

# Uncovering The Gems At Ethiopia's Addis Fine Art Gallery



Images courtesy of Addis Fine Art, Addis Arabia and London

The London and Addis Ababa-based gallery Addis Fine Art is pioneering modern and contemporary East African art at home and abroad. Rebecca Anne Proctor visits the Ethiopian gallery to explore its treasure trove of art

It has just rained in [Addis Ababa](#). Traffic has slowed and the city's colourfully dressed residents are out running errands, pausing to chat next to a vibrantly hand-painted door or disappearing inside one of Addis's cosy wood-lined restaurants while catchy music emanates from the door, luring more inside, if not just to grab a quick plate of freshly made injera, Ethiopia's famous sourdough flatbread. Located in the country's highlands where centuries-old Coptic churches can be found adjacent to glistening modern sky rises, Ethiopia's oldest independent capital teeters between chaos and the profound. It is here, amidst this diverse scene, tucked away on a quaint street in the city's centre, that Rakeb Sile and Mesai Haileleul founded Addis Fine Art, the city's first white cube gallery space dedicated

to contemporary African art with a special focus on Ethiopia and its diaspora.

“I started collecting around 2009,” says Rakeb. “Every time I would come to Addis Ababa to visit my grandmother I would go to the local [galleries](#) and buy what I liked,” says London-based Rakeb who previously worked in the corporate world in business consulting and project management. “I was happy with that until I went to the first edition of 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair six years ago. I was interested in art and wanted to see if any of the artists I liked from Ethiopia were represented at this new exciting fair in London, and there were no galleries and no artists from my country represented at the fair. It got me thinking about my collection and how it fits into the wider African contemporary art movement. Really, I couldn’t find anywhere to get those answers.”

In her desire to get a response, Rakeb began researching the art history of her homeland, and she came across Mesai’s gallery in Los Angeles. “There was this guy who had an art gallery in LA dealing with Ethiopian art and I thought maybe he could help me make sense of my collection.” And so off she went to Los Angeles to find him. “He was really knowledgeable about the contemporary art scene in Ethiopia and the diaspora, the modernist movement as well as the wider art historical links to church paintings and how Ethiopia fits into the larger African art discourse.” She laughs, “I think he may be the only person who knows these things.” Rakeb walked away with a greater understanding of her collection but also something else—a partner for a new [art gallery](#).





*Tadesse Mesfin. Pillars of Life: Saturday Market. 2018. Oil on canvas. 178x148cm.*

Why is Ethiopian art not in the international art scene? Why aren't we seeing more art from Ethiopians abroad? "My friends were also asking me which Ethiopian artists to watch out for. And I wanted to advise them and do more for my country's artists," she says. These were the questions that

prompted Rakeb to start her own gallery – a gallery that would add to the [African art](#) discourse and also demonstrate the richness of the art from her homeland, and Mesai had been living in Los Angeles for 30 years. Moreover, it had been decades since he had been back in Ethiopia, mostly because of The Derg, the short name of the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police and Territorial Army that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1987. “The first time I went back was in 1992 and it was a strange place for me,” says Mesai. “My parents had passed away and the country had changed after 17 very hard years of communism. It had completely wiped out that beautiful memory I had of Ethiopia. A lot of people I knew either left or were killed.”

In 1992, Mesai spent a month in Addis and didn’t come back until 1996. “I hated it then but when I returned a friend took me around to see some artist studios,” he remembers. “And I bought my first few pieces of artwork. That experience changed my perception of what artists were; I found them to be the most genuine people in this country.” Mesai then started coming back more often for the art and 90 per cent of his time was spent visiting artists and buying art. “The artists pushed me to do something for them in the US, and so we started doing pop-ups—finding a place, renting it and then doing an exhibition for a few days and selling the art—it was amazing,” he remembers. “Art was my side gig but it became my passion.” One of his major feats was staging a retrospective of acclaimed Ethiopian painter Wosene Worke Kosrof at the National Museum of Ethiopia in 2010.

A few years later Rakeb came to find Mesai in Los Angeles and everything changed. “When Rakeb wants something she gets it,” he laughs. “I had no idea what I got myself into. She had this crazy idea that we would go to London, find a space, and do a show. I was like, ‘Good luck!’” Mesai didn’t think it would happen. But then Rakeb called two weeks later saying she had found a space and that Mesai needed to find an artist. The artist was Wosene Worke Kosrof, the first Ethiopian-born painter to transform Amharic script into contemporary abstract art. The gallery was the Gallery of African Art and the exhibition was the birth of [Addis Fine Art](#). “We sold

so well—it was the start of something new,” smiles Mesai.



*Founders Rakeb Sile and Mesai Haileleul at Addis Fine Art Gallery*

“We worked really well together—he became a real mentor of mine, and I just kept thinking that there was more we could do and that’s how Addis Fine Art was born—first as a mission and then as a gallery,” says Rakeb of this first collaboration. But Rakeb wasn’t satisfied with just doing pop-up exhibitions, she was determined to open a space in Addis. “There really needed to be a space in Ethiopia that could function like a contemporary space and sit side by side young galleries from all over the world,” she says. So the two set forth on setting up an art gallery in Addis. Not a simple change it was—one of them had to move. “Mesai decided that he would move back to Ethiopia and open the gallery,” smiles Rakeb. “It was life-changing for him. He packed up his bags and moved back home at the end of 2014, after decades away, just over a year before we opened the gallery.”

While the dreamy landscape of Addis always holds magic, the city is still not an easy place to run a business, let alone a gallery. “But really the mission was to be a local space with an international platform,” says Rakeb. “This was what we felt was lacking here. While we have nice local places where they show artists from the art school continuously and



servicing the local market, none of them had really made the jump to international audiences. We didn't want to be just another local space." From an international perspective, Addis Fine Art is really the only visible gallery from Ethiopia. "In the future we want to carry on with what we are doing and represent more artists," shares Rakeb. "Add more diaspora artists and pick up the most important ones to work with and collect."

Yet how does Addis Fine Art build a collector base for their artists all the way from Ethiopia? Having an additional project space in [London](#), which will soon move to Cromwell Place, helps. "Our mission is to build a really strong local market as well as an international market," says Rakeb. "Our strategy a lot of the time is to do a show in Addis first and price it well enough so that some pieces stay in Ethiopia, and then we may participate in a fair with that particular artist or do a show in our London space so that there is a balance between works that stay here and works that leave."



*Tadesse Mesfin. Pillars of Life: Harmony. 2018. Oil on canvas. 110x146cm.*

Addis Fine Art has also participated in a number of joint exhibitions with spaces in other cities. "We are trying to forge partnerships with galleries

and institutions so that our artists are seen in as many places as possible,” states Rakeb. During Frieze Week in New York the gallery took part in two collaborations—one with Private View showcasing the work of Tariku Shiferaw and Luam Melake, and another with Steven Kasher Gallery, presenting a generation of photographic artists of African descent born in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, including Addis Fine Art artists Girma Berta and Eyerusalem Adugna Jirenga. The gallery has regularly participated in 1-54 Contemporary Art Fair in London and this year took part in Art Dubai for the first time. It's currently participating at [FNB Joburg Art Fair](#), for which Rakeb is part of the 2018 selection committee.

But what differentiates Addis Fine Art from the plethora of African art galleries establishing themselves on the continent and abroad? While the art world feasts its eyes on African art, Rakeb and Mesai have decided to hone in on a specific African art history: that of the Horn of Africa. “We want to focus on the art history of Ethiopia but also explore the links that the country historically has to Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, and maybe even Egypt given our Coptic heritage,” explains Rakeb. “The art [history](#) of this region, has a different trajectory to West African art history.” This statement couldn’t be more apparent than at the gallery’s recent opening of works by Ethiopian painter Tadesse Mesfin, also a longtime professor at Alle School of Fine Art, where he has influenced a generation of Ethiopian painters including, Addis Gezehagn, Dawit Abebe, and Merikokeb Berhanu.

In *Pillars of Life: The Power and Grace of Market Life* Tadesse’s elongated female figures decorated the gallery with their graceful shapes and colourful garments – reflective of their slender features and bodies of Ethiopian women. Nearly sold out by the time of the opening, the exhibition brought together Addis’s [art](#) scene in one room. An enthusiastic and happy crowd, the gallery could barely contain the string of guests that trickled in through its doors – a sign that Addis Ababa, as Rakeb and Mesai rightly sensed, is eager for much more art.