneliness. This is confirmed by Adu-Agyem *et al.* (2009) that art provides an outlet

for a person to pour out his frustrations. Other works of the disabled artists include philosophies that reflect self-determination, popularity, equal opportunities and self-respect. It becomes clear in the foregoing explanation that in observing a work of art of the disabled, we do not only see an individual's work, but also a reflection of the cultural background and thinking of the artist. This assertion is upheld by (Amenuke, 1995) that a piece of art work reflects the culture that created it, though this might not be apparent to its contemporary observers. Therefore, culture is identified, in part, in the visual forms they create. Many of their works show interest in topics that involve people, stories, myths and legends. Edusei (2004), states that art products represent the beliefs, values and attitudes, as well as the history of the people. Thus, disability art is potentially educative, transformative, expressive, emotionally exploratory, participative and involving. Their works initially show aspects of their disability but as they gain acceptance, they gradually move into the mainstream art where ideas about disability are completely replaced by artists with business minds.

Recent developments within the context of disability art is that since the emergence of the International Disabled Movement in the 1970s, disability art has become inextricably linked to radical new disability policies in some countries which aim at bringing about a more equitable and inclusive future (Finkelstein, 1992).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For ease of accessing materials for the study, it was deemed expedient that the research be confined to Ashanti Region. According to the Department of Employment and Social Welfare, the Ashanti Region has 4,220 identified disabled persons of which 204 are physically challenged (Regional Director, personal communication.). Out of this number (204), 53 are reported to have undergone art-based rehabilitation at the various rehabilitation centres in the region, and occasionally attend meetings of the Physically Disabled Persons in the Kumasi

Metropolis. For the purpose of this research, 10 works of 6 disabled persons from among the 53 were selected as sample study. This was selected based on their different areas of specialization. Formal interviews were conducted to find out about their thoughts, feelings and beliefs in their selected works. Critical observation was also done on the artists' concepts, working tools and equipment, procedures, and finishing of their products. The results are discussed in a qualitative descriptive form and presented together with the corresponding visual education materials in textile, sculpture, painting, 3-dimensional design, and basketry.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

(I) "The Village Scene" is a tapestry work composed of rounded buildings with thatched roofs and a baobab tree which is typical of Northern Ghana (Fig. 1). The scene depicts cluster settlement of a village in Ghana and is bound on the top and bottom with traditional adinkra symbols "Mpua-nkron" and "Nkyim-kyim" respectively. "Mpua-nkron" is a ceremonial hair cut given to a king's guard for royal defence. "Nkyim-kyim" symbolizes travelling around to acquire knowledge for the benefit of society.

"The Village Scene" is showing two major art forms in Ghana; the architecture of northern Ghana and the traditional "kente" cloth of the south which have been combined beautifully to show the unity of Ghanaians. Unity and co-operation between the disabled and the non-disabled are also being promoted in this textile piece for national development. Besides, rich aesthetic qualities can be learned with the scene in any design related class.

(II) In "Music Makers", the subject matter is simply a folk expression pointing to a complex Ghanaian drum rhythm of the day-to-day life styles of varying people of Ghanaian society (Fig. 2). The drummers' figures in this fabric design terminate at a point in their clothes without showing their legs. This particular work has been greatly influenced by physical disability.



Fig. 1: The Village Scene (Artist: Okyere Kwame)

The artist is communicating that even without legs the body can still function creatively. “Music Makers” is a great teaching lesson for the disabled who feel all is lost and cannot use their residual ability to strive to lead an independent life but beg for alms by the road side.



Fig. 2: Music Makers (Artist: Okyere Kwame)

(III) In “Okomfo Kwabena Adjei” the solidity of form anchors this sculpture in cement (Fig.

3). The artist presents a priest wearing dreadlocks. The smock has amulets and charms fixed on it. In his left hand is a strong spear which points heavenward.

The work is painted gold. The figure has a pair of knickerbockers and native sandals. The clarity and precision of the details exhibit the accoutrements of priesthood and deity in the indigenous Ghanaian society. This artifact is a demonstrable piece for a practical sculpture class. In clothing design, it could be an important teaching material for modeling, drapery and traditional costume. The general outfit is a symbol of security as epitomized in the paraphernalia of the apparel.



Fig. 3: Okomfo Kwabena Adjei (Artist: James Kwadwo Boakye)

(IV) “Nana Yaa Asantewaa” was the queen of Ejisu traditional area in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Between 1900 and 1901 she led the Asante ethnic group in a battle against the British colonial government following a demand that they should give their Golden Stool to the governor Sir Frederick M. Hogson to sit on; a demand which was unheard of and a taboo. This was after the British had deported the then Asantehene Nana Prempeh I, Ejisuhene Nana Kofi Afrane and some others to Seychelles Is-

land making Nana Yaa Asantewaa the acting chief of Ejisu (Osei, 1994).

The work is finished in an antique technique (Fig. 4). The precision of details exhibit war accoutrements in the indigenous Ghanaian society. The smock has amulets and charms fixed on it with some tied around her limbs which are believed to protect her from enemy bullets. This artwork is a symbol of defiance, defense and leadership. The pensive looking figure is modeled in cement using tools to define surface quality and also to define drapery. This master piece is a typical teaching material for emancipation and women empowerment. There is no wonder this statue stands proudly today in a round-about at Ejisu on the Accra-Kumasi high way where she once ruled.



Fig. 4: Nana Yaa Asantewaa (Artist: James Kwadwo Boakye)

(V) ‘Sanitation’ is an educative painting which presents the artist’s concern for the filthy environments and deadly health risks in some parts of the country (Fig. 5). Polythene sheets and other waste materials have been naturally captured within a catchment area of dilapidated buildings and residences. The artist is communicating a very strong message of environmental cleanliness and safety which should be

everybody’s concern in the 21st century. “Sanitation” could be a teaching material for environmental health education in our schools and communities. The painting could be used to teach the need for culture of maintenance as against rotteness and this is exemplified in the dilapidated stalls roofed with thatch in the mid-ground of the picture area.



Fig. 5: Sanitation (Artist: Joel Acheampong)

(VI) “H. R. M. Otumfuor Osei-Tutu II” is a portrait of the reigning Asante King who was enstooled in 1998 (Fig. 6). In this painting, the artist’s attention to light and shadow makes a roundness of Otumfuor clear. His pose is formal and his elegant costume indicates royalty.

The main source of variety is in the material quality: the richness in the quality of paint portrays the King’s wealth just as his pose exudes power, self confidence and determination while his face reflects his foresight and patriotic acumen. This portrait is not merely for its own sake but it is a means of recording his contribution to the unforgettable memory of history of traditional authority in Ghana.

(VII) “TV Stand” is rendered in three-dimensional (3-D) form using Rhinoceros software (Fig. 7). The work was influenced by



Fig. 6: H.R.M. Otumfuor Osei Tutu II (Artist: Joel Acheampong)

Baluba culture of the Democratic Republic of Congo in Central Africa; indigenous concept was adapted into a modern household object. The artist portrays a girl kneeling on a half calabash while carrying the other half on the head and supporting it with both hands with the palms open. The thighs of the girl are decorated with three rings of scarification. The body is rendered very smooth and highly polished in a typical Baluba style. Her two conical breasts are pointing downwards and the whole body is bare. This is an African master piece of computer generated work that teaches traditional concepts of beauty and humility. In ICT, it could be a demonstration material for three-dimensional (3-D) product design.

(VIII) In 'Bumper Sticker', the artist presents Jesus Christ in an expressive pose and gesture that seem to be saying "come unto me, all (ye) that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (The Holy Bible, KJV, Matthew 11:28). In this digital design the figure is pointing at a magnificent church building on the right side of the picture (Fig. 8). Using computer graphics to promote Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana, the artist has skillfully blended multiple images to form a unified com-

position. This is a significant contribution to the teaching of Christianity.



Fig. 7: TV Stand (Artist: Samuel Kwame)



Fig. 8: Bumper Sticker (Artist: Samuel Kwame)

(IX) "Co-operation" is a kente stole that depicts the cordial relations between the association of the disabled in Ghana and their counterparts in Norway (Fig. 9). In this work, a modified logo of disability; representing black and white disabled people is presented. Below the logo are the national flags of the two nations. The flag of Norway is placed below the white section of the logo while that of Ghana is placed below the black section.

The artifact has a beautiful combination of definite patterns and distinct colours. The black and white patterns are arranged in a regular and orderly manner. This artifact teaches the importance of mutual co-operation that should exist between the two nations and their disabled associations for sustainable development of their members.



Fig. 9: Co-operation (Artist: Faustina Dzimado)

(X) This exquisite lidded “Laundry Basket” is an art form that serves both utilitarian and aesthetic purposes (Fig. 10). The oval-shaped cane basket is flattened at the base and at the top. The base and rim feature three strands of weavers used to strengthen, decorate and finish the bend and rim to ensure that the basket is robust. The flat cover of the basket is formed from a weaver woven around stakes that have been arranged to cross each other at their centre which is joined to the body of basket. This basket displays a remarkable degree of precision and a painstakingly fine weave.



Fig. 10: Laundry Basket (Artist: Kwasi Wangara)

CONCLUSION

These artists with disabilities are asserting new, artistic explorations. Some of them have had disabilities since birth; for others, their disability is a result of accident or illness. In a world that is largely indifferent to their situation they have struggled to realize their vision. These artists are unique in their individual specialties. They have different experiences to convey because of their limitations or confinements. Although, those creations which depict sadness and despair can induce empathy and affection, emphasis of such themes may negate the disabled artists as the gifted and talented individuals they are. Most of the themes in this study, however, have qualities that promote equality necessary to be considered as capable human beings who can contribute effectively to national development. Therefore the Ghanaian society should recognize their rights and contributions. Their works have different forms and vary in terms of colour and design and in the themes they portray. Their works also reveal variety of creative techniques worthy of study in our schools and colleges. They combine both contemporary and traditional methods of production. Most of the works suggest that they rely on nature for their sources of ideas and have thus made the most of their environment. Nevertheless, research is needed to capture data about the overall performance of the disabled artists, their levels of social acceptance, their attitude towards learning, availability of resources, among others. Research is also needed to assess the problems and constraints that beset disabled artists and physical environments of their art studios and working environments. The future will undoubtedly bring forward new artists who feel empowered to share personal expressions of the human spirit, revealing its untiring ability to achieve for the benefit of society and national development.

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