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How to cite: Adjei-Appoh G, Acquaye R, Ampadu J. The Concept of Avant-Garde as a Creative Fashion Design Trajectory in Sekondi Takoradi – Ghana. Textile & Leather Review. 2022; 5:120-131. <https://doi.org/10.31881/TLR.2021.35>

How to link: <https://doi.org/10.31881/TLR.2021.35>

Published: 4 March 2022



The Concept of Avant-Garde as a Creative Fashion Design Trajectory in Sekondi Takoradi - Ghana

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Article

<https://doi.org/10.31881/TLR.2021.35>

Received 22 December 2021; Accepted 1 March 2022; Published 4 March 2022

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to project the concept of avant-garde as a viable and radical approach to instilling creativity in a fashion design practitioner through putting together different materials to represent shape and form in the ultimate sculpting of a silhouette. Even though the concept of avant-garde in fashion has existed for over a century in Europe, the Americas and parts of Asia, the concept has not caught up well in Ghana in terms of practice and application. Meanwhile, it has a great potential to engender creativity in the teaching and practice of fashion. This is because avant-garde encompasses experimental processes as well as constantly being on the edge, thinking forward and exploring new materials and design possibilities. Reflecting the times in which we are operating provides a relevance to the form of expression of the fashion designer. The qualitative research methodology was utilised in this study, with observation and interviews as the data collection instrument. The study observed selected fashion practitioners thoroughly, using their philosophies and designs as sources of data. The findings and discussion touched upon on a wide array of visualisations and trends and present avant-garde as a creative concept for fashion design practice in Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana. The study, therefore, recommends that fashion design students be made more aware of the essence of trying new and unfamiliar materials every now and then to enable them to be more creative. The concept of avant-garde was explored in this study because of its potential for an extended enquiry into the many trajectories of fashion product outcomes.

KEYWORDS

avant-garde, Sekondi-Takoradi, fashion, creativity, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore the possibilities of the concept of avant-garde as exhibited in fashion design approaches in Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana. The term avant-garde in French means “advance guard” or “vanguard”, which literally translates as “fore-guard”, and denotes people or works that are experimental, radical or unorthodox concerning art, culture, or society [1]. The term is characterised by non-traditional, aesthetic innovation and initial unacceptability and it may offer a critique of the relationship between a producer and a consumer. The avant-garde pushes the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm or the status quo, primarily in the cultural realm [2]. In Breward’s Fashion and

Modernity [3], the avant-garde is considered by some to be a hallmark of modernism as distinct from postmodernism. The term is widely used in the field of art and design, but the meaning casts a breadth of shadows over several areas, particularly in fashion. This is because fashion is closely related to trends and continuous renewal in order to come up with the next outfit that everybody should wear. This notion of avant-garde is reinforced by Bishop [4] who indicated that it is in line with the understanding of the term, that is, the advanced group in any field, especially the visual, literary and musical arts. He further explained that the works are characterized chiefly by unorthodox and experimental material collaboration.

The study is aimed at encouraging young fashion designers in Sekondi-Takoradi to think outside the norm in order to create unique and original designs. This conjecture will suffice, because Sekondi-Takoradi, or for that matter Ghana, is endowed with rich traditions and values that clothing and fashion draw on ceaselessly. Fashion can simply be referred to as clothing styles and accessories that primarily cover the body and also serve as an adornment to enhance one's appearance. It also depicts the manner in which people dress, wear their hair, behave socially or do other things at a given time [5]. This implies that all items used in covering, adorning or beautifying the body found in body arts can be termed as fashion. It reflects the great culture of the past and present, illustrating the character of an individual in relation to the society over the centuries. Fashion cannot be underestimated, with respect to the role of art in the civilisation of man. It is one of the essential arts, just like painting and sculpture [6]. The idea of body covering exists among different ethnic groups in Ghana and in their culture, as seen in the various traditions and ceremonies within the communities. Body adornment ranges from the use of simplest materials, such as bark cloth and raffia, to elaborate designs and styles, such as Kente, Adinkra, Fugus, African and foreign prints and expensive lace garments.

Odem [6] stressed that clothing has been seen as an intimate part of the individual. It is one of the most personal components of daily life and an expression of the social disposition rooted in culture and situated within a particular era. Fashion reflects various viewpoints, and the socio-cultural point of view is based on three factors: the individual's physical body, the cultural set-up of the community and global or external factors. The first, which is the individual's physiological differences with regard to the sexes (the male and the female) determines what to put on the body. In Ghana, the individual physical body is partly enhanced through some traditional practices at the early stage of birth and continues through puberty, marriage and even death; and these rites of passage influence fashion to a greater extent. Secondly, humans are social beings; therefore, everybody is subject to an aspect of the components of the social organisation, the family, community, religion and social differentiation in classes or the masses, which is usually reflected in forms of dressing and adornments. For instance, bodies of individuals are marked in some indelible manner, which often signifies their social belongingness. Thirdly, the forms and functions of clothing within a specific culture are influenced by

universal cultural patterns, i.e. the globalisation, which makes it possible for the fusion of clothing styles throughout the world. A common practice is the use of suits as a formal dress code in almost the whole world, and it is recognised as such. The culture of a particular group of people is a generality of their dressing, behaviour and reactions; ranging from their lingual utterances, beliefs, taboos, festivals and costumes to their hopes and aspirations.

Despite the persistent influence of foreign cultures on fashion in Ghana, the cultural dimensions are still very significant. Among the Akans, which includes the people of Sekondi-Takoradi, religious practices, such as magico-religious rites, rites of passage and festivities, are what shaped the traditional concept of beauty and had effect on the fashion of the people, especially the Ghanaian woman. The uniqueness of clothing does not only embrace the attire that individuals wear but also when and for what purpose or occasions they wear it, as well as the message it communicates about the wearer to the public [7]. These are the basic ingredients needed in determining the true cultural identity of people and their moral uprightness through clothing, which is regarded as the second skin. According to Schall, Christopher and Appiah [8], the selection of a particular dressing code and its body adornment over another are partly influenced by technology, values, morals, hygiene, rituals, aesthetics and symbolism in cultural patterns. Also, customs and laws imposed by a country or social group may be responsible for the stability or changes in the dress code of an area.

Notwithstanding this, traditional fashion is influenced greatly by the system of modernisations. Even though some people are of the view that these modernisations seemingly adulterate culture, the argument here is that some modifications in designs and material are good for the growth and expansion of fashion design, hence the push for the consideration of the concept of avant-garde in this study.

It is common knowledge that most fashion students and designers are trained mainly on utilitarian garments such as everyday wear, children's wear, official wear and other basic outfits. This is partially due to the nature of the curriculum and the immediate needs and demands in society. Although this approach is not entirely wrong, it limits the creative potential of the designers, thus limiting their output. As Siddiqui [9] puts it, avant-garde is important because it is based on constant innovation, taking risks and thinking forward. Real progress can only be made through failure and those who wish to advance must be prepared to fail. Some of the most important artistic and cultural achievements have been made through the avant-garde. Rejecting common mentality and nurturing originality has allowed those who are free in mind to shape the future. Innovation is the key to success in the current scheme of things regarding fashion design practices. It is anticipated that the avant-garde concept will create an avenue for fashion designers to innovate further in their designing and output.

This study argues that even though avant-garde fashion is seemingly against the grain in terms of everyday fashion in Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana, it could be an avenue for fashion design students and

practitioners to explore materials further and be more creative. The practice is a common feature on most international runways that herald the fashion year, notably Paris, London, New York and Milan. “In the 21st century, the avant-garde has become de-centred. Its networks and hubs have spread beyond the traditional marketplaces and creative centres of New York, London, Basel” [10]. Furthermore, creativity is a difficult concept to teach in the abstract form, so certain points of reference (avant-garde) in this context are essential. This study cast a shadow of endless design possibilities that could accrue to fashion design practitioners in Sekondi-Takoradi and stress the need for them to embrace the avant-garde.

METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the research methodology employed in collecting data that was used to support the study. It encompasses the research design, sampling procedure, population sampled, data collection instruments, data collection process and data analysis plan. The qualitative research methodology was used for the study. Aside from the interviews conducted, the study observed selected fashion practitioners thoroughly, using their philosophies and designs as sources of data. The history of the avant-garde from the time of inception, dynamics and trends to this present stage was extrapolated. The population for the study was fashion students and fashion practitioners in Effiakuma, Sekondi-Takoradi and the surrounding communities. However, the target population was fashion students, fashion apprentices and fashion practitioners in Effiakuma - New Site and the surrounding communities around Sekondi-Takoradi. The assessable population of the study is the final year fashion students, senior fashion apprentices and fashion practitioners within the study area. The purposive sampling technique was used since the study was dealing with two distinctive categories, that is fashion students or apprentices and fashion practitioners (referred to locally as masters). Under the fashion students, the study sampled fashion design students in their final year at Takoradi Technical University while the fashion practitioner’s category saw the selection of fashion practitioners within the twin-city of Sekondi-Takoradi.

Table 1. Distribution of population assessed (source: Field Study)

Population	Description	Number
Fashion practitioners	Fashion practitioner in Sekondi-Takoradi	38
Fashion students	Final year students and senior apprentices	64
Total		102

The data collection instrument used were observation and interviews. The researchers observed the classwork and assignments as well as fashion shows and passing-out ceremonies of apprentices during

the period of the study. It was realised that the concept of the avant-garde was not explicitly an approach utilised. It was absent at the apprenticeship level, but some students did explore the concept in their material interrogation and as part of their creative design portfolios. The study also observed the practice of fashion designers who explore diverse materials and techniques to produce inspirational pieces that qualify as avant-garde collections but they do not necessarily consider them as such. Thirty-eight fashion practitioners were interviewed; some interviews were conducted in person, while the others were through phone calls. All interviews lasted between 25 and 30 minutes, they were conducted in Twi and English, respectively. Again, the researcher conducted a focus group interview with the third-year fashion students of Takoradi Technical University. The primary and secondary data were both used to make inferences in this study and they were gathered from non-participant observation and through direct interactions with participants. Relevant information was also gathered from other publications, samples of designs made and a series of fashion shows and other related events.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The concept of the avant-garde is not necessarily a Ghanaian phenomenon; however, over the last few years, there has been some resembling practice in some settings. It has been championed by academics and a few designers who want to go against the grain. From investigations conducted during this study, it is not clear exactly when the practice began in Ghana, but there are layers of events that situate some practices in time and spaces that have become pointers and signposts of the avant-garde phenomena. Ghanaian fashion designer, Kofi Ansah, is one of the forerunners of the concept of avant-garde in Ghana. He studied design at Chelsea in the United Kingdom and graduated with first-class honours. His vibrant, creative and edgy collections have helped push African fashion to glorious heights. He was a major player in the Ghanaian fashion industry and the past president of the Federation of African Designers. He designed fabrics for the 'Ghana@50' Golden Jubilee Celebrations as well as the costume for the 2008 African Cup of Nations (CAN 2008) that was hosted by Ghana. He is one of the designers chosen to sell his artful collections on one of the esteemed e-commerce sites - yoox.com. Kofi Ansah's exploits in experimental design have positioned him as one of the proponents of avant-garde fashion in Ghana. Figure 1 is a design by Kofi Ansah.



Figure 1. Designed by Kofi Ansah (source: Kofi Ansah, Ghana)

Apart from Kofi Ansah, Danny McEll and a handful of other Ghanaian designers, there has been a number of avant-garde experimentations at the institutional level. An example is a Dutch NPT- project 046 from 2009 dubbed “Building Capacity at Accra Technical University to strengthen Fashion Design Education in Ghana”. This experiential collaboration involved Dutch Education assistants, namely Annieke van Hofwegen (Teacher, Fashion Design), Esther Vijftigschild (Teacher, Fashion Design), Clemence Baars (Teacher, Fashion Design), Sofie Groot Dengerick (Teacher, 3D Designs), Pim Tieland (Teacher, Visual Art and Design) and Majoleine Spaans (Teacher, Visual Art and Design). These ‘pro avant-garde designers/instructors’ were in Ghana for five weeks and organised various experiential training for the students and staff that culminated into an exhibition and a fashion show. The educational assistants prepared the content of their teaching programme in the Netherlands, arranged all the working materials and were fully prepared upon arrival in Accra. During the period they worked in Accra Technical University with the staff and second-year students of the Higher National Diploma Fashion Design programme on the concept of becoming more creative. As mentioned in the introduction, although creativity is a difficult concept to conceptualize in a curriculum, both the curriculum and the staff can provide a context in which practical creativity is promoted. Teaching orientation and pedagogical methodology are important facilitators of creativity and that was cardinal during the training period.

The central theme for all the works was ‘place and space’. Through the theme, the instructors tried to illustrate different aspects of fashion design to the students step by step. The students were guided to choose their sub-themes carefully and since place and space is universal it was an interesting topic to work with from two cultural viewpoints. It was also interesting because there’s always an identity behind the subject of place and space, something that is very important if you want to be a designer.

Without truly knowing and understanding your identity it is hard to create one's vision and, by extension, to develop a personal signature. During the training period, Kofi Ansah and Patrick Asante, another famous Ghanaian fashion designer, took students through seminars, such as 'Developing their own signature', that would make them stand out.

One of the course instructors observed that working with the concept was new and appeared very abstract to the students, so by giving them several assignments the whole idea of the concept was made clear to them. Conceptual thinking should ideally be Ghanaian students' way of working because conceptual thinking often leads to a more experimental design instead of ready-to-wear clothing. The idea is that students learn to experiment with diverse designs and materials so that they can have a breadth of competencies to transcend beyond making only wearable clothes after their graduation. The students were shown many new ways of thinking, new ways of finding inspiration and coming up with concepts. They had to stick with this concept during the entire designing process and make it visible in their final design and at the fashion show. 'We are happy and proud to see that so many funny sketches, thoughts and interesting concepts came out of this working process', another instructor observed.

It was further observed that, as part of the Creative Design class for all first-year fashion design students of the Department of Fashion Design and Technology, Takoradi Technical University students were made to design avant-garde pieces and sculpt forms and shapes using basically recycled materials. The results from these exercises by students have been very revealing. Figure 2 shows samples of works produced by the students of the Department of Fashion Design and Technology, Takoradi Technical University.



Figure 2. Samples of work produced by students (source: Department of Fashion Design and Technology, Takoradi Technical University, Takoradi – Ghana)

In recent times, there are events such as Chale Wote Art Festival, an annual art and cultural event that pulls people from all over the world to participate in live art, performance and fashion runway events (Figure 3). According to Phaidon [10], the Chale Wote Street Art Festival is an alternative platform that brings art, fashion, music, dance and performance out of the galleries and runways and onto the streets of James Town, Accra - Ghana. The first festival took place in July 2011, following a series of discussions about creating community projects by participants at a Talk Party event. The partners for the festival include Redd Kat Pictures, Dandano, Mumble, Chaka Orleans Heritage and Gamashie Development Agency. The festival includes street painting, graffiti murals, photo exhibitions, interactive installations, food and fashion marketplace, live street performances, extreme sports, African cinema pavilion, street boxing, fashion parade, music block party, design labs and much more. The COVID 19 pandemic has caused some disruptions to the Chale Wote Art Festival over the last two years (2020 and 2021). It is, however, anticipated that it would bounce back in the subsequent years with some interactive and engaging fashion ideas.



Figure 3. Image from Chale Wote Art Festival (source: <http://accradotalradio.com/chale-wote-street-art-festival/>, <https://mp3ghana.net/more-sights-scenes-from-chale-wote-festival-photos/>)

Jawuley Art Festival is another recent event in the Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolis that offers a novelty for the avant-garde fashion (Figure 4). Activities at the event included, but were not limited to, fashion parades and shows, skating, dancing, photography, art displays, masquerades/fancy dress (Ankos), cultural display, balance art and many more. The aim of the festival, according to the organisers, is to re-ignite the arts and culture of the people of Sekondi-Takoradi, hence the initial theme 'Arts Renaissance', and it is also tied up to the annual Yesu Asor (Resurrection of Jesus Christ) celebration in Easter. Amongst the several activities were beautifully coloured African contemporary models, amidst music and dance. The street from the Lagoon Spot to the 2nd Street along the beach in Sekondi was lit up with street modelling for three days.



Figure 4. Jawuley Art Festival, Sekondi-Takoradi, 2019 (source: Sleek Photos, Sekondi-Takoradi)

Again, in December 2019, there was the Potomanto Festival at Enam Ase in Sekondi-Takoradi. The festival promoted the Ghanaian art and fashion industry through culture, and particularly projected the traditional way of dressing, mimicking trends from as far back as the 19th century slave era. The platform provided an opportunity for the younger generation to learn about the material culture of the then Gold Coast. The festival reflected on clothing patterns from early to mid-century and also featured collections inspired by post-colonialism. Figure 5 is a combination of costumes showcased during the Potomanto Festival.



Figure 5. Image from Potomanto Art Festival, Ghana, 2018 (source: <https://www.picuki.com/media/2208007718846258493>)

Avant-Garde Practices in Takoradi Technical University

The Department of Fashion Design and Technology, Takoradi Technical University was selected for this study because that is the only tertiary institution in Sekondi-Takoradi offering fashion design for a cross-section of students. By extension, the disposition of the Department has a significant effect on other fashion training institutions at the lower levels. The focus group interviews conducted with final year students revealed that the concept of the avant-garde is not a significant feature in the teaching of the Creative Design and Working Drawings/Illustration courses. Meanwhile, these courses are supposed to introduce students to various creative avenues and enable them to manage materials effectively. The breakdown for the three-year programme is summed up as follows. It came out that the first year (foundation) courses aim to help students to learn and use art advantageously in fashion design. Students are expected to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes in drawing and colouring. The learners are also supposed to imbibe skills in handling art media and be as creative as possible. The Creative Design and Working Drawings/Illustration course further aims, amongst other things, to guide students in developing their creative instinct and interpreting ideas, to develop students' presentation skills through illustration and layout, to help them develop theme boards, produce worksheets and produce fabric and colour charts. In the second year, the course is aimed at equipping student designers with creative and technical skills that are needed for drawing ideas when working on a collection. At this level, the course is linked to the pattern and garment technology courses. Moreover, it seeks to analyse and determine factors and elements that constitute style in clothing design, as well as to determine the importance of developing one's personal design as a designer and the role style plays in retail outlets, boutiques and accessorising garments.

In the third and final year, the possibilities for specialization are endless but it depends on the student's personal preference and the limitations of the institution. The course aims to provide the designs and foundation work needed to produce a collection of garments or fabrics to be completed in the final semester and presented in a fashion show. Students are expected to plan their collection by exploring a theme of their choice for the mood board, design development and the final selection to the detailed specifications necessary for cutting the patterns and sewing up. The course in the final semester aims to develop the students' presentation skills in a two-dimensional form, for example, exhibition work, portfolios as well as in a three-dimensional form, such as pieces for fashion shows, modelling, verbal and non-verbal communication. Students at the end of the semester must create a highly finished portfolio and present their final collections and portfolios in a fashion show and exhibition.

The Department of Fashion Design and Technology at Takoradi Technical University, as explained above, is at the Higher National Diploma (HND) level that is administered by the National Board for Professional and Technician Examination (NABPTEx), the same for all the technical universities and polytechnics in Ghana. It is anticipated that the bachelor of technology programmes being developed

by the various technical universities will factor in the avant-garde concept to engender better concept development, creativity and good management of materials by students.

CONCLUSION

The concept of avant-garde connotes, but is not limited to, state-of-the-art, cutting-edge, progressive, advanced and Avant. In many fields of endeavour, the avant-garde is considered as an intelligentsia that projects and develops new and experimental concepts, for example, fashion design, art, architecture and music. This study, albeit exploratory, has highlighted practices that should be encouraged to engender creative thinking and innovativeness in fashion design practices in Sekondi-Takoradi. The study observed that the concept of the avant-garde has not been explicitly integral as an operative training concept in the pedagogy of fashion design in Sekondi-Takoradi and by extension Ghana. However, the potential for experimentation abounds and must be encouraged at the training level to ensure more inventiveness. Fashion designers, fashion students and activities that were sampled in this study lay credence to the fact that, with the appropriate guidance, resources and experimentations, the resultant designs would be very engaging.

It is acknowledged that the 21st-century mindset hinges on creativity, innovations and changing patterns. The avant-garde concept of designing advocated in this study may disrupt the control of the 'norm' to make way for a more dynamic and exploratory approach to handling fashion materials, and finishing. Conceptualizing or manipulation of the material and the content disputes the limitations of an idea, thereby allowing the free flow of creativity and improvisation. As this study points out, experiments and innovations are key ingredients to look out for and not just the design.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization – Appoh-Adjei G, Acquaye R and Ampadu J; methodology – Appoh-Adjei G and Acquaye R; formal analysis – Appoh-Adjei G and Acquaye R; investigation – Appoh-Adjei G; resources – Appoh-Adjei G; writing-original draft preparation – Appoh-Adjei G, Acquaye R and Ampadu J; writing-review and editing – Appoh-Adjei G and Ampadu J; visualization – Appoh-Adjei G; supervision – Acquaye R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the organisers of Chale Wote Art Festival – Accra, Jawuley Art Festival and Potomanto Festival in Sekondi-Takoradi for some of the images used in this study. We would also want to acknowledge the Department of Fashion Design and Technology at Takoradi Technical University for their immense support throughout this study.

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