

BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth W. Giorgis. *Modernist Art in Ethiopia* (New African Histories Series). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2019. xvii + 343 pp. List of Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$90.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0821423462.

Modernist Art in Ethiopia by Elizabeth W. Giorgis presents a detailed view of twentieth- and twenty-first-century visual and literary arts in Ethiopia. Giorgis is a gifted writer and academic at Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia), steeped in a clear understanding of Ethiopian intellectual thought, history, and the arts.

The text opens with an in-depth introduction which presents engaging first-hand experiences by Giorgis with numerous visual and literary Ethiopian artists. A visit to Skunder Boghossian's eclectic and quirky apartment reveals a large bedspring on his living room floor (1); this is nothing unusual, Giorgis explains, for the internationally renowned artist. This vignette immediately immerses us in the world of modernism in Ethiopia; the reader realizes that Giorgis has experienced the artists and/or their works firsthand and is not an "armchair" critic. Ethiopian Modernist art is presented as innovative in form, context, and function, as the author clearly communicates example after example via her personal accounts.

In addition to the introduction, five detailed chapters cover *Early to Mid-twentieth Century Modernism to 1957*; *Intellectual Thought of the 1960s*; *The Modernists of the 1960s*; *Art during the Derg 1974-1991*; and *Contemporary Ethiopian Art from 1995-2015*, along with a concluding chapter, copious notes, and a detailed bibliography. The volume includes numerous illustrations (most of them full color, and all clearly printed) showcasing painting, sculpture, and photographs of installations, along with examples of literary texts of poetry and prose, all of which are necessary to summon an evocative sense of Ethiopia's visual and literary modernist history.

Giorgis' keen sense of critical theory incorporates a critique of the "Orientalist gaze" steeped in coloniality and referenced by previous authors on Ethiopian visual arts. Her volume is inclusive and diverse, paying homage to significant female artists, such as Bisrat Shebabaw and her *Enat meret*

damena (1985) (“Mother Earth, Cloud”), which depicts women in a farm field working and conversing with one another. Giorgis interviews the artist, gives us a brief autobiography, and describes the painting (a system the author applies throughout the volume). Giorgis has the ethical presence to provide us with explicit descriptions by the artist, such as “the fragmented lines in the image as a representation of musical rhythms...” and more (243).

Literature, also a focus of the text, occupies a somewhat secondary place to the visual arts. Nevertheless, both visual and literary arts are masterfully discussed by the author in an integrative fashion. For instance, in describing *The Modernists of the 1960s* (Chapter Three), Giorgis focuses on Gebre Kristos Desta (who is both a painter and a poet), showing the multivocality of arts in Ethiopia (a point Giorgis could further elaborate upon.) Giorgis deftly translates a poem by Desta with an excerpt from “To Painting” (121):


A journey that never ends
 Miming and converting
 Swimming in colors
 Playing with lines
 And clashing with shadow and light
 Yearning to know
 Deep into space
 Searching—

Giorgis states, “...Desta was a powerful poet in addition to a painter—a man who, both in words and images, referenced the Ethiopian intellectual’s charged context of change and innovation in the 1960s” (121). She then displays Desta’s *Self-Portrait* (1967) (125), a portrait of complex colorings which Giorgis affirms is represented “through somber, vibrant, and gushing colors, that are at once exuberant and agonizing” (124).

Another key area of discussion surrounds artistic expression during the Ethiopian Derg in the midst of famine. (The Derg refers to the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia, 1974–1987.) For instance, Esseye Gebremedhin’s *Untitled* (1980) oil on plywood illustrates how the artist creates a monumental Mother Ethiopia towering over a banquet table with well-fed African and European men attired in tuxedos. Here, the author describes how Mother Ethiopia is depicted quite differently than in many other renditions; she is powerful, the realism of “her face anguished and tormented” (198–99), clearly demonstrating Giorgis’ understanding of the anguish of that period in twentieth-century Ethiopian history.

The text offers an evocative visual and literary sense of Ethiopian socio-economic and political contexts during modernist times. Conceptually rich, detailed in interviews and illustrations, the book is appropriate for those new to Ethiopian history and culture. Its vibrant in-depth presentation of twentieth- to twenty-first-century Ethiopia is also fitting for experienced Africanists. Ultimately, the volume places Ethiopia in a rich pan-African

context by evoking how the arts, both visual and literary, can elucidate one country's intellectual, political, and social history.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Adams, Monni. 1989. "African Visual Arts from an Art Historical Perspective." *African Studies Review* 32 (2): 55–104. doi:10.2307/523970.

Cohen, John M. 1979. "Revolution and Publication: Ethiopia Since 1974." *ASA Review of Books* 5: 154–63. doi:10.2307/532444.