

From Workshop to Three-Dimensionality: A Biographic Study of Commercial Artists in the Ghanaian Visual Arts Education



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ABSTRACT

The Ghanaian Visual Arts Education is a rich tapestry woven with threads of tradition and modernity, encompassing both the creative expressions of fine arts and the functional aesthetics of commercial arts. While existing scholarship has examined contemporary Ghanaian artists in academia, less attention has been paid to the specific contributions of the commercial artists who operate at the intersection of art, design, and commerce. This study sought to fill this gap by providing an in-depth biographic study of selected commercial artists and their professional lives, media, techniques, sources of inspiration, and impact on Ghana's creative economy. Employing a qualitative descriptive research design, the study was conducted in Winneba, Takoradi and Kumasi of Ghana with instruments such as semi-structured interviews, direct observation, artifacts and photography to gather the required data for the study. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the gathered data through a purposive sampling technique of the three participants. The findings discovered that these commercial artists navigate a balance between artistic expression and market demands by contributing to Ghana's visual culture and shaping its identity in a globalized world. The paper calls for further research by scholars and practitioners of Art Education into the diverse art forms of commercial artists and urges formal recognition of their role in Ghana's cultural and economic development. The study contributes to scholarship by highlighting the symbolic and philosophical dimensions of design practices and positions visual arts education in Ghana as a critical space where design, lived experience, and communal values intersect.

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INTRODUCTION

In Ghana's art ecosystem, the formal classroom is not the only site of education. Across cityscapes and village streets, art workshops resonate with the rhythm of mallets, chisels, and mentorship, embodying traditional systems of knowledge transmission. These creative hubs, often overlooked by academic discourse, serve as the informal classrooms of commercial sculptors and practicing other artists whose work not only fills galleries, shrines, and public monuments but also molds minds and preserves traditions.

As Mensah et al. observed, art education in Ghana historically extends beyond institutional walls, often taking root in community-based apprenticeships and master-student relationships.¹

In Ghana, commercial artists have historically operated outside the formal education system, often acquiring skills through apprenticeship-based workshops rooted in indigenous knowledge and informal training. These commercial artists, through hands-on experience and practical engagement with materials, have developed profound expertise in three-dimensional forms such as signage, sculpture, installation, and carpentry-based art. From these workshops emerges more than just finished artworks; they produce a layered, three-dimensional education, a form of instruction that blends hands-on technical training, cultural identity formation, and creative exploration. This metaphor of “three-dimensionality” is used here both literally and symbolically. Literally, it refers to sculpture as a spatial art form that exists in height, width, and depth, offering a tangible and immersive experience. Symbolically, it captures the rich, layered learning that takes place in commercial art spaces, where artists not only hone their hands-on skills but also carry forward indigenous knowledge and share deeply rooted artistic values and ways of thinking.

Despite operating outside formal curricula, these sculptors serve as vital educators, transmitting generational knowledge, cultural values, and artistic innovation through structured apprenticeship models. Kpodo et al. note that such informal systems often serve as parallel educational institutions, especially in underserved or rural communities with limited access to formal visual arts training.² Through public engagement, commissioned works, and mentorship, these artists contribute significantly to national identity and cultural continuity, often without recognition from official art education frameworks.

Using a biographic qualitative approach allows for a deep exploration of personal trajectories and pedagogical transitions of commercial artists into educators. By situating their experiences within the broader discourse of art education and skill transmission, this research highlights how informal learning spaces contribute significantly to formalized three-dimensional art education.³ This study investigates the lived experiences of selected commercial sculptors in Ghana, particularly from Western, Ashanti and Central regions. The research explores how their backgrounds, artistic philosophies, and professional challenges shape their roles in visual arts education by applying a biographical and qualitative lens.

The findings call for greater institutional acknowledgement of these sculptors not only as visual culture producers but as unofficial educators and custodians of Ghana’s creative heritage. Teixeira draws attention to the complex nature of preserving contemporary art, pointing out that meaningful documentation involves much more than just recording basic details.⁴ She argues that to truly preserve an artwork, one must understand its deeper meanings, its materials, form, symbolism, and the context in which it was created. This study explores the biographies of commercial artists to understand how their lived experiences influence teaching practices, student engagement, and the curriculum in visual arts programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Three-Dimensionality

The history of the expression of three-dimensional structure in art can be traced from the use of occlusion in Palaeolithic cave paintings, through the use of shadow in classical art, to the development of perspective during the Renaissance.⁵ Three-dimensionality refers to objects or space that express three measurements: length, width, and depth (or height). These objects are tangible forms that exist in the physical world; this may include relief images on a panel or statue of human bodies, unlike a two-dimensional drawing or painting on a wall or paper. Boakye-Yiadom et al., in a quest to differentiate a painting from sculpture,

¹ Fredrick Boakye-Yiadom, Evans Kwadwo Donkor, and Ronald Osei Mensah, “Exploring the Role of Project-Based Learning in Higher Education to Promote Indigenous Knowledge through Sculpture Students’ Engagement with Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols,” *Discover Global Society* 3, no. 1 (2025): 4.

² Reuben Agbelengor Glover, Cyril Senyo Kpodo, and Selasi Awusi Sosu, “Contract Cheating ‘Pseudepigraphy’. A Cardinal Sin in Higher Education? A Phenomenological Narrative of Andragogical Experiences, Insights and Reflections,” *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, December 24, 2024, 3140–56, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202451636>.

³ John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016).

⁴ Iêgo Rodrigues Coelho et al., “Democratic Formation of the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil of 1988 (CRFB/1988).,” *Revista Brasileira de Crescimento e Desenvolvimento Humano* 33, no. 1 (2023).

⁵ Boakye-Yiadom, Donkor, and Mensah, “Exploring the Role of Project-Based Learning in Higher Education to Promote Indigenous Knowledge through Sculpture Students’ Engagement with Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols.”

noted that sculpture is “a painting cut out and stood up somewhere,” emphasizing its tactile and spatial impact.⁶ Baker, stated 'By its nature, sculpture is simply more real than two-dimensional art forms; a carving of a person is more lifelike than the drawing of one'.⁷ Similarly, Mensah et al. opined that a German philosopher Hegel considered sculpture as the perfection of art in his classification of arts since it dealt with 'Idea and its reality'.⁸ This makes three-dimensionality not just a physical characteristic, but a metaphorical dimension, a means to layer meanings into form. According to Boakye-Yiadom et al., sculpture, unlike painting or drawing, is perceived “in the round,” allowing interaction from multiple angles and spatial relationships.⁹ The construction of three-dimensional work requires a high degree of skill and good eye, brain and hand coordination.¹⁰ Mensah et al. narrate that from the Western history of art, traditional sculpture was used to denote truthful mimetic representations of human form.¹¹ Though sculpture has transitioned from traditional to contemporary sculpture due to the introduction of new materials and techniques, it has, however, maintained its three-dimensional form. Velayutham & Raman assert that studying trends in contemporary sculpture-making is crucial for understanding the evolving artistic landscape and utilising various materials and techniques.¹² Boakye-Yiadom et al., an introduction to new materials and techniques beginning in the 1950s, welding metal, incorporating found objects and recombining industrially prefabricated units were some of the new approaches that were embraced and practiced.¹³ This includes wax, ivory, metal, plaster, concrete, clay and fiberglass. Markova offers a thoughtful look at how today's sculptors are expanding the boundaries of their art by experimenting with unusual materials and creative techniques.¹⁴ This throws more light on the shift in the approach to sculpture-making, with contemporary artists placing greater emphasis on using materials and artistic expression rather than traditional storytelling elements.

Yavuz explores how sculpture derives its meaning not merely from its form, but from the artist's deliberate process of making.¹⁵ This portrays the level to which artists push the medium's boundaries, ensuring that sculpture remains a dynamic and evolving art form. Contemporary sculptors continue to blur the lines between different art forms, incorporating elements of performance, installation, and digital technology. Sculpture as a three-dimensional object provides numerous benefits to both art education and society in general. Aftab emphasizes the enduring cultural and aesthetic relevance of sculpture in contemporary society.¹⁶ He emphasize that from ancient civilizations to modern times, sculptures have served as potent symbols of power, political statements, and reflections of societal values. Coşkun Onan and Ünlüsoy argue that researchers advocate that three-dimensional work attracts the attention and interest of children more than painting work.¹⁷ In this light, three-dimensionality also speaks to educational depth, as students not only engage with materials but also absorb embedded cultural narratives.

⁶ Boakye-Yiadom, Donkor, and Mensah, “Exploring the Role of Project-Based Learning in Higher Education to Promote Indigenous Knowledge through Sculpture Students' Engagement with Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols.”

⁷ Don Baker, *Beyond Forgiveness: The Healing Touch of Church Discipline* (Multnomah Press, 1984).

⁸ Boakye-Yiadom, Donkor, and Mensah, “Exploring the Role of Project-Based Learning in Higher Education to Promote Indigenous Knowledge through Sculpture Students' Engagement with Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols,” p. 4

⁹ Boakye-Yiadom, Donkor, and Mensah, “Exploring the Role of Project-Based Learning in Higher Education to Promote Indigenous Knowledge through Sculpture Students' Engagement with Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols.”

¹⁰ Boakye-Yiadom, Donkor, and Mensah, “Exploring the Role of Project-Based Learning in Higher Education to Promote Indigenous Knowledge through Sculpture Students' Engagement with Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols.”

¹¹ Boakye-Yiadom, Donkor, and Mensah, “Exploring the Role of Project-Based Learning in Higher Education to Promote Indigenous Knowledge through Sculpture Students' Engagement with Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols.”

¹² R. Velayutham and S. Raman, “Contemporary Sculpture-Making Trends and Their Educational Implications,” *Asian Journal of Arts Education* 18, no. 2 (2024): 34–47.

¹³ Boakye-Yiadom, Donkor, and Mensah, “Exploring the Role of Project-Based Learning in Higher Education to Promote Indigenous Knowledge through Sculpture Students' Engagement with Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols.”

¹⁴ D. Markova, “Eco-Art: Transforming Awareness through Creativity,” *DOM Art Residence*, March 18, 2025.

¹⁵ Ö. E. Yavuz, “A Study on the Problem of Meaning in the Art of Sculpture,” *Art and Design Studies* 114 (2023): 1–8.

¹⁶ M. Aftab, “The Importance of Sculpture,” *Pangea Sculptures*, 2023, <https://pangeasculptures.com/blogs/news/the-importance-of-sculpture?srsltid=AfmBOorWm1jmcirQ8QIy8NRgqCrPvQjp9BM9LrdlCLlZpUj-n5btFHJ>.

¹⁷ Burçin Coşkun and Kübra Karakaya Özyer, “The Effect of Student Characteristics and Socioeconomic Status on Mathematics Achievement in Türkiye: Insights from TIMSS 2011-2019,” *International Journal of Assessment Tools in Education* 10, no. 3 (September 22, 2023): 454–81, <https://doi.org/10.21449/ijate.1272517>.

Nature of Commercial Art

Commercial art in Ghana encompasses functional, market-driven artworks such as signage, advertising designs, souvenirs, architectural embellishments, and sculpture. These works are created by practising artists, often trained through informal apprenticeships or self-taught methods, and serve economic and cultural functions. Amenuke et al. were among the first to document Ghanaian artists across disciplines, including some commercial practitioners. However, comprehensive studies on commercial sculptors have remained limited.¹⁸ Danso and Berko attempted to fill this gap by documenting the lives of practising artists, revealing their crucial role in community art education and cultural preservation.¹⁹ Boakye-Yiadom et al. highlighted the importance of informal learning spaces, such as commercial art workshops, in transmitting indigenous knowledge and artistic philosophies.²⁰ He argues that commercial artists often serve as cultural intermediaries, translating traditional aesthetics into modern contexts. They provide accessible artistic experiences to the public, particularly through works displayed in community spaces, festivals, and religious institutions. Their practice bridges the gap between formal art education and community-based cultural transmission.

In sculpture, commercial artists contribute to public memory through busts, monuments, and commemorative pieces. These works are not only decorative but didactic, teaching history, morality, and tradition. They also reflect economic innovation by adapting new materials such as fibreglass and concrete and finding objects to suit modern demands.²¹ Commercial artists often face systemic marginalisation in Ghana's educational and policy frameworks despite their importance. They are rarely included in visual arts syllabi or consulted in curriculum development. However, their workshops often function as informal schools, teaching techniques, discipline, and cultural knowledge to apprentices in ways that rival formal institutions.

Art education in Ghana exists at the intersection of tradition, modernity, and national development. Historically, artistic training in Ghana was rooted in informal systems of apprenticeship, where young learners acquired craft skills such as carving, weaving, beadwork, and sign painting by working under established masters in workshop settings. These systems emphasised practical skill development, creativity, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems, which were deeply embedded in cultural, spiritual, and social practices.²²

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research uses Pierre Bourdieu's sociological ideas, including habitus, field, capital, and praxis, to explore how commercial artists in Ghana build their professional identities within visual arts education. Habitus refers to the habits, attitudes, and ways of seeing the world that artists develop through life experiences. For Ghanaian commercial artists, this includes influences from family, informal apprenticeships, and time spent in workshop communities. These shape their creativity, ambitions, and how they respond to challenges in the art world. The field is the social space where artists work, such as schools, workshops, galleries, markets, and cultural institutions. Each of these settings has its own rules and power structures that artists must navigate to gain recognition and grow their careers.

The field influences which kinds of art are respected and who gets acknowledged as a legitimate artist. Capital refers to the resources artists can draw on, like money, training, networks, and reputation. Many commercial artists in Ghana rely heavily on cultural capital from apprenticeships and social capital from relationships with mentors, clients, and peers. These can be just as important as formal qualifications in shaping their success. Praxis is about what artists actually do, the strategies they use in everyday life to progress, such as blending tradition with market trends, using new tools, or forming partnerships. This framework shows that an artist's journey is shaped not just by personal choice or raw talent but by a

¹⁸ S. K. Amenuke et al., *General Knowledge in Art for Senior Secondary Schools* (Accra: Ministry of Education, 1991).

¹⁹ S. Danso, "The Role of Apprenticeship in the Development of Traditional Arts in Ghana" (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 1996); A. B. Berko, "Disabled Artists and Their Contribution to Ghanaian Art" (University of Education, 2009).

²⁰ Boakye-Yiadom, Donkor, and Mensah, "Exploring the Role of Project-Based Learning in Higher Education to Promote Indigenous Knowledge through Sculpture Students' Engagement with Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols."

²¹ I. Opoku-Mensah, "Innovative Use of Materials in Ghanaian Sculpture," *Sculpture Review Africa* 4, no. 1 (2018): 12–19.

²² Boakye-Yiadom, Donkor, and Mensah, "Exploring the Role of Project-Based Learning in Higher Education to Promote Indigenous Knowledge through Sculpture Students' Engagement with Ghanaian Adinkra Symbols."

complex mix of social structures, support systems, and individual actions. It highlights the dynamic and creative ways that commercial artists in Ghana build their place in the visual arts world.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a qualitative research approach to examine how commercial artists in Ghana contribute to three-dimensional practices within the field of visual arts education. The study was guided by Art-based research (ABR) positioned within the parameters of the qualitative research design. Barone and Eisner defined Art-based research as a way to enhance understanding through the communication of subjective realities that can only occur through works of art.²³ They also indicated that Arts-Based Research blends creativity and inquiry, enabling researchers to explore, express, and share knowledge through artistic mediums. The qualitative research design was used to conduct a biographic study of three commercial artists and their sculptural works as part of an empirical artistic study. The researchers used this approach to help them collect a large amount of data from a small number of artefacts through direct observation, artefacts (sculptural pieces), photography and semi-structured interviews to obtain the needed data. The qualitative paradigm was selected because it emphasises context-specific understanding and the lived experiences of individuals, critical for exploring the often-underrepresented influence of workshop-trained artists in academic settings.²⁴

According to recent scholars, employing multiple data collection methods such as interviews, observations, artefacts, and photography enhances the credibility, authenticity, and trustworthiness of qualitative research by allowing for triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.²⁵ The sample for the study was chosen using a purposeful sampling of three selected commercial artists.²⁶ All interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants' consent, and observational data were documented through detailed field notes. Data were thematically analysed through organisation, transcription, and interpretation of the dataset.²⁷ Ethical clearance was obtained from the participants involved in the study. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings of the study.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Biographic data of James Boakye

James Kwadwo Boakye, also known by his friends as Okomfo, was born on 5 February 1951 at Sekyere Dumase in the Ashanti Region. He was born into a Christian family and is married with five children. According to James, he became disabled after an injection given to him by an unknown person as a result of illness as a young child at the age of five years, and since then, he has not been able to walk.

²³ T. Barone and E. W. Eisner, *Arts-Based Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 2012).

²⁴ J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (SAGE Publications, 2018).

²⁵ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*; U. Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 6th ed. (Sage Publications, 2018); S. J. Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*, 2nd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).

²⁶ Prabhaker Mishra et al., "Descriptive Statistics and Normality Tests for Statistical Data," *Annals of Cardiac Anaesthesia* 22, no. 1 (2019): 67–72.

²⁷ John Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, SAGE, Ca; Ofprnia (California: Sage Publications, 2013); Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.



*Figure. 1: James Kwadwo Boakye
Source: Fieldwork data, 2017.*

James had his basic education at the Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) Primary and Middle Schools at Kumasi (1964 –1973). From there, he met Mr. W.K. Enin around 1969, who decided to sponsor his secondary education at Kumasi Academy due to one of the works he made, a life-size statue of Dr. Kofi Abrefa Busia (Prime Minister of Ghana from 1969 to 1972). He then continued to the College of Arts and Industries at Kumasi. From the College of Arts and Industries at Kumasi, he decided to start something on his own since there was no one to sponsor his education. In 1996, the Ghana Tourist Board declared him the man of the year. He has also attended numerous workshops and seminars, such as the Aid to Artisans Ghana (ATAG) seminar in 2001.

Professionalism and artistic experiences

His life as a sculptor began at a younger age, around six, when he used to model domestic animals like dogs, hens, goats, etc, with clay. According to the artist, nature has been his major source of inspiration. He further elaborated that the natural world is a source of inspiration through observations of natural forms combined with his creative use of shapes, which lie at the heart of his sculptures (James Boakye, Personal Communication, 20/08/2017). The people around him also greatly inspire him, his apprentices and others who appreciate his work. This makes him feel he has gotten to a point where people look up to him, and therefore, he needs to push harder. James Boakye made several creative works, and he was recommended to join other artists at the Kumasi Cultural Centre in 1984, where he has been working to date. James has been practising for more than twenty years. The themes for his works centre on religion, social, cultural and political figures.

Personal philosophy of a sculptor

“Revelation of thoughts”, according to the artist, believes the best way to express his ideas is through his creative skills or artworks. Therefore, his sculptures are meant to be shared among people in a particular locale or environment and to expose his natural capabilities. As a physically challenged sculptor, he intends to reveal his creative skill within an entity to be shared through the vivid expression of his mastery of representations.

Tools, Materials, and Techniques employed by James Boakye

Due to the artist’s production technique, his tools and materials are limited. The artists' modelling tools used to manipulate the material into the desired shape include binding wire, mallet, chisel, their hands (fingers and thumb), spatulas and trowels of various shapes, sizes and styles. He uses these to cut, scrape or shape the modelling material to create a specific effect. They are usually produced from carbon steel, stainless steel, wood, and plastic. Among all the tools mentioned above, he identified the trowel and spatulas as his favourite tools. Sandpaper, parting agent (oil or clay slip), steel/wire mesh, cement, clay, wax, P.O.P. and paper are the materials used to produce his works.

James Boakye's Artistic Mentors

He believes that we learn from our masters and that Mr. Jacob Agazie inspires him. According to the artist, Mr. Jacob Agazie, he was influenced by his art style and served as his master when he was young. He always assisted him by giving him directions and borrowing his tools when he lacked the capital to purchase them. He also mentioned Mr. Isaac Opoku-Mensah, a sculpture tutor at the University of Education, Winneba. He is fascinated by his detailing and finishing in sculpture, which makes his works geared towards bringing life into being. These peculiar characteristics of his mentors have greatly influenced his works by paying much attention to the finishing, which some sculptors lack (James Boakye, Personal Communication, 20/08/2017).

Challenges faced by James Boakye

As a physically challenged artist, his greatest challenge has been the perception of disability. People look down upon him because of his physical disability, and he has been denied several commissions because of his attitude towards his disability. Berko unearthed some physically disabled artists and their contributions to the nation. It is clear-cut that disabled artists contribute to the nation religiously, economically and politically.²⁸ This study is of the view that disabled artists should gain a voice and a platform that can push them further, faster, to alter societal perceptions around disability. Financial constraints are one of the challenges he faces as a commercial sculptor when purchasing tools and materials. He lacks modern tools and equipment to help execute his work. Lastly, as a disabled sculptor who primarily uses his left hand, he relies on others to lift and carry materials, which affects him emotionally when non-disabled individuals are reluctant to help.

Major Contributions to Ghanaian Visual Arts Education

Mr. James Boakye has trained over one hundred (100) individuals who have acquired the knowledge and skills in direct modelling and casting. They included students from various universities and polytechnics who had industrial attachments at his studio to study under him and gain experience. Other works of Boakye are statues for various religious organisations, such as the crucifix, the statue of the Virgin Mary, and other sculptures found in churches. James Boakye is also known for his political sculptures, such as the life-size statue of Yaa Asantewaa, Dr. Busia, the first President Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah and the bust of former President of the Republic John Agyekum Kuffour. He has also made countless busts of principals in schools across the country. To mention but a few, Charles Quaye (the first headmaster of Fijai secondary school), former headmaster of Efyia Kubi Senior High School, etc.

Artistic works of James Boakye



*Figure 2: Frontal view of Boakye's studio, Cultural Centre, Kumasi.
Source: Fieldwork data, 2017.*

²⁸ Berko, "Disabled Artists and Their Contribution to Ghanaian Art ."

Figure 2 above depicts two life-size sculptures of a seated man and a woman carrying a baby on her lap, located in the Kumasi Cultural Centre. This sculpture symbolises solidarity through the woman caring for the minor child. The artists modelled directly using cement as the primary material and later gave the work a bronze finish. Each receives great care of proportionate balance, and he utilises his modelling tools to establish surface quality and repeats folds to define drapery. The traditional outfit of the figures discloses the Ashanti cultural dressing as the man is wrapped in a cloth with both arms exposed, and the bulk of the cloth is lying on the left shoulder, whilst the seated woman, taking the attention of the playful child, wears Kaba and Slit, making its way back to headlining African fashion.



Figure 3: Angels
Source: Fieldwork data, 2017.

The beautiful outdoor angel statues made by Boakye in Figure 3 are in cement. These sculptures have been given a multi-coloured finish. According to the artists, these figures are made to suit their client's taste since it was a commissioned work. He had to finish the work in a European style to meet their demand. Figure 3 depicts two angels posed in different gestures. The left statue has its left hand pointed at its chest, while the right has both hands holding a small plate and showing holiness and modesty. Both statues are characteristically winged and show expressive details of light eyes, dark hair, and comely features and fine bodies that lack whole masculine musculature, body hair and beard. The angels also depict more feminine characteristics than masculine ones.



Figure 4: Yaa Asantewaa, Ejisu Roundabout, Kumasi.
Source: Fieldwork data, 2017.

This life-size sculpture was erected at a public arena (Ejisu roundabout) in 2009 to bring out “national memory” about the anti-colonial warrior Yaa Asantewaa and other personal losses in the past to remember the bravery and unity of the “nation” against British colonialism in 1900. The concrete in the round of "Yaa Asantawaa" (Figure 4) shows how the artists handle volume and balance. He sculpts Yaa Asantawaa wearing an amulet-laden smock (batakari kese) in a contrapposto pose, holding a rifle. Her pose looks independent and energetic as the artist makes good use of his modelling tools, making the works successful. James shows sharp drapery that depicts the folds of her war smock and wrapped skirt. The statue is raised above the surface of the ground, and it stands on a higher pedestal to make it visible from all angles to the viewer. Mid-reliefs of adinkra symbols such as “Akofena” and "Gye Nyame" on the concrete pedestal symbolise courage, valour, majesty and heroism. The just-mentioned symbols in the figure reflect the true charisma of Yaa Asantewaa.

Biographical data of Gilbert Forson



Figure 5: Gilbert Forson
Source: Fieldwork data, 2017.

Gilbert Forson is a thirty-two-year-old sculptor raised in Mankoadze, a suburb in the central region of Ghana. He is married and has four kids, two boys and two girls, respectively. He is a Christian and worships at the Covenant Community Church. Forson had his primary and middle school education at Mankoadze Primary and Junior High School, Mankoadze. He couldn't further his education due to his parents' financial status. According to Gilbert, he has never received an award since his time in practice. He has been practising for more than fifteen years. He believes his works are not made to perfection, and thus, he is still learning. His works centre on religion and social, cultural, and political figures. Forson's life as an artist began after completing Junior High School in 1992. He broke away from painting due to the low demand for manual printing as the digital method was introduced. In 2002, he decided to try his hand at sculpture and has been practising to date. He postulated that no one taught him how to sculpt; he started everything on his own.

Philosophy of the Sculptor

“Beautification and purpose” is the rationale behind the artist's creative pieces. He stirs the viewer's mind with this ideology, as one may wonder the exact type of beauty this artist sought to put across. The beautification aspect of this philosophy interplays with the technical term aesthetics, which is in synergy with beauty and the sublime. Taking a close look at his works in Figure 6, his multi-coloured works exhibited in front of his studio are given the European finish because it is perceived that everything about the Westerners is beautiful and, in his attempt to decorate the environment, he gives his works the European touch to make them pleasing to the eye.

Tools, Materials and Techniques employed by Gilbert Forson

Forson uses different sizes and shapes of knives, trowels, cutting wire and brushes to produce his artefacts. At the same time, the materials include Portland cement, white sandpaper, iron rods, cement, P.O.P. and

sand. According to the artist, his favourite tool is the trowel since it is used multi-purposely. He models with it and uses it to smooth the surface of his works. His primary technique in sculpture is direct modelling. The artist smoothly adds a concrete mixture bit by bit to the mesh armature using a trowel. He then reinforces the work with a two-layer mesh to help the outdoor sculpture resist extreme temperature conditions. He later applies the material over the top surface to define his shapes. Spatulas are then used to bring out fine details. Unlike James, Forson applies P.O.P. to the modelled work before sanding to give it extra smoothness. A Decorative coating, such as pigment, is then applied to the sanded work to enhance its beauty.

Challenges faced by Gilbert Forson

The lack of good professional criticism has been a big challenge to Gilbert. He stated, “Apart from God, who gives me ideas, I have never had a mentor since practising sculpture” (G. Forson, personal communication, 16 June 2017). According to Forson, no one taught him how to sculpt; everything was a struggle till he got it right. He lacks a good critic to bring out his mistakes, and he often relies on commission clients for feedback. He also faces the challenge of marketing. Though his studio is on the highway, few people stop. He dropped out of school early, which has affected his ability to use the computer or the internet to market his art through social media campaigns and some advertisements in local media. This is a great gap since social media is the modern way of reaching out to people and showing them your abilities. Gilbert always thinks about what to sculpt next rather than how to sell them. This has made him unable to win national or international contracts.

Major Contributions to Ghanaian Visual Arts Education

Forson has made fountains and statues of animals such as horses and birds. Elephants, etc., are mounted in hotels, guest houses, and individual homes to enhance the beauty of their respective environments. Educationally, this craftsman has contributed to society by training several individuals to develop their knowledge and skills. This has made it possible for individuals to make a living through this craft by offering training and employment, hence playing a good role in the nation's economic growth. Religiously, Forson has produced sculptures of different types and sizes found in traditional houses, churches and shrines to disclose the religious identity of individuals and groups. In 2012, he was commissioned to make statues of some icons in the Bible (Moses, Joseph, Mary, etc.) for Prophet Samuel Koffie, popularly known as Dr. Jesus. He also made a similar work for Apostle Kwadwo Sarfo and other crucifixes found in roman catholic churches, which depicts a representation of a cross with a figure of Jesus Christ on it. He has also produced miniature and life-size figurines mounted in front of or inside concrete shrines (Posuban).

Works of Gilbert Forson



Figure 7: Fountain
Source: Fieldwork data, 2017.

The fountain (fig. 7) is conceived primarily as an ornamental feature, intended to augment the visual and spatial aesthetics of its environment. Executed by Forson, this sculptural waterfall fountain, crafted in concrete, was commissioned for a mountain guest house situated in Kasoa. Rising to a height of five feet, the structure incorporates a submersible pump mechanism that facilitates a continuous cycle of water, cascading elegantly from the apex into a basin before being recirculated upward. As an outdoor installation, it contributes significantly to the landscape design, introducing dynamic movement and an auditory element of tranquillity.

Formally, the work invites multiple interpretive readings. When apprehended in the round, its silhouette bears a striking resemblance to the royal umbrella, a potent symbol within Akan traditional culture signifying authority and reverence. Alternatively, a critical perspective might discern a series of these umbrellas rendered in inverted form and varying scale, suggesting a deliberate play on repetition and transformation. Such ambiguity enriches the fountain's sculptural language, positioning it as both a functional object and a culturally resonant artistic statement.



Figure 8: Posuban figures, Mankessim

Source: Fieldwork data, 2017.

In Figure 8, Forson presents four concrete life-size statues mounted at the entrance of *the Posuban* shrine. The shrine is located in the trading towns like Elmina, Mankessim and Anomabu. He surrounds the shrine with four strong male statues in different postures and is well-clothed in a traditional style. Though the figures have the features of humans, they lack the right proportions and have sharp drapery effects that make them look more artificial. Each figure is symbolic, usually related to do with religion or how to have power over their enemies. Perspective-wise, the artist presents a projecting man with masculine features, wearing a red and white *batakari*. In his right hand, he holds forth a stick, indicating the power of the *Asafo* company. Behind this figure is a bald man wrapped in a traditional cloth with both arms exposed, and the bulk of the cloth is lying on his left arm; from his frontal stance is another figure dressed in a white and green shirt with jeans and trousers. He holds a traditional drum in his left arm, showing his joy or victory for the *Asafo* company. Behind the bald man is another figure of a man wearing an amulet-laden smock.



Figure 9: Chief's Palace Mural

Source: Fieldwork data, 2017.

Figure 9 is the palace of the chief of Gomoa Kumbe in the Central Region. The palace has a clean environment, and extensive wall decoration welcomes visitors. The elaborated concrete mural is the most striking feature of the building. The frontal part has a boldly modelled bas relief with a large variety of designs comprising an image of a lion standing on a traditional stool with a rat in its mouth, swords at both ends of the stool, and accompanied by inscriptions hovering over the entire design in curved form. Gazing at the emblem in the pediment, the two ceremonial swords at both ends represent the chief's authority and serve as a kind of spiritual protection of the kingdom.

Biographical data of Ray Agbo



Figure 10: Ray Agbo
Source: Fieldwork data, 2017.

His educational journey started in Togo, where he lived with his uncle, though it was the dream of his parents for him to become a medical doctor, but things got twisted along the line. Ray Abgo started his basic education at Lome, Anehoe, Sokodei and Paleme (Togo). Due to the nature of his uncle's job, they kept moving from one place to the other. In 1986, he completed his basic school at Kpalime and continued to a veterinary school (1987) for a year. He then attended an art school from 1989 to 1992 and later taught as a drawing teacher at Lome. Though he won the grants for the Alias Norbert Foundation in 2004, he doesn't believe in awards because he feels they are dicey, and it kills creativity. Agbo has been practicing wood carving for over twenty-five years. In 1993, he started practicing as a wood carver in Takoradi-Ghana and organised his first exhibition in 1997. He later discovered new avenues and techniques pertaining to the practice of sculpture, through workshops and exhibitions organised in Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin, etc.

Personal Philosophy of a Sculptor

"Bringing hidden beauty to life", his philosophy denotes his taste for discarded materials as he unearths the beauty in the so-called "rubbish" and alters them to have pleasant effects on the human eye. He believes creation contains both seen (physical elements) and unseen (hidden) desires that energize people to come out with what they possess. These possessions are the very capabilities and values that accompany the artist's works, since he believes his materials communicate with him. In addition, his artistic composition of discarded materials should make the viewer bring back home what he disposed of in his bedroom.

Source of Inspiration

Nature is his source of inspiration; he believes everything about nature is beautiful, especially the shape of a woman for taking into considering the body contours. This portrays his taste for natural materials such as wood. His work titled "freedom" depicts a fire outbreak in a forest as people escape from the

centre. The artist uses only tree branches to create this piece. The work is well-sanded and polished to enhance its natural appearance. He is mentored by Kofi Setodje and El Anatui because of the natural look of their works. Agbo is fascinated by their use of simple materials such as discarded liquor bottles, pieces of metal, and broken parts of wood that are used to create sculptures into complex assemblages that stir up the mind of the viewer. This has had a great influence on his use of these materials, as it reflects his interest in the reuse and transformation of found objects.

Tools, Materials and Techniques employed by

Tools used by the artists are saws, bench vice, cramps, chisels (both long and short), gouges (long and short) and a mallet. He doesn't have a favourite tool; he works with any tool so far as it can help him get the job done. Some of the materials, such as sandpapers, wood, scraps of metals, plastics or bottle tops and sharpening stone are also used. His tools are imported, whilst some are locally manufactured by the local blacksmiths from discarded metals. Carving, assemblage and construction (hybrid dimensions) are his main techniques to communicate with his audience in order to let them know what's on his mind, how he sees the world. In creating his mixed media sculptures, he carves discarded wood or tree branches to reshape them, and combines pieces of scrap metals or discarded material by glueing or nailing them together to create a form or an art piece. According to the artists, it's up to the viewer to interpret or explain their sculpture, whilst his work is to bring into existence what his material communicates or tells him.

Challenges faced by Ray Agbo

He is faced with the challenge of becoming established and making a living from creating art (pay bills, maintain a marriage relationship and raise children). According to the artists, starting an art business and making it successful hasn't been easy for him since he has to generate income from his artworks to pay his bills due to his power tools and also take care of his family. As a commercial sculptor, establishing his brand and learning how to market himself to attract attention from potential collectors is the root of his financial challenge. Though his works are on social media platforms like Facebook, he confessed that some of his works that were produced 15 years ago are still in his studio without being purchased. This sometimes creates a negative impression when talking to his clients, since communicating or advertising his work to them may turn out as begging for the artwork to be bought because it has been lying in the studio for decades. Culturally, he feels his works are not fully accepted by the society due to his style or approach to sculpture. Sometimes he feels his works don't fit within the market need because most people are fascinated with portraiture or the carved figure of a woman; therefore, penetrating into the market with his style of art has been quite challenging, since sometimes people see him as going wayward in his art. It only takes a few people who know the value of his art to purchase them; sometimes, he is compelled to do other business to survive.

Contributions to Ghanaian Visual Arts Education

Educationally, Agbo has trained over 30 individuals and is still counting who have acquired the knowledge and skills pertaining to this area of study. They include students from various universities and polytechnics who have their industrial attachment at his studio, study under him and acquire first-hand experiences. This has reduced the burden on parents and the government as a whole since these individuals are able to generate income from the work they produce, hence serving as a source of employment. Religiously, he has contributed greatly by producing crucifixes made of wood for churches. These crucifixes are normally placed both outside and inside of churches to emphasize Jesus' sacrifice of his death, which Christians believe has brought about the redemption of mankind. Also, he has provided artefacts for chieftaincy purposes, which included stools of different sizes, linguist staffs, furniture, etc. He has also produced creative wood carvings for various hotels and guest houses in the country for beautification purposes. Petit Pale is one of the hotels where some of his works can be found. Also, he produces other artefacts like relief carvings, centre tables or counters that are used to decorate various homes as well.



Figure 11: *The world and me*
Source: *Fieldwork data, 2017.*

Sculpture is everything best define Agbo's works. He brings together discarded materials such as scraps of wood, metals, plastic bottles, etc and with metal fastened together with the help of adhesive, steel rods, bolts and nuts to create sculptures in the round or relief. In Figure 11, Agbo carves scraps of wood; these pieces are woven into a complex network of structured compositions from which emerge to reveal indirect and mysterious forms. The textured surface was then polished to give it a good finish. "The world and me" reveals the struggles and life challenges an individual goes through since life is not all rosy. The three-legged branch of wood painted with black oil paint looks isolated, but joins a smooth path and later joins the rough path of the wood, depicting the challenges ahead of time.



Figure 12: *Strength*
Source: *Fieldwork data 2017.*

The matching dots painted with similar colours perceived from the upper view create a line showing togetherness brings to mind the saying, "united we stand, divided we fall". Figure 12 apparently depicts strength, showing the usage of nails and how the elements of design (colour and line), white and black thick lines coming from their separate backgrounds, are intertwined with each other to create a dichromatic design. Philosophically, the radial pattern at the central section of the floral design, positioned in the left block, denotes a higher or prominent personality in addressing the crowd arranged in the form of several dots at the right block. The overall work possesses muted but neutral colours consisting of browns, white and black. Figure 12 can be interpreted through the lens of design theory and semiotic analysis, where formal elements such as line, colour, and form have become carriers of symbolic meaning. The arrangement of similarly coloured dots, perceived from an upper vantage point as forming a continuous line, exemplifies Gestalt principles of proximity and similarity. This perceptual effect constructs a visual metaphor for collective unity, recalling the maxim "**united we stand, divided we fall.**"

Within this framework, the line becomes not merely a compositional device but a semiotic signifier of solidarity, illustrating how design elements can encode sociocultural values.

The use of nails as a material or representational element extends this symbolism into the domain of strength and durability. From a material culture perspective, nails function as agents of cohesion, binding disparate components into a single, stable structure. Their incorporation here, therefore, operates metaphorically, evoking notions of resilience, endurance, and structural integrity. This aligns with the design principle of emphasis, where specific objects are deployed to reinforce conceptual underpinnings of the work. Equally significant is the dichromatic interplay of thick white and black lines, which emerge from distinct backgrounds yet converge within the composition. This visual strategy produces a dialectic of contrast and synthesis, echoing design theories that foreground balance and tension as essential to visual harmony.²⁹ The interlacing of opposites can be read philosophically as a representation of coexistence difference accommodated within unity, underscoring the work's thematic orientation toward togetherness. The radial floral motif positioned within the left block further contributes to the interpretive depth of the composition. Radial patterns, historically associated with centrality and authority, here function as a metaphor for prominence or leadership. Its outwardly directed form suggests influence and communication, as though addressing the adjacent right block, where the dispersed dots resemble a collective audience. The dialogical relationship between these two sections can be situated within rhetorical models of visual communication, wherein the "speaker" figure interacts symbolically with the "listeners," establishing a power dynamic mediated through form.

Finally, the chromatic restraint of the work, dominated by muted browns, whites, and blacks, supports a contemplative aesthetic. Neutral tones often serve to reduce sensory distraction, emphasizing the conceptual over the ornamental. Such use of colour aligns with principles of minimalism and visual clarity, enabling the symbolic content to emerge with greater force. By privileging restraint, the composition fosters an interpretive space in which viewers can engage with the relational dynamics of the forms rather than surface embellishment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper calls for further research by scholars and practitioners of Art Education into the diverse art forms of commercial artists and urges formal recognition of their role in Ghana's cultural and economic development. It is also recommended that a system be developed to formally recognise the skills and contributions of workshop-trained commercial artists. Providing them with avenues for certification or academic bridging programs would validate their expertise and enable them to contribute more fully within institutional settings. Again, academic institutions should offer targeted professional development programs to help commercial artists acquire teaching methodologies, classroom management skills, and assessment strategies. This will enhance their effectiveness as educators without diluting their creative strengths.

CONCLUSION

This paper has illuminated commercial artists' vital yet often under-recognised role in shaping three-dimensional visual arts education in Ghana. Through biographical narratives, it becomes evident that many artists bring practical, workshop-acquired skills and indigenous knowledge into formal educational institutions, enriching the curriculum with real-world experience and cultural relevance. Their transitions from informal apprenticeships to academic roles challenge rigid educational hierarchies and bridge the gap between traditional craftsmanship and institutional learning. Despite systemic barriers such as societal misconceptions, inadequate recognition, and limited institutional support, commercial artists continue to influence how sculpture, signage, and installation art are taught and understood. Their pedagogical approaches, often grounded in improvisation, material innovation, and local aesthetics, offer a unique model of creative education that aligns closely with Ghana's cultural and economic realities.

As Ghana seeks to modernise its education system while preserving cultural identity, recognising and integrating the contributions of commercial artists is both timely and essential. By valuing

²⁹ R. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, New Version (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

biographical knowledge, supporting cross-sectoral collaboration, and reforming curricula to reflect Ghana's artistic diversity, the country can foster a more inclusive, skill-oriented, and culturally grounded visual arts education system. By bridging the gap between workshop traditions and academic institutions, Ghana can cultivate a vibrant and inclusive arts education system that prepares students for creative leadership in the 21st century.

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