

# Ethiopian Painter Tadesse Mesfin's Women of the 'Guleet' at Addis Fine Art



Courtesy of the Artist and Addis Fine Art

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By Rebecca Anne Proctor

Her determined, transfixed gaze startles me. Steadfast, curious and filled with pride, her look locks with mine from every corner of the room. It seems to follow me around, as if watching my every move. Yet this woman isn't real; she's a figure in *Pillars of Life: Saturday Market* by Ethiopian painter Tadesse Mesfin, one of nine recent works on view in *Pillars of Life* on view until 28 July at Addis Fine Art in [Addis Ababa](#). While the woman's elongated figure echoes that of Amadeo Modigliani's long and elegant portraits, this woman is far removed from the Italian painter's European references. She's a simple shopper at the "Guleet" or marketplace

in Ethiopia. And yet the way in which she is depicted spells out grace, beauty, fortitude and regality.



*Market Day*. 2018. Oil on Canvas. 140cm x 200cm. Courtesy of the Artist & Addis Fine Art

“These women are working in small markets – they are the backbone of Ethiopian economy,” says Mesfin. “For me they are the language, they are the alphabet – they are everything for me.” Gentle, warm hues of colours of orange, blue, green and yellow endow each work with the earthy qualities associated with Africa. Many of the women wear head wraps, ankle length skirts and simple blouses. They walk bare foot and are reminiscent of Mesfin’s travels to the southern parts of Ethiopia as well as Harar. “I have composed them in such a way that there is harmony; they are seated together but at the same time I try and find different features,” he says. “They are made in a more or less columnal structure like African sculptures. They are a combination of Ethiopian traditional plus [African art](#) and modern art.” In each painting it is the face that lures us in the most, especially the



eyes. “You must concentrate on the face because the face and the eyes are the reflection of the soul. I took more time to make the portraits and the feet and hands and rest of the body are suggestive.”



*Harmony*. 2018. Oil on Canvas. 110cm x 146cm. Courtesy of the Artist & Addis Fine Art

The artist tells how in traditional Ethiopian painting often incorporates many eyes. “Eyes are the mirror of the soul. When you see the eyes of a man, you can see what they are thinking about,” he says. At times the body of his women is rendered more abstract, while at others it is realistic. In either case, the face always remains strong – each figure with a different spellbinding expression. “I love them,” says the artist. “They are beautiful; their figures are always graceful.”

Mesfin has spent the last 33 years teaching at the Ale School of Fine Arts and Design, where he has influenced a generation of painters including, Addis Gezehagn, Dawit Abebe, and Merikokeb Berhanu. Born in Weldia, Ethiopia in 1953. He attended the

Addis Ababa University School of Fine Arts and Design where he was taught by Gebre Kristos Desta, receiving a Diploma with a distinction. He then attended the Repin Academy of Painting, Architecture & Sculpture in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1984, where he graduated with Honours in a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Painting. His recent exhibitions include his solo show In Search of Rhythm at the Alliance Ethio-Française, Addis Ababa in 2014; Art of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa in 2013 and 2010; Continuity and Change: Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida, USA in 2007; and Four Points: African Contemporary at the Pounder-Koné Art Space in Atwater Village, California in 2007. His work was also featured in the Second World Black and African Festival of Art and Culture (FESTAC 77) in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977.

It's precisely Mesfin's celebration of the beauty in the everyday that offers such richness to his work. He is revered in Ethiopia for his modern approach to painting and his incorporation of local culture. The playfulness of the artist's market scenes welcome the viewer; there's a serenity as well as a rhythm that permeates each painting, bringing to life the beauty of the everyday. Through such scenes and his elegant women with their mesmerising gaze, Mesfin calls us to his homeland, prompting us to explore Ethiopia and all of her ancient and modern wonders.

Pillars of Life runs until 28 July.

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