



HONORING THE PAINTER POET
GEBRE KRISTOS DESTA

BLEN

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BLEN

HONORING THE PAINTER POET

GEBRE KRISTOS DESTA

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Foreword

Dear readers,

Thank you for your continued support to the Blen Team. With your avid encouragement, the 3rd Annual Blen Art Show, Celebrating the Life of Skunder Boghossian, was an overwhelming success. The 4th Annual Blen Art Show, like the previous ones, continues to promote visual art and honor an international visual and poetic icon, Gebre Kristos Desta. The show will be open to the public in Washington D.C. on November 11, 2006, and will remain open until November 25, 2006. Original works of the late painter and poet, Gebre Kristos Desta, our distinguished guest, Wosene Kosrof, and other prominent artists will be exhibited at this historical event.

Art has formed an integral and ubiquitous part of human civilization from its earliest stages. Every now and then, however, a pioneer emerges to channel creativity in new and unimagined directions, changing the face of art itself. Gebre Kristos Desta is one of those unique innovators, guiding a generation not only with his unparalleled paintings, but with the genius of his pen. Both a visual and literary icon, Gebre Kristos is truly one of the fathers of modern Ethiopian art. With our 4th Annual Blen Art Show, we pay tribute to the life and work of this remarkable man.

Blen plays a vital part in the development of the artistic community worldwide. Bringing international and local artists together for four years, Blen bridges the gap between the classic and contemporary in Ethiopian art. The extremes of any culture; the deepest sorrows, the worst outrages, the most poignant beauty, and the dearest hopes for the future, are revealed in its art. Far from being merely aesthetic, art is the voice of culture itself, and our continued endorsement of the arts protects the best of our heritage. Blen's commitment to introducing new work and commemorating the accomplishments of established artists assists in engineering appreciation of art and culture in a new generation of Ethiopian youth.


Blen, however, is by no means alone in its goal of promoting valuable artwork. We would like to confer special recognition to the Dimension Group, located in Addis Ababa, which is also devoted to honoring extraordinary Ethiopian artwork and has previously acknowledged the achievements of our featured artist, the painter-poet Gebre Kristos Desta. In addition, the German Cultural Center in collaboration with Addis Ababa University produced a catalogue of Gebre Kristos' work, helping to extend knowledge of this remarkable visionary beyond his home country. Where such committed members of the community still exist, the precious messages communicated in visual art will never be lost.

An imperative part of sustaining the efforts of these artists is the maintenance of facilities dedicated to collecting and displaying Ethiopian pieces. The opening of Artful Gallery in Washington D.C., and Addis Art Gallery in Los Angeles, California, which feature Ethiopian art selectively, is an exciting development. Other art exhibitions, such as the highly anticipated upcoming event co-curated by Achamyelah

Debela and Rebecca Nagy, Continuity and Change: 3 Generations of Ethiopian Artists, also contribute to spreading knowledge of resonant Ethiopian art movements. This exhibit, scheduled for January, 2007, focuses on modern art in Ethiopia and the contributions of the Addis Ababa Fine Art School, featuring artists from the 1900s up to the present, such as Agegnehu Endeda, Skunder Boghossian, Gebre Kristos Desta and Afework Tekle. The mobile exhibition will first be held at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida and later at Diggs Gallery of Winston-Salem State University, in N.C.

Appreciation of Ethiopia's art scene is not limited to physical shows and galleries, however. The advent of virtual space allows the general public to penetrate the varied facets of Ethiopian art. Amha Asfaw's compiled poems of Gebre Kristos Desta and other poets, the Debre Hayq online art gallery (www.ethiopianart.org) and forums such as Art-topia, an online group, also contribute to the vitality, publicity, and active study of Ethiopian art. By creating online reservoirs of knowledge accessible worldwide, interested individuals can discover the rich history and dynamic progress of Ethiopian art. We hope that all members of the Ethiopian community and those who love Ethiopian art will support these important venues and forums. Involvement and attention of the community stands as a singularly essential aspect of the continuation and development of Ethiopian art.

Blen has previously played an integral role in maintaining the rapport between Ethiopian art and the community with art shows, the creation of discussion groups, and hosting open forums for art appreciation. The enormous effort and finance assumed in the delivery of the Blen Art Show and Blen Magazine, however, have proved to be a serious challenge. Shortages in production manpower have forced the Blen Team to reevaluate the frequency of our major projects, namely the annual show and magazine. While the Blen Team does intend to sponsor future events, shows will cease to be annual occurrences.

Over the years, I have been privileged to work with talented and inspiring individuals, scholars, and artists from all over the world. My heartfelt thanks goes out to all who have helped along the way and to all those who supported with their interest and effort. I am always grateful. In the last annual show and publication, please join us in celebrating the legacy of Gebre Kristos Desta and also in welcoming the future in the accomplishments of our newest modern artists. 

Ephrem M. Girma

Blen Art Show Coordinator

The 4th Annual Blen Art Show

Exhibiting

Gebre Kristos Desta

Wosene Kosrof &

Abebe Zelelew
Beshowamyelesh Gedamu
Dilip Sheth
Elsa Gebreyesus
Endalkachew Girma
Esayas Kebede
Ezra Wube
Martha Mangestu
Mathewos Legesse
Mekbib Gebertsadik
Meseret G Desta
Nebyou Tesfaye
Solomon Asfaw
Teferi Gizachew
Yisehak Selassie
Yohanis Mibrathu
Yohannes Tesfaye

November 11 - 25, 2006

Artful Gallery

1349 Maryland Ave NE, Washington DC 20002

www.artfulframing.com

www.blenartshow.com

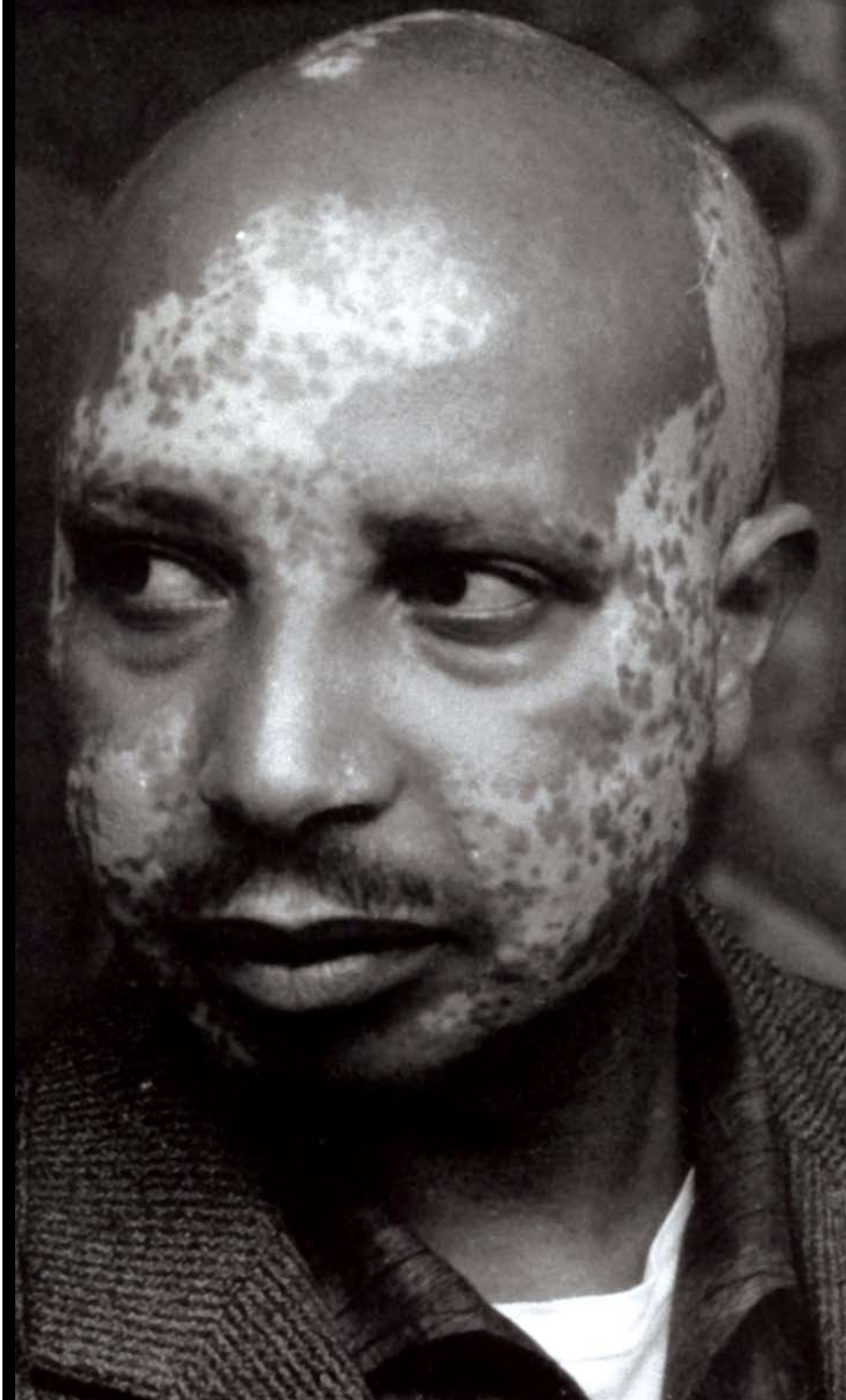
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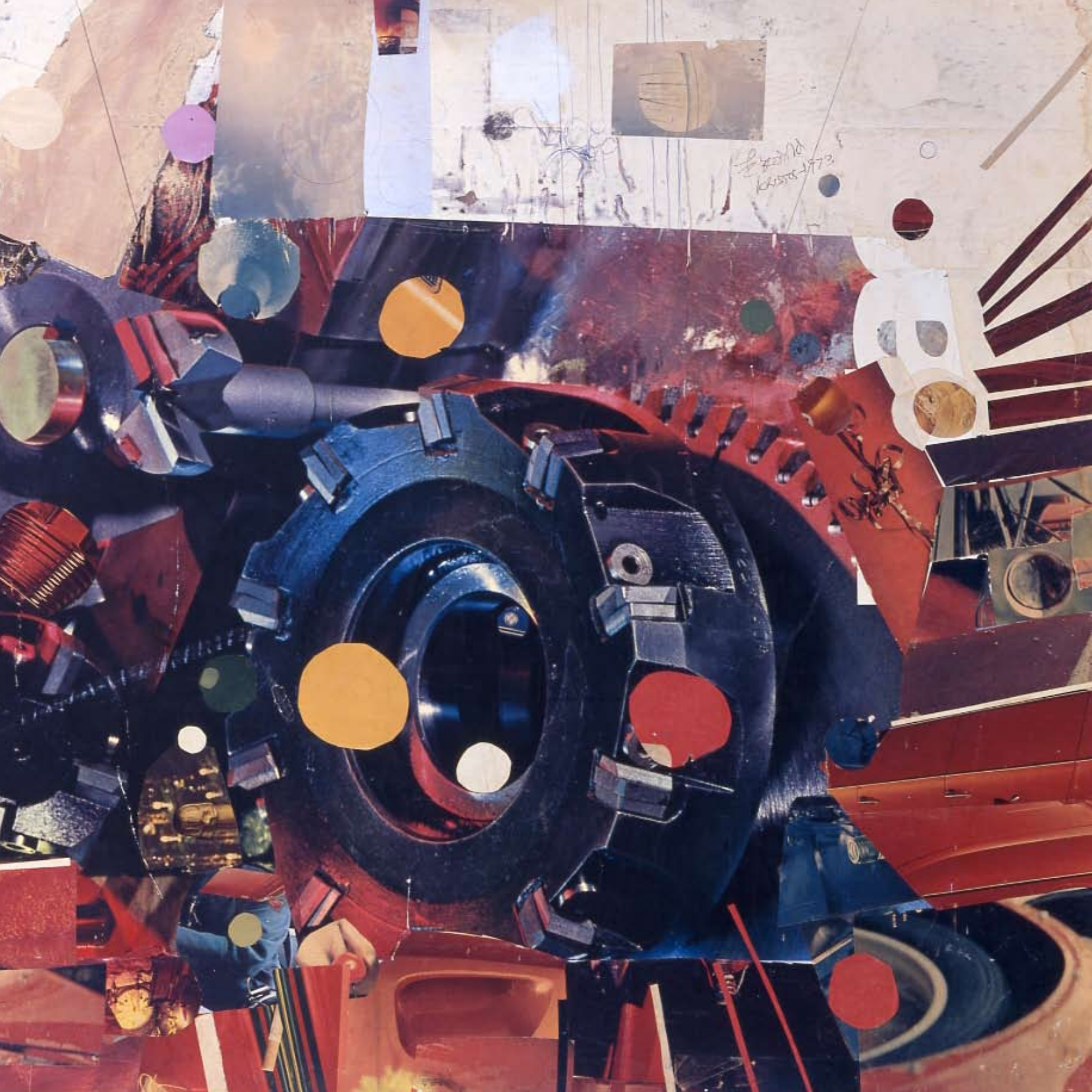
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GEBRE KRISTOS DESTA

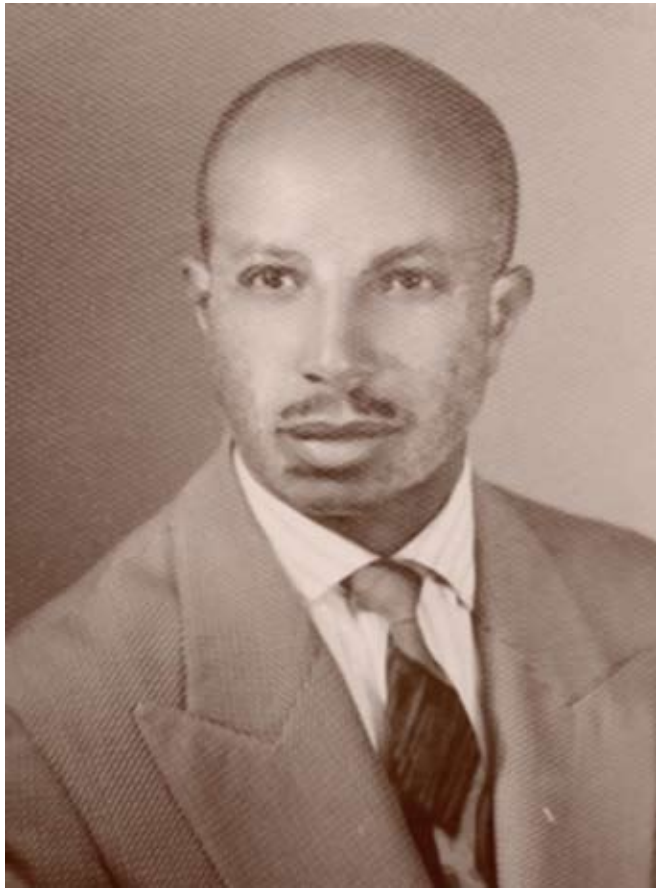
1932—1981







#2170
KASIS-1773



Gebre Kristos Desta; Ethiopia's Painter and Poet Extraordinaire (1932-1981)

By Achamyelah Debela

Gebre Kristos Desta was one of Ethiopia's leading painters, a poet and an inspiring and dedicated teacher. From his exemplary life and work in pre and post-revolutionary Ethiopia, his work and experiences in exile, until his untimely death in 1981 in Lawton, Oklahoma, USA, Gebre Kristos created many important milestones in the history of contemporary Ethiopia art.

Gebre Kristos Desta, the painter-poet, was born in 1932 in the Eastern province of Harar, Ethiopia. His father, Aleka Desta, was a clergyman in Harar and a graphic artist with the title Aleka. Aleka Desta was trained as an apprentice in the church school and was familiar with traditional clerical literature and religious art of the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Church. Like most accomplished traditional artists, he copied many religious manuscripts with illustrations that depicted events from the Old and New Testaments, as well as the lives of the saints and other traditional themes. Gebre Kristos observed his father and indeed admired his ability to write and illustrate as well as decorate religious literature. Thus, as a child, began his affinity and influence towards art.¹

Gebre Kristos Desta completed his elementary education in his native town of Harar. Like most children of his age, young Gebre Kristos had the dream of becoming a soldier. He went

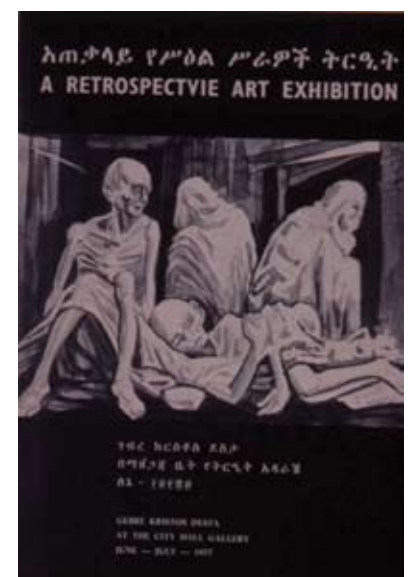
to the Haile Sellassie 1st School and finished at the General Wingate High School. He later joined the Science Department at the Haile Sellassie 1st University, presently Addis Ababa University. In a country where agrarian workers comprise 90 percent of the population, Gebre Kristos was encouraged by his family to become a professional farmer. Gebre Kristos did not, however, pursue the field of scientific agriculture in college. Instead, his spare time was spent reading all available material on art. The young student also painted whenever possible. Up to his sophomore year in college, Gebre Kristos was a self-taught artist, but the desire and conviction to be a professional artist persisted. His inclination towards the arts grew stronger until Gebre Kristos finally abandoned his studies and left the University at the end of his second year, all in the hope of becoming a full time artist.

Between the time he left the University College and his travel abroad to study art, Gebre-Kristos worked for several agencies that helped to mould him into a serious and mature individual. He worked in the Soil Analysis Chemical Laboratory of the Imperial Ethiopian Government, Highway Authority. He was an apprentice engineer, working with Alidade and Map Charting section in the Geological Department of the State Bank of Ethiopia, and his first teaching experience was at the Sebestie Negasie Elementary School, as an English, Geography, and General Science Teacher. His first paid job as an artist also took place before his departure to study art in West Germany. Gebre-Kristos was appointed as a graphic artist with the task of illustrating children's books in a U.S., Government sponsored program then known as the Point of Four Education.

Young Gebre Kristos was an athlete who played soccer and volleyball and lifted weights to keep his body in good shape. However in his early twenties he became ill and developed a disease which altered his skin pigmentation. This tragic experience became a turning point in Gebre-Kristos' life, and he continuously tried to find a cure, both at home and later abroad.

Gebre Kristos Desta's early encounter with the rather disturbing reality of the haves and the have-nots was an unforgettable experience. In Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, he observed how his fellow country men and women were reduced to the vagaries of unemployment, begging, prostitution and disease. The impact of his observations resulted in a series of paintings done in the years 1950-1951, and 1953; such as "Poor Family", and "Meimenan". This series of paintings, among others, was exhibited at the United States Information Service Library in 1954, where Gebre Kristos Desta was at the time employed as an illustrator. These early pieces demonstrate the deep personal impression made by the suffering present on the streets of Addis. In these stunning works, the depiction of stark human misery is exposed by the subjects' protruding bones and gaunt figures, which he depicted vividly and unabashedly.

Gebre Kristos' overwhelming desire to study abroad was realized when he won a scholarship in 1957. From 1957 to 1961, he studied painting and graphics at the Werschule fur Bildende Kunst und Gestaltung, an art school in Cologne, West Germany where graduated at the top of his class. For his outstanding achievement, he was awarded a private studio to help him develop his art. While in Germany, he met a variety of famous abstract painters, and it was there that he developed his interest in abstract expressionism. Among others,



he was well acquainted with the works of the Russian abstractionist Wassily Kandinsky, and many of the pioneer abstractionists, including expressionist painters in Europe in general, and Germany in particular. After graduation from the Cologne Art Academy he held his first one man exhibition at the Gallery Kuppeers, Cologne. This first exhibition turned out to be greatly successful. It was held after one year of work and an extensive six month tour of Western Europe. The focus of the educational tour was art schools, art academies, art education programs at higher education institutions, and museums and galleries of art.

Gebre Kristos was highly motivated. In Germany, as well as other parts of Europe, he was exposed to a variety of tools, techniques and art forms. He fully embraced new technique and medium, and excelled in mastering it. His canvasses in Germany were cool and nostalgic. For a while, flat surfaces, drawn in sharp, tortured lines, filled with dull gray colors were to occupy his palette. A certain amount of bitterness in those canvasses was apparent. Skeletons reemerged consistently. He emphatically expressed human misery and his own social preoccupation seemed to have grown into a somber obsession.

Gebre Kristos's studies and hard work paid off and he demonstrated his artistic talent and dexterity at his first exhibition at the Gallery Kuper in Cologne. His first gallery debut was greeted with recognition of his work as that of an accomplished artist when a reviewer wrote:

*"...he kept the metamorphic; he likes to show fixed contours and has an expressive delight in colors, so that one may characterize the result a tranquil expressionism with an extraneous accent. Sometimes geometrical forms appear and almost constructional formations, but the fine restraint of contrary shades lends a particular attraction to all products."*²



Gebre Kristos Desta | Landscape painting Title, size and date unknown

His decision to form himself as an abstract painter was conscious and deliberate. When asked why he chose to specialize in abstract art, Gebre-Kristos Desta said:

If an artist were to devote his artistic life to the reproduction of figures and forms as they exist, he would be competing with the camera, which is best suited for this type of production. An artist goes beyond the matter of the story. . . . And therefore, the realistic is insufficient. The artist seeks to find another language to express what is beyond. This could be the reason for abstract paintings.



Gebre Kristos Desta working on a painting in the mid 70's | Featured on the Cover | Flower No. 4

Gebre Kristos returned to Ethiopia in 1962. Upon his return, he introduced his art to his people in a one-man show, held at the School of Fine Arts in 1963, where he was also a member of the faculty. It was at this juncture that Gebre Kristos began to face the challenges faced by many contemporary African artists of his caliber. His art was met with negative review. His critics were quick to point fingers and say that his foreign art forms snubbed traditional Ethiopian art by opting for modern and alien structures. His reply was:

It is funny that people who know nothing about the history of art attach such exaggerated importance to the art of their own country. They don't realize how international art really is. Picasso would hardly have created his "Cubism" had he not seen African Art. Matisse was influenced by Islamic traditions. Gauguin went as far as Tahiti to find new inspiration. We create ultra modern houses in our developing countries. We build super highways on which we drive the latest model cars from all over the world. We use all sorts of up-to-date international styles in technology, science, education, medicine and what have you. Why in the world should art be different? (Head, 1969)

About the same time as Gebre Kristos' one man show, in an attempt to enlighten Ethiopian "critics" who jumped to the conclusion that "abstract art is foreign to Ethiopian tradition", critic Solomon Deressa wrote, "How much more abstract can one get than the non-figurative Ethiopian manuscript illuminations or the steles of Axum which are skyscrapers complete with windows and doors, but definitely closed to anyone trying to penetrate their mystery?" (Deressa, 1966-67) Deressa further explains a nagging problem that was repeatedly used by self proclaimed "critics" of the day; a problem of undefined concept of "Ethiopianism" in art.

Just as asphalt roads built to connect two points of the empire are Ethiopian, containing all the qualities and defects of the Ethiopians who build them, so too a house designed for the comfortable living of an Ethiopian family within the country is Ethiopian regardless of whether



Gebrekrstos Desta | "Flowers No. 1" Oil on hard-board 48 X 74 In, 1967

the kitchen is inside or out. A house built for natives of this country renders daily living. Time-consuming strategies and uncomfortable edifices are not un-Ethiopian, but simply bad. A skyscraper in some village in Wollega, therefore, though its motifs may be Ethiopian, would reflect on the builder's lack of common sense.

A portrait of a German girl by a good Ethiopian painter is necessarily more Ethiopian than either a portrait of an Ethiopian face by a foreigner, or a schmaltzy portrait of an Ethiopian peasant by a slick Ethiopian painter. The schmaltz is neither Ethiopian nor un-Ethiopian, but quite simply bad. In short, it is difficult to realize how a good work by a sincere Ethiopian artist can be anything but Ethiopian. (Deressa, 1966-67).

Similarly, when the criticism comes from the western critics, and art historians, it comes from an undefined concept of what African art should be or how and what a contemporary African artist should paint. Such a concept is neither helpful nor practical, but born of ignorance and a deliberate attempt at perpetuating the idea that African art and culture is static. This kind of criticism, both at home and abroad is not new to contemporary African artists who are trained abroad and who come home with new techniques and media, and present works of art of a new method and process. These artists face a dilemma. He or she is expected to produce a "uniquely African art". What is not realized is the fact that the contemporary African artist does not create in a void. Western influence, whether one likes it or not, is a fact of life. Therefore, it is a denial of historic truth and a double standard to impose on the contemporary African artist such values that are Western, or Euro-American. If, in fact, traditional African art can influence Western art and it is accepted as normal historic and artistic process, and that the Western (European) artist has not, as a result of his being influenced, lost his or her identity, why in the world should Western influence on African art be uniquely African? Why it is a difficulty for anyone to understand that change is inevitable and perfectly acceptable for the contemporary African artist to express himself or herself according to his/her experience?

If history were to serve as a reminder, Gauguin spent a tremendous amount of his artistic life working under the influence of the people and tradition of the South Seas. Was he not greatly influenced by what he saw? And does that render his work less European than his contemporaries in Europe? Is it not a fact that traditional African art and Eastern Asiatic art has enriched the visions of the European artist? Why in the world should the visions of the African artist

not be enriched by his exposure to Western art culture? And, if so, would that render his art less African than his contemporaries in Africa? The criticism that Gebre Kristos faced was not something he could easily ignore. Not only was his integrity as an artist questioned but also his national pride as an Ethiopian. His answer to such accusation was:

The Ethiopian Church Art, which is regarded as an important part of our cultural heritage and which I am accused of discarding in favor of foreign styles - this supposedly indigenous art actually is Byzantine in style. It too incorporates "foreign" elements and arrives, perhaps, at a characteristically Ethiopian synthesis. Now the same thing will happen in the present age. Fifty years from now, we may see a new Ethiopian tradition evolving, one which draws on what the rest of the world has to offer, but which is more than the sum of its parts. Don't misunderstand me; I do not for a moment, deny the importance of preserving traditional arts, and we have artists here who are doing just that. But not everybody need be in the preservation business. There are pioneers in art just as there are in other fields. I'm interested in moving on, in showing our society that an Ethiopian can achieve something in the most modern way.

Imbued with the conviction that there is as much need to advance art as science and technology, Gebre Kristos' dedication to abstract art is a courageous act that can only be pursued by an artist of the pioneer spirit. Indeed, this contemporary African artist has boldly pursued unhindered creativity, both as a painter, and a poet. He has introduced a new approach and



Gebrekrstos Desta | "Shoe Shine Boys" Oil on hard-board 47 X 39 In, 1967



a new form of expression of art in a grand manner to Africa in general, and to Ethiopia in particular. He eagerly shared his views about the world around him; his personal experiences about life, his moments of contemplation and conversation with nature - the human misery and the complexity of modern man. He wanted us to see beyond the ordinary, and used colors, lines, textures, and shapes and forms to achieve this end. He created visual signals, a new language, and a new media; the symbolic meaning of which we have to learn to see, symbols different by far from the complex abstract Christian symbols found in the pictorial art of the predominantly religious art of Ethiopia.

Gebre Kristos was convinced of our ability to access a deep psychological level of communication through form, shape, color, line and texture, as is evident in his presentation of such exemplary works as "Green Abstract." Gebre Kristos builds composition around a focal, shining center, a core of vibrating energy, and harmoniously develops around crystallizing waves suspended in luminous field. In this dramatic and new approach to reality there is a feeling of serenity, a soft blending of light and dark surfaces to create interplay of forms. The circle as

In 1965, despite frequent sharp criticism, G.K. won the Haile Sellassie 1st prize Trust Award in Fine Arts, and his accomplishments were officially recognized. The citation praised him as an artist with outstanding creative and interpretive abilities and as one who is largely responsible for introducing non-figurative art to his country. One author suggested without documentation that the citation might have been even more meaningful had it credited Gebre Kristos as being one of the earliest exponents and not the foremost practitioner of abstract art in Sub-Saharan Africa.

He continued his search, always faithful to his moods, never seeming to reconcile with the world that he was scrutinized to the last brush stroke. His abstract compositions dealing with form, shape, line and color were not a series on a specific theme at any given period. While "Green Abstract" was done in 1966, similarly named compositions were to follow, such as "White Abstract" in 1967, "Red Abstract" in 1968 and "Blue Abstract" in 1969. The relationship linking these paintings is that of the use of the circle. The texture and/or surface quality in "Blue Abstract" is more dramatic and lines seem to have been diffused. A relatively heavier impasto technique has prevailed. In 1969, G. K. introduced a new theme, a reminder in the intricacy and complex aspect of the new in "Television" and abstract representation of the flickering colors and images reduced to fused lines and colors. That same year he produced "Abstraction" and "Late Evening Sun".

It is when Gebre Kristos comes to terms, as he did from time to time, with the visible world of semi-abstract that a dramatic synthesis of anguish and resignation takes place. This is best demonstrated by his painting titled "Age." Gebre Kristos found his inspiration from the simple, ordinary, everyday things in his surrounding. He once said that his work is the expression of his own ideas in a search to interpret his surroundings, to pose and ask questions about probable solutions to life. He said his was "a conscious attempt to think by way of the almost inexplicable and never ending idea,"

This prolific contemporary African artist was equally a brilliant poet and unleashed an equally controversial outrage on both counts. In fact, his approach to poetry was different from that of the traditional Amharic poems. His critics question whether they are poems at all. He broke from tradition by introducing new rhythms and several levels and dimensions. Solomon Deressa, a contemporary author, poet, critic and friend of Gebre Kristos Desta predicted that, "When the first volume of his collected poems appear, chances are that Amharic poetry might never be the same," Both a catalogue of his work in English and a book of his collected poems were published this year, thanks to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and the Goethe Institute in Addis and the German Government. Solomon Deressa, in a letter to African Arts observed "Gebre Kristos Desta, a painter who perhaps overly cerebral on canvas, is so far the only Ethiopian poet who, unwittingly or not, has unleashed a raging controversy in the local papers as to whether his poems are poems at all. It is difficult to believe that the journalists fail to see the sparse beauty of his rhythm in several dimensions". (Deressa, 1966-67) He further explained as to why this was so. He wrote, "One assumes that his offense has been to break with the sedate tradition of Amharic poetry which, put grossly, amounts to variation on the kind of poetry that Alexander Pope wrote." (Deressa, 1966-67)

One of my favorites is Gebre-Kristos's poem to a painting and I believe it implies what Deressa calls 'bare lines reminiscent of the skeletons in his paintings.'



Gebre Kristos Desta teaching at the Addis Ababa Fine Art School (date unknown)

leitmotif in his paintings has become very much a language that is as symbolic as the skeletons that kept reappearing in many of his early works. "The circles," Gebre Kristos explained, "are symbols of universal things; mouth, earth, and sun, etc., and more importantly, they also make interesting patterns." (Talbot, 1966)

Green Abstract was done in 1966 along with "September," "Water Carriers," and in 1965, "Tam Tam" and "Small Market". The circle both in the non-figurative pieces as well as suggestive abstracted figurative paintings continues to be a dominant visual symbol. Expounding on his stamp as an artist, the use of this sign, Gebre Kristos, said:

The circle is infinite, unending. It symbolizes the hemisphere and heavenly bodies. It is in line with the search for a solution in life, when it frequently happens that one may believe he has reached the optimum solution only to find, (since art is life itself) that the search must continue, a perfect solution remains forever elusive. (Talbot, 1966)

Gebre Kristos continued his search while teaching at the School of Fine Art in Addis Ababa.

To Painting

This Journey has no end stimulate, translate

Swimming the colors

Playing with line

Crushing into light

Occupying the unoccupied to experience, to create

To search

To search

The uncreated, to create

Baiting a dialogue with the invisible.

Interrogating life

Questioning thought

Questioning the Universe

To move

To go to go

Beyond the moon, beyond the stars, beyond the sky

Journey to the unknown to occupy the unoccupied.

By thought and thought hidden

To search, to bring out!

This Journey has no end.

Translation by Solomon Deressa

The poetic line has the dagger's capacity to stab. Fragmented images provide clear openings into caverns that related forms by their relatedness cannot possibly penetrate.

Ever since his first successful one man show at the Gallery Koppers in Cologne, Gebre Kristos Desta has held numerous exhibitions both at home and abroad. He was truly an ambassador of his culture and his art. He served in an ambassadorial capacity, heading cultural delegates and traveling with touring Ethiopian art exhibitions in Europe. In 1965, Gebre Kristos was the recipient of the Haile Sellassie 1st prize National Award for the Fine Arts. In 1967, he was invited to exhibit his works and to visit important museums, artistic, and historic sites in the USSR. The same year he visited and exhibited his works in Czechoslovakia by invitation of the government of that country. In 1970, he was invited by the Federal Republic of West Germany to present his work as well as visit important places of art interest. Also in 1970, on the occasion of the founding of higher education in Ethiopia, Gebre Kristos was invited by the National University Alumni Association to exhibit his works at the Kennedy Memorial Library in Addis Ababa. The following year, Gebre Kristos was awarded "Best Teacher of the Year" by the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts. A similar honor was bestowed upon him by the Office of Addis Ababa Schools in 1972. The same year the U.S. Department of State invited him to visit as well as exhibit his work in the United States of America. Two years later the Government of India extended a similar invitation to Gebre Kristos to exhibit his work and visit places of art.

In 1974 the Ethiopian revolution erupted. The "Derg", which was then the provisional military government, proclaimed what was known as the "Zamacha", a National Campaign for Education through Cooperation. Some 60,000 students from high schools and the university were dispersed all over the country to propagate and assist in teaching rural Ethiopia about the new changes. Gebre Kristos, like many teachers served in the campaign as an art expert of the Zamacha. Upon his return he was awarded a certificate and a gold medal. Several studies of his experience and observation were included as part of a retrospective exhibition that was held in 1976-77. In 1976, he was invited by the Municipality of Addis Ababa to start the first government sponsored gallery in Ethiopia, which was to be known as the City Hall Gallery.

In 1977, two young and talented Ethiopian artists, Eshetu Truneh and Tadesse Mesfin, were featured as part of the City Hall Gallery's annual Schedule of Exhibits. I met Gebre Kristos at that show. Two years later he was invited to participate at a workshop and exhibit his work at the Pa Ya Pa Gallery in Kenya. From there he traveled to West Germany where he languished for a year waiting for some form of asylum. The German government chose not to give Gebre Kristos asylum, apparently afraid of reprisals from the Ethiopian government. Gebre Kristos was simply told that he was not to be granted asylum because he was famous and that the publicity at the time would endanger a rather delicate diplomatic relationship between the two countries. In 1980, a Catholic church in Lawton, Oklahoma offered assistance. Gebre Kristos Desta, once the cultural ambassador of his country, who has with honor and pride exhibited in Yugoslavia, Greece, India, West Germany, USSR, USA, Canada, Kenya, Nigeria (Festac), Tanzania, Brazil, Ghana, Spain, Italy, and Belgium, came to Lawton, Oklahoma as a refugee. The pain, anguish and humiliation took its toll. In Lawton, Gebre Kristos lived in a one room apartment where he began to work on small scale stills. While in Lawton, Gebre Kristos taught art part time in the local YMCA and later at a high school. He was suddenly took ill and died in 1981. Prior to his untimely death, he had a one man show in Oklahoma City, opened by the mayor, at the Gallery of Witchitas where 47 of his most recent works were displayed. These works ranged from 11 x 16 ½ in. (the smallest) to 48 x 48 in. (the biggest) and used acrylic, oil, collage on paper, canvas and masonite. With titles like "Military Checking", "The Wheel-Chair", "Break Time", "On the Roadside", "Football One" and a "New Home", the majority of these works included still life studies of tulips and a variety of flowers and aquariums. Gebre Kristos Desta was a unique individual, a man, an artist extraordinary, a poet, a teacher and an Ethiopian with his head high in the clouds and his feet firmly planted in the Ethiopian soil. He is indeed very much alive through his work, in which he shared his very being with the world.

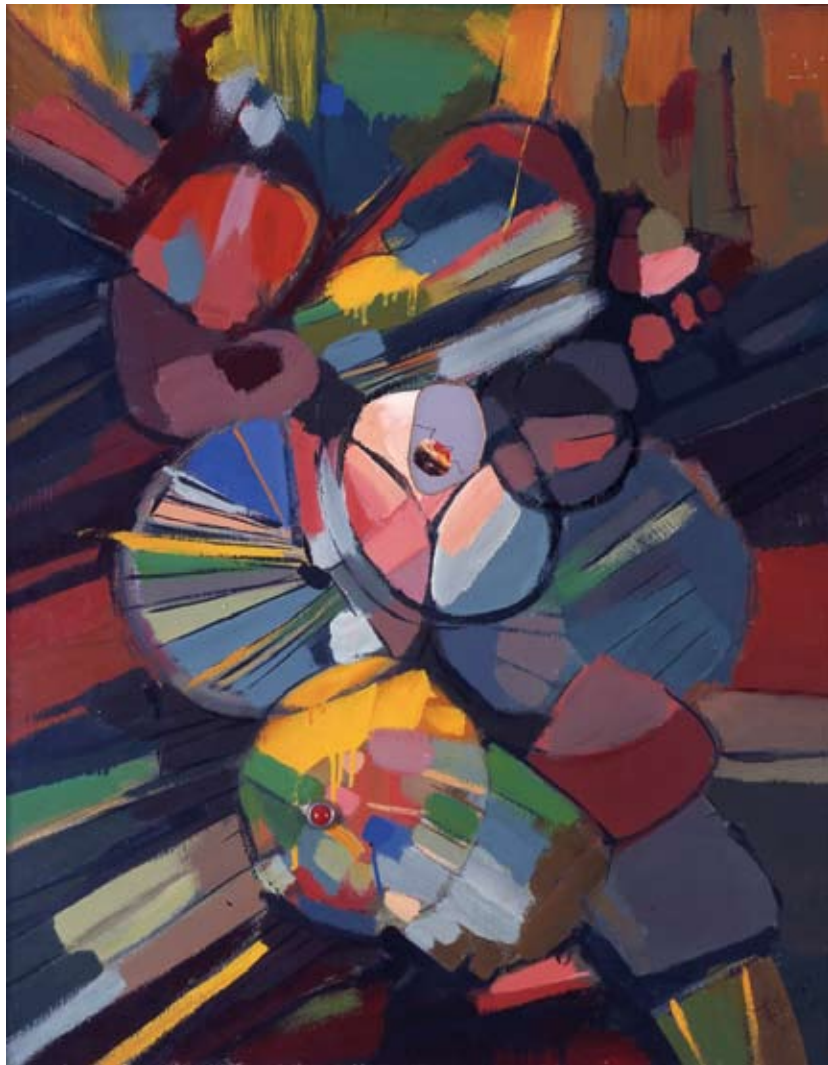
The Gebre Kristos Center under the Goethe Institute Addis Ababa, Gebre Kristos Center" was opened in 2006 after great anticipation. Some thirty pieces by Gebre Kristos Desta were returned from Germany and were entrusted to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies under the directorship of Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis. The rather delicate negotiation and collaboration between the Addis Ababa University leadership and the Goethe Cultural Institute / German Government resulted in a renovation of the former palace of the crown prince Asfaw Wossen Haile Sellassie at Sidist Kilo. A rather handsome facility has been developed from the former palace and is intended accommodate the mission and objectives of the Goethe Cultural Institute as well as house a space serves as a gallery to permanently exhibit works by Gebre Kristos. There was jubilation by friends and admirers of Gebre Kristos Desta at the opening of the center. Memorable speeches were made, including a letter of acknowledgement by the prime minister. Gebre Kristos deserved a place where his gift to his people would find a home and his major works would be made available to the Ethiopian public. I, for one, was privy to earlier discussions of a gallery space, a small research library dedicated to his work and possibly his contemporaries so that the young and old who are interested to read and write on his work



Gebre Kristos Desta | "Reservation" Acrylic on carton 29" X 29", 1979



Gebre Kristos Desta "Green Abstract" Oil on canvas 31" X 47", 1966




Gebre Kristos Desta | "Crystalline" Oil on hardboard 31" X 39", 1975



Gebre Kristos Desta | "Inclining Nude" Oil on hardboard 38" X 35", 1973

would have access to not only the physical or original works of art but also to literature, photographs, recordings and anything archival about the artist and his life.

As it turned out, the result was not as anticipated. The gallery space cannot accommodate even thirty pieces. The exhibit is not permanent, as activities of the Goethe Institute seem to require constant reprogramming and shuffling of rooms. Here, the dismantling of the Gebre Kristos art works as often as the program dictates, and accommodating changing activities of the institute is indeed an abrogation of the spirit of public trust. It deprives the public of the opportunity to see his works and physically endangers the pieces themselves. No full time curator will oversee the movement or storage of the collection, increasing the chances that they may be lost, damaged or destroyed. I am sure the intentions of the Goethe Cultural Institute are well, however, a rethinking and replanning of the meaning and objectives of the Gebre Kristos Center needs to be revisited by both the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University and the Goethe Cultural Institute Gebre Kristos Desta Center.

I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank Blen Team and those who have dedicated themselves to organize The Annual Blen Art Show by Ethiopian artists at home and in the Diaspora, and behind the scenes at that. I take the liberty to intervene and undo the "Muia Balib Naw" idea and let you, the reader of this article, that they have done an excellent job to date and deserve all the accolades that they have not demanded. I am particularly delighted that they chose to dedicate these shows to the modern masters, last year to Skunder Boghossian, and this, the 4th Annual Blen Art Show, to Gebre Kristos Desta 

Acha Debela is a former student of Gebre Kristos Desta and presently a North Carolina Central University art professor in Durham, North Carolina.

¹ Interestingly, there was a pencil drawing entitled "Maternity" or "Mista Fikur Wolda", a depiction of Mary and baby Jesus. This drawing, included in the retrospective exhibition of 1977 at the City Hall Gallery in Addis Ababa, was a sketch done in 1938 at the age of seven. At the time, he was closely watching his father make parchments, draw, paint religious figures and illustrate stories from the New and Old Testaments, including the lives of Ethiopian saints. Exhibition catalogue entitled: A Retrospective Exhibition, Gebre Kristos Desta, at City Hall Gallery June-July, 1977.

² Kolner Stadtanzeiger, January 12, 1962

Wosene Worke Kosrof

Taken from www.wosene.com

For over twenty-five years, Ethiopian-born artist Wosene Worke Kosrof has explored the aesthetic potential of language, using the written symbols of his native Amharic as the major compositional element in his work. In his paintings, the calligraphic forms of Amharic are broken apart, abstracted, and reconfigured to create a new visual language that draws upon the artist's Ethiopian heritage while incorporating his experiences as an expatriate living in the United States. As Wosene explains (the artist has chosen his first name as his professional name), "The symbols bring my culture to me and at the same time I recreate my culture with the symbols, producing a unique international visual language."

Born in 1950, Wosene received his BFA in 1972 from the School of Fine Arts in Addis Ababa. Although Wosene's work gained early recognition within Addis Ababa's lively culture scene of the time, the oppressive political climate that developed in the aftermath of the 1974 military coup prompted him to leave Ethiopia. In 1978, he enrolled at Howard University in Washington, DC, to pursue graduate studies in studio painting, obtaining his MFA in 1980. Wosene has exhibited internationally in museums and galleries since 1970, receiving increasing recognition since the late 1980s. His work is represented in the permanent collections of museums in Africa, the United States, and Europe, including the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress. In 1998, he became the first African artist to participate in the Rockefeller artist-in-residence program in Bellagio, Italy. Wosene currently maintains a studio in Oakland, California, and resides in Berkeley, CA.

Wosene has created three distinct series of works since 1980 that focus on the written language of Amharic. In his first series, entitled *Graffiti Magic* (1980-1987), the artist used Amharic symbols as a form of visual protest, drawing upon their conventional meanings in his work. The second series, *Africa: The New Alphabet* (1988-1994), created new meanings for the written symbols, exploring and including motifs from many cultures throughout Africa. Wosene began the third series, *The Color of Words*, from which the paintings in the (Neuberger and Newark exhibits) were drawn, in 1995 and continues to work on it to this day. In this third series, the symbols become abstract visual images that move localized ideas about history, culture, and memory beyond their culturally specific boundaries.



Wosene Kosrof | "The Preacher III" | Acrylic on canvas 44" X 36", 2000 (National Museum of African Art)

The improvisational quality that Wosene values in jazz is central to his artistic process. He does not work from a preparatory sketch, but begins by negotiating with the canvas, discerning which forms begin to emerge from its space. Once the Amharic symbols surface visually, he works with the lines and shapes in a process he describes as choreography or a dialogue. Wosene works using acrylic paints, a medium that fosters a sense of immediacy. He explains, "I like to work with fast-drying acrylic paints, because they draw me into the painting process and strengthen my concentration by forcing me to constantly make aesthetic decisions."

Wosene readily acknowledges the complexity of his position as a transnational artist, yet resists classification as a representative of an artistic movement or group. "As an artist who worked to move traditions into contemporary art," Wosene states, "I see myself definitely as a representative of contemporary art in Africa...I also see myself as an individual, drawing on my culture, bringing my culture to the wider world...I'm simply trying to examine and interpret my own emotional understandings, my feelings, and my spiritual journey, us-

ing the Amharic writing as a base." Having lived in the United States for more than twenty-five years, Wosene's relationship to Ethiopia is shaped as much by the continuing presence of his memories as it is by his physical absence from the country itself. The artist's hybrid identity is revealed in highly textured and visually dense canvases that evoke a world in which animated dialogue around a neighborhood fire in Addis Ababa coexists with the sounds of jazz streaming from a Berkeley coffeehouse.

The Ethiopia that finds expression in Wosene's art is at once culturally specific in its visual vocabulary, highly personal in its interpretation, and international in its outlook, reflecting the complex realities of contemporary artistic practice in a global society.



The Marketing Dilemma of Contemporary Ethiopian Art

Esseye Medhin

In the history of 20th century Ethiopian visual art, the folk, the religious folk, the self-taught genre and souvenir artists were the first to sell their works on the open market. Most of these artists take their inspirations and their subject matter from the church classical works or from the work of formally trained artists. For whatever reason, foreign collectors and writers preferred the self-taught and the folk artists to those of formally trained artists. As a result, the work of self-taught and folk artists slowly became almost fully commercialized. The collectors also created the Ethiopian “art world” by writing and talking about it. Presently, some of these works reside in the permanent collection of museums and in private collections both in Ethiopia and abroad. If the folk artists were able to succeed in their commercial and artistic ventures, it was because they had advantages that their formally-trained counterparts did not.

Since the time the first art students arrived from Western countries in the 1920s, the majority have been preoccupied with the question of fame for their country in the face of the modern world. As they were government employees, whatever work they produced on commission, in private, outside of their job, they related to the cultural significance and to their artistic achievements, not to the art market. The emotional and sentimental commitment they maintained to their country and its history gave them strength and compensated for their lack of material comfort. Even the occasional art shows in hotels, schools and cultural centers in the 1950s and 1960s were more to satisfy an artistic ego than to sell. During the 1960s, when Ethiopian modern art drew considerable attention, the Zemenay, Ethiopian Modernist artists, and thirty years later, in the 1990s, the new masters, members of the Addis International, Friendship of Women Artists (FOWA), Point Group, Dimension Group and other individual artists, did not use their talents to winning the support of people who could have promoted their art. Instead, they dedicate themselves to artistic passion, to their reputation and tied their art only to their cultural activities. Their only compensation, respect and celebrity status still hung on the shoulder of their successors and has become to some a burden, to many a nuisance and still to others a driving force.

The myth that artists are taught to make art, not money and the romantic opposition of art and commerce were at the heart of their education. They acted more like dilettantes than professional artists. Unfortunately, economically unbeneficial art in its return is only satisfying if it is only a hobby. Whether or not these artists genuinely try to avoid the commercial element of art, or think that the market is dangerous or debasing to art is a matter to speculate. In any case, until very recently, the majority of formally trained exhibiting artists bypassed the embryonic art market and dedicated themselves to artistic passion and tied their art to a greater cause. Until very recently, contemporary Ethiopian artists were not in a position to market their work, let alone support themselves by selling it.

Whereas the quest for Western training characterized much of modern Ethiopian art and in considerable ways directed its future, the century-old Ethiopian modern art endures in the absence of a Western kind of art world and its institutions. The modern art world—and its network of collectors, critics, dealers, scholars, patrons, art press, open art market and museums, auction houses, galleries and art schools did not exist. When one of the most artistically successful Zemenay artists, Skunder Boghossian, left the country in 1969, Stanislaw Chojnacki wrote



Yohannes Tesfaye | Title, size and date unknown

that he left “with the obvious intention of finding a larger audience for his activities.” In reality, it is not so much that the audience of at least 40 million people at that time was missing in Ethiopia. It is the kind of audience that was missing that was in question. Faced with the difficulties of earning a living as a fine artist in a nonexistent market, many talented and promising artists either gave up the

profession or never graduated from art school. As a consequence, the number of formally trained artists and the quality and the quantity of contemporary Ethiopian art declined dramatically. In today’s Ethiopia, there are fewer than 3000 formally trained artists in a population of 70 million.

To this day, some Ethiopian artists refuse to see their art as a commercial venture. On March 10, 2004, on the occasion of the Pioneers Forum at the Stanford Ethiopian Student Union, Afewerk Tekle, the quintessential modern Ethiopian artist, shared his view of Picasso with the Stanford Daily:

When I met Pablo Picasso and his wife, he was totally different from what I expected. He was a very humorous man, and when he looked at my work, he said that my drawings were stunning work, but I needed to work harder on my oil paintings. But then these Texan patrons of his work came for lunch, and he completely ignored me. He took a piece of bread and traced it on the tablecloth, and then he traced his hand. The Texan said, “I would like to acquire that.” If anyone had said that to me, I would have been offended, but Picasso told his wife to take the tablecloth and prepare it. I was absolutely spellbound to see the reaction of [the Picassos]. In a way, I wish that I had never met him, because he became just a simple merchant in my eyes.

Whether or not Afewerk’s account is true is immaterial. But his remark about the mercenary attitude of the most admired artist in the world is pertinent. Afewerk’s view of marketing and promoting his work is quite different from and a bit more complex than those of other Ethiopian artists. His statement doesn’t reflect upon his business acumen. In fact, he is commercially and artistically successful artist. Rather, it reflects the belief of the majority of his and the subsequent generation of Ethiopian artists and the Ethiopian public have regarding art

and its marketing. The point here is not to show that one artist's approach to the art market is good or bad, or to argue that art is simply a commodity. The purpose is to question whether the younger generation of Ethiopian artists should be seen, to use Afewerik's phrase as "just a simple merchant" if they enter the market in order to support themselves?

The "exit generation" new generation artists of the 2000s have or at least they show a different perspective and imagination, as well as values that are at odds with the nation's conservative artistic and cultural matrix and tradition. Although they have not formally been taught marketing skills, they are aggressive in marketing their work. These artists know that if they are not aggressive in getting out their work in the marketplace at any cost, by whatever means, their art will become nonessential. Interestingly enough, the most artistically and commercially successful artists of the new generation artists are those who are openly businesslike with their own dealers and agents. Many of the artists have yet to learn this lesson. Fortunately, the modern art world system, and the art market in Addis Ababa has taken off in an unprecedented fashion, supporting these artists and satisfying the aesthetic desire of the national public. If the opposite was to happen, there could certainly have been a marked separation of these artists from the public. As the country's current history has shown, inspired artists will at best produce artwork intended for export and international art fairs, creating an artistic void at home. At worst, they would have been alienated and disgusted with the situation and go into psychological, spiritual and probably literal exile.

When sudden and unprecedented value and respect are given to contemporary Ethiopian art, it is accompanied by an unavoidable marketing dilemma. While the artist creates his work without any idea of how much it is going to be sold or even if it will be sold, in the end he will be tempted to sell his work to the highest bidder. The moral and cultural dilemma is when the nation's finest and gifted artist creates work with the intent of or thought of the outside market and not of the nation's artistic need.

Artists of the 1950s and 1960s were self-contained, and probably thought they could right the country's wrongs. Those of the 1980s were less pretentious, conscious artists who were for the most part ignored by the establishment and the public. Through their numerous art works, they have demonstrated their creative motivation and interests and were certainly able to create art which uniquely represented 20th century Ethiopia. If the cultural setting of these artists is finished, there is no question that their passionate artistic engagement, the national pursuit of aesthetic unity, was conscientiously achieved. The popular artists, applied and commercial artists, the new generation artists in particular are the practitioners and beneficiaries



Ezra Wube | "Watching" Oil on canvas 18" X 18", 2006

of their achievements. What was to flourish in the 1990s in Addis Ababa was pioneered in the 1960s and 1980s. The art marketing dilemma of the 2000s has created and refined not only the artistic skill of the late 1960s and 1980s, but also the survival skills of the artists.

The survival passion of the new generation artists is creating an interesting and testing artistic and cultural environment. If any visionary or experimental works are not judged, discussed, critiqued by the society that pays for the training and if the artists are not accountable for their action, art, will have a much different face and purpose in the society. In light of this dilemma, even if 21st century visual art culture of Ethiopia endures, without the conscious involvement of the artists and the public, the outcome will be a travesty. ☺

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እንቅልፍ እንደሬሳ ዘላለም ልተኛ።

መንገድ ሰጡኝ ሰፊ . . .

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ልፍጠን እንደብርሃን አለማትን ልለፍ

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እንደ ፅርሃ ኣርያም ሁሉንም የሚያሳይ።

እሳተ ገሞራ ኣመዱ ረመጡን፥

ጎርፍ የሳት ጎርፍ ልሁን፥

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በፀጥታው ቦታ ዘመን ከቆመበት።

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ስጉዋዝ እየተሞላሁ በጠፈር ሳይ ፋና፥

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ሰማየ ሰማያት ኣመዘብራለሁ

የተዘጋውን በር አበረግዳለሁ።

የሌለ እስቴፊጠር፥ ዝምታ እስኪነቃ

በትልቅ አርምጃ ከመሬት ጨረቃ

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በፀሃይ ሳይ ጎጆ - ቤቴን እቀልሳለሁ

ከሲኦል ሚሊዮን ቢሊዮን ልቃጠል

ከገሃንም እሳት ሚሊዮን ነበልባል

መንገድ ሰጡኝ ሰፊ . . .

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ይህ ግጥም ከአቶ አምሃ አስፋው ድህረ ገፅ ላይ ከነመስተካክሉ የተወሰደ ነው።

The Amharic version of this poem is taken from Amha Asfaw's website with his permission. The Blen Team thanks him for his contribution.

To read the compiled poems of Gebre Kristos Desta, collected by Amare Mamo, Fekade Azeze and Brook Abdu, please visit www.missouri.edu/~asawa.

Out of This World

Perfunctory jokes do not become me;

I would casually die in the bowels of one-hundredths of a second;
Sleep like corpses eternally do.

Pave me a path so vast that I may be

That I may travel within horizons

Past universes and suns

Ricochet back and forth between infinites

Faster than the speed of light itself

Soon a Sun-to-be; illuminating luminary clear

Like the frothing lava and scalding ash

I would be the fiery floods

The million flames that set Hell ablaze

Pave me a path so vast that I may be

That I may see amidst the darkness

The charcoaled, sooty blackness

Where time stands still embraced in eternal hollow caves

At that infinite vacuum

... Let me hover, watching.

For me, stars are but mere pebbles ... toys

And I, a crumb from the earth, writing Her ploys

On the dark manuscripts of the skies

I wander through galaxies

Vandalizing the high heavens,

Blasting open all shut gates

Until the non-existent comes to life

Until silence is rudely awakened

And in one large stride,

Leap from the earth to the moon

Then to the stars; from one world to another

Travelling

Creating

My humble abode on the sun.

And I'll cast my shadow on the sun.

The endless flames of Hell may scorch me

And the fiery depths may swallow me

Pave me a path so vast that I may be.

Translated by Robel Kassa





Addis Art Gallery

Salem Berhanu

Saturday, August 6th, 2005, saw the opening of the very first art gallery, outside of Ethiopia, dedicated to the works of Ethiopian artists. Appropriately titled “ENEHO”, the work of the renowned Lulseged Retta became the first to be exhibited at this historic event. Addis Art Gallery, located not too far from LA’s Little Ethiopia, opened its doors to over two hundred guests who answered the call to celebrate and to be reintroduced to the “joy of sight”. Since then the gallery has been exhibiting works that serve as a testament to the skill and relevance of Ethiopian artists.

Intrigued as I am by the conception of ideas, my first question to owner Mesai Haileluel was if he distinctly remembered the first time he thought of opening up a gallery. Mesai’s first response was “I never started out with the intention of owning a gallery. However, I do consider myself extremely lucky.” He then re-traced the steps that set him on this course.

Born and raised in Ethiopia, Mesai moved to the United States in the early summer of 1974. After completing his higher education in Oklahoma, he went on to live in Texas and finally settled down in Los Angeles, California. Mesai’s first association with Ethiopian contemporary art being that of an aficionado, he started collecting art works long before the inception of Addis Art Gallery. The five years that followed 1996 provided him with the opportunity to travel to Ethiopia and to be introduced to many artists and their work. Some of the artists he met during his visits were Lulseged Retta, Shiferaw Girma, Tadesse Mesfin, Merid Tafesse and the five members of the Habesha group. In 2001, one of these artists, Lulseged Retta, came to Washington, DC to exhibit his work. One of the venues at which the artist was trying to organize a show was WorldSpace – an international satellite radio company. Mesai got wind of this through his sister, Firehewot, who happened to be in charge of handling such events for WorldSpace. Excited, Mesai got in touch with Lulseged and agreed to help him organize the art show. On July 2001, the show successfully opened, becoming the first of several art exhibitions Mesai would have a hand in organizing.

After nearly five years of devoting his extra time to organizing art shows for Ethiopian artists, Mesai reached what he recognized to be the turning point. He realized he would have to decide whether it would be all or

nothing. He would either go into establishing a business based on contemporary Ethiopian art full-time or walk away from it altogether. Deciding on the former, Mesai spent close to six months looking for a place to set up his gallery. In the end he chose the building on the corner of Sierra Bonita Venue and West Pico Boulevard. Mesai fervently told me that all his accomplishments would not have been possible without the incredible support of his family and friends, specifically his seven sisters who happen to be part of the reason he considers himself extremely lucky. He also credits knowledgeable friends and acquaintances for helping him meet the initial challenge of finding sound financial advice.

One of the guiding principles of Addis Art Gallery is that the works of Ethiopian artists, being part of the larger Ethiopian cultural heritage, need to be primarily collected and appreciated by Ethiopians. For this reason, the commitment and focus of the gallery lies on the diverse work of Ethiopian artists living in and out of Ethiopia. Nevertheless, the gallery also accommodates non-Ethiopian artists by renting out space as it becomes available. Furthermore, even though the primary guests and customers of the gallery are Ethiopians, 30% -50% of the average turnout at the gallery events are non-Ethiopian, art lovers.

To his surprise, Mesai started realizing that his undertaking, being one that required collaborative efforts, was having the unexpected impact of bringing the Ethiopian community together. Beyond raising awareness and appreciation of Ethiopian art, the exhibitions at Addis Art Gallery were fast becoming community building activities. Realizing the significance of this, Mesai intends to further open up the gallery space for book readings, film screenings and basically any artistic events which advance creativity.

My conversations with Mesai, made me aware of his keen understanding of the plight of Ethiopian artists that are trying to make a living from their art. The lack of galleries, the inexperience of artists when it comes to the art business and the limited art appreciation within the Ethiopian community are all factors that contribute to the challenges faced by the Ethiopian artist. Add to this the language and cultural barrier and in some cases the art audience’s unfamiliarity with the subject matter and you have a frus-

trated Ethiopian artist living in the Diaspora. In response to these challenges, certain trends are developing among artists living in Ethiopia, some more commendable than others. Mesai believes one of the biggest developments in the Ethiopian art scene is the creation of a type of artists' cooperatives. This developed naturally where two or three artist friends would team up to rent modest villas and set up art studios in order to reduce costs. On the other hand, though done for the sake of survival, Mesai is against the trend to copy from artists who sell well since this has the adverse effect of stifling creativity.

As far as the future is concerned, Mesai would like to partner with galleries in Addis Ababa and even dreams of opening one there. He identifies Zoma Contemporary Art Center, Asni Gallery of Contemporary Ethiopian Art and Alliance Ethio-Francais as taking the forefront in advancing the works of Ethiopian artists. Here in the United States, Mesai is happy to see the East Coast following suit by opening up Artful Gallery owned by his friend Dilip Sheth. He is especially encouraged by this since he sees that the artists living outside Ethiopia are dealt a much harder card than those living within the country. His impassioned response when I asked him about the need for other galleries like his in the United States was "In all the major cities, we need one!"

For more information on the gallery please visit www.addis-art.com



Professor Richard Pankhurst with his wife and Dr. Ephraim Issac at the opening of Contemporary Works of Art by Ethiopian Artists in Addis Art Gallery (July 2006)



Yonas, Wosene Kosrof, Mekbib Gebretsadik, Meseret Desta, Esseye Medhin and Yohannes Tesfaye (Addis Art Gallery: July 2006)

Artist Biographies & Plates



Abebe Zelelew
Beshowamyelesh Gedamu
Dilip Sheth
Elsa Gebreyesus
Endalkachew Girma
Esayas Kebede
Ezra Wube
Martha Mangestu
Mathewos Legesse
Mekbib Gebertsadik
Meseret G Desta
Nebyou Tesfaye
Solomon Asfaw
Teferi Gizachew
Yisehak Selassie
Yohanis Mibrathu
Yohannes Tesfaye



Mathewos Legesse | "The Gate" Oil and Acrylic on canvas 31" X 31" 2006

Abebe Zelelew

Abebe Zelelew graduated from the School of Fine Arts of Addis Ababa in 1985. He has since held solo and group exhibitions in China, Djibouti, Ethiopia and France. In 1996, some of his works were selected to represent Ethiopian art in the "Aethiopia" exhibit that traveled across Europe.

Beshowamyelesh Gedamu

Beshowamyelesh Gedamu, better known as Beshou, was born and raised in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. She also lived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for four years before coming to the United States, where she graduated with a BA from Bridgewater College, Virginia. It wasn't until late in her college years that she developed a keen sense for the arts, specializing in photography. Having previously lived in the metropolitan Washington D.C. area, she was influenced by friends and local artists to pursue her passion for photography. In addition, her exposure to various cultures and languages gave her a unique and multifaceted perspective on life, which she captures in her remarkable pictures. "Whether the story is told in a classic, timeless black and white, or a more colorful and contemporary way, I just want to be able to transcend the lens and hope that the moment, the story, is captured in a frame."

Dilip Sheth

Born and raised in Ethiopia, Dilip Sheth immigrated to America in 1980. Even though he managed business most of his adult life, his greatest moment was when he chose to work with the artistic eye he developed since childhood. Dilip Sheth's paintings reflect the two divergent cultures in which he has lived. His early exposure to African art is apparent through his distinct style, warmth, and balanced tones on his striking palette. Western culture's emphasis on the individual is also visible in his work, delineated by the heavy outlines that identify his paintings. His figures are treated with an artist's reverence for beauty but with imagination as well, taking on a slightly surreal approach to see everyday settings. Faces and elements become familiar, often reappearing in later compositions. Dilip currently resides in Takoma Park, Maryland.

Elsa Gebreyesus

Elsa Gebreyesus lived in Ethiopia, Kenya, and United States. She received her BA from Brock University in Ontario, Canada. After 1993, she lived in Eritrea for five years, working as a Project Officer with an indigenous women's organization. After leaving Eritrea, she came to the United States, where she has been pursuing her lifelong passion for art. She also volunteers and works with organizations involved with human rights issues especially in Africa. She continues to learn from artists she admires and has been greatly influenced by modernist painters from both Africa and the West.

Endalkachew Girma

Endalkachew Girma was born in Addis Ababa Ethiopian in 1973. He started drawing at an early age. In 1996, he received a bachelors' degree from the Addis Ababa University Fine Arts and Design. He worked in Ethiopian Airlines and exhibited in Ethiopia and abroad. He moved to the United States in 2004, where he exhibited his art at the Farmount Gallery, Dules Gallery, and Max Art Gallery.

Esayas Kebede

Native Ethiopian Esayas Kebede Siweya was born Addis Ababa in 1975. He began drawing at a young age, professing an early interest in the arts. Esayas joined Addis Ababa University's School of Fine Art and Design in 1998. After four years of intensive training, he graduated with a BA degree in the field of mural art. Esayas has displayed his work in many prestigious galleries in his home country, such as Addis Ababa University in 2001, the German Culture Institute and Alliance Ethio-Franciase in 2002 and the Addis Ababa Hilton Hotel in 2003. "Art, for me, is breathing. It's necessary for survival, but also refreshing for the mind and spirit. Besides this, art is also an expression of beauty and the self,"



Yisehak Sellassie | "Labor of Love" Acrylic on canvas 24" X 30" 1998



Teferi Gizachew | Title, size and date unknown



Endalkachew Girma | Title, size and date unknown



Martha Mangestu | "Adey Abeba" Mixed media, 60" X 60" 2005

Ezra Wube

Ezra Wube was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He came to the United States at the age of 18. Ezra's artworks are inspired by Ethiopian folk tales' spiritual commentaries on social and political life and the diverse and ancient Ethiopian civilizations. The folk tales' has symbolic universal messages and Ezra applies their lessons to his daily life in the West. After graduating from the Massachusetts College of Art, Ezra received the Dondis Travel fellowship to travel throughout Ethiopia and collect folk tales. Within four months, he gathered over 100 stories. Currently, Ezra works on translating these stories into visual art to introduce them to the Western world.

Martha Mangestu

Martha Mangestu was born on 14 October, 1979, in Addis Ababa. She received Mural Art bachelors' degree from Addis Ababa University School of Fine Art and Design. She realized her passion for art at the age of six and started to spend her time with a paper and pencil trying to capture her surroundings. Her works focus on the beauty of women, design, traditional paintings, and hair styles from Ethiopia. She explained "I choose to paint women because it is in

them that I find exaggerated beauty." She has presented her works in solo, group and permanent exhibitions in different galleries and cultural institute. Marta resides in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and she is full time studio artist.

Mathewos Legesse

Mathewos was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He graduated from Addis Ababa University's School of Fine Arts and Design. He has participated in different solo, group and permanent exhibitions in Ethiopia, Germany, US, and Sweden, which enabled him to visit the works of famous artists in museums and galleries. He participated in a live art program, making body painting on 'adugna' dancers for a circus. He has begun creating paintings expressing his ideas and feelings about the concept of a 'LIFE-LINE,' or the path that each individual follows and the goals that we try to achieve along the way. He is interested in helping and working with children. He is currently attending an artist residency program in the United States.

expressing his ideas and feelings about the concept of a 'LIFE-LINE,' or the path that each individual follows and the goals that we try to achieve along the way. He is interested in helping and working with children. He is currently attending an artist residency program in the United States.

Mekbib Gebertsadik

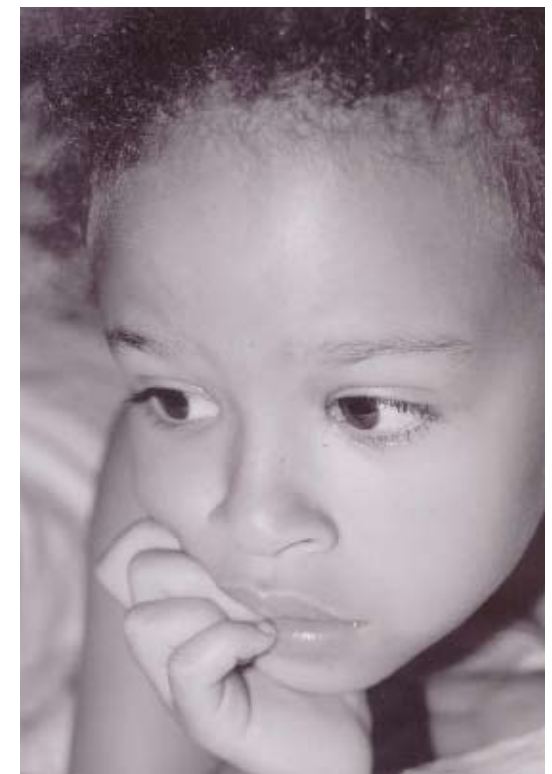
Mekbib Gebertsadik is an artist who specializes in Africanism, an art form that draws from African tradition. He started painting at an early age and spent many years learning art. In 1994, Mekbib received a BA degree from Addis Ababa University's School of Fine Arts and Design. He had many solo and group exhibitions in Ethiopia and other countries. He was a full time studio artist from 1994 up to 2001. He then received a Mekbib's work has been exhibited in museums, galleries and cultural centers throughout Ethiopia, Europe and USA. Venues recently exhibiting his work include the Addis Art Gallery, Sewall-Belmont House and Museum, and Marlboro Gallery. He received the Skunder Boghossian Painting Award and '2000 Reasons to Love the Earth' prize. He lives with his artist wife, Meseret G. Desta, in Virginia.

Meseret G. Desta

Meseret G. Desta was born in Ethiopia. She received a BA degree from the Addis Ababa University School of Fine Arts and Design, where she was an honors student for all four years. Although her love for art started early in life, Meseret began pursuing her passion for art in the past thirteen years. She enhanced her art education with a computer technology degree. She has exhibited her work in museums, galleries and cultural centers throughout Ethiopia, Europe and the United States. She recently exhibited her art in the Addis Art Gallery and Sewall-Belmont House and Museum. Meseret currently lives with her artist husband, Mekbib Gebertsadik.

Nebyou Tesfaye

Nebyou Tesfaye was born in 1978 in Addis Ababa. After completing high school, he joined Addis Ababa University's School of Art and Design, where he obtained his degree in 2001. Nebyou bolstered his credentials by attending Moscow Surikov Art Institute. His composite resume includes exhibitions in many countries, including Ethiopia, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States. Nebyou currently resides in the United States, where he continues to produce extraordinary artwork.



Beshou Gedamu | "Medallia" | Black and white photograph

Solomon Asfaw

Born in Ethiopia in 1977, Solomon Asfaw resided Addis Ababa until 2005. He studied at the Addis Ababa University School of Fine Arts and Design. Solomon built a reputation as a talented artist in the art world of Ethiopia. Asfaw came to the United States to pursue his dream in becoming a globally recognized artist. Inspired and motivated by great Ethiopian artists such as Skunder Bogosian, Gebrekrustos Desta, Wossone Kosrof, Tadesse Mesfin and the likes, Solomon developed his talent in using colors and designs to produce images that have creative composition. Scenes and figures from the eastern regions, the urban settings, and symbolic icons and writings from Ethiopia heavily influence his artwork. As TSION Asmamaw, an art collector and manager states "Asfaw's humbleness and hard work allows him to give his audience the best of this soul and this will lead him to a great place."

Teferi Gizachew

Teferi was born in Addis Ababa 1974. He worked as gold and silver smith for two years and half and attended evening art classes to receive his Mural Painting degree from the Addis Ababa University School of Fine Art and Design. Teferi gave private art lessons in his own studio. He exhibited his works in different place in Ethiopia and abroad. He participated in art workshops in Addis Ababa and Cape Town, South Africa. Currently, he is studying Interior Design in San Diego, California.

Yisehak Selassie

Yisehak was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He started drawing at the age of seven. His education and work remains centered on his faith and art. Yisehaq was first inspired by his grandmother, Princess Welete-Israel Seyuom. As a devout Christian without any Western education, she produced and donated spiritual paintings to churches. Yisehak obtained his Bachelors of Art degree from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1988, majoring in Illustration. Because of the traumatic experience of being uprooted from his native land and forced separation from his parents by the 1974 Revolution, Yisehak's work reflects harsh human conditions. He currently resides in California. He works in two and three dimensional designs with different mediums. He accepts work on commission.

Yohanis Mibrathu

Yohanis is a self-taught artist whose paintings reflect the influence of his origins and the places he has known. Originally from Ethiopia, he has lived in Djibouti, France, and the USA, and has held exhibitions in Texas, New York, California and France. His medium of choice is acrylics with occasional forays into watercolor and inks.

Yohannes Tesfaye

The young and talented abstract expressionist, Yohannes Tesfaye, received his advanced diploma from the Addis Ababa University School of Fine Arts in 2001. After graduating, Yohannes assisted in the restoration to a historical mural in Addis Ababa's Trinity Cathedral. Yohannes then went on to pursue further education in Russia. Yohannes' pieces have been exhibited in Germany, the Netherlands, and Ethiopia as well as being displayed in the United States. The passionate artist specializes in abstract expressionism, believing it to be a spontaneous assertion of the individual. Yohannes Tesfaye's energized mixed media works and techniques are presented in acrylic, oil on canvas, wood, and fiberglass.



Esayas Kebede | "Expression" 8" X 6" | Oil on canvas | 2006



Elsa Gebreyesus | "The Texture of Sound III" Acrylic on paper 40" X 30" 2006



Dilip Sheth | "Landscape" Acrylic on canvas 19"X 24"



Yohanis Mibrathu | "The City" Acrylic on canvas 14" X 11" 2006



Meseret Desta | "god" Mixed media, 40" X 30" 2006



Mekbib Gebretsadik | "Yemariam Menged" Acrylic on canvas. 30" X 24" 2006



Abebe Zelelew | Title, size and date unknown



Nebyou Tesfaye | "Untitled" Oil on canvas 36"X26" 2005



Solomon Asfaw | "Jegol Mender (Harrar)" Oil on canvas 40" X 30" 2005

The Arranger

Sayem Osman

Ethiopian music is finally basking in an unprecedented degree of international appreciation, and yet its lyricists, composers and music arrangers have largely been left in the dark. Only now, with the growing popularity of the Ethiopiques series is this trend finally beginning to change. Ethiopiques series producer Francis Falceto has included meticulous liner notes accompanying each volume, and it is he who deserves credit for identifying the giants of Ethiopian music who would have otherwise remained both faceless and nameless.

The thing that makes the Ethiopian music of the Golden Era different than the music of today is the richness of the instrumentation and the importance of the arranger. Most of the arrangements that were done in this era are, in my view, more than first-rate; they are timeless.

The arrangers were everything most musicians can only dream of being: lyricist, music writer, arranger, vocalist, accomplished pianist and finally bandleader. Unless you were a true lover of Ethiopian music or were into the music scene from the mid 1960s and into the 1970s (G.C.), you probably have never heard the name Girma Beyene. To most, however, if any name comes to mind associated with the word arranger at all, it is probably that of Mulatu Astatqe. Yet, according to Francis Falceto, in the heyday of vinyl records, Girma Beyene is credited to having arranged close to 65 titles, compared to Mulatu's 40.

Born in Addis Ababa, Girma Beyene completed his primary education at the Nativity Catholic Cathedral School. He started his career as a musician when he received rave reviews for his performance with Girma Bogale on acoustic guitar at the Haile Selassie I Theatre. He was in high school at the time and the critical acclaim he received led him to practice with the Haile Selassie I Theatre Orchestra during his school breaks. In 1961, Girma Beyene and Bahta Gebrehiwot (known for his song "Anchim Endelela") were picked to join the Ras Band at the Ras Hotel from a pool of about 70 musicians.

The first Ras Band was formed in 1961. It was led by Tefera Mekonnen (piano, music writer and arranger), Getachew Welde-Michael and later Wodajeneh Felfelu (saxophone), Zewdu Desta and later Assefa Bayisa (trumpet), Tilahun Yimer (bass), Bahru Tedla (drums), Bahta Gebrehiwot (Amharic and Tigrigna vocals), Girma Beyene (English vocals) and Gebreab Teferi (MC and lyricist). Most of the members of the first Ras Band came from the Haile Selassie I Theatre Orchestra; Wodajeneh Felfelu, Assefa Bayisa, Tefera Mekonnen, Tilahun Yimer and Bahru Tedla. The Orchestra was then led by the famous Armenian Nerses Nalbandian (1915-1977), the grandfather of all arrangers of modern Ethiopian music, and perhaps the first to marry traditional melodies with modern, big band brass instruments, as well as the piano, upright bass, Western drums, and guitar. Until 1955, Tefera Mekonnen, Tilahun Yimer and Bahru Tedla were also in the Imperial Bodyguard Orchestra Jazz Symphony under Austrian

Franz Zelwecher (1911-1998). As members of the Jazz Symphony, Tefera played the upright bass while Tilahun and Bahru played, respectively, percussion and the drums. Today, Bahru Tedla, Bahta Gebre Hiwot and Girma Beyene remain the only survivors.

When in 1965, the first Ras Hotel Band renamed themselves to the Ghion Band and moved to the Ghion Hotel, the self taught Girma Beyene, who had never had formal training in playing music instruments or arranging music, remained and formed the second Ras Band. The band consisted of Girma Beyene on piano and English vocals, Tesfamariam Kidane on the saxophone, Hailu "Zehon" Kebede on bass, Tesfaye "Hodo" Mekonnen on drums, Menelik Wossenachew and Seyfu Yohannes as vocalists. While with the second Ras Band, Girma Beyene wrote and arranged Menelik Wossenachew's Wub Nat, Seyfu Yohannes' Qonjiteye, and Ewedesh Nebere.



Girma Beyene and Mulatu Astatqe (1969)

Following his departure from the Ras Band in the late 1960s, Girma Beyene, along with Girma Zemariam, formed The Girmas Band. In the mid 1960s, he wrote such gems as Qurtun Negerign (Tewedjegn Endew), Tirulign Tolo (Fitsum, Fitsum), Meslogn Neber, Neyna Entchawet, Rocket Besera and Tsigereda. Girma used the tune to Qurtun Negerign to do an ad for Gillette. The ad was so famous that it is still remembered today by the generation of the '60s and '70s. In 2003, Shewandagne Hailu, did a cover of "Tsigereda." In a blatant act of hopefully unintentional misrepresentation, in the U.S. release of Shewandagne's album "Sik Alegn," the producer credits Teddy "Afro" Kassahun as the lyricist and music writer for "Tsigereda." Shewandagne Hailu in an undated interview for Addis Live Radio said that he had asked and garnered Girma Beyene's permission before he released his version.

In 1969, Girma Beyene recorded four tracks for Amha Records (named after the owner Amha Eshete, who also owned Harambe Music Store).

Set Alamenem, with lyrics and music by Girma Beyene, and arranged by Mulatu Astatqe, in my view is a masterpiece; it's been reported that Girma actually went through the heartache the lyrics so movingly describe, and perhaps this accounts for both its beauty and its transcendental misery. The music and Girma's vocals on the song are described in this manner by Joe Tangari on Pitchfork Media:

This is the sound of smoke wafting through the air in some Addis Ababa nightspot — you can almost hear the drinks clinking in the background. The organ could have fit on Pink Floyd's A Saucerful of Secrets, but the song's dark, luxuriant sprawl is different from a traditional understanding of psychedelia-- its altered states via ancient Coptic churches carved in solid stone, with the bass strangely mixed almost as high as the vocals. Beyene's whispered vocal delivery burns with quiet intensity and Mulatu Astatqe's vibes wrap them in dense, unhurried atmosphere.

These four tracks were remastered and released on Ethiopiques 8: Swinging Addis.

- Dawit "Messay" Melesse did a cover of "Set Alamenem" in the early '90's. The producer's failure to give credit to Girma Beyene led the younger generation, and on one occasion a seasoned musician, to think it was a Dawit's original. For the record, Dawit never claimed it was his song first. In fact, he has gone as far as correcting fans of this oversight.
- Enken Yelelebish with lyrics by Getachew Degefu (1944-2000) a famous pianist player who contributed to the Ethiopian Airlines Instrumentals, music by Girma Beyene, arranged by Mulatu Astatqe. The band Lasta Sound did a cover of Enken Yelelebish under the title "Ethiopiawit Konjo." In their liner notes they give Girma Beyene full credit and thank him for his contribution. It's said that this song was written for W/zt Sophia Assfaw who had won the first Miss Ethiopia pageant in 1964.
- Ene Negn Bay Manesh with lyrics by Getachew Degef, music by Girma Beyene, arranged by Mulatu Astatqe
- Yebeqagnal (Lyrics by Bahta Gebre Hiwot, music by Bahta Gebre Hiwot, arranged by Girma Beyene) In an undated interview for Addis Live Radio, Bahta Gebre Hiwot humbly admits that Girma Beyene version is by far the better version.

Girma Beyenes departure from the Girma's Band led to the formation of The All Star Band (1970-1972) and The Alem-Girma Band (1972-1974), respectively.

The All Star Band was formed in 1970. Its members were for the most part taken from two popular bands, The second Ras Band, and The Soul Ekos Band. Members from the Ras Band included Girma Beyene on keyboards, Tesfamariam Kidane on sax, Hailu "Zehon" Kebede on bass, and Menelik Wossenachew on vocals. Feqade Amdemesqel on sax, Hailu "Zehon" Kebede on bass, and Tamerat "Lotti" Kebede on drums previously belonged to Soul Ekos. Tekle "Huket" Adhanom on guitar and Girma Tchibsa on percussion were the only new additions in terms of band experience. Alemayehu Eshete, on vocals, came from the Police Orchestra. From 1970-1972, the All Star Band recorded a great deal with Alemayehu Eshete and Menelik Wossenachew. Alemayehu's releases included Alteleyeshegnem, Teredchewalhu, Tchero Adari Negn, Addis Ababa Bete, Yeweyn Haregitu, Denyew Deneba, Temehert Bete, and Nefas Endayegeban. Menelik's releases include Tizita, Chereqa, and Meqaberen Liyew. With the exception of Tizita (Mulatu Astatqe), Girma Beyene did all the arrangements for the above songs.


The Alem-Girma Band was formed by Alemayehu Eshete and Girma Beyene. Both shared the taste of music and clothing fashion from the U.S. with influences including those of James Brown, Elvis Presley, and Wilson Pickett, to name a few. It was during these years that Girma arranged Alemayehu Eshete's most famous songs, such as Addis Ababa Bete, Yewoine Haregitu, Teredchewalehu, Man Yehon Teleq Sew, Eruq Yaleshew, Alteleyeshegnem, Shegitu Mare, Hiwote Abate New, Qotchegn Messassate, Telantena Zare, Tchero Adari Negn, Eskegizew Berchi, and Ayalqem Tedenqo. In an undated interview Alemayehu Eshete gave to Addis Live Radio he acknowledges that the band that he felt contributed the most to his success was the Alem-Girma Band.

It is important to note that bands such as the All Star Band and the Alem-Girma Band were session bands. They were sought after for their creativity in the studios as opposed to being a live band.

The 1974 Revolution extinguished the Addis Swing era. Lead singers such as Alemayehu Eshete, Tilahun Gesesse, Bizunesh Beqele and Hirut Beqele were forced to sing in the military bands. Amha Eshete and other notable musicians fled Ethiopia to save their lives. It was during this time that Girma Beyene joined the Walias Band. Its members included Hailu Mergia on organ, Moges Habte on sax, Yohannes Tekola on trumpet, Mahmoud Aman on guitar, and Temare Harege on drums. It was here that Girma composed "Musiqawi Silt," a tune that has adorned the Ethiopian instrumental music scene for years and has even been remade by various U.S. bands including The Either Orchestra, The Daktaris, and Antibalas Afrobeat Orchestra.

In 1981, while the Walias Band was on tour in the United States, some members including Girma Beyene decided to remain in the U.S. It was soon after that Girma Beyene lost his beloved wife. Though never confirmed, some say his grief led to his untimely departure from the music scene altogether.

Abegaz Kebrework Shiota, relating a story to Kyle Stone, revealed that in the 1990's, while living in Manhattan, he and a friend, the bass player Fasil Wuhib, were walking through New York's Central Park. To their utter astonishment, they heard the unmistakable sounds of familiar Ethiopian music. They came across a group of young African-American musicians, "kids, really," playing in the park. When they finished, one said to the small crowd which had gathered, "That was a tune by the great Ethiopian composer Girma Beyene." "It made us realize," Abegaz added later, "how we had overlooked this gem which was in our midst."

Today, Girma Beyene still lives in the Washington D.C. area. Though we have not heard from this musical giant in more than twenty years, it is this author's hope and dream that Girma Beyene will return to his first love in the near future 

I would like to thank:

Nolawi Petros for granting me permission to reuse the original piece I did on Girma Beyene posted on www.bernos.org/blog

Kyle Stone who graciously related Abegaz's story and for editing this piece for me. She is filming a historical documentary, "The Days All Start At Midnight: Swinging Addis And Its Music," on the "golden age" of Ethiopian music in which Girma played such a key part, and is seeking funds to go to Addis and finish production there.

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Artful Framing & Gallery



Solomon Asfaw | "Market Women" Oil on canvas 40" X 40" 2006

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