

# Sources of Inspiration and Portrayal of the Ideal Woman in Ghanaian Culture Through Contemporary Paintings

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the sources of inspirations of artists as well as the qualities of the ideal Ghanaian woman portrayed in selected paintings of Prof. Ablade Glover and Dr. Ben Offei Nyako (BON). Qualitative research approach was employed for this study. Further, the topic investigated lends itself to a case study design. Qualitative research therefore provides the easy platform that requires an in-depth and in-context study which can uncover many aspects of the female traits as pertain to the case of the contemporary painting of the ideal Ghanaian woman. The population for the study included contemporary Ghanaian painters who feature ideal female images in their works, painting lecturers, painting students and enthusiasts/connoisseurs. In all, there were thirty-four respondents which were made up of two Ghanaian contemporary painters who mostly convey female images in their painting (Glover and BON), six painting lecturers and twenty painting students from both University of Education, Winneba and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, and six enthusiasts/connoisseurs were sampled for the study. Purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the painters and lecturers on the basis of their unique knowledge of the desired information required, whilst the painting students and enthusiasts/connoisseurs were conveniently selected. Semi-structured interview guide, observation checklist and painting imageries were the main instruments employed to collect data for the study. An in-depth semi-structured interview were carried out with the renowned painters, painting lecturers, painting students and enthusiasts/connoisseurs. Observation was also carried out to complement other materials of data collection on the field. Thematically, based on the research questions, direct quotations and interpretative techniques were employed in analysing the data gathered from the in-depth interviews, whilst scene description (pertaining to the observed effects) were employed in analysing the observational outcome. It was concluded that painters (artists) are inspired by several things in their environment which includes previous works, works of other artists, especially, the masters, events, magazines, photographs, women, and personal experiences. It became apparent that women are preferred as the major subject matter for contemporary painting artists. In the light of these findings, people have to be sensitive to understand the principles of art appreciation and that female images used in paintings are not meant for erotic display but rather to portray the hidden qualities of the ideal woman.

## Keywords

Artistic Inspiration, Contemporary Paintings, Ghanaian Culture, Ideal Woman

## 1. Introduction

My interest in the history of art as it relates to women and subject matter in the context of contemporary art led to a more specific personal curiosity about the qualities of an ideal Ghanaian woman, Ghanaian culture and contemporary

paintings. This paper is a hybrid product that includes both research about my interest in the qualities of the ideal Ghanaian woman in contemporary art, an appreciation of selected works of some contemporary Ghanaian artists, as well as the sources of inspiration for their artistic portrayal of women.

Women historically have been the major focus matter in

the themes of Visual Art expression. As a result, female images have become common place in the composition of art, especially, in paintings. Unfortunately, this situation has created an erroneous that perhaps artists create teams of women as mere erotic subjects for amusement or as burdened, thus bringing them into disrepute. Some of the dominant qualities of the female nature such as astuteness, confidence, resilience, hard work and perseverance.

Female images portrayed by a handful of noteworthy Ghanaian contemporary painters like Amon Kotei, Ablade Glover, Ben Offei-Nyako, Betty Acquah, Papa Yaw Domi, among others in their works can likely be dismissed as irrelevant in Ghanaian culture if the correct interpretations are not given. Contemporary cultural ideal of a woman today is becoming more complex than the past. According to Lotz, the ideal woman in the 1950s for example was the ultimate homemaker who supported her husband, cooked delicious meals, kept spotless homes and attractively dressed as the immaculate wife and mother [1]. In contrast, the Ghanaian woman of today fits the homemaker moulds of yesterday woman. In fact, many women who do choose to stay at home, full time, experience social contempt for not developing careers of their own. This lends itself to the issue of gender stereotyping in society.

Gender stereotypes are both descriptive and prescriptive in nature. That is gender stereotypes have descriptive components, which are beliefs about what men and women typically do. They also contain strong prescriptive components, or beliefs about what men and women should do [2], [3]. This prescriptive nature is assumed to stem from the high level of contact and interdependence between men and women (e.g., Fiske & Stevens), which not only allows perceivers to create estimates of how men and women actually act but also creates expectations for how they should act [2]. This issue has transcended into several domains in the lives of women. Fortunately, the manner in which the European and American Society openly handles this changing definition of gender roles in public debate is influencing women around the world including Ghana.

It is believed that the most important clue to a woman's status anywhere in the world is her degree of participation in economic life and her control over property and the productive output. Ghanaian women perform varying roles in the development of the nation. They are visually accessible and therefore constitute an unsolicited pool of models for artistic creation especially in painting.

The Women, Culture, and Development (WCD) and African feminist frameworks are particularly, important to this research as both argue for alternative methods of studying and involving women from developing countries in their own development and cultural setting. Their approaches emphasize the importance of local structures and processes in analysing the realities of women's issues and concerns in developing countries. Both seek to answer questions about women's agency, attend to issues of difference and identity, and work for women's socioeconomic and political empowerment. African feminism portrays how women are

empowered economically, socially, and politically in their local environment. It emphasizes the importance women attach to both their reproductive and productive activities and the question is can contemporary paintings also play a similar role?

The rendition of women in paintings is the subject of academic study and controversy. Recurring themes include the level of independence of female in our societies from their male counterparts, as well as their sexual objectification and sexualisation. There are a number of literatures on general art books on the depiction of the African idealism with insufficient information on the depiction of the Ghanaian woman in painting. This study is also consistent with other studies on women and visual arts such as; the conception of a beautiful female figure, as analysed by Kofi Antubam; the study of selected indigenous Ghanaian women in Visual Arts, and the physical conformity of contemporary plumb Ghanaian women, which gave less concentration to the qualities expressed beyond physical appearance.

It is held that Ghanaian women today perform varying roles in the development of the nation. As such they are virtually accessible and constitute an unsolicited pool of models for artists, especially in paintings. The perceived problem is that, a general impression seems to be created that women are used as models in paintings to project their sexuality or misery, attract sales and perhaps they do not play any other meaningful roles in Ghanaian culture. The question then is "is there not any other reason for portraying female figures in painting?" This research finds it extremely important to document the general compositions that are characteristics of the Ghanaian woman as featured in contemporary paintings of Ablade Glover and Ben Offei-Nyako.

On this note, the purpose of this study was to identify the qualities of the ideal Ghanaian woman portrayed in the paintings of Ablade Glover and Ben Offei Nyako (BON). They portray women in a variety of thematic compositions, such as at work, with babies and carrying loads on their heads. Both painters explore the erotic, beauty and philosophical content of female images for several reasons. This study aimed at assessing selected paintings of Ablade Glover and Ben Offei Nyako which portray women and examines their inspirational sources of the ideal women in the Ghanaian culture.

The following research questions guided the study (1) What are the sources of inspiration for the artistic portrayal of the woman in Ghanaian culture?, and (2) what are the aesthetic qualities of the images of the Ghanaian ideal woman conveyed in paintings?. To what extent could paintings expose the ideal qualities of women in Ghanaian culture? Even though there are several contemporary painters in Ghana, the study was confined to paintings of only two prominent contemporary painting artists namely, Ablade Glover and Ben Offei Nyako.

## 2. Literature and Conceptual Perspectives

Over the years, numerous studies have been conducted on assessing the use of female figures as subject matter in paintings. After the end of the Second World War, some artists, such as Amon Kotei, Kofi Antubam and Saka Acquaye started to fight the myth of static primitive tradition [4]. They claimed 'European' realism (broadly defined and incorporating diverse styles, such as naturalism, impressionism and expressionism) as an artistic style of their own, thus symbolically denying boundaries between themselves and their colonizers.

The prejudice was that the Ghanaian is not fit, capable, or that it is not African art to do anything that is realistic. Let us change this prejudice, and prove that the colour of our skin has nothing to do with acquisition of knowledge, which is power, and the exercise of intelligence, which is the only possession God gave to human beings to use the cultural scheme of the paternalistic white colonizers [5]. But although artists such as Kotei broke the myth of white stylistic superiority, they insisted on the distinction between black and white cultural identities. Amon Kotei is a very outstanding artist whose indigenous expertise in applying the right combination of complimentary and contrasting hues to paint images of well-endowed female figures is legendary. Some of his paintings were the "face to face", "moment of thought" "mother and child" "slim woman" and "group of girls" etc. Kotei used his painting as a platform to throw more light on the qualities of the Ghanaian woman as serious hardworking, caring and make them appear bold and confident before the eyes to be experienced and remembered.

Figurative art works showing African tradition are produced to this day. They depict aspects of contemporary life that evoke memories of the past [4]. Svašek explained that any sign that can be interpreted as 'modern' is deliberately left out [4]. For example, in 1988, Amon Kotei made an oil painting with the title 'Market Women'. He depicted the women in what he called traditional African dresses, including colourful cloths and scarves [5]. The market women in the painting sell fish, something Ghanaian women have done for time immemorial. Kotei gives an idealistic view of present-day Ghanaian culture as being solely rooted in past traditions. This and many others show that there are distinctive qualities of an ideal Ghana woman. It is therefore, believed that, the Ghanaian woman is the balance in society. She is the pivot of humanity. Her uprightness and soundness cause the society to be upright and sound. She is a treasure for the husband, a fortune for the children, a jewel for the parents and a blessing for humanity. It has been evident that the qualities of the ideal woman are just beauty in the eyes of the beholder but vivid in actions. These attributes are dutiful tasks, sensitive to husband and children, as hope of her parents, caring and finally is balance in the society.

However, culture is also responsible for the glorification of the classical nude and veneration of physical beauty. Dankwa

infers that centuries-old philosophy, religious beliefs, workplace discrimination and domestic roles on gender and sexuality perpetuated the opinion that women were inferior to men [6]. Dankwa further argues that inasmuch as women can be seen at echelon of power and moving organisations from cradle to fame, male domineering traits are still witness in workplaces [6]. Gender based discriminations and exploitations are widespread in the workplaces of women. The socio-culturally defined characteristics, abilities, personality traits, roles assign, responsibilities and behavioural patterns of men and women contribute to the discrimination in workplaces. Gender differences in workplaces are labels assigned by society in patriarchal manner. These socio-culturally assigned traits from society seems to impinge on women exhibiting inbuilt and outward capabilities.

Earlier feminists struggled for a legally equal position for women and demanded democratic rights, which included right to education and employment, right to own property, right to vote, right to birth control, right to divorce, etc. Today feminists have gone beyond demanding mere legal reforms to end discrimination between men and women. They have raised issues of violence against women, rape, unequal wages, discriminatory personal laws, the sexual division of labour, distribution of power within the family, use of religion to oppress women and negative portrayal of women in media [7]. More recently, the Women, Culture, and Development (WCD) framework proposes the centrality of culture in the study and integration of women from the south into development [8]. As culture is the foundation on which further analysis is made, this framework is used in this study to examine the particular structures, socioeconomic contexts, and processes under which women are portrayed in their daily chores and livelihoods through paintings. The incorporation of culture into development studies provides effective models for gender research that leads to the empowerment and advancement of Ghana women. The identification of the motivational sources for the artistic portrayal of women in contemporary Ghanaian paintings will bring into focus the level of the significance of ideal woman in Ghanaian culture.

This notwithstanding, TV3 has taken the pain to organise a beauty pageant which puts beauty and brains on display, teaching the youth about the rich solid Ghanaian Culture in all the regions of the country with their contestants spearheading the whole event. The search for Ghana's Most Beautiful looks out for girls who are bold, articulate, confident and well versed in their region's culture, history and traditions and fluent in their region's language. One may ask is it all that Ghanaian beauty entails?

According to Morgan, the Ghanaian woman's body is truly feminine. It is soft, tender, smooth and shapely, making her the focus of attention within every environment [9]. This shows that beauty of the human figure is thought of and expressed in terms of certain definite symbols. This can be expressed in "Akuaba" (fertility and play doll). Morgan continues to support this view by saying that she does not employ herself in sitting work only or in that which is only

the nice performance of the fingers; but if there be occasion, she will go through work that requires all the strength she has, which she will use as one that knows it is the way to have more [9].

From the above contributions it is rather clear that beauty is not only about the outward looks but the inward look as well. Therefore, the body represent two main things thus a symbol and an agent. Each part of the body is symbolic but also could be used as a vessel to carry a message across. And both as symbol and agent disseminate attributes of beauty. This can be depicted in contemporary painting.

Painting has played a historical and aesthetic role in the different ages of existence. Many people believe that painting is the application of paint, pigment, colour or other medium to a surface which is a support. It is classified under two categories thus a verb which is a process and an object which is also the product. Paintings can be naturalistic and representational (as in a still life or landscape painting), photographic, abstract, be loaded with narrative content, symbolism, emotional or be political in nature. Painting is more concerned with the physical act of pushing paint, and the artisan-like way a painter operates in the studio [10]. Watson, defines painting as the deliberate application of paint to a surface, whether for decoration and protection of that surface [11]. Hunt, also describes painting as everything which can be seen and suggest or every emotion which can be felt [12].

According to Esaak, contemporary just means "art that has been and continues to be created during our lifetimes" [13]. In other words, contemporary art started from the 1960's or 70's up until this very minute. On a more serious note, while it may be hard to classify emergent movements, Contemporary art - collectively - is much more socially conscious than any previous era has been. A whole lot of art from the last 40 years has been connected with one issue or another: feminism, multiculturalism, globalization, bio-engineering and AIDS awareness. Contemporary art is the term used for art of the present day. Usually the artists are alive and still making work. Smith states that, contemporary art is often about ideas and concerns, rather than solely the aesthetics. [14]. This means that they are the art of the present but not the art of yesterday. Further, it goes on to say that contemporary art period is this period of the late 1900s which saw major socio-economic, cultural, political and also educational changes the world over, which undoubtedly influenced art, amongst many other productive fields. Artists are constantly creating new works that break the rules experimenting with ideas and materials. Contemporary artists use whatever they think illustrates their idea most appropriately. Nowadays artists have many different methods and materials to use. Some use painting and drawing but there is also photography, sculpture, film, new media, live performance, light, sound and installation. It is art that is being made in our time, which coexists with us. Adding to the above, the contemporary art of Ghana eludes generalized description. Artists have utilized various mediums, from oils to silk screening, and methods varying from brass casting by the ancient lost wax process to welding tin cans and other

metals into sculpture. Thus, a contemporary artwork is classified as Ghanaian purely on the basis of the artist's nationality, rather than according to a peculiar style, subject, purpose, or medium.

Inspiration in painting stems from the fact that creativity is an enigmatic aspect of human experience; it is often difficult to identify what it is that drives this impulse and the elements that inspire an artist's work. Written from the perspective of a practicing painter and writer, this post brings together ten areas that are sources for artistic inspiration. The following are some sources of inspiration for painting suggested by the web design lifestyle magazine: art, galleries, internet, music, the environment, books and magazines, ordinary experience, inner feelings and imagination, etc. From the sources of inspiration, it could be deduced that the environment is the major source of inspiration. Thus, the individual painter is able to think and link his themes and title with his every day scenes. Secondly the designs and plans of artist are influenced by the quest for order which is being tailored through the innate feelings of the individual and all these are guided by the experiences in life. The researcher believes that the two school of thought are almost the same and applicable.

### 3. Methodology

Qualitative research approach was employed for this study. According to Creswell, a qualitative research is a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of the participants, asks broad and general questions, collect data consisting of words from participants, describe and analyse them into themes in a non-subjective and unbiased manner [15].

The research critically investigated selected paintings of Ablade Glover and Ben Offei Nyako, and solicited ideas on their perceptions on the ideal images of Ghanaian women. Again, the research is designed to achieve the set-out objectives. Therefore, a qualitative research approach is proposed for this study. This is because the study demands instance of a documentary analyzes and interpretations, reveal explicit and implicit meanings, resulting in a narrative descriptive account. The type of qualitative research for the study, will therefore be an evaluative case study since it involves description, explanation, and judgement.

Further the topic under investigation lends itself to a case study because the researcher sought to sample the views of 34 respondents from 4 categories of people on one main issue into details. The use of one-on-one interview approach was to probe deeply into how contemporary paintings are used to portray the ideal woman in Ghanaian culture.

The population for the study included contemporary Ghanaian painters who feature ideal female images in their works, painting lecturers, painting students and enthusiasts/connoisseurs. Non probability sampling method was employed in this study. The purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the Ghanaian painters who feature ideal female images in their works and painting lecturers for this study, since the respondents were chosen on

the basis of their knowledge of the information desired. The painting students and enthusiasts/connoisseurs were conveniently selected. In all two Ghanaian contemporary painters who mostly convey female images in their painting (Ablade Glover and Ben Offei Nyako), six painting lecturers and fourteen painting students from both University of Education, Winneba and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi were sampled for the study.

Semi-structured interview checklist, observation guide, and painting imageries were the main instruments employed to collect data for the research. Since the purpose of the case study was to provide an evaluation of the information under study, an in-depth semi-structured interview were carried out with renowned painters, painting lecturers, painting students and enthusiasts/connoisseurs. Observation was also employed to complement other materials of data collection on the field.

Thematically, based on the research questions, direct quotations and interpretative techniques were employed in analysing the qualitative data gathered from the in-depth interviews, whilst Golo and Eshun's scene description (pertaining to the observed effects) were employed in analysing the observational outcome [16].

## 4. Findings and Discussions

This unit presents the results of the interview conducted, photographs taken and observations made on the topic contemporary paintings of the ideal Ghanaian woman. The unit comprises two sections. The first section deals with the demographic characteristics such as qualifications, positions and working experiences of the respondents, whilst the second section discusses the findings based on the outcomes of the interviews and the observations. The major themes in the research on which data were collected, presented and discussed were as follows: sources of inspiration of the selected Ghanaian painting artists, and ways paintings could expose the ideal qualities of women in Ghanaian culture.

### 4.1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The researcher considered the demographic characteristics for each of the following respondents, students, lecturers, artists and art connoisseurs.

School and gender of students indicates that 2 females and 2 males were selected from the following institutions: University of Education, Winneba, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Winneba Senior High School, Accra Academy Senior High School and 4 females from St. Mary's Senior High School, making a total of 20 students. The statistics shows that ten males and ten female students were involved in the study.

Institutions and gender of lecturers shows two male lecturers from the University of Education, Winneba, two male lecturers from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology were selected for the study.

Also, two male and two female artists who were

interviewed. Two male artists interviewed were the same artists whose works were studied under the topic. The other two female artists were also interviewed in order to know how they feel about the use of female figure as themes and subject matter in paintings.

Gender of connoisseurs shows two males and two females were interviewed. The males were interviewed to find out how they see paintings made by these artists. The other two female connoisseurs were also interviewed in order to know how they feel about the use of female figure as themes and subject matter in paintings.

### 4.2. Sources of Inspiration of Selected Ghanaian Painting Artists

This section is discussed based on research question one which is-*What are the sources of inspiration of the artists in this study? (Ablade Glover and Ben Offei Nyako (BON)).* To answer this research question, semi-structured interview guides were formulated to elicit responses from students, lecturers, connoisseurs and the artists.

To ascertain the sources of inspiration of artists, respondents which were made up of artists, lecturers, students and connoisseurs were asked to come out with the possible sources of inspiration of artists. The following were the outcomes of summary of the analyses: number of paintings over time, dreams and visions, women, stories, previous works, other artists, events, photographs and magazines, personal experiences, people, religion, etc.

The outcome shows the results from the study on some sources of inspiration on the paintings of Ablade Glover and BON. The results revealed that previous works and women were accepted by all the respondents with photographs and magazines being the third highest, as the most frequent source of inspiration for the artists. Furthermore, all the respondents with the exception of connoisseurs agreed that all the other sources listed except dreams and people contributed to inspiration of the artists. Less than fifty percent of the respondents agreed on other artists as sources of inspiration for the contemporary artist. Also, 25 percent which is 8 respondents agreed on stories as their sources of inspiration. Three among the four connoisseurs agreed that the main source of inspiration for the artist rest on his colleagues. Finally, fifteen students agreed that the artists rely mostly on pictures. The following statements illustrate respondents' responses:

*Why women? I'm mummy's boy and I got a good wife I honour women because of their beautiful species and would like to project them.*

*They are well shaped and well-proportioned. They are rounded and have big back and breast their dark skin gives a reflected light and starts shining as if gold has been sprayed on it most especially Winneba and Cape Coast women.*

*I did the study of the female anatomy and it's easier to paint the female figure than the male figure. Anywhere I find women I paint and add a background and impressions to it.*

*For mentors, I have many: Ablade Glover is my mentor in business. Prof. Ato Delaquis and Leroy Mitchell, my lecturers,*

*for their academic discipline. But the one who has inspired me so much is Amon Kotei for his compositions and imaginative colour orchestration.*

*Those artists are fond of women and are inspired by their beautiful looks I encountered the work of Saka Acquaye Which challenged my perception of the African female.*

*Artist are also influenced by their fellow artists and their works.*

The first research question sought to find out the sources of inspiration of selected contemporary Ghanaian artists precisely Ablade Glover and BON. The result indicated that all the artists draw their inspiration from their previous works and the activities of women in general as their sources of motivation to come out with new paintings. According to the results, all the respondents agreed on women, previous works and other artists as the main influences on the painting activities of contemporary painters. This is also a further indication that even though other things motivate painters, the desire to paint the female figure is paramount.

Secondly it is not even surprising that women as the source of inspiration is paramount among the sources of inspiration. It could even be seen from the analysis that seven students also agreed that the source of inspiration of an artist depends on the experiences gained. This is definitely different from the number of paintings produced over the years because the artists' experience as individual covers both childhood and adult, spiritual, social and psychological experiences. Here is a response to confirm the experience of an artist having a positive effect on his works.

*At the University we had a female model for quite a long time. And so, I had the opportunity to study the female anatomy. My recollection of images during my formative years seem to be fond of women. My upbringing did re-enforce those images of courage, elegance, perseverance and positivity. I live with a family which is highly populated by females. I go with feminine agenda. That's my make-up.*

However, the respondents seldom agreed on as a major painting inspiration because what artists normally sees in his day dreaming does not really influence his painting as most of them tend to change certain things and replace them with experiences when they forget or find it unimportant in their composition. Below are some the responses from the respondents:

*I do not believe in hallucinations and I think things like that do not exist. What people see is what they imagine.*

On the whole, memories play a major role on imaginative composition. The result of the study also shows that all the respondents excluding the artists agreed that events could also leave memories that could affect the composition of a painter. This can be true when the artist visits occasions being organised in his environment, the artist pickup scenes and stores them in the memory. This ability to store the information has positive impact on some contemporary paintings. It is also evident that the artists interviewed do not probably value the activities of events in motion but rather when those activities appear in the form of pictures.

### 4.3. Ideal Visual Qualities of Ghanaian Woman in Contemporary Paintings

This section discusses the ideal qualities of women in Ghanaian culture as depicted in paintings. The discussion is based on this research question - To what extent could paintings expose the ideal qualities of women in Ghanaian culture? To answer this research question, semi-structured interview guides were formulated to elicit responses from students, lecturers, connoisseurs and the artists.

To ascertain the ideal visual qualities of Ghanaian woman in contemporary paintings, respondents which were made up of artists, lecturers, students and connoisseurs were asked to come out with the possible ideal qualities of women in Ghanaian culture as depicted in paintings by artists. The following were the outcomes of summary of the analyses: confidence, thick lips, dark complexion, motherly, proportional, heavy breast, hardworking, beautiful, courageous, etc.

Result of the study indicated that eleven qualities of the ideal Ghanaian woman stated were rated in the following order as answers by the respondents. The ideal woman must be confident, astute, respectful, possess thick lips, dark complexion, well mannered, a motherly of all, well proportioned, heavy breast, hardworking, beautiful and confidence. The data gathered revealed that heavy breast, well proportioned, thick lips and dark skin, beautiful and hardworking received the greatest percentages as compared to the rest of the qualities. Thick lips were relatively recorded the lowest percentage among the qualities stated because it is considered difficult to attest that attribute in a painting. The following are sample verbatim statements of the respondents to support the five major qualities deemed to be worthy of Ghanaian woman seen in contemporary paintings.

*I'm inspired any time I see a typical dark-skinned woman. Anytime I see that I quickly capture and paint. I love to paint women (Artist).*

*I do paint men too but it's easier to paint women for a man you need to get the contours and the muscles but for a woman all you need is just the proportions and you add flesh to it you are there (Lecturer).*

*The female spirit of perseverance, strength, courage all those positive attributes of the females cannot be cowed disposition. My women profile therefore is a continuous and consistent study of those positive attributes of the Ghanaian culture (Artist).*

The responses generated further comments on the kind of painting that can address some of the qualities listed above:

#### 4.3.1. Beautiful

There are selected works of female idealism in Ghana. Every guy has a different grasp of what "ideal" is. Not all men want a woman who just cleans, cooks and have sex all day. And not all men want a full independent woman either. Instead of focusing on what men want in a woman so you can conform to what "they would like" let's try to work on the qualities that makes a woman ideal. After a series of interviews these were some of the answers to the question



‘who is an ideal woman’.

“As for me my ideal woman is not one that is "Hot" but more along the lines of "Beautiful". What I mean is when you look at someone with your heart and you can tell that person is the real deal. She doesn't have to cook clean or be intelligent. She just has to be the one to fill the void in my heart. That sounds corny and it may not make sense, but love was never meant to make sense I guess.”

*The beauty of a woman is not in the clothes she wears, the figure that she carries or the way she combs her hair. The beauty of a woman must be seen in her eyes, because that is the doorway to her heart, the place where love resides. (connoisseur)*

*The beauty of a woman is not in a facial mole but the true beauty in a woman is reflected in her soul. It is the caring that she lovingly gives and the passion that she shows. The beauty of a woman grows with the passing years. (Student)*

The result of the study shows that beauty is one of the major qualities of an ideal Ghanaian woman. The result also reveals that all 32 respondents were of the view that beauty is an attribute of a woman. Two students gave the following explanations and comment respectively:

*Though they say beauty is in the eyes of a beholder, some beauties exhibited in painting cannot be debated but rather accepted. Apart from painting a realistic figure, a semi or full abstract picture can also attest to that. (1<sup>st</sup> student)*

*The beauty we talk about here is about the size of shape of the figure, the big earrings, big eyes the plated hair, the colour of the skin, the clothing and the posture.*

*A beautiful woman in the Ghanaian context does not only exhibit physical beauty but also plays her traditional roles as well. (2<sup>nd</sup> student)*

Referring to his paintings entitled “My Princess” and “Angular Portrait” (see Figures 1 and 2 below), BON indicated that these two paintings are real Ghanaian beauty. He captured that from the central part of Ghana. The following are what he said in an interview:

*I really love this painting because it reveals the real Ghanaian beauty which also expresses the feeling of livelihood and boldness which will give the beholder a life time vision which could never be forgotten.*

So, when asked whether or not he has ever seen any painting of a naked man? The question startled him.

*After days of looking at a thousand pieces of art, he never saw a single painting devoted to the beauty of the naked masculine form.*

The researcher is of the opinion that Ghanaian concept of beauty comprises several complex attributes which cannot be captured in a single painting. The figures portrayed by contemporary painters for that matter the artists under study, are directly linked to Ghanaian attribute of fertility. These are reflected in painting through the expression of heavy breasts, thick hips, which artists now attempt to represent. This evidence is also in line with Francis Bacon’s statement that there is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.

BON’s ‘My Princess’ and ‘Angular Portrait’ are true

reflections of a Ghanaian image of beauty which has been expressed in finger prints. The attractive red lips appear ready to speak words of kindness, the bold white lovely eyes seem to seek out the good in people and the beautiful dark short hairstyle is a sure tempting attraction. The surrounding atmosphere is infused with warm colours. Red sets the tone of the entire painting and creates a feeling crisp, clear spring afternoon a beautiful mid-day. Light passes through the white-paned window of her eyes, strikes the lip-stacked dark-complexioned figure of a woman. The beautiful figure of a woman is surrounded by all the accessories of beauty, motherly care and love.



**Figure 1.** My Princess.

Artist: BON.  
Medium: Oil on canvas.  
Dimension: 30×30cm.  
Date: Unknown, BON’s Library.



**Figure 2.** Angular portrait.

Artist: BON.  
Medium: Acrylic.  
Dimension: 45×60cm.  
Date: 1994.  
BON’s Library.

#### 4.3.2. Well Proportioned

Human beings in all cultures have perennially focused attention on the female body for aesthetic pleasure, sexual

attraction, fertility, and reproduction.

The results of the study showed that the well-proportioned female figure is one of the key qualities mentioned by BON. In the study which revealed that 96% of the respondents also agreed that an ideal Ghanaian woman has structurally shaped proportion. The artists agreed that the shape of a woman really adds to the ideal quality and value to her individual personality. The artist must be careful to capture it well in a painting. They explained further that an ideal Ghanaian woman is noted for the 'coca cola' shape which fits perfectly into any garment she wears. To attest to this statement, a painting was selected.

A critical study of the painting of "Mother and Child" (see Figure 3 below), by BON depicts that, the weight and height perfectly support bust area of this female figure and that the circumferences of her bust, waist, hips, and their ratios, define her round shape. Aesthetically when the figure is viewed from the side the curve from the waist down to the crease where the buttock joins the leg, there is an interesting bulging curve, that of an ideal comfort which almost all Ghanaian nursing mothers have converted to baby carriers, and create an image has become a popular artistic theme in Ghanaian contemporary painting.

The result also shows that both painters and students adore the shape of a Ghanaian woman. They also believe that the beauty of a woman can never be fulfilled without her shape. This is because the society thinks that for a woman to be fertile it will require elements of her shape, thus her breasts, her waist, her buttocks and calves. One of the students interviewed framed it this way:

*The 'bias for beauty' operates in almost all social situations all experiments show we react more favourably to physically attractive people. And when this is demonstrated in painting everybody will love it.*

Another lecturer interviewed also commented that:

*We also believe in the 'what is beautiful is good' stereotype, an irrational but deep-seated belief that physically attractive people possess other desirable characteristics such as intelligence, competence, social skills, confidence and even moral virtue. You know that it is always true that the good fairy/princess is always beautiful; the wicked stepmother is always ugly. Beautiful.*

Notwithstanding the above comments, all the parts of the human body are important in determining the idealness of a woman. The size of the body- is an important determinant factor in to the perception of idealness of a Ghanaian woman. Even though some men think the ideal woman must be as slim, there are others in some cultures that prefer plumper women, as more attractive and beautiful. The buttocks are also one of the physical features of an ideal woman. The female buttocks have been a symbol of fertility and beauty since early human history. Statues created as early as 24,000 BCE, such as the Venus of Willendorf, have exaggerated buttocks, hips, and thighs. It corresponds to the observational theory which states that female buttocks evolved in the context of females competing for the attention and parental commitment of powerful resource-controlling males.

These assertions hint at the fact that physical attraction can be studied from a number of perspectives, including universal perceptions common to all human cultures, cultural and social aspects, and individual subjective preferences. Additionally, the perception of attractiveness of images represented in paintings can have a significant effect on how people judged them in terms of the environment (background) they are placed, for example their employment, social opportunities, relationship with other images, sexual behaviour, and attachments.



Figure 3. Mother and child.

Artist: BON.

Medium: Oil on canvas.

Dimension: 45×60cm.

Date: 1994.

Collection: BON's Library.

#### 4.3.3. Hardworking

The result of the study showed that certain characteristic features of paintings of the two contemporary artists under study exhibit certain amount of hardworking qualities. Ablade Glover and BON are among the few painting artists who portray women as hardworking but not burdened. All the painting lecturers agreed that contemporary painting can really demonstrate quality of idealness in their work. It appears that many of other artists interpret house chores of women in their painting as burdensome, while in reality these images are compliments to the hardworking quality of the ideal woman.

Daily chore 5 (see Figure 4 below), is a painting of a bare footed teenage girl almost in silhouette, standing imposingly in a doorway against a background of lush vegetation. There is a bucket by her side, suggesting that she is about to go out to fetch water which is a cultural practice of Ghanaian homes in the rural communities. She ties a piece of brown cloth around her waist with a yellow blouse on top. She seems to stare at something but appears to take decisions far from what her eyes could capture. The fleshy looking arm and feet and the protruding stomach, the thick lips nose and swollen face suggest a pregnant woman in her first trimester. The presence of the shadows of the figure and the bucket together with the reflections of the yellows in the background, the bucket and the costume for the figure indicates a bright sunny morning. The hand resting on the waist, and the presence of



the doorway is an indication that she is either from the stream or about to go to the stream to fetch water. If this particular chore is performed every morning then it is a sign of hardworking. This is to second the statement made by BON during the interview that; *Ghanaian woman are never relaxed they are always doing something*. This is one of the most difficult activities performed by women at the rural areas for daily existence in Ghana which is captured by the artists is what is authoring this research.

The researcher agreed with both artists when they appreciated women by saying that, the Ghanaian woman is very hardworking, she works from dawn to dusk. She is engaged in the cultivation of food crops for home consumption and the local market, childbearing and upkeep, housekeeping, etc. She is also a very loving and caring wife and mother. This quality is seen in the Figure below.



**Figure 4.** Daily Chore 5.

Artist: BON.  
Medium: Oil on canvas.  
Dimension: 70x90cm.  
Date: 1990.  
Collection: BON, s Library.

#### 4.3.4. Confidence

The results of the study shows that confidence is also one of the qualities of the Ghanaian ideal women which is considered as a very important attribute that helps a woman to know more about herself. This is clear from the analysis that out of the 32 respondents 30 agreed on this quality. This discussion therefore covers issues like the woman knowing herself is, accepting herself and then building positively on her image.

The painters under study believe that the individual is accepted by the way she presents herself and that also depends on how she sees herself. The painting artist presents the ideal woman in so many ways as depicted in the selected works by the artists under study. The painting titled "Facing the competition II" (see Figure 5 below), by Ablade Glover depicts a market women scene. The painting entails dozens of women involved in different activities an the market. Two women are singled out from the crowd given artistic threatment. They stand and seem to be holding luggages and baskets in their hands. One of them wears a blue blouse and straps of blue cloth around her waist with her long right arm stretched behind her. The other woman also has a protruding stomach, with clothes appearing to be in tint and shades of blue

and red. She also seems to be holding a basket with her left hand. Both of them tied their hair with scarfs matching with their attire. The women on the background are involved in series of market activities carrying baskets, some gathering, arranging, distributing, buying and selling. The combination of cool and warm colours suggests a bright sunny morning where farmers mostly send their goods to the farm.

In this painting, Glover uses lines to depict space and movement of figures. His strokes in the form of broad lines appears very thick and bold in the figures. Thin and straight lines depicting distance in and space defining one figure from the other. Short and long lines are also used to depict draperies in their costumes with curve lines and daubs suggesting tables and other things found in the market. Comparing the stomachs of both women, the woman on the right hand side suggest a pregnant woman with strong dark tones just below the line dividing the upper and lower torso.

The harmonising dark and cool colours suggest a buzy environment of tidious tasks. the painting depicts a hardworking activities performed by market women who always struggle at the market to fend for their basic needs and that of their families in the form of competition.

The movement of lines suggest a contineous activities without breaks where the market women do not even purse to rest. The women in the painting show market mannerisms with arrogant poses. The women are distinct from each other and treated with special styles of painting. The distance between the two women thought very wide as compared to the women at the background which depicts a quarelling mood. Their long stretched necks and the arms behind their backs, with an upright stand suggesting boldness and confident.

From the interview outcomes, the reaeacher therefore, agreed with both artists under study that the ideal Ghanaian woman must be portrayed with exaggerated confidence in what ever activity she might be engaged in. the figure below portrays that.



**Figure 5.** Facing the competition II.

Artist: Ablade Glover.  
Medium: Oil on canvas.  
Dimension: 48x60cm.  
Date: 2008.  
Collection: October Gallery.

#### 4.3.5. Motherly

From the interview conducted, from one student deduced that: *"a mother's love is the first love which almost every*

*individual experience in a life time. Her love, no matter how different from what we see in movies or read in books or witness across the street, is the most unconditional kind. Strong, faithful and not even death can come between."*

*A connoisseur also had this to say: "In honour of these great women, our mothers, and their even greater love for us, artists, to be precise painters have chosen beautiful images to appreciate this divine bond between mother and child to remind us all that no individual who walked on this earth passed unloved."*

The result of the study revealed that all the respondents agreed on motherly care was one of the major qualities of the ideal Ghanaian woman. This is clear from the analysis that 32 respondents agreed that BON and Glover are the main advocates of motherly love through for students. This discussion covers paintings like a woman carrying a child either on the lap, on the back, on the shoulder or in the stomach, a woman feeding a child and a woman fending for the child to survive.

It is generally believed that mothers are responsible nurturing their children, feeding, clothing, and she will nurse them when they are unwell and hold them when they are sad. It is her responsibility also to teach them and guide them in ways that will help them become productive contributing adults. For these duties have given contemporary artist a task to perform.

BON has depicted women in countless times in most culture. Sometimes as goddesses, sometimes they are seen enjoying a tender moment - a sweet memory, really - from when our all-too-quickly-grown children are carried on the laps. Glover also supported that statement by saying that; "In my modest, but heartfelt, attempt to salute fellow mothers everywhere, these following favourites paintings are offered in reverse."

Closely related to the above statement are some selected painting titled "Alone facing the storm" (see Figure 6 below), by Ablade Glover depicts a woman with an elongated neck stretched into the atmospheres with a baby strapped on her back with the head almost covered with the cloth. She stretches the right hand behind her in a short sleeve blouse covering almost half of the arm. She also wears a scarf that matches well with her costume. The background is covered with the roof of buildings in a perspective. She appears elegant and bold. The movement of the arm depict a person in a hurry to reach somewhere. The protruding mouth, chin and elongated neck suggest an unhappy expression against something. Grovers women in the painting does not even pick a glance at the environment but looks stifle forward as if there is a crown ahead to be worn. The baby behind seems to drop down the buttocks when still appears very firm because the strapping pieces of the cloths are doubled. The lines indicate shadows in the figure and also show graduation of colour moulding in the figure to look three dimensional. The colours used to denote the complexion of the mother and the child suggests a strong bond between them. Glover exclaimed that Ghanaian mothers perform the most tedious works but always carrying their babies behind during their activities. The stretched arm behind seem to receive something and at the same time protecting the baby from any harm and this really shows motherly love.

The mother is not always seen with a baby in the hands but

can also carry the baby in her womb. Both artists stressed on the nine months of pregnancy as a credit to the ideal woman. Glover's words were can only be heard from his painting below.

"Mother again" (see Figure 7 below), is also one of Ablade Glover's monochromatic paintings about mothers which appreciate the nine months journey of mothers. In this painting he portrays a pregnant woman in profile. She wears a blouse with big cloth wrapped around her body. Her face is the only uncovered part showing in the painting. She also wears a long scarf which flows freely downwards her waist line. Her gaze appears to focus on something very dear to her. Linking the size of her tummy to that of her gaze it depicts readiness for her baby's arrival.

Mother again portrays the ideal woman as a very brave and persistent person in whose effort of keeping a baby must be highly appreciated. She does this as many times as nature could determine. This effort is described as motherly.

From Glover, mothers appear very busy with their babies tied on their backs. The ideal Ghanaian women are portrayed as caring and always put her family first in everything she does. Even on her way to the market she carries her baby and at times carries the baby while working on the farm. This is evident in the painting of BON titled "Mother and Child" (shown in Figure 3 discussed earlier).

*There is the need to know, or more importantly, that one needs to feel connected to something, is what always prompt children to draw closer to their mothers because mothers always give emotional psychological and even spiritual satisfaction. Everybody feels safe of being with a mother.*

This does not however mean that mothers should not discipline their children. However, results of the study proved that the ideal Ghanaian woman must be motherly thus caring. Here stands a bear footed woman in the open carrying a baby with the back view. She ties the hair with a scarf and a sleeveless green blouse matching with strapped red cloth. The baby seems to be half naked and the woman hangs him at the left corner of the arm. The size of her buttocks is proportional to the body size as compared to the upper torso. She stands in a three-quarter profile with the baby's hand, legs and face showing. The background is showing in a very far distance. lines are to depict a rectangular hat and two children seem to be half naked communicating. Tick tinted yellow strokes runs across the picture moving from the top left running down the mid right. The presence of the mother's arms around the baby appears to be very firm by the use of broad lines use to outline the arms. The mothers arm suggests protection for the baby. The environment with no close buildings or people are treated with cloudy diagonal strokes. It seems to act as a threat on the baby's life perhaps the mother's protection. Also, the absence of the slippers signifies a rural life at the same time the mother thinks the presence of the slippers might delay the activity to save the baby thereby neglecting them. The protruding buttocks suggest comfort for the baby when strapped at her back. The distance between the people, vegetation and buildings on the background shows how far a mother's love can go. Even on lonely grounds a mother's love still stands strong.

Additionally, the woman looks bold and strong depicted by the firm legs and upright stand. This together, also suggest an eternal confidence in the baby.



**Figure 6.** Facing the storm.

Artist: Ablade Glover.  
Medium: Oil on canvas.  
Dimension: 40×60cm.  
Date: 2007.  
Collection: October Gallery.



**Figure 7.** Mother again.

Artist: Ablade Glover.  
Medium: Oil on canvas.  
Dimension: 40×30cm.  
Date: 2011.  
Collection: October Galle.

#### 4.3.6. Heavy Breast

The researcher found that females desired breasts larger than their current size. Obviously, breasts are reacted to in relation to other body parts and overall body shape. Breast size and shape changes caused by pregnancy or old age are not effective sexual signals. As pointed out by Low, Alexander, and Noonan (1987), the sexual appeal of breast size depends on overall body fat, waist, and slenderness (or lack of it) of arms and legs. Low (1990) predicted that only thin young women with well-endowed breasts would be judged attractive. Taken together, these studies suggest that the effect of breast size on judgment of attractiveness and age estimation may depend on both overall body fat and the size.

Despite the above assertions only 8 out of the 32 respondents agree that large breast should be one of the

attributes of an ideal Ghanaian woman. Among the artists interview I realised that only one of them was in favour of that quality. One of the artist interviewed said;

*I don't think heavy breast will make a woman beautiful. I am a Ghana man and I can't handle it so I won't go in for it.*

Referring to the paintings of BON he specifically pointed out that an ideal Ghanaian woman must have big breast which he thinks is an attribute of beauty. He made the statement that: *A typically Ghanaian woman must have big breast.* Sometimes the breasts are covered at times uncovered and, in both cases, radiating some reflections of light. Painting titled “Fish monger 5” (see Figure 8 below), by BON presents a front view portrait of a woman. She is wearing a blue sleeveless blouse and a blue scarf. The distant background is a grass patch with some coconut trees. The yellow background is reflected in her dress and covers the entire picture plane reflected in her face. The weight of the breast seems to force the figure to bend as well as her face. There is a white reflecting light shape that gives the breast an illusionary three-dimensional shape. Although the firmness of the breast alludes the traditional concept of fertility and continuous nourishment, it also adds an attractive dimension to her other female ideal quality and image of child bearing mother.

One of the students interviewed commented, “*Ghanaian men consider this quality in selecting a life partner.*”

Glover on the other hand expresses the outward physical quality of women in the abstract which could mostly be visible only through their mannerisms. For BON, the ideal Ghanaian woman must have those heavy breasts to feed the family and add to her beauty.



**Figure 8.** Fish monger 5.

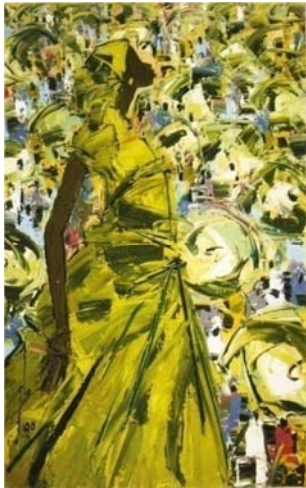
Artist: BON.  
Medium: pastel on paper.  
Date: 2008.  
Dimension: Unknown.  
Collection: artist's Library.

#### 4.3.7. Dark Complexion

Both were particular about the skin tone of their women. BON emphatically stated, “the Ghanaian ideal woman must be dark in complexion.” The statement is obvious in many paintings in which women are portrayed in dark complexioned. This portrayed in a painting titled “Elegance



II” (see Figure 9 below) by Ablade Glover. The “dark complexion” attribute is achieved by shading black hues. Bon for instance, stated in his interview that he uses blues and browns which he uses to get his dark colours must harmonise with other colours in the picture. Reflections of light from the costumes and backgrounds are sometimes seen in the colour of the skin bringing a balance in the paintings. There is also always a middle colour that brings a harmonious whole between the complexion of the figure and the costume.



**Figure 9. Elegance II.**

Artist: Ablade Glover  
Medium: oil on canvas  
Dimension: 40×24cm  
Date: 2008  
Collection: October Gallery.

#### 4.3.8. Thick Lips

Four out of the thirty-two respondents agreed on thick lips as one of the qualities of the Ghanaian ideal woman. One of the respondents also commented that beautiful lips make a woman’s face even more alluring and they are the main characteristic of sexual attractiveness and sensuality, and the size plays an important role in a woman’s appearance.

A lecturer interviewed elaborated that, the mouth, like the eyes, defines the overall look of the face. The mouth itself should be round, the upper and lower lips must have approximately the same fullness and the cavity on the upper lip must have clear contours. The upper and lower lips should converge in the corner to one point. In my BON’s paintings, he portrays a paint form of the mouth with the upper lip smaller than the lower. This adds an element of naivety, as well as sensuality, to the look. He makes the female figure looks ideal, exciting and passionate, by simply giving the lips more volume. Figure 10 titled “Oh what a day by BON. On the other hand, thick lips are not an attribute of Glover’s painting of the ideal woman. He registers the lips in a light volume and protruded yet very attractive. Figures 11 and 12 titled “Grey profile by Ablade Glover and “Winneba beauty” by BON respectively.



**Figure 10. Oh what a day.**

Artist: BON  
Medium: pastel  
Dimension: 40×36 inches  
Date: 1985  
Collection: BON’s Library



**Figure 11. Grey profile.**

Artist: Ablade Glover  
Medium: Acrylic on canvas  
Dimension: Unknown  
Date: Unknown  
Collection: October Gallery



**Figure 12. Winneba beauty.**

Artist: BON  
Medium: pastel  
Dimension: 15×20 in  
Date: 2004.  
Collection: BON’s Library.

In summary, it is clear that all the women portrayed by BON in his paintings are having thicker lipped as compared to Ablade Glover's. Glover's women who are almost always in profile rather have protruding lips. During the interview, BON is in agreed with the statement and in fact added that thick lips are also ideal qualities of the Ghanaian woman. He uses the thick lips to perform the double role emphasising on the mood of the figure and also to express beauty.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Painters (artists) one way or the other are inspired by several things in their environment. It was observed that artists have several sources of inspirations, and these are previous works, works of other artists, especially, the masters, events, magazines, photographs, women, and personal experiences. Women are the most commonly used among all the sources. It became apparent that women are preferred as the major subject matter for contemporary painting artists.

The measurable ideal qualities of a woman in Ghanaian culture established in this research were beauty, confidence, motherly care, hard work, thick lips, heavy breasts and dark complexion. Their unstinted curves and confident poses have been the subjects of the masters and even today's artist. However not all Ghanaian women are portrayed in these paintings except women who have been seen as the epitome of beauty: healthy, fertile, and desirable. Inferences made point to the facts that, artists portray women with good intention but not as sex object. Unfortunately, most people believe them to be only for erotic reasons while this may not be true, the fact still remains that the total picture of women in general is not fully reflected in their works.

However, qualities such as respect, submissiveness and generosity were hidden inner qualities which are difficult to measure and therefore be expressed in paintings of female images.

This study was meant to be a preliminary attempt to quantify the portrayals of women in painting for a positive reason. The results of the study indicate that some changes in the portrayal of women have taken place over time, however several differences still remain. In the light of these findings, people have to be sensitive to understand the principles of art appreciation and that female images used in paintings are not meant for erotic display but rather to portray the hidden qualities of the ideal Ghanaian woman.

Frequent in-service training and workshops with the renowned artists must be organised to equip the young artists about the new techniques and innovative ways painting since the works of the masters is one of the main sources of the painter's motivation. This will help painting artists to have varieties of inspirations from several sources that will boost their paintings. They should also create different ways of capturing women who will promote their image and efforts in

the societies through the paintings.

Today women are portrayed mostly in family/home settings, while men are portrayed more often in professional service/carriers, clerical, media/entertainment and business management roles. This reinforces the stereotype image of the woman's place is in the home. These images fail to show the true range of women's roles in our societies and it is the responsibility of the contemporary painter to change that misconception through painting.

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