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| The Akwapim Six |
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| Modern African visual practice did not begin as an imposition from Europe, but rather because African women and men chose to master new technologies and media, beginning with photography from the 1850s, and turn them into practices of local relevance within the evolving local modernities of the continent. The formation of the Akwapim Six in Ghania pre-dated the better-known ‘Zaria rebels’ (The Zaria Art Society) by a decade. Like the latter group, it advocated a synthesis of the new techniques acquired through modern art education, and rich local resources in Africa. Moreover, The Akwapim Six enacted some ideas of the South African émigré H.V. Meyerowitz (1900-1945), an influential artist and educator in the Gold Coast. The group sought inspiration from tradition-based concepts such as Sankofa (a return to the aesthetic principles and artistic values of the past), as well as the theme of a national art contest for seeking out new talent. Sankofa was used as a strategy by Ghanaian artists as a way of underlining a history of their own modernity. Founder and artist of the Akwapim six society, Oku Ampofo, argued against a Ghanaian adoption of Western naturalism: ‘Just as the rhythm of African music is totally different from that of the West, so too is the ‘plastic’ rhythm of African art [...].’ |
| Modern African visual practice did not begin as an imposition from Europe, but rather because African women and men chose to master new technologies and media, beginning with photography from the 1850s, and turn them into practices of local relevance within the evolving local modernities of the continent. The formation of the Akwapim Six in Ghania pre-dated the better-known ‘Zaria rebels’ (The Zaria Art Society) by a decade. Like the latter group, it advocated a synthesis of the new techniques acquired through modern art education, and rich local resources in Africa. Moreover, The Akwapim Six enacted some ideas of the South African émigré H.V. Meyerowitz (1900-1945), an influential artist and educator in the Gold Coast. The group sought inspiration from tradition-based concepts such as *Sankofa* (a return to the aesthetic principles and artistic values of the past), as well as the theme of a national art contest for seeking out new talent. *Sankofa* was used as a strategy by Ghanaian artists as a way of underlining a history of their own modernity. Founder and artist of the Akwapim six society, Oku Ampofo, argued against a Ghanaian adoption of Western naturalism: ‘Just as the rhythm of African music is totally different from that of the West, so too is the ‘plastic’ rhythm of African art [...].’  File: Watching the Flock  Figure 1 Albert Osabu Bartimeus, *Watching the Flock,* 1976  Source: National Art Gallery, Accra  The Akwapim Six was the first Ghanaian modern art society to engage local art traditions and techniques with styles and genres from Europe. Oku Ampofo (1908-1998) wrote of the achievement and promise of his contemporaries whose works were exhibited in 1945 in Ghana and in England in 1949. Ampofo’s preference was for a ‘free and natural style’. Writing in 1991 Ampofo ‘[...] felt that creative art in Ghana was as important as political freedom and the two should go together to establish’ Ghanaian identity. Thus the ideology of the group was established.  The original six members comprised of Oku Ampofo, sculptor; F.A. Gyampo, painter-sculptor; J.D. Okae, painter / illustrator; E.O. Asare, weaver; John Christopher Osei Okyere, sculptor-painter; John Cobblah, ceramicist.  Others members included: Adi Darko, ceramicist; Emmanuel Owusu Dartey, painter; Alex Ofei-Aboagye, sculptor; Charles Philips, painter; Comfort Anno-Nyako, textile artist and Teddy Awuah, painter. Associate members included: Prof. E.V. Asihene, painter-sculptor, Christopher K. Agbolosu, sculptor / textile artist; Ekow Bentil, painter; Richard A. Charway, graphic artist, calligrapher / book designer / book art designer. The group held annual exhibitions in Accra but since the 1980s has ceased to exist.  File: Daughter of the Earth  Figure 2 Christopher Agbolosu, *Daughter of the Earth*, C 1970  Source: Centre for National Culture, Greater Accra Region, Accra  Notable members included: J.C. Okyere (b. 1912), appointed headmaster of Twifu-Praso Teacher Training College in 1965, received his training in art in Ghana and in Britain; A. O. Bartimeus (1927-1988) studied at the Kumasi College of Technology, Science and Arts, among the second intake of students. Bartimeus’s work uses a technique similar to the Impressionists, a technique which replaces outline and chiaroscuro by patterns of colour, designed to convey the diffusion of light. Bartimeus’s landscapes and figurative compositions reveal a strength in colour, applied with the use of *impasto*. Themes based on market scenes, durbars and local festivals were characteristic of Bartimeus’s repertoire.  Despite holding the post of Managing Director of Ghana Tourist Board in Accra (1972-1986), Bartimeus continued to exhibit both nationally and internationally. Christopher Agbolosu (b. 1940), who studied with Ampofo (1961-1964), worked as a textile designer for Patterson Zochonis Ghana Ltd. Agbolosu was involved as a sculptor with the Ghana Institute of Art and Culture, winning first prize for *Mother and Child*. This image was used for the statutory currency note Five Cedis in 1979. It was also reproduced in *Sculpture in Ghana* by Vincent Kofi (1964); Agbolosu was also a senior designer at Freedom Textiles Ghana Ltd.  File: Mother and Child  Figure 3 Christopher Agbolosu, *Mother and Child,* 2008  Source: Collection of Atta Kwami and Pamela Clarkson  Of varied educational backgrounds, the diverse media and techniques of production its protagonists ranged from painting, textiles, sculpture, pottery and illustration. Akwapim Six embodied tradition and modernity. J.C. Okyere, A. O. Bartimeus, Ampofo and associate members, E. V. Asihene and Christopher Agbolosu drew strength from the act of creation related to modern forms of representation, and the ancestral carvings in wood, drawing and painting traditions of Ghanaian art. While the sources of inspiration were profoundly Ghanaian, both in subject matter, spirit and the techniques employed were not unfamiliar to Westerners.    File: Adoration  Figure 4 John Christopher Osei Okyere, *Adoration,* c 1968  Source: Courtesy of *Cultural Heritage*, (1968), Accra: Arts Council of Ghana and Mobil Oil of Ghana Limited  Oku Ampofo, founder of The Akwapim Six, became the president of the Ghana Institute of Art and Culture in 1961 and later, Chairman of the Arts Council of Ghana (1969-72). Clearly, Ampofo took advantage of his position as Chairman of the Arts Council of Ghana to promote The Akwapim Six through its annual exhibitions. Much of of H.V. Meyerowitz’s philosophy was adapted and disseminated by Ampofo. For example: ‘to convince students that they have an African viewpoint to express and to share with the rest of the world; to re-awaken in the students the natural gift for designs and the creation of patterns to fill various spaces and shapes; Picasso and others have been inspired to explore a new outlook in painting by African sculptures, why shouldn’t the African seek to express his culture and other ideas or imagery in the painting media at the easel.  The most important aspect of Ampofo’s work with the group, inspired by Meyerowitz’s example, was to embark on nationwide tours offering lecture demonstrations in schools and colleges, |
| Further reading:  (Brown)  (July)  (John)  (Kwami) |