

# What is African art?

The concept of African art may raise difficult questions but the work speaks for itself — attracting a growing number of buyers, both local and international

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Ibrahim el-Salahi hoped his exhibition at Khartoum's Grand Hotel in 1960 would mark a proud homecoming. He had completed his formal artistic training at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. The show would display a selection of the landscapes, still lifes, nudes and portraits he had produced using techniques imparted by his tutors.

"The viewers I had in mind for the exhibition were my Sudanese compatriots, but although a lot of them came to the opening out of courtesy, they quickly vanished," he recalled years later. Plenty of westerners bought works but only two Sudanese showed any inclination to do so. His work spoke to foreigners; to Sudanese, it was dumb.

El-Salahi set off to traverse his homeland and was "amazed to rediscover the riches I had seen all around me during my childhood, and whose value and rich meanings I had for years abysmally failed to grasp". In Sudan, on the join between black Africa and the Arab world, where Islam, Christianity and indigenous beliefs intersect, the young artist found material at least as fertile, and techniques at least as enchanting, as those he had encountered in Europe. He became a founder of the Khartoum School, a movement that made art from the Arabic calligraphy of the Koran.



Ibrahim el-Salahi, 'Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams I', 1962-1963 Right Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu, 'Anyanwu simplified'

So engrossed were el-Salahi and his fellow artists in their task of reaching a Sudanese audience that they were surprised when outsiders started to show an interest in their work. In time, he concluded that “the division between local and international audiences is arbitrary and illusory”.

Today, el-Salahi ranks among the most renowned and best-selling African artists, described as the father of African modernism. His transfixing “Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams I” (1962-63) hangs beside Picasso’s “The Three Dancers” in London’s Tate Modern, which put on a major exhibition of his work in 2013. A recent painting based on his observations of flamenco dancers, currently on show at the Vigo Gallery in London, is valued at £1m, one of the relatively few works by African artists to command seven figures.

But the tension he felt half a century ago — the gap between how westerners and compatriots saw his work — continues to animate the makers, dealers, collectors and critics of African art. International attention has increased sharply in recent years, along with prices.

Specialist galleries in western capitals are multiplying; new champions are joining the likes of Vanessa Branson, who hosted the now-acclaimed South African artist William Kentridge's debut UK show nearly 30 years ago.

Yet the very notion of "African art" is vexed. For some, the label is a tool for propelling the continent's artists into the global limelight. Others bridle at what they see as yet another way to lump all of Africa in together, sensing a neocolonial imposition by outsiders. "There is no such thing as Sudanese art," el-Salahi once said. The question also goes for African art: is there any such thing?

One of the major set pieces in the African art calendar took place in May, in a packed hall in Mayfair. Collectors milled among the lots on offer at Bonhams' latest auction of work from the continent. One — "Crowd Awaiting", a carved wooden relief full of peering faces — encapsulated the ironies of a market shaped in part outside the continent whose work it promotes. It is by El Anatsui, a celebrated Ghanaian artist who this year received a Golden Lion for lifetime achievement at the Venice Biennale (an event curated for the first time by an African, the Nigerian Okwui Enwezor). Anatsui lives in Nigeria and has spoken disparagingly about the concept of "African" art, despite being one of its stars.

Among the punters at the Bonhams preview, there is talk of how African you had to be to qualify as an African artist. Would Polly Alakija, who lived in Nigeria, married a Nigerian, paints Nigerians and is collected by Nigerians but happens to be a white woman from Worcestershire, make the cut? What about young black British artists who have limited connections to the continent but aspire to its artistic embrace? Or megastars such as the Turner Prize-winning Chris Ofili, whose parents were Nigerian but who grew up in Manchester, was counted among the Young British Artists and now lives in Trinidad?

Many Africans — and outsiders — have grown tired of a debate they see

as a sideshow. "It's just art!" exclaims Bonhams auctioneer Giles Peppiatt. He wafts a pair of spectacles around the room in an arc that takes in works so diverse they have nothing in common beside the continent of their origin. On one wall hangs one of the "Tribal Marks" series by 25-year-old Nigerian Babajide Olatunji, whose botanist's eye produces hyperrealist portraits showing traditional facial scars; on another, separated by 5,000km, three decades and a gulf of style, are the lavish curves and colours of two untitled 1980s pieces from the late Mozambican painter Malangatana Valente Ngwenya.



El Anatsui, 'Crowd Awaiting'

Peppiatt has been leading Bonhams' charge into the African market since 2009, when the auction house broadened an initial South African sale into a continent-wide one. To begin with, it was tough. "When we started the sale, we didn't know who to send the catalogue to," he recalls. By the fourth annual auction, sales were motoring. Typically, four in every five

buyers are African or have a strong connection to the continent. Each year the sale attracts a dozen or so new collectors with no previous ties to the continent or its art, including, lately, Chinese buyers. Gross sales are climbing steadily. This year Bonhams split its Africa Now auction in two: May's "Modern Africa" had a strong component from Nigeria, the best-selling country, and "Contemporary Africa", to be held in October, will focus on living artists.



Benedict Chukwukadibia

Enwonwu, 'Anyanwu simplified'

Peppiatt has little patience for concerns about the African art label. "I don't get worked up about it," he says. "We are not attaching labels for any other reason than to ensure that the right people get sent the right catalogue. We are not trying to define an aesthetic or a genre."

African artists themselves have not always found their interaction with the west so straightforward. At times, it reflects the complex relationship between coloniser and colonised. The top seller at May's auction — the late Benedict Enwonwu, whose thin, curving, bronze sculpture of Anyanwu, the Igbo earth goddess, fetched £74,500 — is a case in point. Born to a sculptor father in eastern Nigeria in 1917, he trained, like el-Salahi, at the Slade. His teachers, according to a biographer, "searched his art for evidence of his African identity". Some of his work portrayed his own home as an exotic place, as an outsider might see it. There were whirling masquerades and dance spirits. (There was international fame, too, thanks to a sculpture of Queen Elizabeth II, for which she sat during a visit to Nigeria in 1956, four years before independence.) Over time, like el-Salahi with his calligraphic forms, Enwonwu found a way to render the spirit of his homeland while avoiding caricature, culminating in his "Negritude" series. He died in 1994.



Ayo Adeyinka belongs to a younger generation of Nigerians who slide seamlessly between London and Lagos. An art dealer, he roams the growing crop of specialist African galleries in central London, a short walk from his Tafeta agency. Two Olatunji "Tribal Marks" portraits, companions to the one in the Bonhams show, hang in his office. "This market has been commandeered and worked on by the west," says Adeyinka, who was previously a financier. "And there's nothing wrong with that."



Babajide Olatunji, 'Tribal Marks' Series II No. 8, 2015

Some art critics have written disdainfully of an "African art" discourse that can often equate sophisticated technique with the west and primitive material with Africa. But Adeyinka, like others, is unapologetic about the need for a label to propel new artists from Africa towards more buyers: "There is no 'African art', but it's a necessary classification to write about and to sell." African artists' work still sells at a discount relative to their peers from elsewhere, Adeyinka says, especially those from China, where

prices “went crazy”. A bit of blunt marketing is no bad thing if it allows more young artists to make a living from their work, he argues.

Adeyinka sees at least two broad groups of African artists. The difference between them amounts to whether or not they have been picked up by one of the multinational powerhouses of the art market. The biggest names transcend their origins. “What defines them is the sophistication of their dealers,” Adeyinka says. He includes in this group Chris Ofili; his fellow British-Nigerian and explorer of colonial themes, Yinka Shonibare; and Ethiopian-born, Michigan-raised Julie Mehretu, among others. Mehretu was the top African on last year’s Artprice annual league of contemporary artists by the value of auction sales, with 20 lots fetching €4.5m.



Malangatana Valente Ngwenya, Sem Título (Untitled)

Then there are the local scenes — no less vibrant and in some cases no less pecunious. Arthouse Contemporary in Lagos is a leading light. At an auction on a humid evening in May 2013, the atmosphere fizzing like the champagne, an Anatsui sculpture went for \$82,500, as did a pair of Emwonwu sculptures — prices to match the big sellers at the Bonhams auctions.

Local markets, dealers say, are often driven by private collectors, rather than galleries or public museums. Frequently, they buy directly from artists, acting like patrons. In Nigeria, Yemisi Shyllon, a Yoruba prince, has amassed a 7,000-work trove that looks fit to burst into the sumptuous gardens of his Lagos home. Another major collector, Congolese businessman Sindika Dokolo, is the husband of [Isabel dos Santos](#), the

billionaire daughter of Angola's authoritarian ruler José Eduardo dos Santos. He too grapples with semantics. He has stressed that what he is assembling is an "African collection of contemporary art" rather than a "collection of African contemporary art".

Homegrown galleries are blossoming from Nairobi to Luanda (Angolan art, dealers agree, is hot). Burgeoning gallery scenes in Benin, Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Morocco and Tunisia are joining the well-established one in South Africa, where the continent's biggest public art museum is under construction in Cape Town.

Touria El Glaoui is trying to connect those brimming local scenes with globetrotting art buyers. In May, 1:54, the contemporary African art fair she founded, made its New York debut. October will see its third London edition. That show, she says with a broad smile, will include work by el-Salahi. El Glaoui's interest in art began with her father, Hassan El Glaoui, who studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris (with encouragement from family friend and amateur painter Winston Churchill) before returning to Morocco.



Ibrahim el-Salahi, 'The Tree', 2008

Touria, who used to work in banking and telecoms, decided to start an African art fair after calculating that work from the continent made up about 0.05 per cent of that on display at the established fairs. She agonised over a name for it, seeking one that would travel easily on a continent where the languages that outsiders brought blend with older tongues. She settled on 1:54, which, she says, has the added benefit of reminding the sort of people who say things like "When I went to Africa in 1974 . . ." that the continent comprises 54 states. In contrast to the Bonhams sales, the buyers at 1:54 are



overwhelmingly foreign.

"I personally feel very happy to be considered African," says El Glaoui. (She objects to north Africa frequently being incorporated into the Middle East on the art map.) However, she says, sipping a coffee at Somerset House, the venue for 1:54, there is no "African aesthetic". And the perception that African art is there to be "discovered", as though its African audience does not count, bothers her. "A Malian artist who has been painting for 30 years is not 'emerging.'" She neither predicts nor hopes for a great boom in sales. Rather, she wants a "constant evolution" of the place of African art in the world.

"It's a sad thing and it's a happy thing. You have to play the game of the art world. You know how to get value for your work: there's a map. The sad thing is if [artists] stop being creative in their own way to meet certain criteria, when they know what's selling outside [Africa] and they play to an audience." A shadow crosses her face when she imagines the homogenising forces of globalisation — "everywhere in the world today you have the same hotel chains, the same shops" — infecting the art world. But she senses that the new generation of artists feel less of a need to emulate their predecessors' foreign pilgrimages in search of instruction. "They are staying in Africa," she says, "and being successful."

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*Photographs: Justin Piperger/Vigo Gallery; Tate Collection: Andrew Dunkley/Tate Photography; Courtesy of Bonhams*