Continuity and Change

Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists

Rebecca Martin Nagy

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Continuity and Change: Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists” tells the story of modern and contemporary art in Ethiopia from the 1940s to the present and explores the role of Emperor Haile Selassie’s support of artists as part of a purposeful strategy for the modernization of Ethiopia. The exhibition also examines the influence of the School of Fine Arts in Addis Ababa, one of Africa’s leading art academies. In particular, “Continuity and Change” focuses on those artists who were and are active in Addis Ababa within the context of the political and social upheavals of twentieth-century Ethiopia. Artists active in Addis Ababa are still largely unknown outside Ethiopia and a narrow circle of international curators and collectors. “Continuity and Change” introduces a number of these artists to US audiences for the first time. Of the twenty-three artists in the exhibition, twenty are still living and active as artists. The exhibition is organized by Harn Museum of Art Director Rebecca Martin Nagy and North Carolina Central University Professor Achamyeleh Debela.

In recent decades museum audiences in the United States have had several opportunities to learn about the rich artistic heritage of Ethiopia, particularly the predominantly Christian traditions of the Ethiopian highlands. Notably, the exhibition “African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia,” which traveled to a number of venues from 1993 to 1996, offered a window into the long and colorful history of the art of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, where painting has been the dominant medium of artistic expression for more than six hundred years. In addition to organizing “African Zion” with the nonprofit group Intercultura, the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore has assembled, handsomely installed, and duly published an impressive permanent collection of Ethiopian Christian art, offering a wider public the opportunity to experience and learn about these treasures. In 1999 the exhibition “Ethiopia: Traditions of Creativity,” organized by Michigan State University Museum of Art, presented a broader spectrum of Ethiopian art, from baskets and woodwork to contemporary painting. The exhibition “Painting Ethiopia: The Life and Work of Qes Adamu Tesfaw,” featuring the paintings of a contemporary traditional artist of both religious and secular works, opened at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History and is currently traveling to museums in the United States. “Ethiopian Passages: Contemporary Art from the Diaspora” at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution in 2003 highlighted the work of ten Ethiopian artists who live and work in the United States and France. For the exhibition “Continuity and Change: Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists,” my co-curator Achamyeleh Debela and I have chosen to focus on artists who were and are active in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s cosmopolitan capital city, and to consider their careers and work in the context of seven decades of political and social change.1

1 Tamrat Gezahegne, Untitled, 2005. Paint and India ink on cardboard, 190.5cm x 190.5 cm (75” x 75”). Private collection.

According to the artist, this untitled drawing portrays the powerful angel who protects and sustains the entire world and all its elements, animate and inanimate. The body of the angel is covered with eyes, recalling the use of eyes in traditional Ethiopian healing scrolls and the prominence of eyes in the work of several older contemporary artists, such as painter Worku Goshu. Extensive passages of Amharic script create delicate patterning throughout the composition but are also legible. Tamrat describes these text passages as visual music and as a kind of journey through the layers of his thoughts.
The first generation of artists included in the exhibition benefited from the patronage of Emperor Haile Selassie. He supported the education of artists in foreign academies but also played a significant role in the establishment of the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School in 1957/58, where many of the same artists eventually were employed as faculty. A few of these teachers left Ethiopia in the early years of the Derg (1974–1991), the repressive Marxist regime of dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, as did some of their students. Other members of the second generation of contemporary artists in Addis Ababa studied in Eastern Bloc countries and returned to Ethiopia to teach or pursue their careers during the Derg years. The youngest artists in the exhibition, the third generation shaped by the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School, studied and launched their careers during the sixteen years of relative freedom and creative energy since the overthrow of Mengistu’s government in 1991. They are central players in the vibrant and expanding art scene that characterizes Addis Ababa in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

In contrast to many contemporary artists in other parts of the world, most Ethiopian artists choose painting as their principal medium. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of works in the exhibition are paintings. Among selected artists, only Bekele Mekonnen and his former student Tesfahun Kibru focus primarily on sculpture, whereas Elias Sime works in a variety of media including sculpture, collage, embroidery, and assemblage. The emphasis on painting in modern and contemporary Ethiopian art relates to the importance of painting in the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Since medieval times, illustrated manuscripts, icons, and mural paintings have been produced by church artists for use in religious observance. Sculpture was never a major medium of church art. From religious art, secular painting developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and gave rise in due course to modern and contemporary art. Most of the first- and second-generation modernists included in this exhibition have studied and traveled in Africa, Europe, and North America and have experienced at least some exposure to international contemporary forms of artistic expression, including the alternative media prevalent in Western countries. Nonetheless, most artists in Addis Ababa today continue to embrace painting as their preferred medium. It is our hope that American audiences will approach their work with openness to a different world view, one rooted in Ethiopia’s ancient and distinctive cultural heritage yet shaped by exposure to and interest in the artistic expression of contemporaries in other regions of Africa and the world.

**THE ROLE OF ART IN MODERNIZING THE ETHIOPIAN STATE**

Emperor Haile Selassie, whose reign spanned forty-four years from 1930 to 1974, with a hiatus during the Italian Fascist occupation of Ethiopia from 1936 to 1941, had a deep appreciation for the power of visual imagery to convey critical ideas to national and international audiences. He employed pageantry and performance, architecture, art, and symbolism to reinforce his image as both a divinely anointed dynastic ruler and an enlightened champion of political and social reform. His support of fine arts education and patronage of contemporary artists signaled his commitment to the modernization of Ethiopian society.
Recognizing the importance of secular education in a country where church schools had long been the only centers of learning, the emperor established a Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts in 1930. The government’s educational advisor at the time, the American Ernest Work, recommended that a national system of elementary education be the first priority, but that secondary schools and a university eventually be established (Teshome 1990:72). The emperor responded enthusiastically to the idea of a university, but progress in building a system of secondary and university-level education was slow. Only after 1941 were secondary schools established, and the University College of Addis Ababa (later Haile Selassie University and now Addis Ababa University) was not founded until 1950. Meanwhile the government continued a practice initiated by Emperor Menilek II in the late nineteenth century of sending promising college-age students abroad to study. Haile Selassie’s keen awareness of the role artists would play in establishing the new Ethiopia was indicated by the granting of government scholarships for artists to study in Europe and the United States. Among the first artists offered this opportunity was painter Agegnehu Engida, who studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1926 to 1933. After returning to Addis Ababa he had several exhibitions and received commissions for military uniforms and currency designs for the government, church mural paintings, and portraits. In 1941 Agegnehu was appointed assistant director of the newly established Department of Fine Arts in the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts. Around the same time he set up an informal art school, a forerunner of the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School founded in 1957/58.

Agegnehu Engida was a “modern” artist in that he eschewed the styles and media of Ethiopian church and folk painting and adopted European academic styles and techniques. Two of his portraits survive in the collection of the National Museum of Ethiopia, a self portrait from 1944 (Fig. 2) and a portrait of Aster Mengesha, a famous beauty of the day. Another early “modernist” in the same sense of the term was sculptor Abebe Wolde Giorgis, who pursued fine arts studies in Marseilles and Paris for eighteen years. Upon his return to Ethiopia, he produced sculptures for several public buildings. Perhaps the most significant achievement of these two early modernists was the establishment of private, informal art schools, however short-lived, where they taught small numbers of students, thus providing a precedent for secular education of artists in Ethiopia. (On the careers of Agegnehu Engida and Abebe Wolde Giorgis, see Taye 1991:16, 22, 83).

The modern artist best known to Ethiopians today is painter and sculptor Afewerk Tekle (b. 1932), who still works at his imposing home and studio, Villa Alpha, in Addis Ababa. Having enjoyed the patronage of three successive Ethiopian governments, wide recognition at home and abroad, and corresponding financial success, Afewerk is credited with introducing into Ethiopian society a new appreciation of the artist as an educated professional who moves as an equal among academics and social and political elites. From 1947 to 1954, Afewerk studied in London, where he earned a degree in Fine Arts at the Slade, the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of London. Upon his return to Addis Ababa in 1954 he mounted a one-person show that was attacked in the press because of the abstract style of many of the paintings, and by leaders of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church because of the artist’s abstract interpretation of the Crucifixion in one of the works. To demonstrate support for the British-educated artist and his modern style of painting, the emperor bought two canvases and encouraged others to purchase works, albeit without success (Indrias 1999).

The first commission received by the young artist from Haile Selassie was for a series of paintings and a mosaic for the Church of St. George where the emperor had been crowned. The paintings are executed in a Western, academic style. At the time of their execution they caused an uproar, not because of their European style, but because the artist signed his name in defiance of the standard practice of church painters to remain anonymous.

Haile Selassie awarded two important commissions to the young Afewerk for projects in the old eastern Ethiopian city of Harar, where both the emperor and his father Ras Makonnen had served as governor. One commission was for a monumental equestrian bronze statue of the emperor’s father (Fig. 3). Afewerk’s concept for the sculpture derived from the tradition
of equestrian portraiture going back to Roman antiquity and revived during the Renaissance and Baroque periods in Europe. The artist was well acquainted with such monuments from his art studies in London and travels in Italy. The other commission in Harar was for a series of four stained glass windows portraying Ethiopian rulers and military heroes for the Military Academy. The windows are still in situ in a room that now houses a district court. Although the medium of stained glass had not been employed by Ethiopian artists prior to this time, Afewerk had observed stained glass windows in Europe and collaborated with European artisans on the execution of this project. Afewerk’s most celebrated work and one of his most successful is an enormous stained glass window for Africa Hall, the headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, built in 1961. Afewerk’s window, titled The Struggle and Aspiration of the African People, is pan-African in theme. It symbolically portrays the sorrowful past, present struggles, and high aspirations for the future of the nations and peoples of the continent. In 1964 Afewerk Tekle was named the first recipient of the Haile Selassie I Prize Trust Award for the Fine Arts. The prize was awarded "for his outstanding drawings, paintings, landscapes, and portraits which eloquently express his particular world environment, and for his contribution in being among the first to introduce contemporary techniques to Ethiopian subject matter and content” (Pankhurst 1987:43).

THE ADDIS ABABA FINE ARTS SCHOOL

The birth of the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School is closely linked to another painter, Ale Felege Selam Heruy. (On the founding and early history of the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School see Achamyelah 2003:116–19). Born in 1929 into a family of distinguished traditional painters, he taught himself to draw and paint as a child. He graduated with distinction from Addis Ababa Technical School and was offered the opportunity to study abroad by the emperor. Ale Felege Selam was awarded the BFA degree by the school of the Art Institute of Chicago. After a sixth year of working to save money, he spent three months traveling in Europe before returning to Ethiopia in 1945. Determined to share what he had learned with promising young artists, he recruited students from the city’s high schools and conducted classes in his house. With the goal of building an art school he launched a fund-raising campaign. Mounting an exhibition of his students’ work, he invited members of the royal family, foreign diplomats and friends to buy works of art for a good cause. After several such shows, Ale Felege Selam had raised 75,000 Ethiopian dollars. He presented the check to the emperor as seed money for an art school and requested the emperor’s assistance. The emperor authorized the release of funds and in 1957/58 the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School was established with Ale Felege Selam its first director (Fig. 4). Since there were no Ethiopian artists trained to teach in an art school setting, the new director sought help from foreign embassies and was able to recruit Italian painter Vincenzo Fumo, Austrian sculptor Herbert Seiler, German printmaker Hansen Bahia, and German art history instructor Madame Gutenberg, among other foreign instructors. Somewhat later he recruited Ethiopian painter and calligrapher Yigazu Bisrat, who at the time was working for the Ministry of Education as an illustrator. He had not studied abroad but rather had apprenticed with the French-educated pioneers of modernism, sculptor Abebe Wolde Giorgis and painter Aegnehu Engida.

The founding of the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School ushered in a new era. Ethiopian artists who were trained abroad returned home to practice their art and teach at the new school, so that the make-up of the faculty began to change. In 1962 Gebre Kristos Desta returned from his studies in Cologne, Germany, and in 1966 Skunder Boghossian returned from his academic training in Paris. Both were hired as faculty at the School of Fine Arts and began to infuse a new creative energy into the school, the art students, and the cultural milieu of Addis Ababa. More than any of the pioneers of modernism who had preceded them—Aegnehu Engida, Afewerk Tekle, Ale Felege Selam Heruy—Gebre Kristos and Skunder were true modernists, who understood
and employed abstraction, expressionism, surrealism, and other modern styles but developed new visual vocabularies that were contemporary and international yet distinctively Ethiopian.

When Gebre Kristos held his first exhibition in Addis Ababa in 1963 he was sharply criticized for abandoning Ethiopian representational traditions to embrace European-inspired abstraction (Achamyeleh 2006:13). He emerged as an eloquent champion of expressionistic and abstract art (Fig. 5) and encouraged his students to experiment with contemporary styles and materials. As a sculptor and poet as well as a painter he was also an unwavering advocate of interdisciplinary experimentation. As such, he was a driving force during the "Addis Summer," a term coined by Solomon Deressa to describe the florescence of visual, literary, and performing arts in Addis Ababa in the 1960s (Solomon 1997:14). In 1965 Gebre Kristos won the Haile Selassie I Prize Trust Award for the Fine Arts for being "largely responsible for introducing non-figurative art into this country" and for having "outstandingly contributed [to] the growth and evolution of Ethiopian Art" (Head 1969:20). Although by this time Haile Selassie was more interested in maintaining and expanding authority and control than in modernization and reform, he still paid at least token tribute to the role of contemporary artists in Ethiopia's progress.

In Paris Skunder Boghossian studied at the Ecole nationale supérieure de beaux-arts and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. However, he spent most of his time in cafes and jazz clubs, museums and artists' studios, reveling in the intellectual and artistic fervor of the city. Through his exposure to philosophers and writers such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Aimé Césaire, and Leopold Senghor and artists such as André Breton, Roberto Matta, Wifredo Lam, and Gerard Sokoto, he explored theories of Negritude, Pan-Africanism, and surrealism. He studied traditional African art and systems of thought through his friendship with Madeleine Rousseau, an art historian and collector (see Solomon 1997:19–23). Skunder's compositions of his Paris years, with their kaleidoscopic layering of form, meaning, color and design, reflect his interest in pan-African themes as well as his Ethiopian heritage (Fig. 6).

Stanislas Chojnacki wrote a glowing review of Skunder's first solo exhibition in Addis Ababa in 1966: "Above all he has demonstrated that his long stay abroad did not result in a simple copying of foreign models. His art is obviously permeated by trends and achievements of modern art; these, however, are digested and moulded into his own style" (Chojnacki 1966:184). As Afewerk Tekle and Gebre Kristos Desta had been before him, Skunder was awarded the Haile Selassie I Prize Trust Award for the Fine Arts in 1967 in recognition of his contributions to introducing modern painting into Ethiopia. He taught at the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School for only three years before moving to the United States. He was on the faculty at Howard University in Washington DC from 1971 to 2001 and a number of students followed from Ethiopia to study under him there.

Today Skunder is fondly remembered in Addis Ababa from his brief tenure on the faculty of the Fine Arts School. Among the

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6 Skunder Boghossian. Night Flight of Dread and Delight, 1964. Oil and mixed media on canvas with collage. 143.8cm x 159.1cm. (56¾” x 62¼”). North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, purchased with funds from the North Carolina Art Society (Robert F. Phifer Bequest 98.6)

Night Flight of Dread and Delight suggests the enchantment of dreams and the menace of nightmares. The midnight sky explodes with jewel-like stars and orbs, biomorphic forms, a winged spirit and an ascendant owl. Intrigued by the works of surrealist painters in Paris, Skunder Boghossian drew on age-old Ethiopian and West African stories about powerful visions, supernatural forces and mystical transformations. As Solomon Deressa has pointed out, at the time he was reading the novels of Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola, which are filled with imagery of spirits and nightmarish metamorphoses.
In this painting executed while she was a student at the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School, Desta Hagos captures the energy, movement, creativity and imagination of theatrical productions during the “Addis Spring” of the 1960s. The composition is drawn from her imagination and from her general impressions of the theater rather than from a particular stage production. She wanted to convey that the audience is part of the drama so that there is no real distinction between the stage and life.

During the Derg regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991, Gebre Kristos Desta, like all faculty and students at the Fine Arts School, was called on to design posters, banners and other ephemera for the Marxist government. This drawing is the preliminary design for a poster advertising a play of the same name, which glorified the revolutionary uprising that overthrew Haile Selassie in 1974.

One of the painters who acknowledges her indebtedness to Gebre Kristos as teacher, mentor and friend is Desta Hagos, the only woman of her generation to make a successful career as an artist. After graduating from the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School with a diploma in painting she studied in the United States and earned a BFA degree from Catholic Lutheran University in 1973. Desta’s return to Ethiopia coincided with the Revolution of 1974, which tore her family apart. When her husband fled the country in order to escape execution, Desta was not allowed to leave and raised their daughter alone. Despite these hardships, she remained active as an artist. In 1976 Desta took a job with the Ethiopian Tourist Organization in the Public Relations Office. Ten years later she transferred to the Ethiopian Tourist Trading Enterprise, where she served as head of the Artistic Activities Department until retiring in 2002. She now makes her living as a painter. Much of her work is concerned with the daily lives and emotional struggles of women, although she also paints still lifes, landscapes, and abstract compositions that reveal the enduring influence of Gebre Kristos in both style and subject matter.

While a student at the Fine Arts School Desta shared a studio with four male artists at the Creative Arts Center of Addis Ababa University, a venue for exhibitions, theatrical productions, musical and dance performances, and poetry readings. Desta often attended gatherings of writers there, including painter/poet Gebre Kristos Desta, art critic/poet Solomon Deressa, poets Mengistu Lemma and Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, and journalist Be’alu Girma, who later was killed by the Derg. She was friends with prominent actors Debebe Eshetu and Wogayeh Negatu and was persuaded by them and Mengistu Lemma to play the female lead in a Chekhov play translated in Amharic by Mengistu (she does not recall now which play it was). Leaving aside acting to concentrate on her art, Desta continued to be an enthusiastic member of the audience for performances at the Center and other venues. In The Stage (1969; Fig. 7) Desta captures the energy, movement, creativity, and imagination of theatrical productions during the Addis Summer of the 1960s.
Already during the reign of Haile Selassie, thanks to Ethiopia’s participation in the Non-Aligned Movement of the Cold War era, a few artists were awarded scholarships by communist governments to study in Eastern Bloc countries. Upon their return to Ethiopia, several of these artists who had been trained in the socialist realist style of Eastern European art academies were hired to teach at the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School, where they introduced this style to their students. During the last years before the 1974 Revolution the atmosphere at the school was increasingly fraught with rivalry and tension between the proponents of modernism and abstraction and the practitioners of socialist realism. With the establishment of the Marxist military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam, socialist realism became the official and exclusive style taught at the Fine Arts School. The style was also required of artists employed by the government to produce ephemera such as posters, banners, stage sets and designs for stamps and currency as well as more permanent monumental paintings and sculptures glorifying workers or political leaders (Fig. 8).

Like some of his fellow students at the Fine Arts School in the early 1970s, painter Eshetu Tiruneh embraced the anti-imperialist ideas that led to the 1974 Revolution. He employed an academic figure style for his paintings of working people and the poor and daringly chose a subject critical of the emperor’s government for his graduation work, which portrayed the terrible famine of 1972–1974. Haile Selassie’s failure to acknowledge and address this famine was a critical crisis of leadership that fueled the popular uprising that overthrew his regime in 1974. However, as early as 1977 urban youth were dismayed by the violence and oppressiveness of the Derg regime, and a number of militant groups waged guerilla warfare against the new government. The Derg in turn unleashed the brutal Red Terror campaign to put
down the youth resistance movement. Eshetu Tiruneh followed these events from Moscow where he was pursuing a graduate degree in painting at the V.I. Surikov State Academic Institute of Art, which he completed in 1984. His triptych To Live or Not to Live (Fig. 9), painted in Moscow in 1981, with images of murder (Cain and Abel), killing in self defense (David and Goliath), and execution (the Crucifixion), poignantly expresses his grief over the internecine strife that tore his country apart during and after the Revolution of 1974.

Another young revolutionary student at the Fine Arts School during the last years of the emperor was Tadesse Mesfin. He graduated in 1972, designed costumes and stage sets for the National Theater from 1973 to 1978, and studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Leningrad, where he completed the MFA degree in painting in 1984. He says today that he joined the Communist Party during the Derg regime because he had no other choice, but that the duties assigned to him by the government were not unpleasant. He designed state sets and costumes for the international tour of an Ethiopian folk group. He traveled with Korean artists working for the government to introduce them to various regions of the country, where they sketched landscapes, architecture, and clothing styles for use in their subsequent designs for posters, stage sets and monuments. Tadesse also designed currency for the government. Since 1985 he has taught at the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School, and in his early years there dutifully instructed his students in the strict socialist realist style in which he himself was trained. Since the overthrow of the Derg in 1991 Tadesse has felt free to experiment with abstraction and a variety of materials (Fig. 10). He has developed a strong interest in the historical art of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and studies manuscript paintings and other traditional forms of art from books to get ideas for his paintings. In reflecting on the vagaries of his own career Tadesse recently quoted a popular saying, “If you are not a communist at 18 you are not normal and if you are a communist at the age of 40 you have a problem” (Geta 2007:32).

THE ARTS DURING THE REGIME OF MENGISTU HAILE MARIAM

Responses to the demands of the socialist government on faculty and students at the Fine Arts School and on other artists working in Addis Ababa varied from person to person. Skunder Boghossian left the country before the Revolution of 1974, but his paintings from the 1970s (Fig. 11) show that he was deeply troubled by political and social unrest and warfare in Ethiopia and other parts of the world (Harney 2003:37). Gebre Kristos Desta chafed under the scrutiny and demands of the Derg regime and finally sought refuge in the United States in 1980. Lonely, impoverished, and in poor health, he died the following year. Yohannes Gedamu, a student and protégé of Gebre Kristos, had graduated from the Fine Arts School in 1967. He taught art in a high school in Gondar, Ethiopia, for two years, then worked as a graphic designer in Addis Ababa until 1975. After living in
Nairobi, Kenya, for five years, he moved to Cologne, Germany, where he enjoyed a successful career as an abstract painter for seventeen years before returning to Ethiopia in 1998 (Fig. 12). During the Derg years, painter and performance artist Tibebe Terffa was not active in politics, but nonetheless was viewed with suspicion by the ruling party because his art did not conform to the principles of socialist realism. He was imprisoned several times as a result of negative reports in the government-controlled media about his work. In the atmosphere of greater artistic freedom since the overthrow of the Derg in 1991, Tibebe has been active as an installation and performance artist. The experimental and unconventional nature of his work continues to provoke controversy in Addis Ababa, but he is now free to exhibit his work, stage his performances, and travel internationally at will.

Some artists, such as Desta Hagos and Lulseged Retta, made their peace with the Derg and served in departments of the socialist government while pursuing their personal artistic interests outside the public arena. They have emerged into greater prominence as contemporary artists since the 1991 coup that ousted the Derg regime. Lulseged Retta graduated from the Fine Arts School in 1977. After earning an MFA degree with an emphasis in graphic arts from the Academy of Fine Arts in Leningrad in 1987, he worked as head graphic designer for the Ethiopian Tourist Trading Enterprise until 1996. Since then he has worked as an independent artist and lives from the sale of his paintings (Fig. 13).

From 1980 to 1997 Yohannes Gedamu lived and worked as a full-time artist in Cologne. Since 1998 he has resided again in Addis Ababa, where he continues to make his living as an artist. Yohannes uses no preparatory sketches, but rather works from his subconscious and does not know when he starts a painting how it will look when completed. His paintings are distinguished by abstract images that often suggest landscapes but with few or no recognizable forms. This painting from 1994 when the artist was living in Cologne features two egg-shaped forms, which he speaks of in terms of parallel universes. He never titles his paintings, however, so that each viewer can respond in an individual way to the works.

Ale Felege Selam, founding director of the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School, was pushed out by the Derg and went into retirement. Now in his 70s, he is still active as an artist. Faculty members elected fellow teacher Abdurahman Sherif to be the new director of the school, a post he held from 1975 until 1992. Like Tadesse Mesfin, he joined the Communist Party out of necessity but he insists that “I was never able to do one socialist work. I couldn’t bring myself [to do it].” He was able to avoid assignments to make art for government projects, using his administrative responsibilities as an excuse. He could not, however, protect faculty and students at the school from such demands. Their work was constantly interrupted by government functionaries requiring that they produce paintings, monuments, posters, and stage sets with socialist themes. Abdurahman studied at the Khartoum Technical Institute under Ibrahim El Salahi, at the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School, and in Germany at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Kassel and the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, graduating from the latter in 1968. He embraced a mod-

Oil on canvas, 80cm x 99.7cm (31½’’ x 39¼’’).
Collection of the artist.

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Acrylic on cotton cloth on board, 75.6cm x 150.5 cm (29¾’’ x 59¼’’).
Collection of the artist.

For this painting, Lulseged Retta chose to imitate the style of his revered teacher and friend Gebre Kristos Desta. Lulseged listened to jazz and blues while painting this tribute, for which he borrowed Gebre Kristos’ vibrant and expressionistic color, repeating circles and bold black lines to suggest a head, mouth, trumpet, drums and drumsticks. Jazz Night is a paean to the explosion of creativity and the synergy of the arts in Addis Ababa in the 1960s.
ernist abstract style characterized by bright colors and experimental techniques of collage, frottage, and silk screen reverse printing (Fig. 14). In Addis Ababa during the Derg years Abdurahman had little time to paint, but used vacations to produce work that he occasionally exhibited at foreign cultural centers like the Goethe Institute and the Italian Cultural Center. Despite the displeasure of the Derg, these cultural centers consistently provided venues for exhibitions by artists such as Abdurahman and fellow Fine Arts School instructor Zerihun Yetmgeta, who deviated in their paintings from the approved socialist realist style. When the Derg was overthrown in 1991, Abdurahman felt that this was “a liberation not [only] for the country, but for me, too, as an artist.”

**A NEW FREEDOM AFTER 1991**

The youngest artists from the second generation included in the exhibition studied at the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School during the Derg, but returned from graduate studies abroad after the overthrow of the Mengistu regime in 1991. They had been trained in the strict tenets of the socialist realist style at the Fine Arts School and several of them studied subsequently in Soviet art academies. Upon their return to the post-Derg Ethiopia of the 1990s they experienced a stimulating but disorienting, sometimes chaotic, artistic freedom. Each of these artists has emerged from the aesthetic confusion of the early 1990s with a distinctive and individual style, medium and subject matter. Bisrat Shibaw graduated from the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School in 1985. She continued her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Leningrad where she earned the MFA degree. She returned to Ethiopia in 1995 and worked as a freelance artist until 1998, when she joined the faculty at the Fine Arts School. Bisrat’s drawings, collages, and paintings since her return to Ethiopia in the mid-1990s are far removed in style and subject from socialist realism. However, the solid academic training she acquired in Leningrad provides a foundation for Bisrat’s idiosyncratic and fanciful approach to rendering figures, flora and fauna, night skies, and stormy weather. She employs vividly contrasting colors and layered patterns. She often listens to European classical music while working and finds inspiration and themes for her work in music, legends, folk stories, and fairy tales. She is drawn to natural phenomena that are characterized by intricate designs and complex but delicate patterns—the star-studded night sky, swarms of butterflies, and interlacing tree branches, for example (Fig. 15).

Geta Mekonnen graduated from the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School in 1985 and subsequently studied at the Slade School of Fine Arts of the University of London (1987–88) and at Bristol Polytechnic (1988–91). He returned to Ethiopia in 1992 and for fifteen years has been a powerful catalyst to the emergence of a vibrant and energetic contemporary art scene in Addis Ababa. He was a founding member of the Dimension Group, which organized annual group exhibitions from 1995 to 2001. As owner of Tewanney Studio, a graphic design firm, Geta made a personal commitment to ensure that these exhibitions were documented with catalogues. In addition, he built photographic archives of the works of fellow Dimension members. He has organized and co-organized citywide cultural events including Addis Art Week in 1994 and the European Film Festival for several consecutive years beginning in 1997. Geta coined the term “Confusion Art” for work done during the period immediately following the overthrow of the Derg, when artists suddenly were free to experiment and make any kind of art they wanted but had no clear direction or focus (Geta 1997:37). In his own work Geta has grappled frequently with what it means to be an Ethiopian citizen and artist in a time of political and social upheaval (Fig. 16).

Another Fine Arts School graduate and founding member of the Dimension Group, Bekele Mekonnen (no relation to Geta),


Bisrat Shibabaw stands next to several of the eleven canvases that together comprise the work titled Moonlight Sonata after Beethoven’s composition of the same name. According to the artist, this work relates to Beethoven’s music, the sky and stars, beautiful fairy tales and childhood stories. She speaks of individual canvases in terms of shooting stars, constellations, lovers embracing and flying through the sky, the sound of dragonflies’ wings in the evening, the reflection of moonlight on water, the voices of frogs, and the creation of the world.

EMERGING ARTISTS IN ADDIS ABABA

The youngest generation of artists active in Addis Ababa today includes many recent graduates of the Fine Arts School or, more recently, the School of Fine Arts and Design of Addis Ababa University. The school became an academic unit of the university in 2000 and now awards the BFA degree rather than a diploma in art, as had been the case since its founding in 1957/58. The three emerging artists in this exhibition are men. Although women have always studied at the Fine Arts School, only a few have continued their careers after graduation due to societal pressures to marry, have children, and stay home to raise them. This situation has changed little over the fifty-year history of the school, and the three women artists included in this exhibition—Desta Hagos, Bisrat Shibabaw, and Elizabeth Habte Wold—are exceptions to the rule.

Elias Sime is the oldest of the third generation artists in the show. He graduated from the Fine Arts School in 1990 with a diploma in graphic arts, having studied under Zerihun Yetmgeta. Although Zerihun encouraged Elias and allowed him freedom to experiment with the limits of the art school curriculum in the waning years of the Derg regime, Elias did not pursue his interest in making mixed media works using found objects until after graduation. As a child Elias had taught himself to sew, embroider, and repair furniture. He collected cast-off objects and materials such as flattened tin cans and fashioned them into his own creations. Today he still collects energetically, but also pays local children to collect stuff for him—plastic shopping bags in different colors, plastic shoes, horns from slaughtered cattle—and buys some of the raw material for his work, such as buttons, at the Mercato, Addis Ababa’s sprawling central market. Elias prefers old items to new ones, which have no patina of use. Just as he gathers materials for making art from the markets and streets, Elias finds the themes for his works in the streets of Addis Ababa.
In his untitled composition with concentric circles, the plastic plate at the center of the design is a symbol for the universality of the need for food (Fig. 20). The hundreds of buttons in many colors represent the peoples of the world circling the plate, united by their shared need for sustenance.

Tesfahun Kibru studied with Bekele Mekonnen at the Fine Arts School and received his diploma in 2000. His sculptures and assemblages are also based on his observations of the people of Addis Ababa, whose human foibles, struggles, and small triumphs he views with wry but affectionate humor. He uses a variety of recycled materials including baskets, gourds, metal, rubber, leather, wood, clay and, on occasion, his own shorn dreadlocks. Tesfahun describes his work as a series of discoveries. He seeks to make connections to daily life as he responds to his thoughts and feelings about various materials, such as animal skins. He purchased the leather for the piece titled Skin Matters (Fig. 21) at a special market for skins in the Mercato, a place he describes as “inspirational.” Tesfahun’s viewers in Addis Ababa bring their own associations to the experience of the artist’s skin pieces. Meat is prized in the Ethiopian diet and the skins of slaughtered animals are also valued and used for many purposes, including parchment for the handwritten books that have been used for centuries by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and for clothing, whether traditional garments of different ethnic groups of the fashionable leather attire of city dwellers.

Like Elias and Tesfahun, painter Tamrat Gezahegne uses whatever materials are readily at hand. At the Fine Arts School, where he studied with Mezgebu Tessema, Tamrat felt constrained by the structured curriculum and frustrated by requirements to stretch and prime canvas and make other customary preparations for painting. For his large paintings Tamrat glues together pieces of gray cardboard—recycled packing material (Fig. 1). Used for shipping furniture, the cardboard is salvaged and resold at the Mercato. Tamrat uses house paints, sometimes in combination with pastel stick and India ink. He enjoys experimenting with these materials and is not concerned with the permanence, or lack thereof, of his work. His paintings are about this process of transforming the artist’s ideas into physical sensations, processes and materials. The finished works convey the spontaneity and immediacy of the art making process.

As is the case with older and mid-career artists, also among recent graduates of the School of Fine Arts and Design a number of promising young artists are studying or working abroad. This eliminated them from consideration for an exhibition that focuses on artists active in Addis Ababa. Even with the narrower focus on artists living and working in Ethiopia, the selection of artists for “Continuity and Change” involved a long process of careful deliberation. From 2001 to 2006 Acha Debela and I traveled frequently to Addis Ababa to see museum collections and exhibitions, visit artists in their studios, and consult with arts administrators and faculty, curators and collectors. Undoubtedly other curators would choose differently and would include worthy artists whose work is not represented in this exhibition. It is our sincere hope that this exhibition will stimulate further interest in Ethiopian artists working in Ethiopia and abroad and that future exhibitions and publications will introduce more of those artists to an international audience.

**16 Geta Mekonnen, The Hands, 2005.**
Oil and acrylic on canvas, each panel, 80 cm x 99.7 cm (31½” x 39¼”).
Collection of the artist.

This vertical diptych embodies the artist’s reflections on the situation in his homeland. The hands held upward are for praying, the hands held downward are begging for handouts. Either way, these hands are not working and are not productive. Ethiopians like to celebrate their country in poetry and song as beautiful, green and fertile, but, as Geta observes, there are frequently terrible famines in this verdant land. In large measure this is due to the lack of adequate infrastructure for storing and distributing to affected areas the food that is abundant in other regions of the country. Thus Ethiopia’s famines are called “green famines.” For Geta, this is the irony of Ethiopia, a land of endless contradictions.
THE EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

“Continuity and Change: Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists” is accompanied by a publication of the same name, which includes essays by the curators and other scholars. Achamyeleh Debela’s opening chapter focuses on “The Addis Ababa Fine Arts School: A Critically Important Institution in the History of Ethiopian Art.” He provides an introduction to education in Ethiopia with a particular focus on the training of artists. He examines the modernizing agenda of Emperor Haile Selassie and the key role that educational institutions, including the Fine Arts School, played in realizing the emperor’s vision for Ethiopia. He focuses particularly on the founding of the art school, its early history, the changes that occurred with its integration into Addis Ababa University beginning in 2000 and the challenges faced by the school today. Heran Sereke-Bhran and Shiferaw Bekele contribute a chapter on “The Florescence of the Arts in the ‘New Flower’ (Addis Ababa) before 1974.” They discuss the intense artistic activity of Addis Ababa in the 1960s when performance, literary, and visual artists worked synergistically in an explosion of creativity. Like Achamyeleh Debela they consider the role of modern educational institutions in fostering and nurturing this flowering of the arts and examine in some detail the contributions of cultural institutions such as the Creative Arts Center of Addis Ababa University, Hager Fikir Theater, Haile Selassie I Theater, and the Haile Selassie I Prize Trust, among others. Geta Mekonnen’s chapter titled “Beauty and the Beast: Art and Dictatorship in Socialist Ethiopia, 1974–1991” seeks to break a long silence about the dark days of the Derg regime and the military dictatorship’s impact on the visual arts. He offers insights from his experience as a student at the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School during those years and from interviews with a number of artists who taught and studied at the school or worked for government agencies under the Derg. Rebecca Martin Nagy’s chapter on “The Art Scene in Addis Ababa Today” reflects on the emergence of a vibrant and energetic art scene during the sixteen years since the overthrow of the Derg. The essay recognizes many positive developments affecting contemporary art and artists but comments as well on the significant obstacles and challenges that must be addressed if Ethiopian artists are to enjoy international exposure and recognition. Leah Niederstadt’s chapter “Menor kebad new: Life and Work as a Young Ethiopian Artist” focuses specifically on the situation of recent art school graduates and draws on personal observations and insights conveyed to her in numerous conversations with these young artists over the last few years. In particular she relates the experiences of Tamrat Gezahegne and Tesfahun Kibru, whose work is included in the exhibition.

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17 Bekele Mekonnen, Plows Playing 3, 2004. Charcoal on paper, 31.8cm x 47.6cm (12½“ x 18½“). Collection of Achamyeleh and Connie Debela.

Part of a recent body of work that deals with the theme of hunger, Bekele Mekonnen’s drawings titled Plows Playing humorously anthropomorphize the iron plowshares that have been used in Ethiopia for millennia. Bekele’s drawings of plows are based on figure drawings from life. He especially likes to capture the poses of boys playing, tussling or lounging on the streets. Boys on the streets of Addis Ababa epitomize for him the art of survival.

18 Bekele Mekonnen. Anger in Hunger, 2004. Metal, 66cm x 86.4cm x 10.2 cm (26” x 34" x 4” in.). Collection of the artist.

Since the 1990s Bekele Mekonnen has used found and purchased objects and a variety of materials to fashion his sculptures and assemblages, often buying items at markets or collecting discarded materials on the streets or from junk heaps. Anger in Hunger is fashioned from iron cooking pans or plates. The exploded form of this sculpture expresses the artist’s anger while also alluding to the fact that desperate hunger breeds frustration, futility and anger in those who suffer from its ravages.

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Notes

1 A note on Ethiopian proper names and their spellings: In Ethiopia individuals are referred to by their given names. A person’s second name is the given name of his or her father. In greeting, a man is politely addressed as Ato (Mr.) and a woman as Weizero (Mrs. or Ms.), abbreviated W/o, thus Ato Gebre Kristos or W/o Mariam, for example. The official language of Ethiopia, Amharic, is Semitic in origin and uses an alphabet derived from the ancient Ge’ez language of Ethiopia. When names and other words are translated into English, several alternate spellings are possible. For example, the following English spellings may be used to refer to the same Amharic name: Afawarq, Afewerq, Afework, and Afewerk. For purposes of this exhibition we transliterate the spelling of artists’ names according to their preferences. For the names of historical figures, geographic locations, and other Amharic words we employ frequently used English spellings without diacritical marks to facilitate readability for non-specialists.

2 The Ethiopian calendar is based on the older Alexandrian or Coptic Egyptian calendar and is closely correlated to the Julian calendar. It consists of 365 days and is divided into twelve months of 30 days each and a thirteenth month at the end of the year with either 5 or 6 days depending on whether or not it is a leap year. The year starts on September 11 of the Gregorian calendar or on September 12 in leap years.

From September 11–December 31 the Ethiopian calendar runs seven years behind the Gregorian year; thereafter the difference is eight years. This creates difficulties when dates in the Ethiopian calendar are translated into years in the Gregorian calendar, resulting in discrepancies in dating by different authors. For example, some historians date the founding of the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School to 1957, others to 1958, in the Gregorian calendar. For purposes of this exhibition we date the founding of the school to 1957/58. The same compromise is used for the dates of other historical events for which there is no general agreement as to which year in the Gregorian calendar should be used, and in the dating of certain works of art.

3 Derg, literally “committee,” was the popular name for the Provisional Military Administrative Council, the Marxist regime that governed Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991.

4 In 1917 when the princess Zawditu, daughter of the late emperor Menilek II, was crowned Empress of Ethiopia, her twenty-five year old cousin Ras Tafari Makonnen was declared regent and heir to the throne. In 1928, Zawditu elevated the crown prince to the position of Negus or king. With the death of Zawditu in 1930, Negus Tafari was crowned emperor and assumed his baptismal name Haile Selassie (Power of the Trinity) as his throne name.

5 Conversation with the artist, June 2005.
6 Ibid.
7 Conversation with the artist, May 2004.

References cited


Oil on canvas, 200.7 cm x 160 cm (79” x 63”).
Collection of the artist.

Mezgebu Tessema often paints landscapes from a bird’s eye view; in this instance, the horizon is so high that the minutely detailed grasses and wildflowers completely fill the canvas. The artist listens to folk and popular music while he works. He associates this painting with a song called, in translation from Amharic, “Let Me Fly like a Bird,” by Alameyehu Eshete.

Although he uses garbage and recycled materials to fashion his sculptures, mixed media assemblages, and stitched and embroidered compositions, Elias Sime’s work is carefully designed and meticulously crafted. He begins his embroidered and appliquéd compositions by making small sketches on paper, then transfers the design to canvas with pencil, and finally stitches or glues his materials to the surface. A single work may require two or three months to complete.


Tesfahun Kibru uses a variety of materials for his art. For the most part these are not “found” objects in the strict sense of the word due to the fact that people in Ethiopia throw so little away. Things are saved for reuse or sold in the markets, so the Mercato and other city markets become Tesfahun’s art supply stores.