

# Review of: "Unearthing the Cultural Values of Personalities in Photorealism Portraiture: The Iconography of the Works of the Ghanaian Fine Artist, Samuel Otu"

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## Abstract

Through five realistic portraits made by the Ghanaian artist Samuel Otu, the authors of this manuscript have tried to elucidate some psycho-social aspects or cultural values of the portrayed characters. The reader will find very interesting the first part of the study, where he will be able to read about some relevant data about portraiture in the history of art, a history that begins, as the authors clearly indicate, in the Egyptian period. However, in the second part of the work, the five portraits are analyzed properly, and it is here where the reader may feel confused to see that the analysis presents a high degree of subjectivity by incorporating opinions and other data already known beforehand, which do not seem to emerge from the iconographic study.

## Hypothesis

The hypothesis or research question posed by the authors is that from some realistic portraits made by the Ghanaian artist Samuel Uto, it is possible to extract questions of a cultural nature through the personality reflected in the portrait of the character. In this regard, we must point out that the issue raised presents a great difficulty, since the expressions "cultural values" and "personality" are imprecise and subjective, making the iconographic analysis a complex task.

## Methodology

The authors of this article set out to find out if the representations made by artists in a realistic way, and through their technical-artistic skills, are capable of revealing the personalities of the portrayed, certain social, political or cultural nuances of contemporary Africa. In other words, they pose a problem that touches both aesthetics and psychology, and strive to find the reality beneath appearances. To carry out this analysis of realistic portraits, the authors have rightly chosen Erwin Panofsky's method. However, the three-phase study comprising pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis and iconological interpretation has possibly been used in a very superficial manner by the authors, perhaps due to the scant attention paid to the formal graphic-plastic elements of the portrait - which are objective and within the authors' reach - and to the high degree of subjectivity of the concepts, which are, moreover, insufficiently delimited and undefined.

The idea of value contained in the expression "cultural values" presents the first problem. Practically since the fifties no

deep research has been carried out on the idea of Value, however, the use and abuse of this idea is nowadays present in most of the topics dealing with the main problems of man, for example regarding the meaning of life, happiness, the goals of humanity or the ends and guides by which history should run, in line with what Luis Carlos Martín Jiménez said (*El valor de la Axiología. Crítica a la Idea de Valor y a las teorías y doctrinas de los Valores*) Pentalfa, Oviedo 2014.

The Idea of Value can be classified through the different uses and meanings given in the course of history, for which reason it presents at least five degrees of conceptualization or strata. In this case, the Idea of Value used in this article is framed in the section "stratum 1 of the phenomena of value" (*Ibidem*, p. 61). In this stratum, we refer to feelings, sensations, desires, or any affective form of the subject in the context of the sensible. For example, respect, happiness, interest, but also disinterest, etc., would be values. Here we have psychological phenomena (sensations, desires, interests, feelings), ethological phenomena, physical phenomena, but also social and political phenomena. And here there is a problem, because some of the ideas of value that the authors handle are taken for granted in this article. Thus, we do not know exactly to which values they refer, since, in each society, values and doctrines can be very different (*Ibidem*, p. 62).

The authors of the article quote Wango (2020) as saying "the subject matter of contemporary African photorealists expresses ordinary everyday socio-cultural, emotional and political life, as well as women's empowerment in contemporary African society". But ordinary everyday socio-cultural, emotional and political life, as well as women's empowerment, cultural values or personality, hardly translate into the face, or at least current research considers it pseudo-science to determine a person's character and personality traits based on the face, although popularly this idea is widespread. In this sense, it is regrettable that the authors have not referred to the various failed investigations of the past, such as that of the German neuroanatomist Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828), whose aim was precisely to try to capture social values and personality through the face, ideas that caused havoc both in Europe and in Africa. Gall founded phrenology, a science according to which the moral and intellectual predispositions of a human being were manifested as a consequence of the shape of his skull.

These theories advocated deducing psychological traits from physical ones, and their proponents claimed that there is a correspondence between graceful forms, the beauty of bodies and a good soul. Conversely, an ungraceful physique denoted a turbid soul. All these ideas were spread by the Ethnological Society of Paris (founded in 1839), the Ethnological Society of London (created in 1843) and the Anthropological Society of London (established in 1863). It was believed, therefore, that through the external appearance of a person, especially his or her face, the character or personality could be known. The interest in phrenology had a powerful influence on Daguerrean portraiture. Photographers sought to evoke the spiritual identity of their models through their faces, where they looked for evidence of the temperament and character of the sitter.

In this case, the clients wanted an idealized and harmonious portrait, as well as to show the deepest traits of their personality as a result of the agreement between the client and the photographer. But what was actually represented was a series of public social behaviors considered to be in good taste, achieved with training, discipline and refined technique. Thus, each portrayed person represented the model of something-someone, i.e., lawyer, baker, doctor, priest, etc., each

and every one of them with their characteristic features, attire and attitudes, susceptible of being compared with the other prototypes.

On the other hand, there is no mention of the Gestalt Theory, a new current that resituated in the external world the stimuli that determine people, which was a brake during the first three decades of the twentieth century, to Gall's pseudoscience. It is not denied here that the portraits do not contain some of the psychological components of the portrayed, since it is evident that certain gestures, postures, and so on, can be captured. In the portraits presented by the authors we cannot know the particular character of the sitters. Instead, what we observe are the social attitudes that we expect to see on the social plane that we all share. In other words, we recognize the typical characters that we might expect in the typical social circumstances that surround people and force them to act in a certain way, especially if there is no spontaneity, and what there is is an agreement between the character and the artist. In this case, the artistic technique determines the attitude that is captured in the drawing.

In this sense, the authors could delve into the Panofsky method to determine these public attitudes that refer us to common human attitudes, but without delving into the question of cultural values and personality, since trying to glimpse the individual psychological characteristics of each character in the current state of research could be considered pseudoscience by the scientific community. To address these issues, the authors could deal with this aspect in a more extensive way, especially in the descriptive phase, emphasizing the object of study, i.e. the work of the artist Samuel Uto, his artistic process and the technical-artistic techniques used to create the pencil portraits.

In line with the "Physical Portrait" -a type of portrait very much in vogue in the 1950s that consisted in emphasizing the physical features of the portrayed-, the authors could study in depth the physical aspect of the portrayed, since the photorealistic technique of the African artists allows it. Although the article already addresses these issues in an almost tangential way, judging by the length of the work, they could delve deeper, through the iconographic method, into aspects such as physical recognition, facial expressiveness, the incidence of light, the search for the characteristic expression of each character, and not so much their cultural values or psychological personality.

Taking into account the object of study, realistic portraits, it would be highly recommended that in the iconological phase, the authors use the method of Aesthetic Objectivism in order to achieve greater levels of objectivity. This method, as is known, seeks to highlight the elements of the work that are capable of better representing the expressive or appealing characteristics implied in the work of art. Aesthetic objects are "phenomena", and therefore captured by the senses, that is, concrete and objective. In this way, it is essential to analyze structures such as symmetries, rhythms, etc., but not to establish correlations between physical and moral appearance, but to recognize archetypes, poses and attitudes, the anatomical evolution of the face, the passage of time, clothing, etc., which, moreover, has an obvious sociological and historical importance.

The authors could incorporate some references that we indicate below to complete the cited bibliography:

Anabalón Schaaf, R. (2021). Más allá de los datos: El arte del retrato como herramienta para la observación, análisis y representación etnográfica. *Chroniques du terrain* [en ligne]. Accesible en <https://www.chroniquesduterrain.org/saisir/el->

## arte-del-retrato

Berger, J. (2006). *Sobre las propiedades del retrato fotográfica*. Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona.

Bray, Z. (2015). Anthropology with a paintbrush: Naturalist-Realist painting as “thick description”. *Visual Anthropology Review* 31 (2). 119-133.

Davis, K (2007), *The Origins of American Photography*. The Hallmark Photographic Collection. Yale University Press.

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Ruskin, J. (1857). *Elements of drawing in three letters to beginners* n.p. Accesible en <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/30325/pg30325-images.html>

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Welling, W. (1978). *Photography in America. The Formative Years. 1839-1900*. University of New Mexico.