Author: Helena Cantone

Tekle, Afewerk (1932-2012)

Afewerk Tekle was Ethiopia’s leading modern artist, famously known for introducing Western techniques of painting and sculpture to Ethiopia, and for his government commissions under Haile Selassie I and the infamous Derg regime of Mengistu. A prolific artist, Afewerk Tekle worked on Pan-African and Christian themes in particular, using diverse media from drawings, paintings, murals, mosaics, stained-glass windows, and sculpture, as well as designs for stamps, playing cards, posters, flags and national ceremonial dresses. His work was strongly influenced by Pan-African ideals and the optimism of the 1950s at the height of liberation movements sweeping across Africa. Afewerk Tekle first went to England to study engineering in 1947, and was later helped by British Suffragette Rita Pankhurst (1882-1960) with his artistic career and training at the Central School of Arts and Crafts and the Slade in London. Tekle returned to Addis Ababa in 1954, where he held his first solo show at the Municipality Hall, the first significant modern art exhibition in Ethiopia, which brought international attention to a new generation of modern Ethiopian artists.

Afewerk Tekle went on to travel extensively in Europe to research the Ethiopian artistic heritage of illustrated manuscripts in the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and the Vatican Library. Back in Ethiopia, Tekle received an important government commission to redecorate St. George’s Cathedral, the first of many state commissions for public and religious buildings Tekle produced. Notably, Tekle created majestic fifty-square-metre stained-glass windows for the entrance of Africa Hall, the headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa (1958-61). The triptych depicts the sorrowful colonial past, the struggle for independence, and the future liberation of the African continent. Tekle was also a talented portrait painter: some of his most distinguished sitters included Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba and Haile Selassie I.

In 1964, Tekle was the first artist to be awarded the National Prize for Fine Arts by Emperor Haile Selassie I. By the 1960s, Tekle was well known internationally, exhibiting extensively throughout the world, and participating at important events such as the Festival of Negro Arts in 1965 at Dakar, Senegal, which represents a landmark in modern African art. In 1981, his work *Self Portrait* was the first artwork from the African continent to be included in the permanent collection of the Uffizi Museum in Florence, Italy.

Afewerk Tekle was linked to a generation of artists and intellectuals that emerged in the 1950s and ‘60s in Africa and recognised the important role art has in terms of identity and nation-building. Tekle looked both to the future and the past for inspiration. Not only did Tekle draw from ancient Aksum and Ethiopia’s rich Coptic iconography, he also documented in drawings and paintings Ethiopia’s people, traditions and landscapes, in an attempt to preserve and pass on to future generations an appreciation of Ethiopian heritage.

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