

Giorgis, Elizabeth W.
MODERNIST ART IN ETHIOPIA.
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Elizabeth W. Giorgis. 2019. *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press. 339 pp.

With this ambitious publication Elizabeth W. Giorgis makes an important contribution to our understanding of the development of modern and contemporary art in Ethiopia. She examines critical junctures in the history of Ethiopia from 1900 to the present and considers major developments in the visual arts and the oeuvres of the leading artists who helped define the ethos of each period. She looks to academic discourse in the humanities as well as to newspaper coverage, theater, cinema, novels, poetry, and music as avenues through which to understand political, social, and cultural contexts.

Giorgis sees grave shortcomings in the prevailing scholarly approach to Ethiopian modernism. Among these is Ethiopian exceptionalism. Historically, Semitic Ethiopians from the northern, predominately Christian highlands have seen their culture as superior to that of other ethnic groups in their own nation and countries to the south. They take pride in the fact that Ethiopia was never colonized and that the Italian Fascist occupation lasted only a few years before Emperor Haile Selassie returned to the throne in 1941. This exceptionalism has resulted in the failure of most scholars to view Ethiopian history and culture within a broader continental context and in terms of the indirect impact of colonialism, which Giorgis seeks to address here. In addition, she brings to bear her own experience in Ethiopia's male-dominated academe and foregrounds women who have been important participants in the formation of Ethiopian modernism.

In her opening chapter Giorgis covers the period from 1900 to the founding of the Fine Art School (FAS) in Addis Ababa in 1957, a period characterized by Ethiopian exceptionalism and a Eurocentric approach to achieving modernity. The first modern art exhibition in Addis Ababa in 1931 featured the work of only one Ethiopian artist, Agegenhu Engida, who had studied in Paris. Other artists sent to Europe to study on government scholarships included Afework Tekle, Skunder Boghossian, and Gebre Kristos Desta. The latter two returned to teach at the newly established Fine Art School.

Giorgis' second chapter focuses on intellectual thought in the 1960s. She identifies several key contributors to the intellectual climate of the decade. One is Addis Ababa's rich array of cultural offerings through the Creative Art Center at Haile Selassie University, the Haile Selassie I and Hager Fikir Theaters, and the Fine Art School. In addition, in 1963 Addis Ababa became home to the Organization of African Unity whereby local citizens were exposed to independence movements across the continent. At the same time, student activism in the 1960s was fueled by Marxist ideology. Joined by artists and writers, students championed the peasantry, rejecting Ethiopia's ancient feudal system, and questioning imperial authority. However, with no serious art critics in Ethiopia, intellectuals of the period did not see the visual arts as a significant part of this political dialogue.

Against this backdrop of political and intellectual history, Giorgis turns in her third chapter to consider the work of modernist painters of the 1960s. She provides in-depth discussion of the careers of Gebre Kristos Desta and Skunder Boghossian. Giorgis credits Gebre Kristos with introducing unprecedented experimentation into teaching at the FAS, but sharply criticizes his failure to address the legacy of colonialism in his work and pedagogy. She praises Skunder for his embrace of issues of race and colonial subjectivity and his responsiveness to black liberation movements and expressive culture across the continent. During his short tenure at the FAS Skunder did not impart to his students the deeper philosophical underpinnings of his popular style of painting, which was widely imitated but little understood by his followers.

In the fourth chapter Giorgis examines visual art production during the violent and repressive regime of the socialist military junta known as the Derg (1974-91), which took power after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie. She is careful not to condemn artists for complying with the regime's demands for Socialist Realist art that supported the government's agenda. But she looks at the ways some writers and painters quietly subverted these demands through sensitive evocations of mundane activities of daily life and exploits of heroes of Ethiopia's past.

In her final chapter on contemporary Ethiopian art Giorgis analyzes the work of several artists' collectives and certain individual artists who oppose the current government's state-sponsored development projects that ride roughshod over the rights and needs of the citizenry. Seven artists, four men and three women, are singled out for their innovative and evocative work in photography, painting, assemblage, and performance art. Here Giorgis is particularly insightful, bringing her historical survey of Ethiopian modernism and contemporary art to a powerful finish.

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Chege Githiora. 2018. *Sheng: Rise of a Kenyan Swahili Vernacular*. Rochester, NY: James Currey/Boydell & Brewer. 220 pp.

Chege Githiora's full-length book on Sheng is a product of one and a half decades of intermittent data collection on the subject. The introduction establishes the basis for understanding the phenomenon of Sheng in terms of the social and language dynamics that have produced it, and the expansion of its domains and speech community from an age-marked