

CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIAN ART IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Ethiopia's rich legacy in traditional art and aesthetics and the recent growth in Ethiopian contemporary art have, unfortunately, received very little attention, in contrast to what has been accomplished in the field of Ethiopian Studies, from the angle of the social sciences, and what has been written about art in many other African countries. This situation may be explained by, among other factors, the lack of local art historians and critics, and the consequent paucity of intellectual discourse on art. Despite the boom in contemporary art in the past decade, the country lacks trained art historians and art critics who are capable of cross-cultural dialogue, and who understand that the formation of present-day Ethiopia is contingent on changing global patterns of migration, displacement, economics, technology and demographics. An art critic or an art historian can only view the intricacies of contemporary art and culture in this broader context.

It is difficult to maintain a cultural position outside the arena of contemporary debate, in an increasingly interconnected world. The break-up of colonialism and the radical cultural theories of the '60s and '70s have created new ground rules for interpreting non-western cultures, both in the West and on the African continent. We need to review, and examine critically the achievements of the West, if we are to make any progress with adequately representing non-western culture, against a backdrop of contemporary culture, as a whole and of the growing hegemony of global capital. The recent success of large-scale exhibitions, such as those of African art in Venice, curated by Salah Hassan from Sudan and, later, Gilane Tawadros, from Egypt, and the last *Documenta*, in Germany and *Short Century*, put together by the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, would have been unthinkable a decade ago and have all charted the emergence of new tendencies in all facets of art and society and attempted to construct new tropes of self-representation.

These exhibitions stood out for their criticism of the lack of representation of non-westerners and for the determination of the latter to face the challenge of creating something new within the context of the creative traditions of the non-western world. With the aid of these exhibitions, African and other non-western artists have succeeded in mastering the language of European modernism and transcending it, by reinvigorating their own traditions and creating a new visual culture of their own.

The African artists who were included in *Short Century*, *Documenta* and *Africa in Venice* bore witness to the inception and development of what is today commonly referred to as "African Modernism". The grand vision of cultural revival and national reconstruction of a decolonised Africa, at the time of liberation and independence, has been usurped, and a new world order of globalisation and debt, civil war, famine and malnutrition prevails, and African artists have articulated this most clearly in exhibitions such as these. In "African Modernism", artists have placed this analysis at the very heart of their discourse, by insisting that it is only possible to constitute a "colourblind" African aesthetic by first making a complete inventory of everything from which the colour has to be removed.

As Stuart Hall says in his introduction to the catalogue of *Faultlines*, the second African exhibition in Venice, we have come to depend "on writers, artists, film makers, musicians and video makers to map this emergent cartography, to report on its shifting outlines and to bring us accounts from its dangerous interior depths". What all this means to African art and culture, we have yet to see. But again, as Stuart Hall says, the shockwaves "are already registering at some seismic levels in global culture".

African artists and scholars, both in the West and the African continent, are raising critical issues of representation. Who has the authority to speak for any group's identity or authenticity? What are the critical elements and boundaries of a particular culture? These are questions that they actively contest. Because of these debates, cultural institutions that had got over the efforts of the struggles for liberation and independence are instead increasingly engaged in a power struggle for the just representation of non-westerners.

Having said this, and given the background to the thought processes of contemporary African art, I want to pose the question of the status of Ethiopian contemporary art. Where is Ethiopian contemporary art, in the light of these debates? Before going into its dynamics, it is worth taking a quick look at the historiography of art history in Ethiopia. It is also important to note that, when we talk about the history of Ethiopian art, we are primarily referring to traditional Christian art, without reference to its specifically Ethiopian components. In contrast, the Library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, the prime research centre in the country, has abundant written material about Ethiopian Christian traditional art, not by Ethiopian scholars but by many outside scholars, starting with the extensive writings of Stanislas Chojnacki, a Pole who came to Ethiopia as a librarian in the early sixties. (It is important to note here that, although Mr. Chojnacki's research is considered to be problematic by some people, it is commendably detailed).

Narratives of Ethiopian traditional Christian art are exclusively foreign, within the European definition of "art." Ethiopian traditional Christian art is part of the mythology of the Orthodox Church. However, it should be interpreted, or analysed, in close conjunction with Ethiopian Christian mythology, and extensive research into Ethiopians' conceptions of the mysteries of the Divinity is necessary, if we are to make any sense of its mythological aspects. Language is an important aid to deciphering the obscure, ambiguous and hidden aspects of these mythological connections, but it is equally important to have a true sense of sharing in this culture and its intricacies. Understanding Ge-ez, the liturgical script, is the best way to gain an understanding of Ethiopian traditional art, or Ethiopian religious scripts. The script and the image are both one and the same and altogether different. They come from the same source of mythic conceptions and beliefs, and it is difficult, even for Ethiopian scholars who do not understand the Ge-ez script; to decipher the difficult aspects of Ethiopian iconography. It is extremely difficult for secular scholars who only speak Amharic, a language directly deriving from Ge-ez, to interpret liturgical scripts or meanings. We should also note that speaking and comprehending the deeper layers of Amharic is greatly preferable to not speaking it at all, if one is ever to engage in an analysis of Ethiopian traditional art. The text and the image are closely intertwined. The Amharic language itself is full of puns, witticisms and layered meanings.

Wax and Gold are the predominant forms of poetic expression in the Amharic language. Superficial, figurative meaning is referred to as "wax", whilst hidden meaning and true significance are referred to as "gold". "Wax and Gold", says philosopher Messay Kebede in *Survival and Modernization in Ethiopia*, "is the art of discovering and reinstating the truth". He says that it corresponds to the Ethiopian conception of the divine. "For the Ethiopian", Messay says, "there is a fundamental duality in the nature of God", and "the mystery of God and his omnipotence constitute the dyad appearance-essence". Therefore, essence and appearance are fundamental to the conception of things.

It is difficult for many outside scholars, including those who have made a detailed study of Ethiopian art, to grasp the dyad of essence and appearance. Ethiopian art is more symbolic than representative or descriptive, and their scholarship is incapable of doing justice to this metaphysical dimension. On the contrary, they remain object-centred. Outside scholars believe that Ethiopian traditional art is redundant, distorted and inviolate and that it consists, in the main, of imported European models; however, the concept of repetition in Ethiopian art is metaphysical and symbolic, and cannot be defined in terms of a western aesthetics.

What is more, European scholars ascribe meanings to the corpus of translated knowledge on which they base their research, and these meanings fit a western paradigm of knowledge transference. The most problematic aspect of this is that students of anthropology and history have

unquestioningly accepted, as gospel truth, the questionable premises on which this research is based and gone on from there to make generalisations about Ethiopian art, as a whole.

The discipline of art history is not taught at university level. The only place where it is taught at all is at the School of Fine Arts. The Art School offers a single course in art history, which is based on an obsolete curriculum of the history of European art, drawn up by artists turned art history teachers, who readily affirm their lack of training in this subject or qualification to teach it. At university level, a few history students have attempted to devote their Masters theses to Ethiopian traditional art and have made appealing attempts to decipher Ethiopian iconography. They have taken advantage of knowing the language and belonging to the culture, in their efforts to try and reveal as much as they could of those aspects that have not been properly emphasised in European accounts.

Unfortunately, they, too, have based their research on the existing canons and have proved unable to make a great deal of progress on their own, though they have set important parameters for future scholarship. They, too, have overlooked the significance of oral narratives and chosen, instead, to follow European patterns of thought. The native traditional painters or the ecclesiastical experts who provide the scholars with this information are treated in the manner of anonymous informants; they have valuable knowledge to offer, which goes unrecognised or is frequently misconstrued. Thus, it is the foreign observer who is recognised as the expert. When we think of history, we often think of the European concept of history, as books that are full of names and events. A great deal of the history that is important to us cannot be found in books.

In the case of Ethiopia, the historical constructs that are missing from the books are created from the local oral traditions that western scholars affect to despise, since these do not fit into their own conceptions about the nature of knowledge itself. Ironically, the published scholarship of the Europeans, employing a whole range of refined, academic and technical, terms has only been made possible by the oral accounts of the oral accounts of the early historians of the church.

Having said all this about the problematic nature of the established canon of Ethiopian traditional art, it is only fair to say that the idea of a general history of art has yet to be established in Ethiopia, and that the material that has gradually been accumulated has largely come together in an aimless fashion, without any sense that this might contribute to the development of a modern history of Ethiopian art. The very lack of a proper academic discipline of art history and criticism has prevented us from capturing the contradictory profile of modern art, encompassing all the crises and schisms of the modern world.

How, then, does contemporary art in Ethiopia fare within this dynamic field? Contemporary art is still a new experience in Ethiopian culture and must still prove its claim to legitimacy. Whereas there has been an increase in the number of artists in the last decade, this has made little impact on the institutional structures of critical discourse, because there is no history of critical discourse in art, as the country's history confirms. The present seminar on art criticism is the first of its kind to be held in this country. Senior students at the Art School have no knowledge of *Short Century*, *Documenta*, *Africa in Venice*, etc., let alone of the curators who were behind these shows. There are now plenty of exhibitions of work, by a host of young artists. Every week, the newspapers carry information about these, but they show little understanding of what they are all about. Young journalists are eager to learn, but there is no platform to accommodate them.

The only Fine Arts School is mainly dominated by teachers with formalist concerns and produces graduates with an excellent technique, but minimal training in theory, even though the university administration, of which the art school has recently become a part, is trying to tackle this problem. The Art School could not even provide a history of traditional art, given the lack on its staff, even, of traditional historians. Nevertheless, it produces many artists who are obsessed with the aesthetics of Coptic art. There are no fora, seminars or public lectures, where students could get acquainted with the dynamics and paradigms of other contemporary cultures or the debates and intellectual undercurrents on the periphery of the contemporary art world.

The university administration, in its efforts to open up a route towards establishing a viable contemporary art platform, has recently set up the Gebre Kristos Desta Center, in alliance with the German Cultural Institute on the campus. It has managed to repatriate all the works of Gebre Kristos Desta - Ethiopia's founding father of modern art, along with Skunder Boghossian – after they had been languishing for twenty years in a museum in Munich.

For the first time, a catalogue of the life and oeuvre of Gere Kristos Desta is being prepared by Ethiopians, with the help of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. Likewise, the Institute is putting together a history of modern art in Ethiopia, in the form of an anthology of essays by, not art historians, since the country has none, but conventional Ethiopian historians, who are trying to introduce a degree of professionalism into the critical discourse on art. We hope that this catalogue, for all its limitations, will establish a precedent for other work of a similar nature. The production of critical discourse, not only in art, but in all other areas, is tantamount to understanding the predicaments of underdevelopment and has the potential for shedding light on the problems created by our country's ills, typified by poverty and ethnic strife.

The questions I posed at the beginning of this presentation, of who has the authority to speak for any group's identity or authenticity, and what the critical elements and boundaries of a particular culture may be, have a special relevance, when it comes to the contemporary culture of

Ethiopia. As I mentioned earlier, the evolution of present-day Ethiopia is contingent on the changing global patterns of migration, displacement, economics, technology and demographics. Identity conflicts related to issues of cultural ownership and representation have been exacerbated by the way in which contemporary artists have uncritically emulated concepts simply deriving from the consequences of global patterns of technological development, migration and so on, and their failure to make any effort to outline the necessary context or to offer any alternative models.

Needless to say, contemporary art in Ethiopia reflects an inherent contradiction of meaning, embodied in representing the present through narratives that imitate other cultural idioms, and failing to engage critically with the material at hand, through scholarship and open dialogue.

Obscene forms of artistic consumption by an elitist class have led to a proliferation of problems for artists. For the elite, the artwork signifies modernity, sophistication and high culture. However, there is a need for dissenting voices to make themselves heard. Critical thought should be brought to bear on issues such as modernisation, responses to the emergence of an Ethiopian Diaspora, and the reasons behind Ethiopia's history, poverty and underdevelopment. All the commonly recognised symptoms of underdevelopment should be examined, to see whether they originate with the former coloniser or the former colonised, and whether they promote true empowerment or strategies of control.

Consequently, the discussion of modernity and modernism in Ethiopia must be conducted in full recognition of its many-sidedness, as well as its cultural specifics, and we should not hesitate to admit the shortcomings of narratives formulated from outside.

For instance, the exhibition *Dialogues in the Diaspora*, of ten contemporary Ethiopian from the Diaspora, at the Museum of African Art in Washington, triggered an article in the Washington Post that employed the typical rhetoric of "otherness" and exoticised the "Other", instead of describing what the word Diaspora means today, in the context of globalisation. It interrogated the conditions of the poor in Ethiopia, without the contradictory effects of globalisation, and yet Ethiopians were so elated that their culture was being recognised in the power capital of the world, that they failed to take note of how they were perceived by the media in the West.

Have we been trained in the art of critical analysis, we should have contested what was being said, as many non-western people have done, and are still doing, in the debate over proper representation. Modern African art is part and parcel of the modernist narrative, calling upon the visual categories that are used to explore the construction of African "otherness". Just as in the other domains of contemporary critical African social sciences, modern African art analyses the makings of African otherness. While contemporary historiography on Africa has often focused on the pathology of violence and institutional degradation, very little is said about Africa's culture, that once played a

very important role in the continent's struggle against colonialism. Cultural values formed an important subtext, on the road to independence and liberation.

In view of Ethiopia's current economic crisis, it is difficult to imagine that the country was once politically and culturally significant and had attained great prominence, in the debate about Pan-African ideals. The quest for continental unity and integration took its root in Addis Ababa on the 22nd of May 1963, when the heads of African states convened for a historic meeting to form the Organisation of African States. The cultural revival that enveloped the rest of Africa, as a symbol of liberation and independence, was contagious in Ethiopia, as well. That was when Gebre Kristos Desta and Skunder Boghossian emerged, as true African modernists and articulated the ideals of liberation and independence, in their visual language. It was also when the fascination with modern art really took a hold, when literature came into its own, and art criticism flourished. That was when the Fine Arts School was established and both Skunder and Gebre Kristos became teachers, and a source of fascination to many young artists.

Unfortunately, modernity and modernism in Ethiopia, both as historical stage and cultural process, have ended up as unpleasant metaphors, after the ills that Ethiopia suffered under seventeen years of socialist rule, which obliterated a once thriving arts scene and were accompanied by general mayhem, resulting in massive migration and institutional degradation. Today, Ethiopian artists accept a state of dependency, with all the contradictions this implies, and without being able to inject any fresh critical insight into their discipline.

African artists have now grown confident of their individual, subjective, aesthetic sensibility and indulge it, in a way that has long been common among artists in the West. They incorporate their lived life into their contemporary art practice. They negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity. They remap their lived lives, not so much as a means of addressing Africa's present as of defining their own place within it.

It is important for Ethiopian contemporary artists to revive similar sentiments in their cultural sensibility. Therefore, critical discourse in the humanities, and especially in art, is urgently needed in a country such as ours. Forums like this should be encouraged, and should involve a representative cross-section of all stakeholders.

I thank the organisers of this conference and hope that there will be more to come, to help our growing number of young artists, so that they, too, will be able to take part in the biennales and mega-exhibitions of African art from which they are currently excluded. They, too, will have stories to tell, and they, too, will offer fresh insights and stimulate the critical analysis of African art.