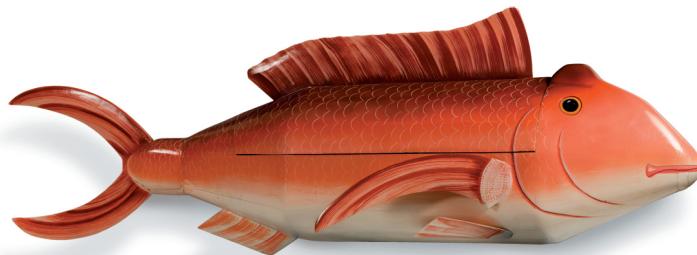




Bonus Artists' Lessons to Thrive! Ch. 8 Ga Fantasy Coffins

Big Idea: Thinking Outside of the Box



FIGURES 1 & 2 (Top) A Coffin Resembling a Fish. Tropenmuseum, part of the National Museum of World Cultures. Source: CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons. (Bottom) Paa Joe (Ghanaian, born 1945). Coffin in the Form of a Nike Sneaker, mid-1990s. Wood, pigment, metal, fabric, 29 x 80 x 22 1/2 in. (73.7 x 203.2 x 57.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Lynne and Robert Rubin in honor of William C. Siegmann, 2000.7

Fantasy coffins, called *abebuu adekai* (proverb boxes), honor the lives of the Ga, an ethnic group in Accra, Ghana during ceremonial funerals. Fantasy coffins began in 1950, when Seth Kane Kwei (1922-1992) constructed a palanquin formed in a cocoa-pod design for a festival to transport a Ga chief (Kane Quaye Carpentry Workshop, 2016). Due to the chief's passing prior to the festival, Kwei transformed his cocoa-pod palanquin into the chief's coffin. Shortly after, Kwei built an airplane fantasy coffin for his grandmother's funeral. She had always wanted to fly in an airplane, but never had the opportunity. Kwei's imaginative practice of thinking outside of the box to design coffins, revolutionized Ga funeral practices and established pathways for his apprentices, including Paa Joe (born Joseph Tetteh-Ashone in 1947), and his descendants to continue and evolve his fantasy coffins. Fantasy coffins are assembled, rather than carved, and take about up to two weeks to produce, costing between \$250 and \$1000. Those intended for burial are made of soft wood to disintegrate into the earth. Ones produced for museum collections are made of hardwoods and meant for preservation. Perceived as art, rather than a temporal instrument, they are fully removed from their funeral roles.

Traditional Ga burials had been performed without coffins at simple, unmarked burial sites with ceremonies that included dancing and drumming. Ga funerals marked the deceased transitions from physical life into the spiritual ancestral world. The Christian burial custom of using coffins was introduced into Ghana during 19th century Colonialism and has remained in practice (Dumouchelle, 2007). Contemporary Ga funerals broadened traditional celebratory rituals to include processions with dancing pallbearers and fantasy coffins. The coffins' exuberant forms align with community members' professions, social statuses, personal interests, and unique characteristics. Fishermen are commonly buried in coffins in the forms of boats and fishes (Figure

1). Consumer products from popular culture inspired fantasy coffins in the forms of Coke bottles, Twix bars, and Nike tennis shoes (Figure 2). Teachers are commonly buried in coffins shaped like Bic pens and books. Luxury cars and airplanes symbolize personal aspirations and prosperity (Dini-Osman, 2022). Ga funerary aesthetic is unique. It fuses traditional ceremonial practices with coffins designed with indigenous symbols and those from popular culture. Ga fantasy coffins illustrate an example of transformative aesthetics due to the Ga adopting the foreign coffin and combining it with their traditional practices and symbols, popular culture iconography, and cultural desires, thereby resulting in something entirely new.

Essential/Guiding Questions

1. How do fantasy coffins represent Ga traditions and innovations? In which ways have outside influences shaped their development?
2. How might Ga fantasy coffins' meanings change due to their functions as coffins for burial and as artworks collected by museums?

Preparation

The teacher will explain the meaning of the idiom thinking outside of the box and how it means having an original and creative idea. Students will discuss the different ceremonial practices in their cultures and the qualities of people they admire.

Daily Learning Targets

I can think outside the box to create a sculptural object to honor someone I care about.

- I can create a unified design integrating symbols from the person's culture and/or ones from popular culture representing their interests, personality, etc.
- I can provide details explaining how my aesthetic choices, design, and selection of art materials honors the person I have chosen.

National Core Arts Anchor Standards 3, 5, 8, and 10

[www.nationalartsstandards.org!](http://www.nationalartsstandards.org/)

References

Dini-Osman, R.K. (2022, February 18). *Ghana's fantasy coffins: Fulfilling burial dreams one coffin at a time*. The World. <https://theworld.org/stories/2022/02/18/ghana-s-fantasy-coffins-fulfilling-burial-dreams-one-coffin-time>

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