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## Iconographical Analysis of the Masterpieces of the British-Ghanaian Mixed Media Artist, Godfried Donkor

**Samuel Prophask Asamoah<sup>1</sup>, Dickson Adom<sup>1</sup>, George Kushiator<sup>1</sup>**

### ABSTRACT

African artists from different ethnic societies have contributed massively to global art history. However, sadly, there has been scanty scholarly documentation of their journey as well as their works. One of such great artists is Godfried Donkor, a British-Ghanaian mixed-media artist. The paper delves into his personal life, educational background, his journey as an artist, and his accomplishments in the development of art in the global and Ghanaian contexts. The paper analyzes two of his works using Erwin Panofsky's procedure of iconography in art historical writing. The findings of the study revealed that it was difficult in drawing a clear line between modernism and contemporary as far as Donkor's artistic creations are concerned. Donkor's works can be considered as a merger of modernist and contemporary art movements. He uses a contemporary artistic approach to communicate/highlights issues of the period of the African diasporic modernism movement especially, the themes that revolve around colonialism and its impacts, racial discrimination/oppression, their legacy, and Afrocentric identities. This was the period when the Africans in the diaspora, especially in the United States and Europe were struggling for a breakthrough to showcase their art and culture to the world. These concepts have been the primacy of Donkor's creative expressions. The study contends that Ghanaian artists, both locally and internationally are advancing in their careers and need to be documented as a step in promoting the artists and the arts of the country on the global art landscape.

**Keywords:** Artist scholarship; Godfried Donkor; Ghanaian contemporary art; iconography; mixed-media.

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### 1. Introduction

Africa is a heterogeneous continent with diverse cultures, heritage, and history resulting in a variety of aesthetic traditions and artistic productions. African artists from different ethnic societies have contributed massively to global art history. However, sadly, there has been scanty scholarly documentation of their journey as well as their works. Although museums in Europe and North America have hosted an unprecedented number of shows of African art in recent years (Proctor, 2019) most of these works and their creators have not been given much attention in the local art scholarship. These

<sup>1</sup> Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Email: [dickson.adom@knust.edu.gh](mailto:dickson.adom@knust.edu.gh)

artists produce works that fall under various art movements, categorized with different timelines in terms of approach, style, and concepts. African artists who have gained recognition in the international/global art scene seem to receive much attention, and documentation of their lives and works by European and American scholars as compared to their African counterparts (Adom, 2021). Some of these artists are locally based, and others are in the diaspora. Godfried Donkor is one of the preeminent African Diaspora artists of Ghanaian descent. He is currently based in the United Kingdom. Donkor is an industrious Ghanaian Diaspora artist with a distinctive, and creative style that bridges the gap between modern African diasporic art and contemporary African diasporic art. He has carved a niche for himself by adopting a contemporary artistic approach, especially mixed media collage, and recycled art to execute works with modern African diasporic concepts. Donkor's themes are mostly centred on slavery and its impact, racial segregation, black pride, the civil rights movement, and other Afrocentric modernist concepts.

The complexity and enigmatic nature of his works require in-depth interpretation precisely, a scholarly analysis, for one to fully gain an insight into their philosophical underpinnings as well as the historical, and cultural context. Though there are various ways of writing scholarly analyses of artwork in art history such as formal (visual analysis) analysis and iconographical analysis, this study adopted the use of the latter. Iconographical analysis contextualizes the integrants, and the overall piece within a historical, theoretical, cultural, and philosophical framework that helps the reader/audience to have an insight into the subject matter and the context within which work was made. Moreover, it gives a deeper meaning to the symbolic representations and also helps to situate the work of art within its precise timeline. Iconographical studies play a pivotal role in demystifying the mysterious conception of beliefs around a work of art from unfamiliar cultures. For these and other significant reasons that contribute to the enhancement of art appreciation, the researchers adopted iconographical studies as a style in art historical writing to document Donkor's life as an artist, and two of his works. The researchers were motivated by the use of the iconographical analysis by Abdullah et al. (2020) recently in studying the works of two Malaysian artists to accentuate the intrinsic content, philosophy and symbolism of their works of art. This study is significant because there has not been a comprehensive study that analyses the creative pieces of Donkor using Panofsky's iconographical analysis to aid in fully appreciating the philosophical drivers of his works, hence this study. The paper presents a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical propositions of Erwin Panofsky's Iconographical analysis as applied to the study of art, a brief methodology adopted for the study, biography of Godfried Donkor and an extensive discussion of two of his works using the procedural steps in Iconographical analysis.

## **2. Erwin Panofsky's iconographical analysis**

Erwin Panofsky is a German-born art historian whose career flourished in the mid-19th century. He is the father of the iconographical analytical approach, which he initially applied to medieval and renaissance art. However, today the analytical approach is applied to various artworks in the various timelines in art history especially to contemporary art. The process involves three significant stages. These are the pre-iconographical description (primary or natural subject matter), iconographical analysis (secondary or conventional subject matter), and iconological analysis (tertiary or intrinsic subject matter). These phases are all preoccupied with a different level or layer of meaning that aids in better appreciating the work of art (Meijer, 2011).

### **2.1 Pre-iconographical description (primary or natural subject matter)**

This is a description stage of the work. At this stage, the researchers identify and describe the visible content of the composition. The identification of the work is without any information of the cultural background of the image. Meijer (2011) refers to this phase as the identification of formal meaning which comprises factual and expressional meaning (expressed emotions present/visible in a work). This is the identification of pure or visible forms (Panofsky, 1939) easily understandable.

### **2.2 Iconographical analysis (secondary or conventional subject matter)**

Iconographical analysis, on the other hand, includes the information of the cultural background or the history related to the individual or collective object perceivable in the composition. Panofsky

(1939) refers to this as, the study of the secondary or conventional meaning. This constitutes the study of the artistic motifs that makes up the composition and their relationship with the subject matter. This is primarily done with the consultation of literature from the period in which the work of art was made (Meijer, 2011). The realization of how the motifs relate to the subject matter through consultation of literature is what (Panofsky, 1939) refers to as Iconographical analysis. Glass (2017) posits that art historians try to understand it by studying the historical context in which the image was made, typically through comparison with texts and other imagery from the time.

### **2.3 Iconological analysis (tertiary or intrinsic subject matter)**

At this stage of iconography, the writer study and interprets all the symbolisms in the compositional and iconographical representations that are sometimes unconsciously depicted by the artist reflecting a social, cultural, or religious convention. Panofsky (1939) posits that this phase of the analytical procedure offers the intrinsic meaning or content which he refers to as iconographical analysis in the deeper sense which later changed to Iconological analysis. At this stage, the researchers' interpretation of the icons is based on the context in which they were made. Art possesses "underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work" (Panofsky, 1939). This is when an image is framed within its specific time, location, and culture. It is an extension of iconography (Kilroy-Ewbank, 2021) and historians sometimes pair it with other approaches to art historical writing. Panofsky (1939) continued to state that, this study uncovers the accepted principles that determine the choice and presentation of motifs, as well as the production and interpretation of images, stories, and allegories, and which give meaning even to the formal arrangements and technical procedures employed. This is the third and the last phase of Panofsky's study of iconography.

## **3. Methodology**

This study relied heavily on secondary data from desk survey (Travis, 2016) and document analysis (Bowen, 2009) by garnering published journal articles and exhibition catalogues, as well as radio and television interviews with Godfried Donkor that have been conducted. The iconographical analytical framework as proposed by Erwin Panofsky was used as the theoretical lens (Panofsky, 1939) for the detailed and systematic analysis of the selected works by Godfried Donkor. The main stages in the analytical procedure include the pre-iconographical description of the works to unearth their primary subject matter, the iconographical analysis stage where secondary subject matter of the works is garnered and the iconological analysis stage where the tertiary subject matter is scholarly discussed. Although the researchers scholarly analysed the two works using Erwin Panofsky's procedure of iconography in art historical writing, we included style by agreeing with Gombrich (1982) who sees style as an instrument used to encode information. Like, Gombrich (1982), the researchers aver that style is an active instrument and not a passive phenomenon as far as iconography is concerned. The researchers believe that using Erwin Panofsky's procedure of iconography in art historical writing, in combination with style could unearth fascinating and detailed information worthy of artworks. Also, to help understand the life of the artist, the researchers presented a systematic biography of Godfried Donkor where his educational background that might have influenced his creative oeuvre, major national and international exhibitions he has participated as well as recognition he has chalked over the years. The researchers carefully validated the facts presented that were consulted for the analysis (Peshkin, 1993) by triangulating the sources of information garnered to vouch their credibility for the scholarly consumption of readers.

## **4. Biography of Godfried Donkor**

Godfried Donkor is widely known as a British-Ghanaian mixed-media artist. Despite this repute, the researchers further discovered that he is a versatile artist with skill in photography, painting, printmaking, fusion as well as knowledge in film performance. Godfried is interested in historical, sociological issues, and, in particular, the shared history of the people of Africa, America, and Europe. Against this background, he reflects on the commercialization of people in all its facets, a complex of themes that runs like a red thread through his work cycles. He was born in Kumasi, Ghana in 1964,

Donkor left at the age of eight, growing up between Spain and England before completing a BA in Fine Art at Central Saint Martins (1984-89), London. Godfried Donkor also did postgraduate studies in painting at the Escola Massana in Barcelona, (Fowler-Paul, 2007) Spain (1991-92), and an MA in African Art History at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London in 1995. Donkor revealed that his inspiration is from the people of Africa and Europe (Donkor, 2015). The fact that he spent some of his formative childhood years in Ghana as well as Britain, and Spain, is significant to his attachments to each continent. Donkor (2013) confirmed when he revealed the source of inspiration for one of his works, titled, “Kumasi de Ville” that, “Driving around the Ville, East St. Louis, and other areas, I found myself thinking of my different childhoods; in Kumasi, Ghana first and then London, and thinking how different it was in St. Louis” (Fitzgerald, 2003: 14).

Fowler-Paul (2007) revealed that Donkor is among the artists of African descent in Britain who finished art school and began their professional careers after the Black Art Movement had reached its apex. However, this political racial debate may have partly influenced his creativity even though his themes are not strictly limited to such contextualization/conceptualizations. The Black Art Movement challenged the racism that the artists of African, Caribbean, and Asian descent perceived as endemic in British culture, particularly in regard to the patronage available to non-white artists within the mainstream art scene (Fowler-Paul, 2007). Donkor's influences encompass topics concerning historical events and social issues. Notably, the commercialization of humans, and the rise of the African American, are the most common themes used in his art. Fowler-Paul (2007) explained that much of these works especially those produced during the 1980s are a rigorous and overt critique of racism that explores the legacy of slavery, oppression, and stereotypes experienced by people of colour in the West. However, Donkor (2013) stated that he has recently broadened his horizon beyond the scope of black experiences which to him, impoverishes the works multivalent iconography, (Fowler-Paul, 2007) and wide-ranging art historical references.

Donkor frequently uses newspaper pages as background for his collage works. He has adopted Financial Times as a compelling formal device that tonally mediates the range of his colour palette (Martin, 2007). He stylistically systematizes the pages to compositionally create a frame for his scale and pictorial order. Thus, he uses the columns, borders, outlines, boxed sections, and rectilinear pagination of the FT to make and remake grids, squares, triangles, straight lines, cross-sections, diagonals, and blocks (Martin, 2007). He sometimes also uses lace, sheet music, photographic images, and other archival paper materials juxtaposing one another in his collage works.

His interest in collage came about when he was a student at St. Martin's College of Art in London. Originally, collage was a preparation for his other works until people began to show interest in these experimentations and encourage him to keep it up. He once stated that “Visual language is intriguing to me and with collage, symbols become a language... thus it was interesting to me that a language was developing from the images. Collage can be a very expressive medium, very instant and direct, [but] I think I'm drawn to using images that may seem to be contrasting harmoniously.” Although known for his painting and collage work, Donkor's original intention as an artist, from the age of 14, was to be a fashion designer (Donkor, 2013). It was only at the urging of his teachers to try a different medium that he purchased some paint and brushes and began painting (Donkor 2015).

Some of Donkor's pieces depict black footballers and boxers, such as Jack Johnson and Mohammad Ali. According to Bernier (2008), in his series of collages entitled *Slave to Champ* and *Madonnas*, Donkor uses images of African Americans in recent history, such as boxers, football players, or pin-up girls, to show the rise of the African Americans from slavery to success. They simultaneously catalogue how male and female black bodies were exploited for their strength to labour and reproduce, as well as exoticized as oversexed (Fowler-Paul, 2007). The variety of characters as well as the rise from the center of the ship in these pieces show that the black ladder to success is not a natural one, but an artificial rise that conforms to a society catered towards white people. The black champions are depicted as saints in most of his compositions. These themes came about after his extensive research, to explore the relationship between boxing and the slave trade within the UK, US, and Ghana, (López, 2020) citing events such as “battles royal”, where white slave-owners would force black slaves to fight to the death until only one man was standing. From aristocrats fighting peasants in the UK to plantation owners staging matches for slaves in the US, Donkor's work examines the social-historical relevance of boxing as ‘the art of self-defense. According to López (2020), apart from sports, Donkor's

works trace the intersecting histories of colonialism, slavery, intercontinental trade as well as cultural events.

Donkor has participated in residency programs in several key spaces in Africa, Europe, the US, and the Caribbean. His works are included in international collections such as Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Smithsonian Museum of African Art – Washington D.C; Studio Museum, Harlem; Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester; Spanish Sports Council Collection; National Collection of Senegal; University of Helsinki; and National Gallery of Botswana. Donkor has won numerous awards including 1st prize/ Best International Artist at the Dak'Art Festival in 1998. He was also Ghana's representative to the 2001 Venice Biennale. He has participated in several exhibitions both in the United States and in Europe and his work can be found in many prestigious museums and institutions around the world as stated above.

## **5. Iconographical analysis of two selected works by Godfried Donkor**

### **5.1 St. Jack Johnson**

This is a figurative composition of a man in gray shots shaded with brown and black tones. He stands bear-chested with a clenched fist. His left hand is stretched to the shoulder level but partly bent at the elbow while the right hand is bent at a right angle at the waist level. There are golden haloes around his head. The legs appear darker than the rest of the body and are almost covered with the variety of blue lines crisscrossing one another forming an image of a ship, and waves at the foreground of this composition. Behind the man are a wooden window fixed in a brown wall and an image of a rainbow beneath it. The man in the composition is a portrayal of a popular boxer named Jack Johnson. He was an African American boxer who is widely regarded as one of the most influential boxers of all time. Legend Jack Johnson was the first African American world heavyweight boxing champion. He was considered one of the most famous and successful black Americans whose fame lasted for more than thirteen years. He owned many businesses including restaurants, night club, and a press (major newspaper), and was one of the first people to own a car in America. He went through racial oppression yet, managed to become successful.

Donkor portrayed this historical fighter as a saint by adorning his head with golden haloes. According to Donkor, the Black Americans who stood firm to uplift the image of this diasporic identity, despite the challenges, and even took lives of most of them can be compared to saints in the Catholic ideal. He stated that “Saints martyred themselves for their faith: that’s the Catholic ideal. But I found that these guys were also historical martyr figures, in a way” (Marks, 2019). These people include musicians, artists, politicians, civil right activist, anti-racist advocates, Afrocentricity advocates, and also sportsmen like Jack Johnson.

Donkor revealed that boxing as a sport has historical entanglement with the slave trade (Marks, 2019). He traced this strand of history to historic events such as “battles royale: Last Man Standing”, where white men would force black slaves to fight to the death until only one man was standing. From aristocrats fighting peasants in the UK to plantation owners staging matches for slaves in the US. Donkor’s work examines the social-historical relevance of boxing as ‘the art of self-defense (López, 2020). Donkor also used this boxer symbolically to illustrate how these black saints (the African diasporic legends) stood to combat the Eurocentric portrayal of blacks been inferior. Their defensiveness significantly impacted the rehabilitation of blacks from all over the world by eliminating the inferiority complex. As Khokholkova (2016) confirmed that being dark-skinned, the African Americans did not feel like full-fledged Americans. Many of them were ashamed of their blackness and were trying to copy the appearance and behavior of the white majority by blanching their skin and straightening their natural hair. Through these legends, the blacks began to believe in themselves and appreciated their racial identity.

The image of the ship and the sea waves symbolically illustrate how the African Americans were transported to the Western and American lands. It is a symbolic depiction of the historical entanglement of the transatlantic slave trade and the migration of people of African descent. He disclosed that he mostly uses the image of a slave ship but this particular image used is "Santa María" (the ship that was used by Columbus). This is to serve dual iconographical purposes, thus, to reveal the genesis of how the Europeans migrated to America as well as how the Africans were forcefully transported to both Europe and America. As a result of this and other historical events, Europe and America became Continents of multiple races. In other words, continents of many colors (race) which is represented by the rainbow.

## 5.2 Browning Madonna

The central figure in this composition is a girl posing with her back uncovered. Her left hand is vertically relaxed on the body while the right with its greater part hidden from the viewer because of her posture seems to be lifted with the palm resting on top of her head with the back of the

fingers exposed. Although her front is turned away from the viewer, she appeared to be wearing a breast cover and a bikini as appeared with her other parts visible. There are haloes around her head and two male figures standing aggressively in the west and east cardinal directions, facing inward. There is another male figure standing in readiness either to attack or defend. Unlike the two other men stated, the greater part of his body, from the foot to the lower chest overlaps the haloes while the remaining part extends beyond the contours of the haloes upwards. On the foreground of this composition is an image of a ship and waves graphically illustrated in black and white. This image of the ship covers part of the female figure from the buttock downwards. The background of the composition is covered with newspapers. Donkor used these images of men and women to represent the Africans in the diaspora who greatly contributed to the promotion of new carved diasporic culture, and the elimination of inferiority complex among African Americans and the generic black race.

The Americans of African descent have been victims of racial discrimination for probably four centuries. The history of this racial segregation can be traced to the advent of colonization of Africa and the Euro-American slave trade that lasted apparently for three centuries. During this period, Western slave traders forcefully transported Africans who were captured in wars, and also through deceitful mechanisms to Europe and America through the Atlantic Ocean. Many of them died on the journey out of afflictions inflicted by the Euro-American enslavers. The survivors were traded as slaves and were forced to undertake various dreary and deadly tasks in white-owned plantations and other industries in Europe and America.

These slaves developed a new culture influenced by their experiences in those new geographic locations. This new culture was somewhat distinct from the Euro-American culture as well as the indigenous African cultures. Locke (1931) confirmed by stating that African American cultural traditions began in North America under conditions of slavery that had severed African Americans from their African cultural heritage, meaning that they began with a blank slate and created something unique out of necessity (Bowles 2018). Although this new African diasporic culture began from the dawn of Euro-American slavery, it came to light in the 1920s. Thus, the era of the Harlem Renaissance was after the abolishment of slavery. The Harlem Renaissance which was also known as "the new Negro Movement", was an intellectual and cultural revival of African American music, dance, visual art, fashion, literature,

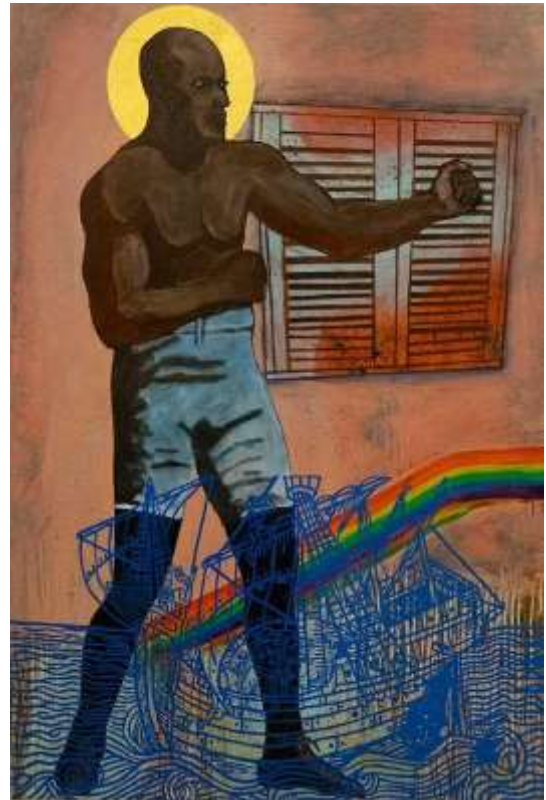


Figure 1. St Jack Johnson, a brunette in a blond town, 2019, Godfried Donkor, Mixed media, 155 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

theatre, and politics centered in Harlem, Manhattan, New York City, spanning the 1920s and 1930s (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 2013).

In other to showcase this distinct culture to the world, these diasporas of African descent, began to engage themselves in various activities such as; sports, diverse art genres such as music, fine art et cetera. These people eventually gained popularity and their images were found in newspapers, magazines, banners, posters, and other communication materials. Donkor used the image of the girl in this art piece to represent the Africans in the diaspora pin-up girls who have worked tirelessly to uplift the image of the black race despite the anti-black racial segregation. The haloes adorning the head of this central figure illustrate how they martyred themselves for their culture and faith, which could be compared with the saints in the Catholic ideal. He considered them to be heroes who deserve to be crowned with haloes.

Donkor used the image of men posing in readiness to represent great boxers such as Bill Richmond, Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali, George Stevenson, and many others who stood to combat against the negative Eurocentric perception of blacks as an inferior race. The image of the ship depicted at the forefront of this composition has dual symbolic representations. The ship portrayed was named, “La Santa Maria” or “La Galleria”. It was the largest and the first ship used by Christopher Columbus to sail on the Atlantic Ocean. This symbolically represents how the land of America was discovered by the Spanish, which marks the genesis of the European migration to America. It also illustrates how the enslaved Africans were transported to the land of Europe and America during the transatlantic slave trade. The newspaper forming the background of this composition iconographically represents fame. Thus, how these black legends worked tirelessly to gain popularity with their images appearing in journals and other media outlets. They contributed a lot to the elimination of the inferiority complex among blacks.

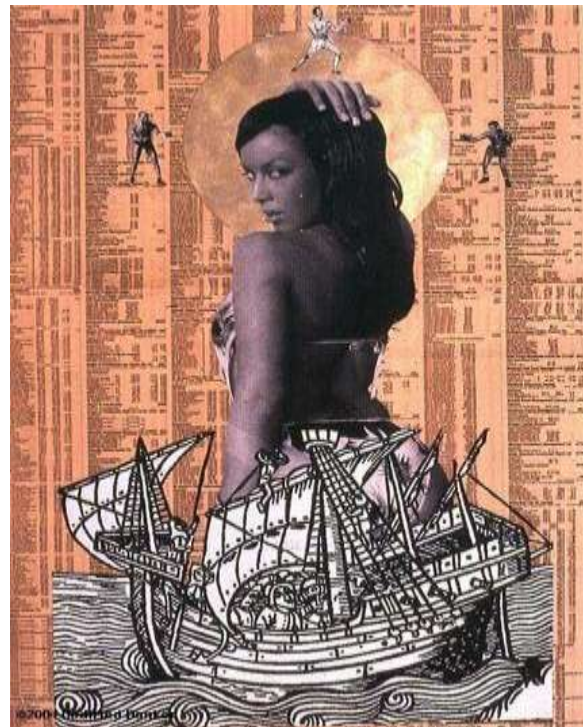


Figure 2. Browning Madonna, Godfried Donkor, 2004, digital print on canvas, 214 X 153cm.

## 6. Conclusion

The paper delved into the biography of Godfried Donkor, a British-Ghanaian mixed-media artist. Donkor revealed that his formative childhood years in Ghana as well as Britain, and Spain, are significant to his attachments and inspiration from the people of Africa and Europe (Donkor, 2015). The paper, therefore, examined the development of Donkor's artworks in the global and Ghanaian contexts. The paper concluded that Donkor artworks bridged the gap between modern and contemporary African diasporic arts. Therefore, Donkor's artworks could be considered as a fusion of modernist and contemporary art movements. Adopting a contemporary artistic approach, Donkor used mixed media collage, and recycled art to create works with modern and African diasporic concepts. The study also revealed that Donkor's themes were mostly centered on Afrocentric modernist concepts. The findings of the study also revealed that Donkor's artistic creations were amalgamations of juxtapositions and superimpositions of elements within the incarceration of modernism and the contemporary art movement.

The paper also scholarly analysed two of his works using Erwin Panofsky's procedure of iconographical analytical approach. The researchers adopted iconographical studies as a style in art historical writing to document Donkor's life as an artist, and two of his works. In his figurative composition entitled 'St. Jack Johnson', Donkor's artwork served dual iconographical purposes of a symbolic depiction of the historical entanglement of the transatlantic slave trade and the migration of

people of African descent. In his work entitled 'Browning Madonna', Donkor expressed the promotion of new carved diasporic culture. These concepts have been the primacy of Donkor's creative expressions. The study also contended that upcoming African artists all over the world are advancing in their careers and therefore need to be documented on the global art scene. It is recommended that African artists contribute massively to the scholarly documentation of their journey towards global art history. Based on these suppositions, there is a danger of indigenous and contemporary art and cultural extinction (Kushiator 2020) if conscious efforts are not made to document these art forms, a step in promoting the artists and the arts of the country on the global art landscape.

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