

Approaches To Ghanaian Visual Arts

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a model for art teaching and learning. It identifies approaches to particular content of Ghanaian visual arts which justifies their uniqueness as a field of study. Six modes of art learning have been outlined: (1) the sources from which the artist finds ideas for artistic expression; (2) the tools and materials he uses; (3) the technical processes employed in creating the artifacts; (4) study of the artifact as a social object; (5) symbolic meaning and social significance of the artifact; (6) uses of the artifact. These modes are distinct subjects for study. The model is consistent with Ghanaian visual arts. It integrates cultural and social content with three modes of human development - cognitive, psychomotor and affective modes - with the approaches to study.

Keywords: sources, process, product, symbolism, function

INTRODUCTION

The problem of methodology in art teaching has been the concern of many art teachers in Ghana. Yet no adequate solutions have been found. At all levels of art education in Ghana, the tradition in teaching visual art has been to emphasise process and product. The learner learns how to make an artifact. Sometimes, one indicates what the work could be used for. But visual art learning must reflect the essential features of Ghanaian visual art which makes the subject unique. The study

of sources of artistic expression, tools and materials, indigenous and modern technical processes in creating an artifact, its meaning, social significance and uses together provide a comprehensive cultural approach to Ghanaian visual arts. The model caters for the basic theory of learning how to do something (acquisition of technical skill). It also provides for the principle of learning that (learning all the facts). Details of this model and elaborate examples of its application cannot be given in this paper. Only a summary of the basic concepts is presented.

The approaches to study being proposed here place the study of indigenous and modern visual arts into the Ghanaian cultural context. In this way, artistic expression in Ghana will be directly relevant to socio-cultural needs. This methodology is also designed to promote change of attitude from western-oriented concepts to authentic Ghanaian artistic mentality. The model may be adapted to meet individual teaching techniques.

SOURCES OF IDEAS FOR ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Sources here refer to all the ideas that relate to the natural and man-made, indigenous and modern environment. They also include the supernatural and mythology. For example, the ideas from the abstract Ghanaian spiritual values are used for sources for adinkra motifs and gold weights.

Some Sources of Ideas for Art

The following are indigenous sources of ideas:

- a. Natural order: God, gods, spirits (divine, evil, ghosts, ancestors)
Human form: male, female, baby,

- child, adult, aged
 Animal form: birds, aquatic animals, land animals
 Plants: trees (stem, branches, flowers, fruits, seeds), land and aquatic plants.
 Life cycle: pregnancy, birth, childhood, puberty, marriage, death, funeral
 Mineral forms: gold, diamond, iron, bauxite, shells, rocks, clay, coral
- b. Man-made environment: indigenous rural settlements, farm, fishing, transportation, shrines.
 - c. Social sources; religion and society - worship, rites, rituals, prayer, libation, sacrifices.
 Health and safety: juju, charms, herbalists, cleansing rites, Goodness and virtue
 Law and order: vice and anti-social acts, disgrace, dismeamour
 Recreation: music, dance, drama
 - d. Political sources; indigenous government, community life, economy, (peasant activities), royal regalia, (linguist staffs, court herald, treasury, royal attendants, installation, enskinning, destoolment)
 - e. Personal and interpersonal sources: self-awareness, self-concept, self-reliance, self-knowledge, self-control, self-expression, self and environment, adaptation to change, self-change and development, social and cultural consciousness, awareness of others.
 - f. Symbolic forms and sources of ideas: mythology - ananse, dwarf, reptiles, elephant, hawk, leopard, bat, parrot.
 Body marking symbols (scarification) hairdo - symbols, puberty symbols, headgear, adornment, adinkra symbols, linguist staff symbols, pottery symbols, canoe symbols, umbrella tops, gold eights, textile symbols, stool symbols, proverbs.
 - g. The following are modern sources of ideas:
 Modern architecture (towns and cities, structures) mechanised activities; transportation (rail, road, sea, air) modern government; civic responsibilities, modern religions, judi-

ciary, prisons, public occupations, recreation, tourism, health services, restaurants, bars, formal schools, fashion and costume, police, army, air force, news media, etc.

SOURCES OF IDEAS AS A SUBJECT OF STUDY

To learn about sources of ideas for artistic expression, the teacher discusses with the student the host of ideas from various sources. Out of these the student identifies an idea suitable for the kind of creative activity he wants to undertake. For example, after discussing plants as sources of ideas for art, the student may decide to choose a fruit. He chooses the pineapple as a motif for a linguist's staff he wants to carve. This exercise involves thinking (cognitive skill) and affective skill (feeling).

TOOLS AND MATERIALS

All gadgets used in transforming a material or medium into an artifact may be called tools. Materials are physical matter which make up the artifact. The adze, knife, brush, pencil, pen, cutlass, axe etc. are considered here as tools. Materials include paint, clay, paper, wood, stone, bone, yarn, dye, fabric, metal, rattan, straw, raffia, bamboo, palm rachis, etc. There is a diversity of tools and materials for art in the different regions of Ghana. Knowledge about the matter which makes up the material as wood, clay or metal, its characteristics, properties, durability and suitability for a particular artifact constitute an important content for study.

SOME TOOLS AND MATERIALS

- a. Indigenous tools and materials (plant, animal, mineral)
- b. Modern tools and materials (metal, power tools, paper, film, paint, inks, plaster, pen, tape recorders, camera, photographs, slides, video etc.)

TOOLS AND MATERIALS AS A SUBJECT FOR STUDY

A student wishing to carve a linguist's staff using his pineapple motif may first identify a suitable wood for

the work. He studies the properties and preparation of the wood. Similarly, he identifies the most suitable carving tools; studies their preparation, care and safety precautions in using them. These could be treated as a subject for study (cognitive and affective skill development).

THE ART PROCESS

Process refers to the transformation of materials and ideas into artifacts by indigenous and modern methods. The process of making an artifact begins as a chain of mental processes involving exploration, selection, simplification, abstraction, problem-solving and synthesis. These mental activities are co-ordinated by manipulating materials and tools. In doing this, the artist employs technical skill, competence, ability to perform or execute an artifact.

SOME VISUAL ART PROCESSES

- a. Indigenous art processes:
 - Ceremonial processes (puberty, marriage, funeral)
 - The festival as an art process (eg. Homowo, Kutum, Ohum, Fetu Afahye)
 - Performing arts (music, dance, drama, fishing, vending)
 - Visual art processes (pottery, basketry, leatherwork, carving, weaving, dyeing, printing etc.)
 - Poetry and literature (talking drums, lyrics, dirges)
- b. Modern art processes
 - drawing, painting, graphic art, ceramics, dance, drama, industrial and commercial art processes, etc.

PROCESS AS A SUBJECT OF STUDY

The student is led through the process of making an artifact. For example, he learns to carve the pineapple motif in wood. He employs one or several techniques in carving. This process integrates cognitive, psychomotor (manipulative) and affective modes of development. The emphasis here is on technology of carving such that in the end, the student would be able to carve a wooden pineapple.

THE END PRODUCT (ARTIFACT)

Product refers to specific artifacts as kente cloth, pot, bead, picture, stool, applique, leather bag, etc. It includes indigenous and modern artifacts.

Some Examples of Art Products

- a. Indigenous art products: buildings, clay products, fibrous products, leather products, textile products, stone products, metal products, wood products, expressive art forms.
- b. Modern art products: painting, ceramics, advertising, clothing, graphic art, modern architecture, sculpture.

PRODUCT AS A BODY OF KNOWLEDGE FOR STUDY

The artifact should be considered as a social object, a cultural product. It expresses the beliefs, values and life styles of the various ethnic groups in the African setting. The artifact is a source of psychological information, history, philosophy, anthropology and religion. In the African context, the artifact embraces the aesthetic and theoretic aspects of life. Aesthetic and utilitarian qualities are usually integrated in a given artifact. These qualities constitute the content for study. The student therefore, needs to identify these qualities about his carved pineapple motif for the linguist's staff. This approach to study is cognitive and affective. Response to the artifact is considered as its appreciation and judgement. The response may be carried further to include description of the work, analysis of its components, its interpretation and meaning.

SYMBOLISM AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRODUCT (ARTIFACT)

The meaning and social significance of an artifact may be referred to as its symbolism. In the African context, an artifact must necessarily have some relevance to life. For this reason, artifacts in indigenous society are made for specific functions.

SOME SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION

- a. Indigenous Expression (male motifs, female motifs, symbolic ways of doing things, expressive art forms, symbo-

lism in social and political order, symbolism of specific artifacts eg. carved pineapple motif).

- b. Modern Symbolic Art Forms (military symbolism, recreation, zodiac signs, national symbolism, traffic signs, religious symbols.

SYMBOLISM OF AN ARTIFACT AS A SUBJECT OF STUDY

In the African context, we express our cherished ideas and values of life in verbal or graphic symbols. We need to study and understand the concepts which underline our artistic expressions. The symbolic motifs as well as the meaning of the whole artifact should be explained. Taking the carved pineapple linguist's staff the student should understand the significance of the linguist's staff, its role in the office of the linguist and the royal administration. The significance of the pineapple as a multiple fruit - a symbol of fertility and prosperity - (of the individual, land and state) should be explained to the student. Integrated with symbolism is the response to the artifact - an important component in art learning. It is through such responses that the student acquires emotional (affective) growth as well as critical skill in talking knowledgeably about an artifact (cognitive skills).

USES OF THE ARTIFACT

The various functions of art in a society make a body of knowledge. Artifacts are used by individuals, groups or the nation.

Some Examples:

- a. Indigenous Uses of Artifacts (Socio-cultural uses, eg. totems, costume, celebrations, festivals, funerals, charms, healing, decoration, trade etc.) Personal uses, in the home, public, farm, entertainment, health etc.
- b. Modern Uses (commemoration, postage, industry, communication, emblems, political and academic uses)

Function as a Subject of Study

Indigenous life, artifacts are made

for economic, political, social or spiritual functions. Household objects, ritual objects, artifacts for funeral, work, entertainment, shelter, clothing and decoration are objects for study. The student learns about the functions of the artifacts in relation to his own environment. In the case of the carved pineapple motif, the linguist's staff may be used by a linguist in his royal and civic duties.

CONCLUSIONS

The teaching and learning model being proposed here is that it is possible to treat each of the six modes of art learning separately as a subject of study. On the other hand, all the six modes may be applied to one learning experience:

Sources of ideas for artistic expression
Tools and materials for artistic expression

The art processes

The end product or artifact

Symbolism and social significance of the artifact

Functions or uses of the artifact

The model is a comprehensive approach to visual art learning especially applicable to African visual art. Its uniqueness lies in the integrative quality of combining cognitive, psychomotor and affective modes of learning within a theoretical framework of learning "how to perform" as well as "learning that." The model also embraces the rich African cultural content and therefore provides a good grounding for a culturally-based education through visual art.

The intellectual dimension of the model is that Ghanaian artists need to study systematically and closely the indigenous philosophies of life as contained in:

religious ideas and practices
indigenous creative technologies
artistic values and qualities
attitudes and beliefs.

The model also stresses the concept of Africaness in the visual arts, and makes possible an integration of ethnic artistic concepts towards the development

of a national culture.

In the Ghanaian context, the model is especially suitable for the integrated vocational skills courses in the schools and colleges as well as tertiary institutions.

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