

AKORA KOFI ANTUBAM



Akora Kofi Antubam: A luminary Achimotan who has spread our fame far and wide. He is shown speaking with President L.S. Senghor of Senegal, during a visit to the school. Antubam was Art Master at that time and he later created the Ghana Regalia, wooden reliefs on the facade of the parliament building in Accra, and murals on the United Nations building in Geneva.

Antubam (1922–64) spent nine years at Achimota School, where he completed an upper primary course, a teacher training course, and a three-year specialization in art and crafts.

In 1951, Antubam returned to Achimota as the new Arts and Crafts Master. While a student at Achimota, Antubam began painting cultural scenes on the school's walls. Many murals and paintings followed and most of them were romanticized scenes of everyday (village) life, or royal depictions of chiefs with their linguists.

Ghana's most prolific contemporary art collector and Achimota alumnus, Seth Dei, recalled that Antubam forbade his pupils from painting 'un-African' subjects. He would, for example, beat children on their heads with a pencil, when they depicted the city of London instead of a Ghanaian cocoa farm.

As an official 'state artist' appointed by Kwame Nkrumah, Antubam attempted to present Ghana as a fully-fledged nation. He was one of the first artists to introduce Adinkra symbols into works of fine art commissioned by the new government in the early 1960s.

Antubam designed, among other things, the panelled doors of the legislative assembly in Accra, the Parliamentary Mace - based on a traditional linguist staff, and a presidential chair that was partly modelled after a ceremonial stool, symbolizing and legitimizing the idea of a modern Ghanaian nation state.

PART 1

Kofi Antubam, 1922—1964 A Modern Ghanaian Artist, Educator, and Writer

By Atta Kwami.

Introduction : I grew up in the 1960s in Ho, capital of the Volta Region in Ghana. There were American, British, French, German, Russian, Dutch, and Hong Kong Chinese expatriates in town. By this time, though, the Ghanaians on the teaching staff of Mawuli Secondary School, where my mother was an art teacher, far outnumbered the foreigners.

My mother, Grace Kwami (1923—2006), had trained at Achimota and Kumasi College of Technology (later to become Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology) as one of the first art specialists in the Gold Coast. She was head of the art department at Mawuli School from 1957 to 1970.

Ghanaian artists (including Antubam), Ernest Victor Asihene, Albert Osabu Bartimeus, and Oku Arnpoto), British art tutors (Jim Mackendnck and John Hillocks), Russian Jewish artist Herbert Vladmir Meyerowitz, and South African artist Selby Mvusi were part of the conversation my mother had with her friends in Ho.

The most influential modern artist of Ghana who came into conversations in my mother's circle was Kofi Antubam. Along with my mother, he was an important influence in art education in Kumasi, where I later studied, and his work and writings had a lasting impact on Ghanaian art history.

Antubam once stopped by in Ho in 1963, back from one of his trips to Nigeria; although I was only six or seven, I remember that he seemed shy and awkward. Grace Kwami told us that he was a great artist who was so driven that he never stopped working. His pen- and-ink drawing of a figural group, made for a calendar, hung up on the wall for several years.

Visiting the Old Parliament House in 1966, I was gratified to be allowed to sit in Ghana's Seat of State, designed by Antubam: I was struck by its elegance. It was the direct result of the modernist philosophy of the African Personality originally promoted by Kwame Nkrumah as the vehicle for moving into the postcolonial age.

For Ghana the decade leading up to Independence in 1957 was particularly turbulent. This period of upheaval, as it laid the foundations for self-government also provided a context that stoked the flourishing of the arts.

Art and culture in the 1950s were considered to be romantic things - in the sense of "feeling, imagination," experience," and yearnings — and they were wed to the longing for freedom from colonial rule that spread across West Africa.

It was within this context that talented young artists such as Kofi Antubam were exhorted to work hard, laying the foundation upon which others might build. Antubam revealed yearnings for recognition:

The present stages of politics and religion in the Gold Coast call for real hard work on their Gold Coast artists' part to lift their art, from the low level of provincialism to the higher and brighter plane of world standard.

PART 2:

This period was steeped in discourse surrounding two men:

Kwame Nkrumah, who became the first president of Ghana and Leopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of Senegal.

For example, their ideas had an impact upon the Nigerian artist Uche Okeke, and Okeke declared to members of the Zana Art Society ("The Zaria Rebels"): "Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are." Nkrumah elaborated on his vision, when he declared that once Africa is free and independent we shall see a flowering of the human spirit on our continent second to none.

The African Personality in liberty and freedom will make a particular contribution to the totality of culture and Civilization. In Ghana, President Nkrumah made an impact on Kofi Antubam, and upon other young artists such as J. C. Okyere, Oku Ampofo, Vincent Kofi, and Grace Kwami: so too did Dr. Emmanuel Kwagir Aggrey of Achimota College.

Nkrumah had been deeply moved by Aggrey's political ideas for African emancipation and Pan-Africanism, later offering free education and providing the framework for a cultural policy.

He was an enthusiastic supporter of the arts, personally championing the wearing of the smock (fugu) of northern Ghana and kente robes of southern Ghana, both of which signified his idea of the "African Personality".

Nkrumah was a leading activist and theoretician of the African Renaissance and Pan—Africanism, a movement that seeks to unify African people. Nkrumah sought the advice and cooperation of Kofi Antubam, in whom he found a cultural lieutenant.

Kofi Antubam would make his mark as a muralist and designer of state regalia. Because of his profile as a major proponent of his promotion of explicitly Pan- African subject matter, Nkrumah shared an affinity with him.

In Antubam, Nkrumah found someone with whom he could work. Of course, others, such as Ampofo and Kofi, along with a raft of craftspeople, also benefited from state patronage, and contributed to the building of a Ghanaian modernism.

Institutional History, from Achimota to “Kumasi Realism”.

During the colonial era there were two main types of art education: the indigenous workshop or household apprenticeship, and European-derived art schools. In Ghana today this is still largely true. Drawing on paper and other surfaces from observation was introduced into Ghanaian culture before the beginning of the twentieth century.

By 1908, “hand-and-eye drawing” was introduced in schools and training colleges in the Gold Coast, whose objective centered on industrial training, through the adoption of the 1887 British Education Code.

An expatriate instructor, Hugh McLaren of the education department, introduced a method of drawing called “hand-and-eye”, in 1909. It was the antithesis of drawing from the imagination and largely revolved around drawing objects based on observation, for which the hand and eye were coordinated.

In academies such as the Slade School of Art, University of London, this method reduced the drawing of the human figure to ‘sight-size.” that is, the figure seen against ones thumb in an outstretched hand.

PART 3:

The earliest British colonial institution in the Gold Coast was Accra Training College, which merged with Achimota College when the latter was opened in 1927. Achimota College was a brainchild of Sir Gordon Guggisberg, the Reverend Alek Fraser. and Emmanuel Kwegir Aggrey.

Achimota was described by Guggisberg as “a model for all education which was to set a standard of attainment.” Guggisberg, who became governor of the Gold Coast in 1919, “was deeply interested in education, which he regarded as the keystone of policy”, although an imported model of education.

Achimota College was seen as innovative by local people, and as offering the opportunity for initiative to teachers. Clyde Chantler would later discern that the main purpose of Achimota was: “To provide on African soil an education equal in technical quality to the best that can be provided in England, and at the same time adapted to African conditions and requirements.”

According to a report of 1952, Achimota had aimed at producing students who were ‘Western’ in intellectual and spiritual outlook, but African in sympathies and anxious to keep the best in “tribal life and Customs.”

The first art tutor at Achimota. George A. Stevens (1900—1980), came from England to the Gold Coast in 1924, when the foundation stone of Achimota was first laid. He had trained at the Slade School of Art but was keen on imparting some of what he had learned about early European modernism to the “natives.”

Antubam wrote. ‘Stevens who came to Achimota from the old Technical School. Accra, had already started on his own to conduct research into the history of West African art.’ Stevens believed tradition-based art forms and local product design of the Gold Coast must form the basis of any vital modern African culture, yet he encountered opposition from his students, who were interested in European modernity.

After the founding of Achimota there was also a move by chiefs and the elite against “Africanization” of the curriculum at the expense of a broader education. In 1929, Stevens exhibited his students’ drawings and paintings in London, demonstrating that he had indeed provided his students with a foundation in European two-dimensional painting practices.

After he left Achimota. he devised a syllabus for art education and instruction in West Africa in 1936, placing much emphasis on imaginative composition. Stevens was interested in promoting vernacular traditions in Ghanaian art alongside the teaching of European techniques, He criticized “hand-and-eye” as an imposed model: “the dull drudgery of "drawing from objects.””

Stevens sought the “conceptual as opposed to the imitative” (that is to say, he wanted to go beyond verisimilitude). He suggested alternative methods of learning and teaching art, including the keeping of

log books by students on artists in their home districts so as to organize workshops and meetings to harness all their rich resources and skills.

He provided research avenues for his teaching of "a history of West African arts" (mostly based on sculpture and masking traditions) that he introduced with an assistant, Carl Dey.

According to Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz, his successor, Stevens "taught very few definite rules about how to draw. What he did most was to encourage pupils to use their eyes well," He abhorred "copy-work".

PART 4:

In his innovative approach, Stevens had students draw humorous cartoons of the daily life at the college. These were valued more highly than academic works, for he saw them as the germ of the African art of the future.

He explained, "These cartoons became the basis of my teaching, and were regarded as the most important part of a student's work, and later won the more respectable title of 'imaginative composition'.

The rest was easy. It was one of the most wonderful experiences I have ever had, to see, month by month, the new life that came flooding in to the drawing lesson. Ideas, wit, humour, a wealth of subject-matter never before dealt with by the hand of the artist, poured over each other in a stream of ever-increasing force and vigour.

Strangely enough hand and eye were trained, accuracy of representation, where it was needed, was acquired, by the way. Why? Because the purpose of the whole business was understood, The dull drudgery of 'drawing from objects' became the practical necessity of 'making Studies'."

Memory drawing became a useful and intelligent drill in the rapid analysis of form. As he encouraged students, they became highly motivated in what he called a "Renaissance."

Meyerowitz later remembered that Stevens delivered a series of lectures on the history of art, covering Assyrian, Egyptian, and Greek sculpture, early European painting, Renaissance and modern painting, and Oriental art. On other occasions he read Ruskin, Pater, and other writers on art, and followed the reading with discussion.

An excellent artist himself, he was intensely interested in the simple drawings of his pupils, and when the ethnographer and government anthropologist Captain Robert Sutherland Rattray asked him to illustrate his volume of Asante folk tales, he was confident that his students could produce the images.

The result was *Akan-Ashanti Folk Tales: Collected and Translated by R. S. Rattray and illustrated by Africans of the Gold Coast Colony*.

Stevens remained at Achimota until late 1929. His departure led to frequent staff turnovers, involving Ghanaian and foreign staff. Gabriel Pippet, head of the department from 1931 to 1936, considered teaching a few rules in drawing a necessity, and so he taught perspective and human proportion.

Crafts, as an after school activity, were introduced during this time. Antubam viewed Pippet's time as a step forward until Herbert Vladimir Meyerowitz (1900-1945) came to teach art at Achimota in 1937. Antubam was his student, as a teacher in training.

A decision was made in June 1945 to develop colonial colleges of arts, science and technology, in West Africa. At the British parliament in London, Sir Walter Elliot, chairman of the Commission on Higher Education in West Africa, had presented a report (now known as the Elliot Report) that paved the way for the construction and foundation of universities in Ghana.

In 1949, Achimota College agreed to be incorporated into the proposed regional college. The proposal had the support of influential "Chiefs", as the rulers of Akan kingdoms were known, and the most powerful of these, the Asantehene Otumfuo Nana Sir Agyeman Prempeh II, generously offered three sites where a university could be built in his capital, Kumasi.

One of these was accepted, and plans for the relocation of the training college were prepared and work commenced on the site in January 1951.

Jim Mackendrick was appointed by the British Crown Agents for the Colonies as the new supervisor of the school of art at the teacher training department in Achimota, in 1951, in time for the college's incorporation into the new university and its move to Kumasi in 1952.

PART 5:

It seems from the accounts of Stevens and Meyerowitz that the early leaders in Achimota art education imported European values of art as 'high art,' despite showing respect for local forms.

The idea of high art is linked to the sixteenth-century developments in Western European traditions elevating sculpture, architecture, and painting. These arts were designated as 'fine arts' because they were said to play important roles in society, representing moral and spiritual ideals and creating worthy buildings for religious and state institutions.

"Artists were considered to require gifts of imagination and intellect, which were not required for making decorative' or 'useful' arts.'

"Street Painters and "Kumasi Realism"

The new Institution in Kumasi was given a succession of titles, but the one that was most widely known is the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) (shortened in local speech to 'Tech).

The art department at KNUST immediately had an impact on the wider artistic community of Kumasi, for sign painters in that city, for example King Samino and Alex Amofa, picked up skills from practitioners at the school of art from Ernest Victor Asihene and Edmund Jimmy Tetteh.

They often exhibited together, and studied through observation (looking). Even workshop-trained artists and masters, who did not engage with the school directly, such as Azey and Akoto, were nevertheless influenced by these professors, their own apprentices familiarized themselves with the material taught at KNUST,

There is thus a connection between Kofi Antubam and these commercial artists, as Tetteh and Asihene had taken part in exhibitions organized by Antubam as far back as the 1950s.

It is noteworthy, though, that KNUST was not the only source of European ideas about art. The inception of art school training at Achimota, round about 1927, coincided with the arrival of the first advertising agencies in Ghana.

By the time KNUST was founded, two-dimensional representational images, and even reproductions of European artworks, were widely available in the environment. The United Africa Company spread posters and enamel signs, imported from England, all over the country. Inside buses, trains, and at railway stations, and on trees.

The sign painters of Gold Coast and Ghana also created influential works. Commercial artist Yemo Kwei Anang painted posters for the Convention Peoples Party (CPP) (President Nkrumah's party) in the 1950s and large paintings for state visits.

Anang had produced some outstanding portraits and murals for hotels in Accra and in Ho. Two professional sign painters known as Yeno and Clement, based in Accra, also painted gigantic portraits of famous Ghanaian statesmen.

Yet, in Kumasi, the interplay between the street painters of Samino's circle and the painters at the KNUST automatically led to what is now a conscious line arts movement. Kumasi Realism, to use Alex Amofa's term.

Amofa, whose business is called Supreme Art Works, said, I do painting, sign writing and fine art but all are the same. Kumasi Realism draws upon photography, advertising, graphic design, European art history, Ghanaian history and culture, and current social problems.

It is informed by a twin concept of illustration and mechanical reproduction, including photography and realistic depiction; it is notable that Kofi Antubam, during his time at government schools in Kumasi, also worked at Abura Printing Press.

In summary, throughout the twentieth century, the global trafficking of images infused the Ghanaian art scene with a contemporary cultural history not dissimilar to that of northern Europe.

Here, we have the workings of a local African modernity which had been sparked off by photography by the end of the nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth centuries. The root of academic painting and street painting in Kumasi is similarly influenced by collage.

The fusion of image with text, and so on. The influence of photography was a particularly important factor in the history of Kumasi painting. This influence can still be felt today; a recent painting by Amofa, *A Game of Mind (The Draughts Players)* was based upon a mid-century photograph by Willis E. Bell reproduced in *The Roadmakers: A Picture Book of Ghana*, compiled by Efua Sutherland.

The work depicts a child and a young adult enjoying a game of draughts, while an old man looks on.

PART 6: Kofi Antubam as an Educator

Antubam believed that very rarely was a pupil without aptitude for, and interest in, some form of art. He also held that confidence could be nurtured by letting a student sample art activities, and that pupils should be encouraged to discover.

It is possible that he was influenced by Marxist thinking, because the USSR had contacts with the Nkrumah, administration during the 1960s.

This position was in contradiction to “Western, art for art’s sake”, or esoteric abstraction (despite the wealth of “abstraction” in the content of local cloth, pottery, canoe, architecture, wall painting, beadwork, and music).

Antubam’s text chronicled developments in the modern Ghanaian art scene in urban centers, art groups, cultural institutions, and organizations central to the promotion of art. The accounts regarding the traditions of training, patronage, or display, were limited to formally trained individuals, again overlooking household, or workshop training.

Yet, had he not written the book, it is possible that much of the history of art education at Achimota, and the history of Ghana’s twentieth-century arts, would have been lost.

The overall goal of the volume was to translate Kwame Nkrumah’s and Leopold Sédar Senghor’s concepts surrounding the “African Personality” and Negritude into ideas for a modern Ghanaian

aesthetic: the text encapsulated Antubam's critical attitude towards essentialism and racism, and Antubam was highly critical of the European discourse on African art.

This modernist strategy for revival, in the aftermath of almost 60 years of colonial policies, became a philosophy. By 1962, Antubam had infused a new principle into his work, he noted, "what the Ghanaian expresses in art today needs not necessarily continue to be featured by disproportions and distortions which undoubtedly are the greatest qualities of the sort of art expected of her by the world outside Africa."

These are features associated with Indigenous African sculpture, the very features which European avant-garde artists so admired and imitated to infuse European art with new life. In this section he appears to be of similar mind as Rhoda Woets, who points out pertinently that in the debates concerning definitions of African art, terms like "African" and "European" are biased since there is no such thing as pure European and African culture and civilization.

Yet Antubam also claims that he wrote the book to help "the African becoming aware of his personality." to gain strength from his roots so he could withstand the utilization of European media and techniques.

Antubam observed that, "painting [by which he meant easel painting] is a new form of art in Ghana. But there is every reason to believe that the twentieth century Ghanaian will continue to paint once he has learnt to do so." Yet, architectural murals as practiced by the Asante, and indigenous wall painting of the Gurunsi of North-Eastern Ghana, were not new forms of visual practice.

It is surprising that Antubam omitted wall painting in the north, and canoe painting in southern Ghana. within the wider field of painting. Antubam's attitude towards easel painting was that it was adaptable to Ghanaian needs, provided that the Ghanaian painter expresses the Ghanaian as distinct from any other country's personality.

"There is no reason why Ghanaian African artists should not paint. It is highly probable that what our friends of the West fear is a possible future competition, I am sure it is just that."

He considered the advantages regarding modeling or chiaroscuro (light and shade), defending his stance: "accepting the fact that he is a sculptor by nature, the Ghanaian artist stands a better chance of expressing three dimensions than anybody else. He has a better feeling for shape than one who is not a sculptor by nature."

In another section of the book he lists as a trend of African life and culture a “priceless possession of a great love of colour.” For one of the most difficult words in the English language, “culture,” Antubam offers an open-ended definition of “ways of life.”

It does appear, therefore that there is not one orthodox or universal definition, which does not exist anyway, but an individual’s possible premise ... As a rule, culture, which is spiritual and abstract, takes form in a people’s architecture, sculpture, ceramics, drawings, writings, music and dancing, poetry, drama and literature.

Antubam’s consideration of indigenous aesthetics was a strategy for understanding modernist expression in Ghana.

PART 7: The Lasting Impact of Antubam’s Art

Antubam sought a national art, “art [associated] not only with a country’s political history, but also with its people’s traditions and ways of life.”

Paradoxically though, the art forms of the Northern half of the nation were missing from the book. Moreover, his incorporation of Adinkra (the extensive body of symbols used on Akan memorial cloths, gold weights, and other art forms) into his own artwork exposed a conflict; his declaration of his abhorrence for “abstract art” was contradicted by the ample evidence of his use of this abstract imagery.

Examples include symbols he used in his masterpieces at Parliament House in Accra, especially the simple and complex use of abstractions on the ceilings of the main hall (1959 and 1960).

Circular concentric shapes (the Adinkrahene sign), embedded with smaller Adinkra motifs, are distributed over a grid. Antubam described carved wooden panels made for the same building: “symbolic” wooden reliefs hanging on either side of the balcony face you.

They are purported to symbolize Ghana’s dedication to the cause of effecting “African unity.” Later, Antubam was to experiment with oval shapes, taking the oval as an important elemental form in Ghanaian culture.

The European influence in Antubam's work is seen in his handling of the figures and the deployment of illusionistic space through the use of perspective. However, according to Antubam, mere naturalism applied in visual representation was vulgar since, if naturalism was the aim, photographs would be more appropriate.

Astonishingly, some of Antubam's opinions have relevance today, as abstract art still is seen by many Ghanaian artists as peculiarly Western, with no social relevance.

This is so, despite the complex meanings embedded in the abstract designs on Ghanaian pots, cloth, and so forth. Antubam first appears to turn to Adinkra symbols in eight illustrations for J. B. Danquah's first edition of *The Alcoa Doctrine of God* (1948) (Danquah 1968).

He continued to refer to these images as he illustrated numerous books and pamphlets, including Kofi Abrefa Busia's *Self Government* (1951) and a work by the noted composer and musicologist, J. H. Kwabena Nketia (1963). In his graphic artworks, a bold use of abstraction was most evident.

It could be argued that his usage of Adinkra symbols as graphic images was not abstract art, but merely schematic: a way of simplifying a depiction rather than rendering it in detail.

Some bas-relief designs on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Asante architecture would also appear to be schematic renderings of natural forms rather than abstract symbols.

In Antubam's graphic artworks, a bold use of these patterns was most evident in what he termed "symbolisms."

PART 8:

The conflation of subject matter from the modern and "traditional" realms is embodied in a colored pen-and-ink drawing by Antubam from 1961, *The Divine Supreme Chief Dancing to the Rhythm of the State-Drums*.

An emblem of power (a state sword designed by Antubam) is featured. A drum ensemble plays on as they are cheered by a royal courtier; a woman bows down and lays a cloth on the ground as a mark of great respect for a great chief who, dressed in kente, dances on the cloth.

In this scene of jubilation, which was reproduced in a local newspaper, the Daily Graphic, the 'divine supreme chief' shown as Nkrumah wields the sword as an instrument of power, authority, and leadership.

This is also seen in the murals Antubam painted for the Ambassador Hotel in 1957. These present agrarian landscapes from northern and southern Ghana and family scenes in idyllic settings. In two parts, the mural shows pictures of promise and prosperity for a new unified nation. Two northern chiefs, mounted on caparisoned horses, converse as musicians perform against a backdrop of Ghanaian mud architecture.

Shown in the distance are sailboats and the modern buildings of a booming township in southern Ghana. The self-sufficient nation is evident in the bumper catches of the fishermen in the second mural.

Horn blowers, linguists, and king are depicted in court life bordered by a royal purification ceremony and by a scene where six men enjoy a game of oware under a shady tree. Behind them, women pound fufu; a woman and a girl carry pots to fetch water, children are at play: this group merges with a farming family harvesting cocoa (of which Ghana was the largest world producer).

In both murals Antubam combines modern and vernacular architecture. His color scheme is influenced by colors of Ghanaian kente; the artist excelled in the use of complementary oranges and blues, evoking the rich atmosphere that prevails at the court of chiefs in southern Ghana.

Antubam did not give a title for the murals at Ambassador Hotel.

The British government presented Ghana with the modern building at independence, and it is likely Antubam was asked by Nkrumah to make a painting that would be a sign of unity for Ghanaians.

The subject matter links the agricultural landscapes and occupations of townspeople as well as celebrating industry. "Work and happiness" was the slogan of the Young Pioneers, the political group set up by the Nkrumah regime.

Understandably, in executing the Ambassador Hotel murals the scale of the work probably demanded simplification of the color gradations, leading to flattening out of planes: the dark lines surround the figures in this major work are unusual for Antubam. Art students from Achimota, such as Joyce Yawa Tawia and Seth Galevo (both practicing artists) and Frederick Adu-Nyako (now a civil engineer), had assisted the artist.

That we do not find Antubam's sketch books suggests all of his sketches and drawings were distributed widely or destroyed.

One of his finer drawings in pen and ink and watercolor is *Bathing a Baby* (1963). Perspective and formalized contours fuse with close observation of the human form.