

Reading the Visual: The Representation of Literature in the Ghanaian Educational Context

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Abstract

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Literature is a paradox in the field of art education in Ghana because of its perceived importance to critical and creative development, yet it is underutilized in an art curriculum that is studio-centric. This paper investigates how literature is represented in the Ghanaian art education context, the influence of literary theory on art production and the increasing availability of digital and new media texts in the art education system, and how this negatively affects the possibility of art learners accessing reading materials. This paper draws from a narrative synthesis of literature on creative arts pedagogy in Ghana, curriculum policy, library and digital infrastructure, and post-colonial art history. The study suggests that while there may be a continuum between textual and visual literacy, the former is not an aside to the latter but an integral component of it. The results suggest that the interplay between cost, inadequate library provision, uneven digital infrastructure and an inherited Eurocentric canon collectively limit students' access to the literature that would place their creative practice within a wider cultural and historical context. The paper concludes that textbook designers, teacher educators, and policy makers in Ghana should no longer regard texts as an ancillary issue in art learning, but as an integral part of the field's infrastructure rather than a supplementary concern and recommends directions for future research in the long-term relationship between literary engagement and creative identity.

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Introduction

There is an in-depth correlation between literature and art education, yet the theorizing of this relationship remains incomplete within academic scholarship. Although art education is often defined primarily in terms of studio practice and visual production, the textual dimension of artistic learning constitutes an important part of the curriculum. The literary works engaged within art education span a diverse range of materials, including monographs in art history, critical theory, artist statements, and visual narratives (Zhang et al., 2026).

It is through such readings that students situate their creative practice within a larger cultural and historical movement. The integration of literature into contemporary art education is not simply a matter of reading; it is a process of engaging with discourse, learning to think critically, and comprehending the semiotics of image culture (Momeni et al., 2026). Reader-response approaches in particular suggest that meaning-making from a text is an active, constructive process, one that mirrors the interpretive work students are asked to perform when they "read" a visual composition.

Within the Ghanaian context, these texts offer the intellectual scaffolding that students require to place their creative work within wider cultural, historical, and global currents. The Ghana Education Service (GES) curriculum, through the Creative Arts syllabus introduced after the 2007/2008 reforms and subsequently revised under the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NaCCA, 2019), places growing emphasis on creative arts at the basic school level through to the senior high school level. Creative Arts as a subject integrates performing, literary, and visual arts, and teachers are expected to deliver these strands in combination (Opoku-Asare et al., 2015). Despite this policy commitment, the literature available to support the visual arts component of the curriculum is often erratic, unevenly distributed, and dominated by materials produced outside the country.

This paper examines the use of literature in Ghanaian art education: the composition of the textual canon available to learners, the ways textual resources inform artistic practice, the barriers surrounding access to art literature, and the implications of all three for curriculum design. This centre the attention on the textual principles underlying art education in Ghana, the paper illuminates the significance of literature as an instrument of artistic inquiry and cultural conservation, and it situates this discussion within the broader, ongoing debate about decolonizing curricula across the African continent.

The stakes of this inquiry extend beyond the classroom. Art education in Ghana operates within a national push to strengthen the creative economy, and graduates of Creative Arts and Visual Arts programmes are increasingly expected to move fluidly between studio production, critical writing, curatorial work, and digital self-promotion. Each of these activities depends on a degree of textual fluency that studio training alone does not provide. A student who cannot situate a painting within a critical tradition, or who cannot draft an artist statement that communicates intent to a gallery, funder, or examiner, is disadvantaged regardless of technical skill. Understanding how literature is currently represented and under-represented within Ghanaian art education is therefore a necessary first step toward addressing this gap.

Method

This paper adopts a narrative literature review methodology, a design suited to synthesizing a heterogeneous body of scholarship curriculum documents, empirical studies, and theoretical commentary around a conceptual question rather than a single measurable outcome. The review draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, GES and NaCCA curriculum documents, and scholarship on art education, visual literacy, literary theory, and digital infrastructure published primarily between 2020 and 2026, supplemented by foundational sources on the history of art curricula in Ghana.

Sources were identified through targeted searches of academic databases and institutional repositories using combinations of the terms "art education," "Creative Arts curriculum," "Ghana," "visual literacy," "literary theory," "digital literacy," and "library access." Materials were included where they addressed the intersection of textual and visual learning, the structure of art curricula in Ghana or comparable West African contexts, or the infrastructural conditions, financial, institutional, or digital that shape access to educational texts. Sources concerned exclusively with studio technique, with no bearing on textual or literary engagement, were excluded.

Selected sources were read and organized thematically rather than chronologically, following an approach comparable to that used in recent reviews of decolonizing practice in creative education, which likewise proceed by identifying recurring themes across curricula, institutional practice, and theoretical commentary rather than by treating each source as a discrete data point. Four themes emerged inductively from this process and structure the results reported below: the composition and expansion of the art literature canon; the relationship between literary theory and artistic practice; the emergence of digital and new media texts; and the structural barriers that constrain literature integration. Because the review synthesizes existing scholarship and policy documents rather than collecting new empirical data, no human participants were involved and no separate results in the form of statistical findings are reported; instead, the following section presents the synthesized thematic findings of the review.

Results and Discussion

The Canon of Art Literature in Ghana

The canon of art literature forms the foundation of art education, offering students the historical and theoretical grounding needed to navigate the art world. Historically, this canon has been dominated by Western perspectives, dwelling on European art history and modernist theory, a pattern consistent with the

broader observation that art history curricula across West Africa were substantially transplanted from the home countries of colonial administrations rather than built from indigenous frameworks. Recent scholarship, however, argues for a shift toward a more inclusive curriculum that accounts for diverse voices and an international outlook, particularly within the African context. Quarcoopome (2022) highlights the significance of studying folk resources in the teaching of creative arts at Ghana's basic schools, proposing the inclusion of local literature and oral traditions into the curriculum as a means of teaching culture directly. Such an enlargement of the canon disrupts the established hierarchy of art literature, enabling Ghanaian students to engage with a broader range of narratives and artistic practices that mirror their own cultural heritage.

This expansion is reinforced by policy: the Creative Arts syllabus for primary schools, developed by the Curriculum Research and Development Division of the GES and later revised by NaCCA (2019), formally combines performing, literary, and visual arts as an integrated subject, with teachers expected to deliver these strands together (Opoku-Asare et al., 2015). In practice, however, generalist teachers who deliver the subject often lack the specialized training needed to draw effectively on literary material to support visual arts instruction, which limits how fully the canon expansion envisioned in policy is realized in classrooms.

A further feature of art literature in Ghana is its interdisciplinary potential. Art students increasingly draw on philosophy, sociology, and technology to inform their artistic practice. Jackson (2021) argues that art education is critical to holistic development, implying that the incorporation of literary theory can support cognitive and emotional growth alongside technical skill. Such an interdisciplinary approach requires a deliberate selection of reading material that promotes cross-disciplinary study. The curriculum should therefore not be structured to cover only art-specific texts but should draw on literature more broadly, material that evokes critical thinking and creativity so that students have sufficient grounding to interpret the visual culture of their own country.

Literary Theory and Artistic Practice

The application of literary theory to art practice is a developing area of concern in Ghanaian art education. Both literature and visual art rest on shared concepts such as narrative, metaphor, and symbolism. Through literary theory, students gain deeper insight into how meaning is constructed through visual media. This orientation aligns with the broader objectives of art education, which aim to cultivate creativity and critical innovation.

Broadhead et al. (2026) propose a holistic education model that combines the arts with other subjects, pointing to a growing permeability between literature and visual art in contemporary practice-based research. This permeability allows students to draw on literary devices to refine their visual narratives, an ability increasingly valued in the contemporary creative economy. Engagement with artists' writings and critical essays further equips students with insight into the creative process: artist statements, manifestos, and critical reviews offer a window into the intent and context of artistic production.

Working with such texts enables students to articulate the intellectual foundations of their own work, helping them express artistic vision and justify creative decisions. This capacity for articulation is central to professional development, preparing students for the demands of the modern art market (Damai, 2025). By emphasizing artist literature, art education programmes in Ghana can cultivate a generation of artists who are not only competent practitioners but also capable thinkers and communicators. This is especially significant given the practical components of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), which require students to draw on reference material and independent research to support their studio submissions.

New Media and Digital Texts

The digital revolution has transformed the art literature landscape, introducing new forms of text and media. Online journals, digital archives, and interactive multimedia sources now constitute significant categories of art literature, offering unprecedented access to global art trends and contemporary practice. Within the Ghanaian setting, however, infrastructural constraints continue to limit access to these digital resources. Demuyakor (2020) notes that digital literacy remains a significant obstacle to accessing educational materials globally, and particularly in developing countries. This constraint can limit the extent to which Ghanaian students engage with world art trends and contemporary practice within their art

education. Many schools lack the internet connectivity and computer access needed to draw fully on digital art databases.

Teaching digital texts in art education requires a corresponding shift in pedagogical practice. Learners must be taught to navigate online resources and platforms and to assess and interpret digital copyright conventions. Da-Costa et al. (2021) point to the constraints of implementing fourth industrial revolution technologies in emerging markets, noting that digital infrastructure is a critical determinant of success. This constraint is especially relevant to art education in Ghana, which is increasingly reliant on digital tools for both creative production and research. Even so, the potential for digital art literature to democratize access to knowledge is considerable.

Through digital platforms, art educators can make a wider range of texts and resources available to students, fostering a more inclusive and diverse learning environment. Realizing this potential, however, requires substantial investment in infrastructure, which remains one of the priorities identified by the Ghana Education Service.

Mobile technology offers one partial route around these constraints. Smartphone penetration in Ghana has grown considerably faster than fixed broadband or school-based computer access, and a number of art educators have begun experimenting with mobile-first resources — short video demonstrations, image-sharing groups, and mobile-accessible journal repositories — as a way of reaching students outside the physical library. These approaches remain informal and unevenly documented in the scholarship, but they point to a plausible middle path between the high cost of print acquisition and the infrastructural demands of full broadband access, and they merit closer empirical attention as the digital literature available to Ghanaian art students continues to expand.

Barriers to Literature Integration

Although the advantages of incorporating literature into art education are well established, several obstacles have hampered the successful adoption of this strategy within the Ghanaian system. The cost of acquiring quality art texts is a major issue: monographs and books on critical theory can be expensive and may be unaffordable for learning institutions, particularly in rural and underfunded schools. This financial constraint is compounded by weak library infrastructure more broadly. Aryee and Tetteh (2024) found that inadequate library resources including a shortage of recommended textbooks remain a persistent constraint across Ghanaian educational institutions, generating frustration among students and library users that can, in turn, produce further strain on the limited materials available. For an art education system that depends on ready access to monographs, critical anthologies, and visual references, this shortage of library provision represents a structural barrier to the kind of sustained textual engagement the discipline requires.

The rapid pace of technological change compounds this problem, requiring educators to continually revise their teaching resources to keep pace with current trends; a considerable burden for institutions with limited resources. A further obstacle is the limited awareness among students and faculty of the significance of art literature. Many art students underestimate the breadth of textual sources available to them and focus attention narrowly on studio practice. Addressing this gap requires proactive outreach by teachers: connecting reading assignments to studio classes, organizing discussions of art texts, and developing accessible guides to the literature.

Preservation presents an additional challenge. Digital formats can become obsolete, and data migration is required to secure long-term access to digital art literature. Institutions must plan for digital preservation to safeguard these resources for future generations. Ayisi et al. (2024) note that insufficient digital infrastructure and a shortage of technologically trained teachers impede schooling more broadly in Ghana, a pattern that is mirrored within the art education sector specifically.

Finally, language and translation present a barrier that is less frequently discussed but no less significant. Much of the critical theory and art history most readily available to Ghanaian institutions is written in English and produced with a European or North American readership in mind, which can create a subtle distance between the analytic vocabulary students are taught and the visual and oral traditions often mediated through Akan, Ewe, Ga, Dagbani, and other Ghanaian languages that inform their own creative practice. Addressing this gap would require deliberate investment in locally authored critical writing and in translation, rather than relying solely on the wider availability of foreign texts as a proxy for canon expansion.

Taken together, these findings suggest that literature functions in Ghanaian art education not as an ancillary resource but as a condition for the kind of critical, historically situated practice that curriculum policy already claims to value. The tension identified across the four themes is essentially one of aspiration versus infrastructure: national curriculum documents from CRDD and NaCCA articulate an integrated model in which literary, performing, and visual arts inform one another, yet the material conditions needed to sustain that integration, affordable texts, functioning libraries, reliable connectivity, and teachers trained to draw on literary material; remain unevenly distributed.

The canon-expansion literature and the decolonization scholarship on African art curricula converge on a similar point: a curriculum inherited largely from colonial models cannot, by itself, equip students to read their own visual culture critically. Quarcoopome's (2022) call to incorporate folk resources and oral tradition into the Ghanaian curriculum is therefore not simply a matter of representation but a pedagogical necessity, it supplies the interpretive vocabulary through which students can situate indigenous visual forms within a theoretical frame, rather than relying exclusively on frameworks developed to describe European art history.

At the same time, the digital literature reviewed here complicates any assumption that expanding the canon is primarily a matter of syllabus revision. Even where more diverse texts exist, uneven digital infrastructure and constrained library budgets determine whether students can actually reach them (Demuyakor, 2020; Da-Costa et al., 2021; Aryee & Tetteh, 2024). This suggests that curriculum reform in Ghanaian art education needs to be paired with investment in the physical and digital infrastructure of access, school libraries, connectivity, and low-cost or open-access repositories of art writing, if a broadened canon is to reach students in practice rather than remaining a statement of intent in policy documents.

The findings on literary theory and artistic practice point to a second, related implication for teacher preparation. Because Creative Arts is frequently delivered by generalist teachers without specialized training (Opoku-Asare et al., 2015), the capacity to connect literary theory — narrative, metaphor, symbolism to studio practice depends heavily on individual teacher initiative rather than on a reliably resourced curriculum. Strengthening pre-service and in-service training in this area, alongside the infrastructural investments noted above, would likely do more to realize the aims of the Creative Arts syllabus than further syllabus revision alone.

These conclusions should be read with some caution. As a narrative synthesis, this review draws on secondary sources of varying methodological rigor, and much of the empirical work available on Ghanaian art education concerns teacher practice and curriculum implementation rather than students' direct engagement with literary texts. Future empirical research surveys or classroom-based studies that track how students actually use literary and critical material in their creative work would strengthen the evidentiary basis for the claims advanced here.

There is also a comparative dimension worth noting. The tension between an inherited, Western-oriented canon and calls for a more locally grounded body of art writing is not unique to Ghana; it recurs across art education systems throughout the African continent and, more broadly, in postcolonial contexts internationally. Comparative work that examines how neighbouring West African systems; several of which share examination structures with Ghana through the West African Examinations Council have approached canon reform, teacher training, and digital access could offer transferable lessons for Ghanaian curriculum designers, while also clarifying which barriers identified here are specific to the Ghanaian context and which reflect broader regional constraints on educational infrastructure.

Conclusion

To sum up, the place of literature in Ghanaian art education is both crucial and multifaceted. Texts provide the intellectual background students need to situate their creative work within broader cultural and historical currents. Realizing this potential, however, presupposes strategic curriculum development, a diversity of resources, and sustained attention to digital literacy and infrastructure.

By addressing the interlinked issues of cost, access, and awareness identified in this review, art education programmes in Ghana can be transformed into more vibrant hubs of artistic inquiry. Future studies should examine the long-term effects of sustained literary engagement on students' creativity and cultural identity, and should pursue empirical, classroom-level evidence to complement the largely policy- and theory-based literature synthesized here. Literature integration in art education is, in sum, critical to

developing a diverse and dynamic creative industry in Ghana. As the country continues to build its creative economy, the contribution of literature to artistic practice cannot be overestimated.

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Author Contributions Statement

EAA and DW conceptualized the study and designed the methodology. EAA conducted the literature search and data curation. DW and OPKB performed the thematic analysis and synthesis of findings. EAA and DW drafted the original manuscript. OPKB reviewed and edited the manuscript for intellectual content. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

AI Usage Statement

AI was to refine some grammatical errors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. No funding or financial support was received from any organization or institution that could have influenced the research findings or interpretations presented in this study.

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