

## KENTE SIMULATION PAINTING: AN EXPERIMENTAL STYLE BASED ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ASANTE KENTE CLOTH

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper is to publicise the outcome of an experiment to create a new painting style called "Kente Simulation Painting". The research into the creation of this new painting style or technique commenced in 1994, and was inspired by the nature and transitional character of the Asante Kente cloth. A painting to be made in this style requires an outline drawing of the subject matter first on the support. Vertical and horizontal brush strokes of colours are then painted over the drawing carefully to ensure that the outlines of the motifs drawn are not obliterated. This is followed with the tinting and shading of the lines and motifs at vantage parts. Textures are then introduced, to complete the painting. This new style or technique produces unique and exciting picturesque paintings. Although Piet Mondrian's Geometric Abstraction also employs vertical and horizontal lines and shapes, the method of composition in the "Kente Simulation Painting" results in a touch of originality completely unlike Geometric Abstraction.*

**Keywords:** *Kente, Warp, Weft, Motif, Support*

### INTRODUCTION

The Kente Simulation Painting is an evolving painting style. It employs vertical and horizontal brush strokes combined with other shapes or motifs to compose pictures. The organisation of the brush strokes and motifs produce criss-cross patterns which imitate not only the interwoven warp and weft yarns, but also the woven strips of the fabric which are sewn together to form the Asante Kente cloth.

Modern trends in fashion and the strong desire to be individualistic rather than to conform to tradition has brought about changes in the usages of the Asante Kente. According to Ofori-Ansa, (1993) the Kente is internationally recognised, and has developed into one of the tangible manifestations of an ever-growing sense of Pan-African comrade.

The effect of modern technology and socio-economic changes has turned the Kente into an art form whose social importance now goes beyond ethnic, cultural and national boundaries. It

has thus become an art tradition in transition. It is now being used variously as decorative accessory of varying degrees. It can be seen in head-gears, hats, neckties, shirts, on handbags and foot wears. It decorates one wall of the United Nations Headquarters in New York U.S.A. (Ofori-Ansa, 1993).

This dynamism in the Kente culture together with its aesthetic qualities inspired the development of this new approach to painting, which commenced in 1994. The future prospects of Kente Simulation Painting is immense, since exhibitions mounted on it by the researcher both at home and abroad have attracted some public interest.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The usual materials required in making drawings and paintings, such as a pencil, brush, paper or canvas, and colour medium be it water based, oil

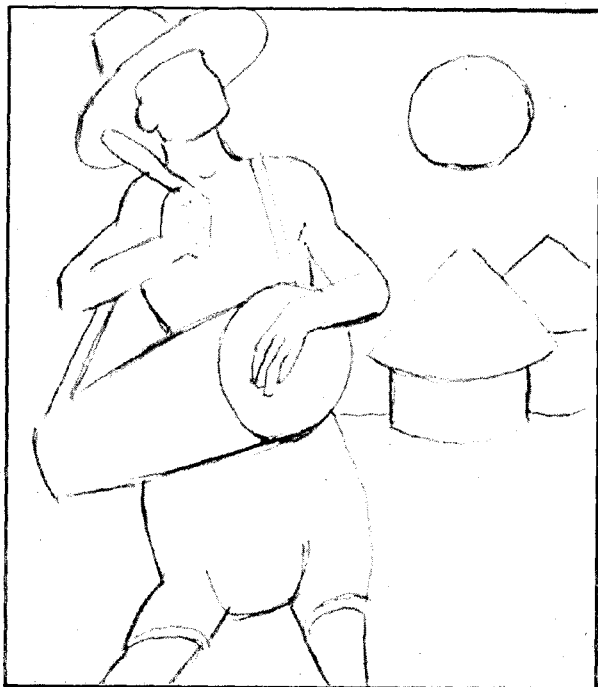
or acrylic are suitable for the kente painting technique.

Four steps or production processes are involved in this style of painting. An outline drawing of the motifs or images must either first be made on the support in accordance with the chosen theme or topic of the intended composition or made after the second step. The second step is the application of colours in vertical and horizontal strokes or strips all over the surface of the support. The third process involves tinting and shading of the vertical and horizontal strips of colour at vantage points to increase or heighten tonal effects. The fourth and final step concerns the creation of textures.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### Drawing of Images or Motifs

This is the basic organisation of motifs into a composition taking into account all the princi-



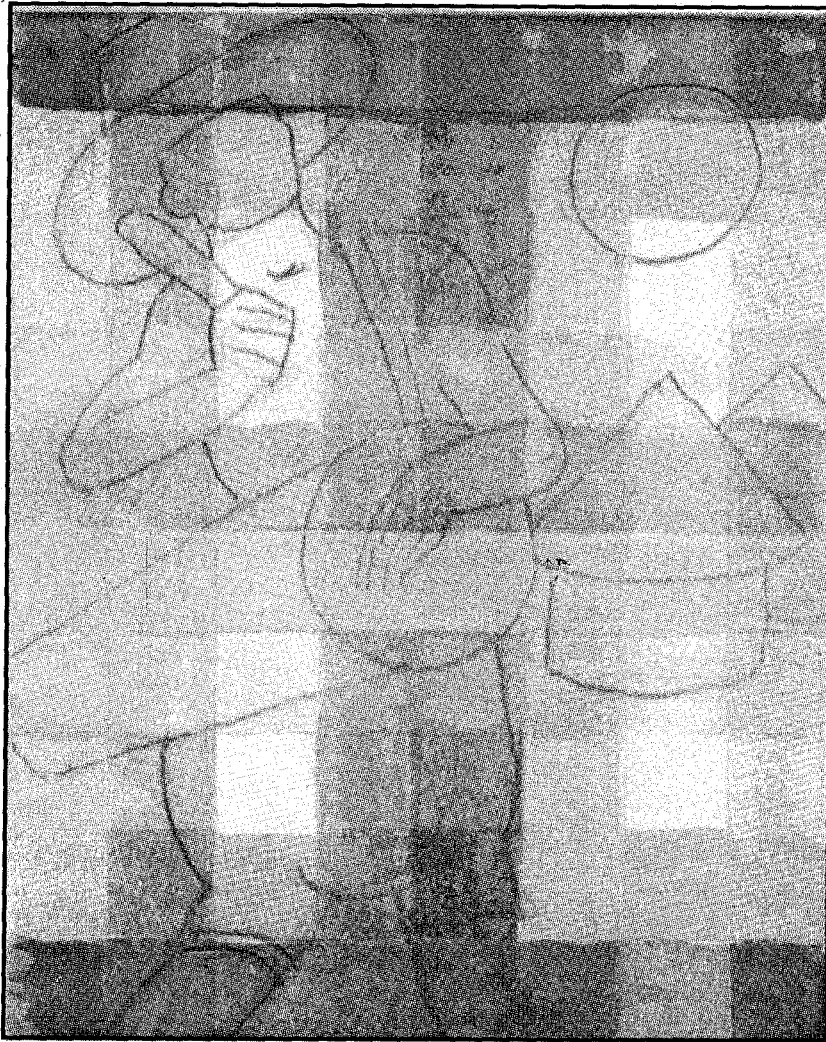
Step 1. Plate 1: Drawing of Images or Motifs

ples of design such as rhythm, balance, contrast, repetition, dominance, unity etc. This stage of the picture making cannot be neglected or down – played since it constitutes the solid foundation upon which the superstructure of colour application depends. This is based on the premise that a bad drawing or composition embellished in colour still remains poor. Greater attention is therefore required to come out with a good composition. (Step 1. Plate 1).

##### Application of Colours

Application of colours to the drawn motifs equally demands great attention and planning. The colour scheme needs to be determined before hand, and the appropriate palette or choice of colours selected. The medium or media is a matter of choice. A mixed media can be utilised as well as a single medium.

It is advisable to apply the colours lightly in the beginning, and gradually build up to very strong values. The application of col-



*Step 2. Plate 2: Application of colours in Horizontal and Vertical Strokes*

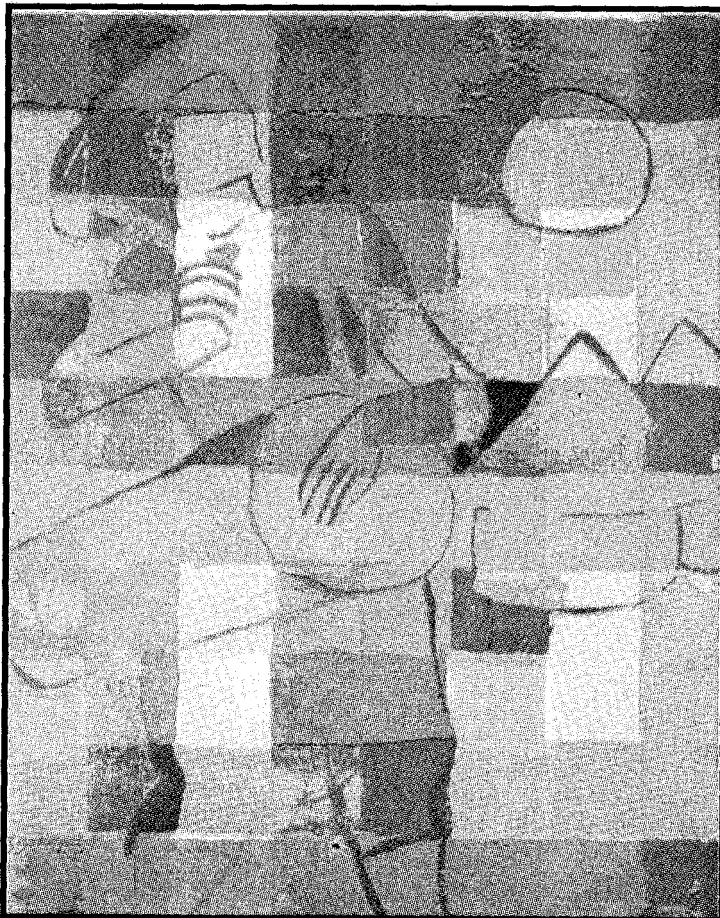
colours goes vertically and horizontally in imitation of the warp and weft of the Kente weaving process. (Step 2 Plate 2).

Care must be taken to get the vertical and horizontal strokes or strips of colours painted free - hand and as straight as possible on the support without the use of straight edges or rulers. The whole exercise should therefore be done free - hand. In this regard the use

of large brushes could be an advantage. Smaller brushes come in handy when textures are being introduced to emphasise or accentuate features.

#### **Colour Toning**

The initial colour application is light as already indicated. At this stage, the colours are either keyed up or toned down to achieve some amount



Step 3. Plate 3: Colour Toning

of tonal values at some points of the picture plane. This third treatment can actually be planned and worked out in a light-dark alternate pattern. This rhythm can be made to run either horizontally or vertically across the picture surface. The light and dark tonal values thus achieved however do not take away the flat or two-dimensional decorative nature of the whole composition. (Step 3 Plate 3).

This assertion is supported by Stewart Mary (2002) who stated that two-dimensional compositions are constructed from lines, shapes, textures, values and colour that have been arranged to create a unified whole. Lines, planes, volumes, masses, and space

are the most basic components of a three-dimensional composition.

As a two-dimensional decorative composition, it makes use of both the positive and negative elements on the picture plane. Turker Amy (2002) observed that design can be seen as an orchestration of positive and negative elements, both of which are necessary to the over-all composition. The dominant shapes in a composition are referred to as the positive elements; spaces that are not occupied by positive elements are perceived as negative space or ground. Two-dimensional art forms rely on the same play of negative and positive elements.

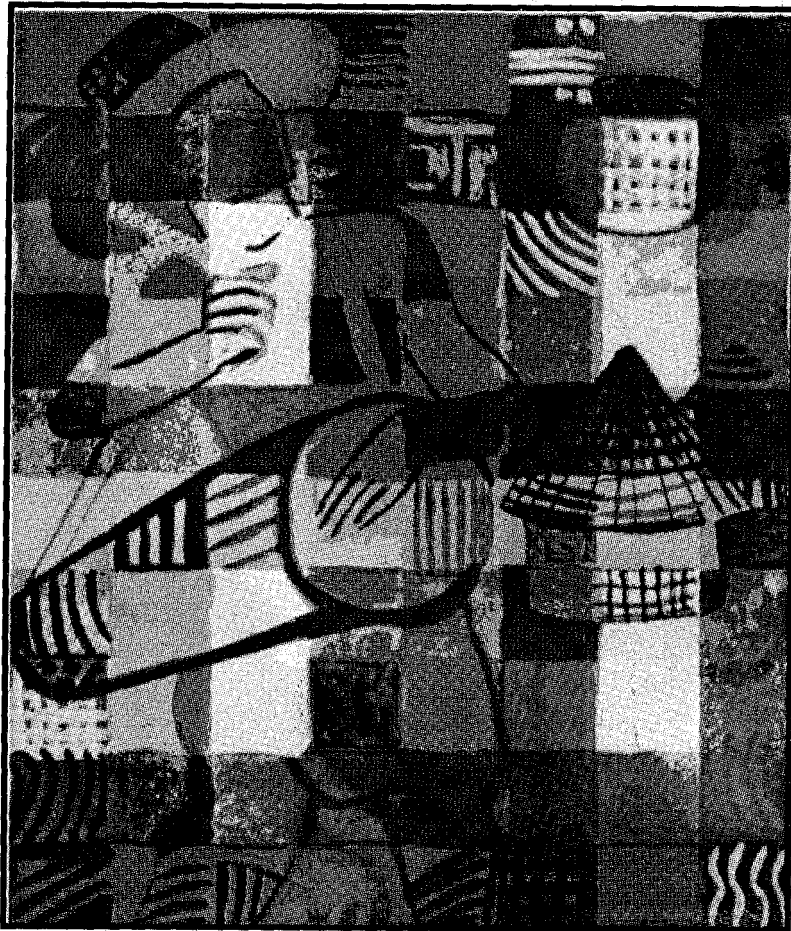
#### Creation of Textures

This involves the colouring of the shapes or motifs already established in outline drawings at the commencement of the production process. Here the whole outline, shape or parts of these motifs can be painted in colour

or colours according to the selected colour scheme. Other features can be put in fully or partially, depending on the preferences of the artist. (Step 4 Plate 4)

The purpose of the creation of texture is to emphasise or accentuate features of drawn motifs that might be obliterated or partially covered with colour during the colour application stage. In this regard, the creation of the textures in the painting is akin to the weaving-in of motifs or geometric shapes in the kente weaving process.

Just as the motifs or geometric shapes determine



Step 4. Plate 4: Creation of Texture

the name of the cloth, so does the introduction and accentuation of textures or motifs help to identify the theme in the pictures made with this style of painting.

#### HISTORY AND SYMBOLISM OF THE KENTE

Studies indicate that the Asante Kente is believed to have been developed by the Asante people of Ghana in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century AD., (Ofori-Ansa, 1993). The cloth has become one of Africa's visual art forms.

Put into its cultural context of use, it is a dynamic visual representation of history, philosophy, ethics, oral literature, religious beliefs, social values, and political thought of the Asante people. Warren opines that weaving was first practised in the north of Ghana; it was introduced to Ashanti by Otaa Kraban, from Bonwire, a village still famous for its Kente cloth, (Warren 1986). Bonwire is located in the Ejisu-Juaben district of the Ashanti Region of Ghana. It is about 16 kilometres north-east of Kumasi, the regional capital. The main occupation of the inhabitants is subsistence

farming and the production of cocoa as a cash crop. Bonwire has become the legendary home of Asante Kente weaving and a popular tourists and research centre on Kente.

According to Warren (1986), Kraban studied at Salaga where fuugu cloth was woven, and the style was taught by Fulani. Fuugu is a loose comfortable piece of clothing like a long shirt made of locally woven fabric of northern Ghanaian origin. Back home Kraban first wove cloth using raffia which resulted in a kind of basket cloth called "Kenten toma". The raffia material was however replaced with cotton obtained in the north. Warren continues that Kente in Bonwire was first woven from the silk of a spider called "okomantan". The silk from the spider was soon replaced by threads separated from imported silk garments, which were then re-woven, into the traditional Kente.

The early Kente according to Warren (1986) were not known to have had designs, whereas today, the cloth is not complete without "atomadwini" a design. Each pattern woven today has a name such as "akyempem", "mbaeda" and "amanpene". Most Asante Kente strips are identified by their warp-stripe pattern. The majority of Kente cloth consists of identical strips generally woven on a single long warp; thus, the cloth takes its name from the stripe of its strips. (Ross, 1998). According to Lamb (1975), there are Kente cloths made up of two or more different warp patterns which are less common but not unusual. These are typically called "Mmaban" which Lamb defines as "mixed" or "there are many". In these examples, the strips are usually designed in a regular pattern.

There are however, some exceptions to this general practice, in cases where the cloths are named for distinctive weft designs on a plain colour warp. An example is "Makowa" (little peppers). The name also expresses the proverb "Mako nyinaa mpetu mmre pe". (All peppers do not ripen at the same time). The only cloth in this category really woven with a plain-weave

ground and named for a solid-colour warp itself is "Sika futuro" (Gold dust) with gold ground colour of the cloth actually corresponding to its name.

Because Asante Kente names are primarily attached to stripe patterns, they are richly varied. It is however rare to find any correlation between name and pattern. Many cloths are named after important personalities such as chiefs and queen mothers. Examples are "Fa wo Hia Kotwera Agyeman" (Lean on Agyeman) in reference to Nana Agyeman Prempeh II the Asantehene (1935-1970), "Kyemee" - named after an important and powerful Asante chief known for his bravery (Rattaray, 1927) and "Mampon-hemaa" (Queenmother of Mampong). Others are connected with important historical events. Examples are "Ohemaa aba Ghana", (The Queen comes to Ghana), which pattern commemorates the visit to Ghana in 1961 by Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom and "Fatia Fata Nkrumah". (Fatia befits Nkrumah), Kwame Nkrumah was the first president of the Republic of Ghana. The design also commemorates Kwame Nkrumah's marriage to Fatia of Egypt before 1966. After Nkrumah's overthrow in 1966 it became known as "Obaakofo mmu man" (One man does not rule a nation).

Some names are derived from natural phenomena such as "Nyankontɔn" (Rainbow) and "Owia Repue" (Rising sun). Other names can also be derived from plants and animals. The large store of Akan proverbs provide names for several designs for the Kente Cloth. Some design names of proverbial origin are the following: "Fie buo ye buna" (Family management is not easy), "Woforo dua pa, na yepia wo" (If you climb a good tree you get a push) and "Papa nko akyiri" (Kindness does not travel far). Many designs represent the clan, social status, and the sex of the wearer.

The aesthetics of the Kente is affected or influenced by the Asante culture and its colour symbolism. The Asante colour symbolism is derived

from the general Akan colour symbolism which is discussed by Antubam (1963) under the heading "Notions of colour". From that discussion, some examples of the general symbolic significance of colours among the Akan people generally applicable to colour symbolism in the aesthetics of Kente cloth are identified as follows;

**YELLOW** in all its shades is derived from the yolk of the egg, ripe and edible fruits and vegetables and with the mineral gold. It symbolises sanctity, preciousness, royalty, wealth, spiritual vitality and fertility.

**PINK** is associated with female essence of life, and therefore linked with attributes such as tenderness, calmness, pleasantness and sweetness.

**RED** is linked with blood, sacrificial rites and shedding of blood. The colour is therefore used as a symbol of heightened spiritual and political mood, sacrifice and struggle.

**BLUE** is associated with the blue sky, the abode of the Supreme Creator. It is therefore used to symbolise spiritual sanctity, good fortune, peacefulness, harmony and love related ideas.

**GREEN** is derived from vegetation. It symbolises growth, vitality, fertility, prosperity, fruitfulness, abundance, health and spiritual rejuvenation.

**PURPLE AND MAROON** are both considered as earth associated colours of Mother Earth used in rituals and healing purposes with the power to repel malevolent spirits. They are also associated with feminine aspect of life.

**GREY** is derived from ash. Ash is used for healing and spiritual cleansing rituals to recreate spiritual balance when spiritual blemish has occurred. It is also used in rituals for protection against malevolent spirits. Grey therefore symbolises both spiritual blemish and spiritual cleansing.

**GOLD** derives its significance from the value and social prestige associated with the precious mineral – gold. Gold dust and gold nuggets were

used as medium of exchange and for making valuable royal ornaments. It symbolises royalty, wealth, elegance, high status, supreme quality, glory and spiritual purity.

**SILVER** is associated with the moon which represents female essence of life. Silver ornaments are usually worn by women and used with regard to spiritual purification, naming ceremony, marriage ceremony, and other community festivals. It is a symbol of serenity, purity and joy.

**WHITE** is derived from the white part of egg and from white clay used in spiritual purification, healing, sanctification rites and festive occasions. It symbolises contacts with ancestral spirits, deities and other spirits.

**BLACK** is associated with soot and symbolises ageing, spiritual maturity, intensified spiritual energy and spiritual potency. Visual effects and symbolic meanings determine the choice of colours for weaving the Kente cloth.

## CONCLUSION

This technique of organising motifs, vertical and horizontal strokes of colours in painting which is easier to do and takes relatively shorter time to accomplish is a new addition to existing styles of painting such as cubism, pointillism, expressionism, impressionism and abstractionism etc some of which are time consuming in their application. The existing painting style, bearing any similarity to the Kente Simulation Painting technique is the Geometric Abstraction of Piet Mondrian of Holland. Ocvirk *et al*, (1962) are of the view that Mondrian dealt with pure elements of form, but purged them of emotional extremes of romanticism. They contended that his art is the unemotional realization of line, shape, value, and colour pushed to maximum optical purity.

Getlein (2002) echoes this view and said that Mondrain distilled his art to what he considered to be the most universal signs of human order; vertical and horizontal lines, and the primary colours of red, yellow, and blue. To Mondrian,

these formal elements radiated a kind of intellectual beauty that was humanity's greatest achievement. Nature, with its irrationality and irregularity, encouraged humankind's primitive, animal instincts, resulting in such disasters as war. In Mondrian's vision of the world, people would be surrounded by rational beauty, and thus become balanced themselves.

However, unlike Mondrian's, the Kente Simulation Painting's characteristic combination of vertical and horizontal strips of colours and accentuated motifs produces a harmonious blend of colours and motifs especially at the various intersections. This gives it a uniqueness of style entirely unprecedented. The Kente Simulation Painting style is therefore a novelty and an original contribution to styles of painting available in the stylistic paraphernalia of artists.

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