

MODERNIST ART IN ETHIOPIA

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INTRODUCTION

IN MARCH 1999, I walked into Skunder Boghossian's apartment to be greeted by an old and bulky bedspring lying in the middle of the living room floor. I had met Skunder in 1996, and by then, I was familiar with seeing strange and abstruse objects in his home, which he also used as a working studio space. This particular object, however, was perplexing in its physical type. A friend, he said, had dropped it off for him. Live and let live was a motto he often repeated. It was part of my initiation into Skunder's world, a form of good manners, to understand that I was not to discuss these peculiar objects or ask about their purpose.

Skunder was commissioned to do the *Wall of Representation*, a mural for the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and I used to travel every weekend from my home in New Jersey to assist him with the project. Nothing was customary with Skunder, even the friends who delivered shreds, odds and ends, ruins, and scraps to his studio. It was amazing that so many people thought of him when they saw the queer and the anomalous and considered such things a bounty for their friend. The truth is that, by 1999, I had also become this type of friend. The regulation and uniformity of my world, so closely related to my former career in banking and finance, had been disrupted by the furiousness of Skunder's place. I found that I had begun to relish the beauty of wreckage.

In the beginning of our friendship, I was bewildered by the objects and the disarray, which was truly extraordinary—intense but also unexpected. The futon sleeper, tilted and damaged, was always covered with a board that was only removed when a guest required a seat; the chair was frequently concealed by painting accessories; the table was enveloped in

canvases. And, of course, the bed was comfortably occupied by Cali the cat. Newspapers, plastic bags, wood scraps, and other odd items had long since taken over the floor, and my early attempts to organize the space only elicited Skunder's fury. Nor was he amused by indifference to his clutter; rather, he demanded absolute and complete sensitivity to it. His was a space without restraint where furniture and equipment were equally functional, their ultimate endurance and performativity accidental rather than deliberate. They became part of the clutter, anticipating their fate—to be destroyed, molded, and then reborn (or not)—sometimes after several years of waiting to no avail.

The finished paintings always dominated. Impeccable and overwhelmingly attractive, the paintings conveyed sheer pleasure amid the bewildering commotion. On a typical day at Skunder's, atypical as every day always was, the clutter, the paintings, the cat, the music, and his loud voice somehow harmonized and resonated with the visitor. The music was almost always jazz; as his friend Solomon Deressa said, "Jazz, the supreme creation of a people in exile, opened Skunder to his own experiences of exile."¹ And so, I learned to accept this paradox of normality and even to appreciate the genius of this state of disorder and its perfect harmony in the midst of pandemonium.



The bedspring was intriguing, and I was certain that it would inspire one of Skunder's amazing designs. What had felt like anxiety when I was first introduced to his language of objects—their secrets, innocence, or duplicity—had in time become excitement, and I remember agreeing with him on the bedspring's delicate yet robust beauty. By then, I had grown accustomed to the enigmatic nature of visual elicitation. Through my friendship with him, I came to realize that, as had happened in our shared country's history, texture and time cooperate in evoking specific forms and entities out of a world of muddles. And everything in that room of his had a purpose—perhaps not as yet obvious but nonetheless a fate. His obsession with creating from wreckage had stimulated my mind. I knew in March 1999, with a bedspring as a source of inspiration, that I would write about shapes that had already emerged or were in the process of emerging. When and how I did not know, but I understood that I would not remain the same predictable and conventional person I had been and that I would someday understand forms and expose new ones that were there all along—in textures,

compositions, and relationships. Fifteen years after Skunder's death, the most vivid memories of his home come to mind, particularly his fascination with "things that witness their time."² And so, in this book, I make an attempt to appreciate the forms and textures of an Ethiopian aesthetic by simultaneously unraveling the temporal potency of its space.



Skunder Boghossian, who is widely believed to be one of the founders of Ethiopian modernism, studied art in Paris from 1957 to 1966 at the height of the movement for African liberation and independence and its politicized philosophy. If the artist's craft was of particular importance, deconstructing the boundaries of European modernism that codified theories of images, shapes, and movements was equally critical for Skunder, as works of art outside the West were considered either "primitive" or lacking in and mimetic of a discriminatory modern European universal. Inspired by decolonization's landscape of optimism, Skunder reexamined and unpacked conventional narratives of European modernism to generate his own articulation of African modernism. By appropriating European aesthetic strategies and juxtaposing his own images, he progressively contested the political, cultural, and intellectual praxis of the Western art market, as well as the academy that had framed the legitimacy of modern African art while often hindering its recognition. As African art historian Salah Hassan has indicated, early modernists such as Skunder revealed "the plurality of modernity, even in its European context, and the realization that there are other modernisms beyond the European context."³

With its political and aesthetic magnitude, Skunder's extraordinary imagination calls readers' attention to the relations or differences between early African modernists who rose to subvert modernism's colonial hierarchy and countless Ethiopian modernists (many of whom are considered in this book) who emerged from a very different history. Certainly, Skunder was first artistically noteworthy in addressing the historical, cultural, and intellectual crises of colonial subjectivity during the early years of resistance against colonialism. But his visual contributions that laid bare the critical association between the ideologies of colonialism and the politics of decolonization were neither conceived nor developed in Ethiopia's modernism history. One could easily attribute this to the country's unique colonial history.

Indeed, it is impossible to fully appreciate the conditions of Ethiopian artistic modernism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries without considering the political and cultural implications of colonialism and the politics of decolonization. Whether Ethiopia was colonized or not, emphasis should be placed on the power relations between Ethiopia and the West—a relationship of margin to center that was hardly free of colonial influence or domination. And yet, the profound cultural, political, and discursive exigencies of Western imperial hegemony occupy a paradoxical space that is neither intimate nor remote in Ethiopia's artistic and intellectual history. That most scholars and artists have unapologetically expressed deeply ingrained feelings of exclusivity by no means simplifies the question, fostering parallels between Ethiopia and the rest of colonized Africa while ultimately abstracting any sense of commonality with the colonial experience.

That said, my fundamental thesis is the following: Ethiopian modernity and modernism are constitutive of the larger political and ideological history of modernity. And as Walter D. Mignolo indicated, "Coloniality . . . is constitutive of modernity—there is no modernity without coloniality."⁴ When we think along Mignolo's lines, coloniality is the stability of colonial practices embedded in the project of modernity through which Western ideas and ideals are ingrained in the non-West. Perhaps a quote from Samir Amin, one of coloniality's early evaluators, is also appropriate: "The European West is not only the world of material wealth and power, including military might, it is also the site of the triumph of the scientific spirit, rationality and practical efficiency, just as it is the world of tolerance, diversity of opinions, respect for human rights and democracy."⁵ In this case, the West "is the best of the world"⁶ and the non-West its antithesis. Hence, what I persistently raise in this book are the critical questions of coloniality that a few artists such as Skunder crucially understood, unlike many others I cover here, and how the central issues of coloniality were translated, transformed, and adapted in the making of Ethiopian modernism and modernity. In an ironic way, noncolonized Ethiopia offers a very interesting comparative cultural space to explore the alterity of the colonized, affording a fascinating sociocultural context for the phenomenon of modernism. Indeed, noncolonized Ethiopia's woven texture of culture and politics raises doubts about the possibility of any simplistic comparison (however constructed) between the modern and the premodern; between the colonized, the noncolonized,

and the postcolonized; or, even more urgently in this case, between the modern and the noncolonized.

At one level, the modern history of Ethiopia (1900 to the present) is exclusively sheltered in what Richard Iton called “the language game . . . that allows few possibilities for agency, autonomy or substantive negotiation.”⁷ I am obviously talking about the accolades, the praise, and the romance of Ethiopia that historically invigorated the sensibilities of black consciousness for Africans in the continent and the wider diaspora. The expansiveness of Ethiopia’s time line, which dates back to the civilization of Axum in the fourth century AD,⁸ its millennia-old manuscripts, monuments, and texts, and its sovereign polity have not only complicated Western images of black people but also caused Ethiopia to be imagined as a living symbol of freedom for Africans in the continent and the diaspora. The Battle of Adwa in 1896, where Emperor Menelik II (1844–1913) defeated Italian colonial aggression, had galvanized this image all the more among Africans living under colonial rule, since Ethiopia defeated a European colonial power and thereby exposed the myth that white armies in Africa were unassailable.

But at another level, leaders had little inclination to connect with the black imagination. They were more interested in garnering tributes than in fostering a productive relationship with black politics, since they saw Ethiopia as a chosen nation. Up until the revolution of 1974, which ousted the monarchy,⁹ citizens were urged to believe that monarchs originated from a divine genealogy—going back to Menelik I, the son of King Solomon of Israel and Queen Sheba of Ethiopia—and to trust that Ethiopia was a chosen nation and, as such, was unlike the rest of the African continent.

What is ultimately ironic is not so much Ethiopia’s indifference to the black imagination but the textures of the indigence that has eclipsed the country in the twenty-first century and that, more ironic still, muffled Ethiopia’s name in black politics and imaginary. In a special issue on Ethiopian literature, art, and culture, the editors of *Callaloo* beautifully expressed the quandaries, the ironies, and the deferred dreams of this land called Ethiopia:

The voices and images of modern Ethiopia speak to each other and to the world. In ways that very few societies can, modern Ethiopians have seen the world through a multi-colored stained glass. They look back to a time when theirs was one of

the richest and most powerful in the world, and have seen it too as one of the poorest and least understood. They speak of both pride and struggle, conquest and famine, nationalism and intense division, loss and longing: what better set of voices to articulate what it means to be human in the world.¹⁰

Callaloo's special issue was accompanied by a conference held at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) at Addis Ababa University, where I served as director from 2005 to 2011. Perhaps the following anecdote will help explain the paradox of Ethiopian exceptionalism in the face of the African American imaginary. In my position at the IES, I hosted a group of forty African American academics who were visiting my homeland. Initially, they were elated by the splendor they saw—the magnificence of the Orthodox Church, the scent of the incense that besieged the church compound, the people, the mesmerizing aroma of unadulterated coffee, and much more. But their joy swiftly turned to anguish when they confronted evidence of the country's rampant poverty. As one of Ethiopia's most prominent poets, Tsegaye Gebremedhin, wrote: "Whose eye for beauty has gone dim, avers the sky is darkness, not bloom. The wretched one."¹¹ Clearly, this was not the Ethiopia that my African American brothers and sisters imagined, and deep expressions of sadness about the human condition resonated whenever we left the safety of the conference space. For these colleagues, it was a complicated pilgrimage, indeed, to this land that they had once regarded with pride. Of course, they knew about the devastating famines of 1973¹² and 1984,¹³ but their knowledge of these occurrences was overpowered by their intimate familiarity with the Battle of Adwa that they so deeply revered. They had passionately taught their students that Adwa was celebrated by black transnational activists, including W. E. B. Du Bois, who saw in Ethiopia the "idea of global African unity."¹⁴ Their students learned from them that almost ten years after the infamous Berlin Conference (1884–85) that partitioned Africa, the victory at Adwa was a triumphant symbol of resistance against colonial aggression in the age of empire. Indeed, my African American colleagues taught their students about Ethiopia's history of many centuries that shaped potent imagery of the country in black consciousness. But that this land called Ethiopia was also a land of pain, famine, and abject poverty was a reality they knew yet all the same did not expect. In fact, the severity of the situation was so

blatantly pronounced that it was hard for them to even acknowledge, and initially, their minds could not accept this truth, for distance had tempered the harshness of reality.

In the face of this repressive quandary, it was the Ethiopians, my colleagues at the IES, who should have provided comfort to these people. They should have told them that the situation was not so grievous as it appeared and that they would come together with their African American colleagues to give Ethiopia's present condition meaning. But the arrogance of history had made most of my colleagues indifferent. Instead of reaching out, they looked at the African Americans as anomalies: after all, they were descendants of slaves that they so tragically patronized. As this and similar experiences reveal, the romance of Ethiopia has yet to address the fundamental terms of our present disorder—the hypothesis, logic, and predicament of the coloniality of our noncolonized land.

My position in relation to the present study, such as my formative years and academic training in the United States, where the structural problems of coloniality and race are persistently deliberated, may have prejudiced my perception, since my central argument in this book is focused on systems of colonial domination and exploitation—systems that, I argue, the core area of Ethiopian academic inquiry has broadly failed to interrogate. The glaring omissions of such knowledge in this academic inquiry and in the wider intellectual thought inevitably demonstrate the extent of anticolonial thinking in historical knowledge. It is precisely this disjuncture that, in fact, characterizes Ethiopian modernity and modernism, accounting for the peculiarity of the various intellectual and artistic currents that I cover. And my primary and central concern is this disregard of colonial epistemes by Ethiopian historians and intellectuals and the historiographical implication that this has produced.

It was six years after I returned to Ethiopia when I welcomed my African American colleagues to the country of my birth. I felt their disappointment and pain then, but my hope had not yet been stifled. Seven years later, I feel much more acrimonious because I still have not found the intellectual joy that fully understands the meaning of subalternity in both its local and global contexts. Scholars such as David Scott have argued that the postcolonial is a new “problem space,”¹⁵ one that requires us to pose new questions about present-day problems if we are to anticipate an opportune future. Scott has said queries of postcolonialism continue to

lament the grim effects of colonialism, as well as the resistance and liberation movements that overpowered the colonial structure. His argument prompts me to emphasize that colonial differences still require multiple and variegated debates. And perhaps Ethiopia should begin to substantially bemoan Africa's colonial past, contrary to what Scott says, in order to imagine dissent outside of its own nostalgic past. I hope this book and others in the same vein will begin to give voice to the silence and void around the historical, cultural, and political configuration of the imperial-colonial matrix of power and its condition in the Ethiopian intellectual space.

This book is one of the few works in Ethiopian scholarship that most emphatically recognize that the country's singularity cannot be conceived outside the broader colonial legacy, and it resituates the deliberations of modernity and modernism as a project in a new and alternative perspective. It is a crucial intervention after decades of unsettled theoretical and conceptual concerns by Ethiopian intellectuals who wrote in the name of modernity, but used colonially mediated modernization projects and processes. These processes have epistemologically excluded knowledge from the larger global networks of ideas that pertain to modernity and coloniality.

Drawing on a range of archives—historical and literary texts, newspaper reportage, poems, popular languages and their occasioning—and in conversation with the main ideas in intellectual thought, I explore the historical emergence of modernism within the foundational categories of the geopolitical imperatives of political modernity. I seek to understand movements of thought and, most importantly, to fathom the relationship of ideas to artistic practice in different periods of modernism's history. The link between intellectual thought and modern artistic practice is significant. And thus, I place Ethiopian visual modernism in the institutional and ideological context within which it was produced. This type of examination opens a larger perspective from which to view the range of images that conjure the historical experiences of modernism, particularly in the absence of written sources that pertain to Ethiopia's modern art history. Offering a portrait of the disparate experiences of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Ethiopia, the book extends a compelling reading of the varied precedents of the country's political and intellectual history to understand the ways in which the import and range of visual narratives were mediated across different moments.

MODERNITY AND MODERNIZATION IN THE WRITINGS OF HISTORY

As I look into the intellectual registers that informed modernism, I find it is the ideological orientation of modernization that has recurrently dominated the core academic inquiry and that has shaped and produced intellectual thought as well as artistic practice and subjectivity. As early as the 1920s when intellectuals responded to the challenges posed by the lack of modern education and infrastructure, the incorporation of Western knowledge and innovation was presumed imperative. Motivated by the dangers of colonial subjugation that surrounded border countries, intellectuals sought Western infrastructures and knowledge to mitigate the concerns about sovereignty. And in a predominantly ethnoreligious construction that afforded legitimacy to the Orthodox Church and to the northern and Semitic constituency, they assumed divinity to be real and saw monarchy and *seletane*—which means “civilization” but was often interchanged with “Westernization” and “modernization”—as a complementarity that functioned dialogically. But the global organization of *seletane* that they sought to appropriate from Europe had always been woven in with the larger political ideologies of modernity, though for these intellectuals, *seletane* simply meant freeing the nation from ignorance—it only meant the movement of science and industry. Indeed, the question of how Ethiopia could be equal to Europe dominated the writings of intellectuals just as the probing of “Otherness” did. Two of the most prominent intellectuals of the 1920s, Fitawrari Deressa Amente and Hakim Workeneh Eshete, for instance, often used the massive industrialization and modernization of early twentieth-century Japan as a model for overcoming European economic supremacy.

How *seletane* was appropriated and translated by the ensuing intellectual generation is crucial to examine, since it is in the understanding of succeeding intellectual thought that we espouse the sustaining philosophies behind the philosophies of modernity and the evolution of the aesthetic imagining of modernism. Ruminating on the nature of some of the notable literatures of the past few decades that pertain to themes of modernity and modernization, I evaluate the types of emphases placed and the questions exposed in these writings.

In one of his most original works, *Pioneers of Change: Reformist Intellectuals of the Early 20th Century* (2002), Bahru Zewde acknowledged

that modernization arrived in Africa “through the midwifery of colonial rule,”¹⁶ and he deliberated on mitigations in response to the modernization routes that the West had prescribed for Africa. He gave a range of synopses on colonial education and its acculturation process in various regions of the continent. He also considered the efforts made by African intellectuals in challenging the cultural hegemony of the West, but he nonetheless fell short of addressing the repercussions of such hegemonies in spaces of knowledge production that African scholars such as Valentin Mudimbe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o extensively engaged.¹⁷ As a scholar who worked arduously on archiving the intellectual history of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1960s, Bahru grappled with the difference between modernization and Westernization without unpacking the politics of knowledge associated with the modernization processes of less developed economies and without articulating the broad historical movement of modernity, colonial or capitalist, that is imperative for any analysis on debates of modernization.

By contrast, philosopher Messay Kebede, in *Survival and Modernization: Ethiopia’s Enigmatic Present; A Philosophical Discourse* (1998), argued that the efforts made by the Ethiopian state in the twentieth century to modernize the country muddled modernization with Westernization. Further, he contended that such confusion, which he said were political traditions of “supra ethnic”¹⁸ ideology and opportunities for “elite mobility,”¹⁹ contributed to the alienation of citizens from their cultural identity. For Messay, projects of modernization, which he deemed synonymous with notions of modernity, were exclusively sponsored by the state: they were imposed by imperial autocracy and centralization before 1974 and by socialist centralization of power and the intensification of class oppression and “social ossification”²⁰ after 1974. These were crucial developments that uprooted the country from what he called its unique cultural identity. He argued that the failure of modernization was primarily caused by the introduction of modern education, which led to an alienated class of individuals who aimed at “reinstating cultural identity” and who took a “misguided detour” by way of waging a revolution. And as he saw it, this revolution was a political, economic, and cultural catastrophe and hence a failed project of modernity.²¹ In this sense, his appraisal of the history of modernization was no more than a tableau of crises. What is more, he essentially rooted Ethiopia’s “cultural identity” in the ethos of the Orthodox Church, excluding the non-Christian population from the Ethiopian polity.

Similar to Bahru, he discounted the genesis and evolution of the political and ideological history of colonial or postcolonial modernity, although he attempted to complicate the experiences of modernity by insightfully constructing a notion of modernity that was neither a negation of nor extrinsic to tradition. Nevertheless, he simplified the shortcomings of modernity by reclaiming a glorious past, which he implied the modernist interventions of the twentieth century undermined. Here, once again, the question involved how well competing discourses justified historical specificities.

Indeed, the projects of modernization that both Bahru and Messay examined played a key role in the dispersion of colonial power, imparting various practices by which subjects apprehended themselves and others. But as sociologist Fouad Makki has stressed, it was essential “to integrate the Ethiopian social formation into the more general historical sociology of the international of which it is a part.”²² What was crucial, consequently, was scholars’ disengagement with the genesis and evolution of the political and ideological history of capitalism and how knowledge was produced and reproduced between precapitalist and capitalist systems.

The dynamic features of the knowledge of modernity and modernization have also been conveyed in other diverging epistemological structures. Although there are very few such structures, I believe they have the potential to answer questions of modernity that have yet to be examined in historical writings. In one of the most philosophical insights of modernity, Andreas Eshete, a prominent founder of the Ethiopian Student Movement that was pivotal in the uprising of 1974, said the student movement not only disrupted the realm of Ethiopian politics in a radical way but also played a critical role in the making of Ethiopian modernity. In “Modernity: Its Uniqueness and Its Advent in Ethiopia”—two lectures given in March 2009 and November 2011 as part of the series *Zemaniwinet: Perspectives on Ethiopian Modernity*—Andreas interrogated the variegated narratives of the experiences of modernity and its intellectual enterprise. He stated: “Leaving aside worries about the emergence of modernity and its causes, we can arrive at rich characterizations of modernity that people with different historical and ethical perspectives can accept. A special feature and self-image is that modernity is the end, not of course chronologically—in the Hegelian sense—but categorically of history defined as the realization of human freedom.”²³ Andreas principally charted the central values of modernity and, more importantly, the significance of fraternity as one of

modernity's imperative ideals. He looked into specific contexts that he considered unique to Ethiopia and that he believed offered a highly vibrant contribution to the debates surrounding modernity. In this regard, he invoked the resonance of the Ethiopian Student Movement, which he described as "a leading public ideal of modernity"; he also remarked that the "Ethiopian Student Movement was a midwife of Ethiopian modernity."²⁴

Another interesting and provocative work is Donald Donham's *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (1999). In an innovative ethnographic study of the Maale people in southern Ethiopia (people from the southern periphery who were historically marginalized), Donham introduced a new reading to the 1974 Ethiopian revolution. His study revealed the various meanings of revolution that emerged from several "points of effect."²⁵ The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 began as a Marxist-Leninist movement but was hijacked by a military junta called the Derg (1974–91), which claimed the same ideology of Marxism-Leninism. "The Ethiopian revolution," wrote Donham, was "hardly a unitary entity," since "variously situated groups interpreted events of the Ethiopian revolution"²⁶ in diverse ways. The Christian Maale who welcomed the *Zemecha* students (students who came from Addis Ababa to Maale land to help implement the 1975 land reform) associated revolution with modernity, which meant better health, a good standard of living, and education. What Donham showed was that significant debates of modernity had also materialized on "the margins of world power and wealth."²⁷ In this provocative study of ethnography, history, and theory, Donham argued that in late capitalism, structural models were replaced by historical explanations and that historical explanations often complicated and muddled encounters with time, space, representations, and social relationships. He suggested an amalgam between structural models (the Maale) and historical explanations (revolution and Marxist theory) for a more comprehensive perspective on the social and discursive meaning of modernity.

The literatures I have examined are the primary works—perhaps excluding Andreas Eshete's contributions—that reveal forms of state-subject relations in the wider contexts of modernity. Furthermore, they are the most significant—and perhaps the only—works written in historically specific terms and against the general trend of developmentalist theory. Certainly, donor-sponsored narratives of modernization that signify a generic form of modernity have inundated academic inquiry. More exacerbated since

the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power in 1991, developmentalist projects have become even more important, and the ideological orientation of the intelligentsia has submitted to new forms of donor-oriented ideological and discursive themes, once again marginalizing the urgent interventions of colonial studies and that area's relationship to Ethiopian nationalist historiography. As I indicate in chapter 5, the violence of the developmental state of Ethiopia represents unproblematic languages of development (prescriptions of the World Bank and other Western donors as well as new hegemony such as China) that fail to configure the reality in which alterities have transpired. The very nature of modern existence in Addis Ababa, for instance, has created a sense of exile and displacement in one's own country. With the displacement of millions of people to slumlike establishments outside the city, garish high-rise buildings have become a fetish of modernity, representing models of modernization that favor tenuous infrastructure over everyday life.

In this regard, the categories of modernity and modernization and ultimately modernism demand new paradigms, fresh readings, and informed encounters to accommodate persistently shifting and diverse experiences. The contemporary artists I examine in chapter 5 are beginning to position the political violence of the neoliberal state in provocative art forms that expose the different categories of truth that have recently emerged. However, there is an urgent need for new cores of academic inquiry that can mutually clarify how societies, economies, and cultural orders are intimately linked to each other and to larger geopolitical contexts. This is significant both to defend citizenship and to combat the violence that is perpetually committed on citizens. Particularly at the present time, the conditions and politics of late capitalism, with its power embedded in transnational corporations, should be seriously examined in contexts of disparate histories.

PERIODIZING MODERNISM

Since the late 1990s, African art historians such as Hassan and Chika Okeke-Agulu and curators such as Okwui Enwezor have written about early African modernists and their significance in shaping and redefining the evolution of modern African art. Building around the aesthetic and intellectual movements that artists such as Skunder Boghossian ushered in, progressive historians have theorized Africa's unavoidable dialogue with

the West to position African modern art as a field of study formed in its own specific claim and association. Okeke-Agulu's *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth Century Nigeria* (2015), which traced the emergence of postcolonial modernism in Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s and its relationship to other contexts of decolonization, and Enwezor's *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (2002), an exhibition and seminal text that examined the politics of African independence movements, are two of the most important contributions to rethinking colonialism, postcolonialism, and classical modernism, in wide-ranging critical paradigms.

To be sure, the dynamic enterprises of modernism reveal an overlapping and contested relationship with the different meanings of modernity that the processes and politics of decolonization have called into question in recent history. In this regard, theories of modernism rooted in colonial and postcolonial forms have also challenged bourgeois representations of aesthetic modernism and avant-gardism to create what Andreas Huyssen called “modernism at large, namely, the cross-national cultural forms that emerge from the negotiation of the modern with the indigenous, the colonial, and the postcolonial in the ‘non-Western’ world.”²⁸ Yet such promises of subaltern agency and its emancipatory potential have rarely been acknowledged in Ethiopian academic inquiry. The question, then, is how to extend the crucial features of such peculiar imaginaries of artists and intellectuals into the contemporary theoretical salience of modernity and modernism, which have grounded signification and representation in wider constellations of colonial consciousness and relations. Clearly, the unique dimensions of Ethiopian visual and intellectual thought have significant consequences in how I theorize modernism within larger contexts of African or non-Western modernism.

If we refer to the political theories and practices of one vital historical interlude, we can understand such inimitability. Without doubt, the most important historical period that fundamentally changed the course of modern Ethiopian history is the 1960s, which I also consider the prime of modernism. The period's aesthetic, intellectual, and political consequences continue to legitimate the spaces of knowledge production. And any study of the movements of decolonization in the 1960s naturally entails, among other things, the beginning of competing ideologies of the colonial past in wider constellations of colonial consciousness and relations.

What is particularly striking in the body of knowledge that was produced in Ethiopia in the 1960s is its broad distance from the histories and theories of colonialism. Regarding the politics of exploitation, rights, and exclusions, intellectuals focused on a Marxist-Leninist understanding of the peasant-landlord relationship to claim Ethiopia was encumbered by an imperial feudal structure, distinct from the colonial arrangement imposed on other African countries. In other words, theirs was a struggle between classes rather than between colonizer and colonized.

Though colonialism and decolonization's broader fields of inquiry were extensively debated by leaders of newly independent African states in the Organization of African Unity (OAU) that was established in Addis Ababa in 1963, colonialism's representational strategies and the crisis of subjectivities that was created by colonialism had little impact on Ethiopian artists' and intellectuals' political philosophies. This cultural and political movement, in turn, galvanized Ethiopian artists, writers, and intellectuals, not necessarily against the colonial powers' cultural hegemony but against the ambiguities of modern citizenship in the Ethiopian state. Passionately expressing a spirit of dissent that envisioned a fair and just Ethiopian nation-state, intellectuals believed that capitalism was a global system and that the working class had to act as part of a global class in order to overcome class conflict, without which emancipation from oppression would never materialize. Between these two boundaries—one that questionably released Ethiopia from the colonial experiences of Africa and another that clearly stood against the very same Ethiopia that had denied justice and equality—I address and theorize the ironies that constituted the tensions and unresolved relationships between African colonial history and the colonial history of Ethiopia.

Moving between the different theoretical registers of modernity and modernism that arose in the past three decades and the discursive elements and epistemes of the specific historical periods and contexts of Ethiopia, I take Raymond Williams's popular query, *When was modernism?*—an interrogation that he described as “a historical questioning of what is, in very different ways a problem, but also a dominant and misleading ideology”²⁹—and ask a similar question, *When and what was modernism in Ethiopia?* The historical questioning of modernism in Ethiopia requires the investigation of a series of genealogies, and the question of how these genealogies are best conceived necessitates a periodization of the country's modern history

from an epistemological and political perspective. In an article entitled “Modernity and Revolution” (1984), Perry Anderson critiqued notions of modernity and modernism that were conceptualized in Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982).³⁰ Anderson’s central argument problematized the concept of modernity and modernism espoused by Berman. In discussing European modernisms of the fin de siècle, Anderson described three factors: a usable classical past through official academicism, an indeterminate technical present with various future possibilities, and an unpredictable future with a prospect of revolution. Anderson was suggesting that the homogenized concept of European modernism had lost much of its coherence, even in Europe itself, with increasing historical claims. And the antinomies of European modernism had to be repositioned beyond the partial view of earlier classical theories of modernism. Anderson’s central argument was this: the conjunctures of modernism are uneven, with specific multinational conceptions and contexts, since its materialization varies with time and place.

I invoke Anderson’s argument concerning European modernism’s uncertainty to help me map out the temporalities of Ethiopian modernism, a modernism that cannot be drawn through the classical text. What were the temporalities that suggest a conjectural explanation of aesthetic practices that were grouped as modernist? To answer this question, it is necessary to frame a set of important historical coordinates that implicated movements of modernist significations. This scheme can ultimately convey modernism’s contextual origins and reception, as well as the recovery of its historical meaning. The proposed vestiges of these coordinates are: (1) the victory in the Battle of Adwa in 1896; (2) the shock of the 1936 Italian invasion that fundamentally upset the political order and Emperor Haile Selassie’s flight to exile; (3) the adoption of “official nationalism” and the end of global colonialism that was partly motivated by the end of empire in the 1960s; (4) the eruption of mass uprisings in 1974 that were hijacked by a socialist military junta and the emergence of dictated aesthetics; and (5) the predicaments of contemporary art after the fall of the military junta in 1991. Different generations of artists within these coordinates reworked modernism on an ongoing basis. Emphasizing prominent artists, this book evaluates Ethiopian art’s stylized and symbolic aesthetic expressions within these coordinates, in the process elucidating and examining their ideologies, values, and refinements.

Also central to my argument is the historical periodization of modernity that is ensnared with a defined form of temporality. I dispute such a historical meaning of modernity; in fact, that is the principal argument of this book. My task is not to settle the historical meaning of time into a unified and historical imagination of modernity but to bring forth its multiple fragments, ruptures, and imaginations in modernity's encounter with Ethiopia. In this regard, I elucidate intellectuals' and artists' relationship to modernity and modernism to show how it had mostly been constricted to strategies and discourses of the processes of modernization, rather than the complex ideological and political spaces of modernity. Also in this regard, I argue that the debates of colonial and postcolonial encounters are both urgent and necessary.

The book does not claim to account for all facets of Ethiopian modernism; rather, it aims to shed light on key episodes of its unexamined history. By focusing on prominent artists such as Belachew Yimer (1895–1957), who worked as one of the first commercial artists in the 1920s; Agegenhu Engida (1905–50), who played an important artistic role before and after the Italian occupation of 1936 to 1941; Emaelaf Hiruy (1908–1971), who engaged in innovative works after the Italian occupation; and Skunder Boghossian (1937–2003) and Gebre Kristos Desta (1932–1981), who fundamentally changed modern art in the 1960s, this book reveals Ethiopian modernism's multiple historical meanings that are both specific to Ethiopia and transnational in their approach.

TRADITION AND MODERNISM

It is not possible to even begin discussing the profound ways in which intellectuals and artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have engaged notions of the modern without discussing the exceptionalist myths and ideals of the nation. And different regimes—until the revolution of 1974, distinctively placed the break from direct European domination by a complex repertoire of nation-building discursive practices. For instance, the popular biblical rendering “Envoys will come out of Egypt; Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God” (Psalm 68:31) is one of many expressions that were periodically reclaimed from antiquity to be used in imperial Ethiopia's dynastic centralization and state-sponsored nationalism. Since the modern nation itself was discursively formulated in theological terms, artists and

intellectuals also identified with a nation that was chosen by God. And in tableaux that echoed divine intervention, they aesthetically choreographed a nation's rescue from colonial bondage. In light of the complexity of political events after the 1974 revolution, the images of modernism would be incomplete without considering the local appeal to an exceptionalist imaginary that continues to linger in the consciousness of Ethiopian modernists. This imaginary ultimately reduced the significant associations between colonialism, postcolonialism, nationalism, and transnationalism, making it a challenge to precisely locate Ethiopia within African colonial history. This is significant because artists' enigmatic engagement with the colonial legacy and its related politics conveys no single explanation for the complexities that incited the range of Ethiopian modernism.

In the 1920s, forms of symbolic imperial social discourse were needed to mobilize the population regarding the promises seletane espoused. One of the different forms of cultural and social discourse that were claimed was an Orthodox Christian identity. And integral to the works of artists and intellectuals of the 1920s were the traditions of the Orthodox Church. Indeed, European travelers, writers, and scholars have extensively written on the country's rich Christian heritage, including paintings, illustrated manuscripts, church murals, and woodcuts that were produced after the advent of Christianity in the fourth century CE in Axum. But often, such works were described by European chroniclers in an Orientalist construction of "Byzantium art in an African setting."³¹ Jules Leroy, one of the early European scholars who wrote on Ethiopian church art, noted, "Although the Ethiopian inhabits Africa, he is not an African in the usual sense in which the word is understood."³² "But it must be admitted," he added, "that most of the examples available to us of manuscripts from the fourteenth century are unsightly in appearance. . . . [W]hen these Ethiopian manuscripts are compared with the fine Oriental models from which they have been copied, they seem childish and not a genuine work of art."³³ European writers had, therefore, often framed Ethiopian church art within these two contradictory accounts of exceptionalism and primitivism. On the one hand, the narrative transcribed Orthodox Christianity as a triumphant history of Ethiopia's greatness, which contributed to its "non-Africanness"; on the other, it denigrated Ethiopian artistic skill, which could never compare to what European writers considered fine art.

What is significant to note is that such Orientalist constructions paradoxically contributed to sentiments of exceptionalism, not only among artists and intellectuals of the 1920s but also among artists and intellectuals of ensuing generations. Often informing the disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities, the Otherness implied in these creations has, to date, rarely been acknowledged as disparaging by Ethiopian artists and intellectuals. Indeed, Orientalism does not occur in an ideological or cultural void, nor is it simply imposed from outside. It is, on the contrary, a joint project between those who produce and those who replicate. The modern history of Ethiopia has also taken shape in an authentically local abstraction that often embraces these types of Orientalist views.

But beyond questioning the unique dimensions and implications of these forms of knowledge, I also consider the distinctive social configurations that gave rise to the aesthetic imaginings and intellectual thought that shaped the consciousness of Ethiopian modernists. For example, I argue that Ethiopian modernists emerged from the traditions of the church. When the modern in its self-awareness released modern life from religious dominance, religious consciousness shaped the Ethiopian modern subject. Artists and intellectuals emphatically claimed the traditions of the Orthodox church to represent and legitimate themselves in the contentious politics of modernity. This made the period's modernism necessary, imparting a substantial and important texture to the movement's origins and stylistic evolution.

One theme that persistently stands out through my interrogation of Ethiopian modernity and modernism is, therefore, the foundation of social change that is composed of and formed by contingencies of "tradition" and the historical past. Although artists of the 1920s eulogized the past to explore new possibilities that functioned in the real and imagined ideals of modernity, artists of the 1930s exalted the past in many state-commissioned works even as they summoned the possibilities of the future in their own private works. And artists of the 1960s devalued different modes of Ethiopian cultural agency while they drew from a wide range of Ethiopian history and philosophy. More recently, younger artists are doing cutting-edge works where the study of tradition has become a core area of inquiry and where artistic styles and genres raise multilayered questions that probe past history to find appropriate conceptual outlines for the present.

Against this background, how, then, do we interrogate the competing claims of the past on intellectual thought and on artistic practice and

subjectivity? And what precisely do we mean by the term *tradition*? A most insightful reading of tradition that provides valuable insight to rethink our understanding of the term is Talal Asad's impression of tradition. Responding to David Scott's *Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad*,³⁴ in which Scott interrogated the location of Asad's work in the "tensions between genealogy and tradition,"³⁵ Asad said that both genealogy and tradition "share something: discipline."³⁶ In a reply that in large part engaged the meaning of tradition, in contrast to the meaning of Foucauldian genealogy, Asad drew on both genealogy and tradition and stated, "Tradition is also the space in which one experiences a multiplicity of times and confronts a variety of memories."³⁷ Decentering the normative usage of the term, Asad pointed out that tradition is not an unchanging truth in homogenous time but a method to examine ways in which historically situated discourses condition the present. With its multiple temporalities, tradition is selected, affirmed, modified, abandoned, or reproduced by what Asad calls "its authoritative practices."³⁸

Two conceptions of tradition give Ethiopian modernism its peculiar reading, one that Asad pointed to as the relevance of tradition in shaping the historical present and the other, a notion of exclusivity that considered Ethiopia as a chosen nation. Although recent works are authored from a vantage point of state developmentalism, in which political economy is the dominant historical event, the politics of knowledge still disguises elements of exceptionalism. It is dismissive in its attitude to the genealogy of colonial consciousness and the geopolitical power relations from which current understandings of developmentalism emerge. The epistemic assumptions and arguments of Ethiopian modernity and modernism that I cover would, therefore, be unfinished without implicating the institutions and memories of tradition and its complications. Given this, one might ask, Which tradition and which knowledge? The control of authority, of the economy, and of knowledge until the revolution of 1974 and, even more, until the EPRDF took power in 1991 to form a polycentric ethnic federalist state was uniquely placed under a northern Semitic hegemony with an Orthodox Christian identity that was intertwined with modern political forms. Though I critically interrogate the agents and institutions that engendered and reproduced the fundamental organization of knowledge that I examine, the rigid social and cultural hierarchies of the Orthodox Church (which I argue gave rise to modernism and modern

subjectivities) play an important role in modernism's enunciations and conceptual registers—despite the considerable diversity of cultures and populations that do not follow the Orthodox Church. Hence, emphasis should also be placed on the constitutive social and cultural unevenness of modernity and modernism in Ethiopia.

WOMEN AND MODERNISM

Regarding women and modernism, it is important to note that inquiries on how gender relations are constructed have historically been pushed aside and in fact are often excluded from scholarship on Ethiopian culture. This is particularly pronounced in Ethiopian modernism's tangential response to women's artistic practice. Women artists have been few in number in Ethiopia, and the understanding and legitimating of women's art have comprised a continuous narrative of a hegemonic gaze, since Ethiopian modernism is mainly organized around a masculine norm. My book incorporates questions about Ethiopian women's art and artists in modernism's history. Distributed throughout the chapters of *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*, women are brought forth—perhaps for the first time in Ethiopian modern history—as participants in the fashioning of modernism.



The material presented in this book is in large part a result of my six-year directorial tenure at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Ababa University, where I was privileged to intimately understand and research one of the most prominent archives of the country. The College of Performing and Visual Art of Addis Ababa University, where I served as dean, has also deepened my historical knowledge of the performing and visual arts. Most importantly, my extensive and in some cases decade-long interactions with artists such as Skunder Boghossian, as well as writers such as Solomon Deressa, Yonas Admassu, and Tsegaye Gebremedhin and playwrights including Abate Mekuria and Tesfaye Gessese, who had prominent roles in the writings and artistic movements of the 1960s, expansively inform the ways in which I interrogate the cultural history of the most important period in modernism's history; furthermore, these interactions give the book its substantial texture. For instance, my discussion of Skunder Boghossian's work is primarily based on my interactions with the artist over the course of

five years. My close relations with artists and writers, in addition to my work in senior administrative capacities in the most prominent arts and culture repositories of the country, have also enabled me to intimately examine the ways in which artists and writers engaged the culture in which their images and texts were produced.

That said, I have done my research with a concern for facts, and I have genuinely tried not to be influenced by my personal biases and friendships with the intellectuals and artists I study, although my imagination and intellectual authority may still exhibit certain forms of partiality. I continue to believe that a new tradition in inquiry, as exemplified in my study, is urgently needed, significantly so when the archive that pertains to Ethiopian art historical studies is a contested domain of knowledge. Breaking away from traditional ethnography and strict art historical disciplinary provisions, I worked through questions formed by an extensive interdisciplinary comparative context. I should say that this approach has expanded the confines of the existing archive. I believe the different materials and vistas that I have used are vital to broadening the potential of Ethiopian humanistic knowledge.

Indeed, rather than giving definitive answers, the book explores a wide and broadly unexamined terrain in the history of visual art, as well as the social and intellectual history of Ethiopia. What I am most interested in is the critical intervention and its potential to open a space for more debate on issues that I have raised in the book—issues that, I believe, have rarely been debated in Ethiopian academic inquiry.

This study consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter explores the negotiation of modernism in its early stages. Portraying the historical experiences of early to mid-twentieth-century modernism (1900–1957), it looks at artists from the period and their forms of inspiration. Furthermore, it examines the Orientalist scholarship of Ethiopian church art to better understand the tensions and contradictions that constructed the knowledge of the art. The work of the writers of *Berhanena Selam*, a newspaper published from 1925 to 1936, is also extensively surveyed to explore the relationship of intellectual thought to artistic practice in modernism's early history. In addition, this chapter investigates the organizing principles behind the formation of the Fine Art School in 1957.

Building on the first chapter, I examine the intellectual thought of the 1960s in chapter 2. I argue that the sixties represented the heyday of

Ethiopian modernism, and I attempt to place Ethiopian visual modernism in the institutional and ideological context within which it was produced. The intimate rapport between artists, writers, and student activists was vital in shaping the modernism of the 1960s, as well as in altering and manipulating its subsequent formulation. For Africa, the sixties were also a time of transition from colonial rule. But I contend that intellectuals and artists provoked a body of knowledge that did not necessarily engage the histories and theories of colonialism but instead focused on the politics of exploitation, rights, and exclusion. In chapter 3, I examine the works of Skunder Boghossian and Gebre Kristos Desta—two artists who were prominent in Ethiopian modernism’s history—and their students. I also examine artists’ broader social and cultural pan-Africanist commitment, that is, their approaches and forms of resistance, negotiation, and transformation within the wider struggle against colonialism and racial injustice. I situate this period within Ethiopia’s larger intellectual history and its engagement with Africa’s general intellectual history.

Chapter 4 examines artistic production during the socialist regime of the military junta. I principally look into the production of art that was supposed to follow a determinate conception of creativity. Restricted styles of pedagogy and officially sanctioned themes and forms were in place. But an analysis of the response by artists during this gruesome period of Ethiopian history shows that the majority of artistic production subversively engaged the power of the state. There is a general agreement on the level of atrocities committed during this period, and much has been written to this regard. But little has been done on the cultural history of the time. Focusing on the remarkable responses in literature and music to the difficult circumstances of the period, chapter 4 also explores the humanism of a politicized society and its unbroken continuity through this dangerous era.

Chapter 5 discusses contemporary works of art and movements. Did artists produce work in response to the end of official art and the collapse of authoritarian military rule? Did they mourn, remember, and critically engage with overcoming the past? Did Ethiopian socialism shape the practices of postsocialist contemporary art? What constitutes contemporary Ethiopian art today? And with which issues do artists in Ethiopia now locate their practices? I critically examine these questions, not only to understand the legacy of the military regime but also to position, in both political and academic terms, the constellation of themes and thinkers encompassing

contemporary Ethiopian art. Since it is almost impossible to cover the entire setting of contemporary art that has proliferated since the late 2000s, I chose to focus on artists and artists' collectives that I believe have set new trends in artistic practice, taking into account the aesthetic, political, and philosophical questions foregrounded by Ethiopian modernism.



I would like to emphasize that this book is only one articulation of Ethiopian modernism, not a total and inclusive account. It is intended to offer starting points for further research, rather than claiming to provide a set of definitive conclusions. The need for Ethiopian scholars to begin writing on Ethiopian art, both traditional and modern, is urgent if we are to place Ethiopian art history in proper perspective. Many extraordinary artists have emphasized a critical practice of art, while also addressing the aesthetic, political, and philosophical questions of Ethiopian modernism. Those who are not covered in this book include, among others, Tadesse Mesfin, Tebebe Terfa, Worku Mamo, Worku Goshu, Eshetu Tiruneh, Tadesse Belayneh, and Mezgebu Tessema. Much more should be done to investigate these broader artistic practices and subjectivities.