

# There Is No Such Thing as the African Art Market

by Rebecca Anne Proctor

*Yet.*

**Ask a question about the African art market, and many experts will be quick to tell you that there is no such thing. How could one market possibly encompass 54 countries, 1.2 billion people, and countless aesthetic traditions?**

It can't. But that won't stop the global art market from trying. The commercial sector has a way of co-opting talent into the international art slipstream (sometimes flattening history and context in the process). It has done so with artists—and entire movements—from Asia and Latin America in the past. Africa may be next in line.

The seeds are there: strong art schools, a growing number of high-net-worth individuals, and rapid urbanization. Researchers project that the continent will be home to at least nine cities of more than 10 million people by 2050. Meanwhile, museums in Europe and North America have hosted an unprecedented number of shows of African art in recent years, while art fairs dedicated to the field have sprung up worldwide, including 1-54 in New York, London, and Marrakech and the newer Art X Lagos, which kicks off its fourth edition in Nigeria in November.

Activity in cities such as Marrakech and Lagos is “opening the eyes of collectors,” says Kavita Chellaram, founder of the Lagos-based auction house Arthouse Contemporary. “African collectors from different regions are now interested in buying African art from different regions. There will be an African art market. It's just the beginning.”

## What's Ahead

Today, Africa's art market has plenty of room to grow. Fewer than 1,000 works were sold at auction on the continent in the first six months of 2019, according to the artnet Price Database. Unlike Asia, where Hong Kong has emerged as a hub for the trade, Africa lacks a preeminent art-market capital.

And while the continent's local collector base is growing steadily—Sotheby's fourth dedicated auction of Modern and contemporary African art in April was dominated by African buyers and generated a total of \$3 million, above its presale high estimate of \$2.7 million—it is still nascent compared with the US, China, and Europe.

What is missing? “You need an infrastructure,” says Hannah O'Leary, head of Modern and contemporary African art at Sotheby's. “On the whole, there is a real lack of public support. We are seeing lots of raw talent, but we need more of a market structure in order to support their careers.”

Some ambitious institutions are already rising. Over the past two years, museums like Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town, the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden in Marrakech, and the Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar have launched with a mission to write their own contemporary art histories. Meanwhile, artists who have already found commercial success, such as Hassan Hajjaj and Ibrahim Mahama, have set up institutions of their own to nurture young talent at home.

## A Closer Look

A single hub for such a massive and heterogenous continent may never materialize. Instead, Rakeb Sile, cofounder of the gallery Addis Fine Art, predicts that “there will be and should be different hubs in several regions of Africa.”

We have assembled a guide to six of these dynamic emerging art capitals: Accra, Addis Ababa, Cape Town, Dakar, Lagos, and Marrakech. Each city has its own heritage, culture, and distinctive history with colonialism—resulting in unique artistic production.

Painting remains most popular in East Africa, which is home to the two oldest art schools on the continent, while West Africa has fostered more experimentation with large-scale installations and performance-based work. Both sides of the continent also have a rich tradition of photography.

“There shouldn't be any question about quality and talent in Africa,” O'Leary says. And where talent goes, the art world follows. The presence of an increasingly wealthy clientele to cater to certainly helps. “When we talk about buyer potential in Africa,” she adds, “there shouldn't be any doubt.”

## Spotlight on Africa

Coptic art, shaped by the 1,500-year history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, is one of the country's major artistic influences and continues to be practiced by numerous artisans. But the 20th century also witnessed three distinct artistic movements that remained popular until the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974: a realistic, or "naïve," style used to depict glamorous Ethiopian society; abstraction, which incorporated influences from Western Expressionism and Surrealism; and social realism, which was political in subject matter and focused largely on urban scenes and the struggling masses.

Despite the difficulty in obtaining art materials, which must be either imported from abroad or made at home, today's artists work largely in paint, together with photography and sculpture using found objects.



Clockwise from top left: Eyerusalem Jiregna, *The City of Saints XX* (2017); the Islamic Blue Mosque in Addis Ababa; Addis Fine Art founders Melaku Haileleul & Rakeb Sile

## Galleries and Institutions to Know

### ALLESCHOOL OF FINE ART & DESIGN

Ethiopia's most important art school, it was founded in 1958, during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, and has educated the country's preeminent painters, sculptors, printmakers, and designers.

### ADDIS FINE ART

The most notable commercial gallery in the capital and its first white-cube art space, Addis regularly showcases graduates from the Alle School. It will open a new location in London's Cromwell Place gallery hub in 2020.

### GURAMANE ART CENTER

A gallery dedicated to emerging Ethiopian artists, it represents the vanguard of the country's art scene.

### ZOMA

This sprawling museum, founded by artist Elias Sime and curator Meskerem Assegued, opened in April 2019 and shows contemporary art from East Africa and abroad.

# Addis Ababa, Ethiopia



## People

Home to more than 112 million people, Ethiopia is the second-most populous country in Africa.

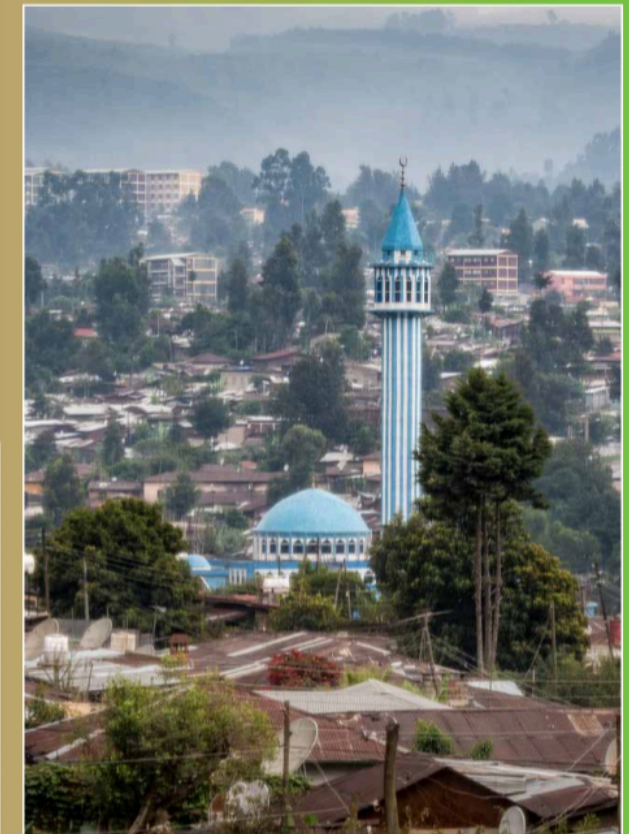
## Economy

According to the International Monetary Fund, Ethiopia's economy is expected to grow 8.5 percent this fiscal year, making it the fastest-growing economy in Sub-Saharan Africa.



"A LOT OF PEOPLE USE ART FOR COMMERCIAL OR PROPAGANDA PURPOSES, AND I HOPE THAT OUR GOVERNMENT UNDERSTANDS THE POWER OF SUPPORTING OUR ARTISTS AND PRESERVING OUR CULTURE. WE NEED TO THINK OF THE PAST IF WE WANT TO GO TO THE FUTURE."

Melaku Belay, founder of the Fendika Cultural Center





Spotlight on Africa

# Artists to Know

2 Addis Ababa

From left: Elias Sime, *No. 11455* (2019); Tadesse Mesfin, *Pillars of Life, Market Day* (2018); Dawit Abebe, *No. 2 Back Ground 35* (2016)

## Elias Sime

**BORN:** 1968

### WHAT TO KNOW

Sime creates monumental works from discarded technological components, including salvaged motherboards and electrical wires. This October, he will receive the African Art Award from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art.

### GALLERY AFFILIATION

James Cohan Gallery (New York); Grimm Gallery (Amsterdam, New York)

### MOST WANTED

Works from his "Tightrope" series, which features electrical waste meticulously woven into abstract compositions reminiscent of aerial landscapes or textiles.

### PRICE RANGE

\$65,000 to \$300,000

### UP NEXT

Sime's mid-career retrospective will be traveling through 2021, appearing at the Wellin Museum of Art, the Akron Art Museum, the Kemper Museum, and the Royal Ontario Museum. He will also have a solo exhibition at the Saint Louis Art Museum in 2020.

## Tadesse Mesfin

**BORN:** 1953



### WHAT TO KNOW

Mesfin has spent the past 35 years teaching at the Alle School of Fine Art, where he has influenced a generation of painters.

### GALLERY AFFILIATION

Addis Fine Art (Addis Ababa)

### MOST WANTED

His recent series, "Pillars of Life," which celebrates the women who work as vendors in Ethiopian markets. It sold out at this year's Art Dubai.

### PRICE RANGE

\$24,000 to \$35,000

### UP NEXT

Mesfin will participate in the 1-54 art fair in London in October and will have a solo exhibition at Addis Fine Art's new Cromwell Place location in May 2020.

## Dawit Abebe

**BORN:** 1978



### WHAT TO KNOW

Abebe's large paintings contain figures rendered in thick impasto, typically with their backs turned to the viewer. His work explores such themes as privacy, alienation, and materiality.

### GALLERY AFFILIATION

Kristin Hjellegjerde (London, Berlin)

### MOST WANTED

The "Mutual Identity" drawing series (2018) and his "Background Painting" series (2015), which examines the relationship between history and technology.

### PRICE RANGE

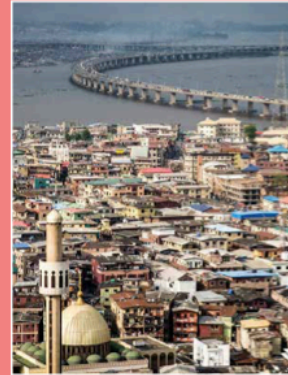
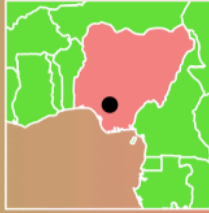
\$8,000 to \$30,000

### UP NEXT

Abebe will participate in the 1-54 art fair in London and this year's Karachi Biennale; he will also have a solo show at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in November.



# Lagos,



# Nigeria



In the early 20th century, Lagos's art scene was dominated by Ben Enwonwu, who developed a distinctly African response to European Modernism. During the 1950s, different schools of art sprang up: The Zaria Rebels fused Modernism with Nigerian forms, while the more conventional Osogbo School carried on Yoruba traditions. Two decades later, students at the University of Nigeria, including El Anatsui and Olu Oguibe, founded the Nsukka group, which aimed to reinvent the traditional Igbo style.

Even after Nigeria emerged from military rule in 1999, it suffered from the perception that it was dangerous and inhospitable. The tide began to turn in the mid-2000s, when a new crop of collectors and art spaces emerged. The country's scene has been further boosted by the success of Nigerian-born Njideka Akunyili Crosby, whose lush paintings are among the most sought-after works of contemporary art today.

"WE HAVE HAD AN ART SCENE FOR A VERY LONG TIME. THE QUESTION IS WHETHER THE SCENE WAS STRUCTURED IN A WAY THAT THE WESTERN ART WORLD COULD ALIGN WITH."

Tokini Peterside,  
founder and director of  
Art X Lagos, West Africa's  
first contemporary art fair

### Wealth

Nigeria is home to more black billionaires than any other country.

### Economy

Nigeria's economy is expected to grow more slowly than other African nations because its oil industry is likely to stagnate in the face of regulatory uncertainty.

### People

Home to 197 million people, Nigeria accounts for about 47 percent of West Africa's population. It also has one of the largest populations of young people in the world.

## Galleries and Institutions to Know

### OMENKA GALLERY

This contemporary art gallery is housed in the former home of Ben Enwonwu, one of Africa's most influential artists, and run by his son.

### LAGOS CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

This nonprofit hub for experimental art was founded in 2007 by curator Bisi Silva, who died earlier this year. El Anatsui has called the organization and its educational initiatives "the biggest thing to happen to the scene."

### ARTHOUSE CONTEMPORARY

An auction house specializing in Modern and contemporary art from West Africa, it was founded by Indian-born Kavita Chellaram.

### SMO CONTEMPORARY

This contemporary art gallery also offers art advisory services.

### AFRICAN ARTISTS' FOUNDATION

A nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of Nigerian art, it organizes the annual National Art Competition.



From left: Gerald Machona, *7 Colonial Powers* (2018); an aerial view of Lagos



## Spotlight on Africa

### Emeka Ogboh

BORN: 1977



#### WHAT TO KNOW

The Enugu-born, Berlin-based sound artist participated in both documenta 14 and Skulptur Projekte Münster in 2017 without a gallery backing him—the only artist to do so. He was also shortlisted for the 2018 Hugo Boss Prize for his performances, sound installations, and food-based works that explore migration, the diaspora, and post-colonialism.

#### GALLERY AFFILIATION

Imane Farès (Paris)

#### MOST WANTED

His “Sound Portraits,” which comprise speakers housed in painted, striped boxes that hang on the wall like paintings and emit sonic portraits of Lagos

#### PRICE RANGE

\$22,500 to \$100,000

#### UP NEXT

An installation inspired by an Igbo village square is on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art through December 1. His work is also included in a group show about borders, “Walking Through Walls,” at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin through January 19.

### Gerald Chukwuma

BORN: 1973



#### WHAT TO KNOW

Chukwuma creates intricate sculptures by painting, burning, and chiseling wood and slate. His work examines themes of politics and migration in Africa.

#### GALLERY AFFILIATION

Gallery 1957 (Accra); Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery (London, Berlin)

#### MOST WANTED

His “Wrinkles” series (2017–19), which pays tribute to the historic Igbo Landing site on St. Simons Island in Georgia, where one of the largest mass suicides of slaves took place in 1803

#### PRICE RANGE

\$9,300 to \$25,000 for wood-slate sculptural works

#### UP NEXT

The artist will have a solo show at Gallery 1957 in Accra next August and participate in 1-54's London edition via Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

From left: Emeka Ogboh, *Spirit and Matter* (2018); Gerald Chukwuma, *Google Map 1* (2017); Otobong Nkanga, *Transformation* (2014)

# Artists to Know

### Otobong Nkanga

BORN: 1974

#### WHAT TO KNOW

The Kano-born, Antwerp-based artist creates works inspired by Nigeria's history, land, and politics in a wide variety of forms and materials. She won a special mention at the Venice Biennale for her winding Murano glass sculpture and works on paper in the central exhibition.

#### MOST WANTED

Her vivid, almost futuristic tapestries, which come in editions of five

#### PRICE RANGE

\$8,000 to \$200,000

#### GALLERY AFFILIATION

Mendes Wood DM (São Paulo, Brussels, New York); In Situ-Fabienne Leclerc (Paris); Lumen Travo (Amsterdam)

#### UP NEXT

Nkanga has a solo show at Tate St. Ives through January 2020, a solo exhibition at Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town opening on November 19, and a residency at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin.