

## Culture of Hand-Painted Movie Posters - Heavy J

This documentary explores the culture of the era hand-painted movie posters, the life of artists after the decline of the artform and the unique challenges faced by artists, using Heavy J as a case study. Jeurs Oko Afutu (Heavy J) is a skillful Ghanaian artist, regarded one of the key artists in what is termed the ‘Golden age of Ghanaian hand-painted movie posters.’ These unique, colorful hand-painted movie posters were created using basic materials like flour sacks as a form of advertisement for the mobile cinemas and local theatres. Despite the decline in demand for this purpose, the hand-painted movie posters have gained a new audience overseas, with posters being exhibited and auctioned all over the world. Heavy J, one of the pioneers of these posters, opened a painting studio after the decline, but now paints primarily for movie poster enthusiasts and private art collectors.

Painting found Heavy J in a period of struggle in the country. In the early 80s, Ghana faced a famine, and for him, there was lack of seriousness in painting. Initially, Heavy J alongside other painters painted on a small scale to meet immediate needs, prioritizing these needs over future goals. However, around 88, he began to take his work seriously, rushing to complete errands and ensuring he didn't miss any important details. This marked a shift in his approach to painting in Ghana. The name Heavy J was chosen for its marketability, and he places a lot of emphasis on the importance of integrity and choosing a good name. According to the artist, ‘You must do your work well so that you will be remembered by it in future, not solely to survive or acquire properties’. Additionally, he emphasizes the need for honesty to avoid work-related problems, particularly avoiding bringing shame or stress to his family who are mostly concerned in his ability to support financially when needed.

Heavy J emphasizes the need for originality in design, recounting an experience where a customer insisted a replica movie poster of a reference image which caused him problems later. The original artist, who spoke in an interview with BBC, threatened legal action and insulted Heavy J for replicating his work without due process. With that being the only legal issue he had encountered in his career, he stressed the importance of adding and removing elements in design to make his works unique and avoid infringing on the copyrights of other artists or asking for permission from creators before replicating any work. He also revealed a new project; building a studio to work and showcase his art. Although incomplete, he was very proud to show his progress and stressed the importance of a suitable environment to work.

Beyond the struggles, Heavy J's values on art and work is insightful. He strongly believes that the legacy of an artist is dependent on the quality of their work and dedication instead of material gain, and rejects the opportunity to make money through inflated pricing, fearing it would cause younger artists to overcharge for their work as well. He argues that art should be valued for its ability to inspire critical thinking, and his criticism of Ghana's low regard for painting as a career reflects broader societal views on the subject. He continued painting even while facing financial difficulty, creating over a thousand pieces throughout his career, whereas many of his colleagues gave up for more secure careers. His commitment highlights the conflict between financial need and creative enthusiasm, yet he is still optimistic that poster art will be appreciated by future generations. In addition to being a personal story, the documentary gives insight into the essential function of art in African cultures.