

ART for TODAY

Art from Ghana

It is not often that a minister flies to London to open an exhibition of art from his own country, makes a speech and departs the next day. Asiedu Yirenkyi, the PNDC cultural secretary did just that when he opened an exhibition of Ghanaian art and sculpture at the Africa Centre as part of the month-long festivities focused on Ghana. But this is not surprising considering the importance given to cultural activities by the present government (see *Ghana Comes to London, West Africa*, March 12, 1984). That this was also a public relations exercise does not deter from the fact that he is probably the first African minister who has actually deigned to pay any attention to the 'fine arts' of his country. What is more, the exhibition is of contemporary art. Unlike other governments, the Ghanaian regime does not feel the necessity to crown itself as the country's saviour by presenting an exhibition of art from the past. What happens now and the need to lay a basis for the future seems to be the (correct) preoccupation – at least in the cultural field.

With over 25 artists exhibiting there is naturally a vast diversity of styles and subject matter. This decision to present a range of work instead of selecting two or three outstanding artists has the effect of giving us a panorama of the various tendencies. Unfortunately sculpture is not well represented and although there is no shortage of women on the walls, where are the women painters? And if they are rare, then the Ministry must take steps now to correct the imbalance so that we can see how the other half views Ghanaian society.

Considering that the last decade has been full of social and economic turmoil, the works on view, with the exception of four or five, give no idea of these events. There are nudes, a head of a woman, women pounding millet, fishermen, and even a *Theory of Evolution*. The most common subject matter is music – there are at least five works devoted to dancers and musicians.

The influence of Western art is still noticeable. Owusu Dartey uses muddy watercolors to depict rural scenes in the best traditions of English watercolorists and Ofusu-Appiah resorts to early cubism. Ayarkwa has cattle advancing under a torrid red sky not unlike the covers of cowboy novels. Perhaps the fact that a significant number of artists work in the commercial sphere has something to do with this though one feels that they should pay more attention to their rich traditions; after all. European designers at the moment are busy pillaging the visual and aural arts of Africa.

Kum Apem is another canvas suffused with reds reminiscent of the European genre of battle scenes though it is sufficiently distanced from that tradition by the immobility of the great mass of people and the symbolical presence of skulls. Death awaits the invader as in the Asante saying *Kum Apem A Apem Beba* – if you kill a thousand, a thousand more will come. Mette-Nunoo's other work, *Greys of Wisdom*, is a portrait of a man from the torso upwards. Why are his hands tied behind his back and why does he have a look of defiance . . . is he a prisoner? *Pacify*, a taut sculpture by Dogbe of a woman turning at the waist in agony, reminds us of the absence of women...why does she need pacification? The title says more about the sculptor than his work. The absence of religious works is a relief; the only one is by Dogbe.

Textile designs are another significant influence. Ackam's large decorative canvases could revert to being wrap around quite easily.

The Ashanti kings had their own Kente cloth patterns which they chose for their own exclusive use from the various designs presented to them; in times gone by, anyone caught wearing the Kings exclusive pattern would be condemned to death. Ato Delaquis weaves his own patterns, patterns not unlike Kente cloth but ones that are derived from the observation of life.

The life of *Kajetia Lorry Park* is conveyed in slabs of vibrant yellow, red and blue overlaid on muted tones. Like the cloth, the canvas is organized in horizontal layers. The two-storeyed buildings of the town form the horizontal band at the top. Below that is a green (grass) belt and then the tin sheds that are attendant to most activities in Africa. The rest of the picture (about two-thirds) is taken up by a band of lorries, buses and people; a large tree is confidently positioned in the middle of the lorries thereby avoiding rigor mortis. Delaquis tackles the market scene, a genre of contemporary African painting, with the same rigour. The constant movement, the general hustle and bustle, is transformed into a landscape of colors in movement; again, the canvas is organized in bands of people and sheds painted in the same vibrant colors. Instead of the tree, he inclines two rows of the covered stalls, the more to emphasise the horizontal layering.

Dr. Ablade Glover is perhaps the only artist to have exhibited in England before. Like Delaquis he stands about 60 metres above the group and views his subject with half closed eyes so that the whole is a blur. Unlike Delaquis he does not impose an order. In the two paintings exhibited here, the people have become a mass with no individual discerning features. In *Alla* they are kneeling – as if in the middle of Idd prayers.

In *Many are Called* he tones down Delaquis' palette and thickly applies it with a palette knife. We are watching here a part of a tapestry that could go on and on.

Kofi E. Setordji is another young artist who we shall hear more of in the future. Like Delaquis, he cannot confront a canvas without imposing a pattern upon it. In *Fish Harvest* he peers at the bottom of the boat just after the fish have been hauled in. They are still writhing. And Setordji sets about capturing the patterns formed.

The houses with their pitched corrugated roofs fill the canvas in *Curfew Series 2*. This time Setordji watches from above and transcribes the random streets and roads for in this neighborhood there are no right-angled corners, no street lights, no gardens, no trees, no people. It is night and silence walks these streets that exist outside the city centre and beyond the bungalows with their garden. It could have been a critical comment were it not for the lightness of the blues and mauves that he has chosen to record the national phenomena – the curfew. He is not against it; one feels that it has given him an excuse to rid the streets of people in order to observe the pattern of the houses. But this interpretation is only one of many. Brave and open minded is the Ministry that chooses such paintings as part of its national showcase.

Ambiguity also resides in Nii H. Abbey's *Freedom at Last*, a miniature mural on a scraperboard. Are the soldier in the centre and the one with his back turned to us in the corner, symbols of freedom like the raised fists with broken shackles? In this small space, Abbey records the days of slavery and the feudal kings, student demonstration, literacy, a family at dinner. Clearly freedom for Abbey is not only restricted to freedom of thought but also freedom from hunger and ignorance. He uses the same technique of juxtaposition of various images in the *Agege Struggle*. Agege is a small town in Nigeria and *Agege Struggle* symbolizes the

struggle for survival for emigrant workers. Abbey chooses to represent this particular aspect of Ghanaian history with symbols that not only portray the immediate aspects of loneliness and hard work, but also those that allude to the future. A man works the earth with a hoe, a lonely pregnant woman lies alone in bed at night, a thief, desire, returning workers in bell bottoms carrying cassette recorders, the Independence arch with the black star over; a teacher writes 'aluta continuo'. It is time Abbey was given a wall.

The black star, national symbol of freedom and independence, also appears in Sammy Bentil's *Our Friend in the Sky*. Bentil is a graphic artist; even his oil paintings look like posters. He should be let loose on billboards.

It would be unfair to pick particular artist but with these four, one can perceive the foundations being laid for new styles/schools of Ghanaian art, an aesthetic or rather aesthetics that are firmly based on reality but not over whelmed nor obsessed by it, aesthetics that fuse the new subject matter with the traditional modes of perception (the absence of single point perspective, flatness, a feeling for pattern), aesthetics that can borrow and adapt elements from other cultures but always in subordination to their own.

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