

The Art of Afewerk Teklé

From Our Special Correspondent
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"My first childhood impressions," Afewerk Teklé, the famous Ethiopian artist whose best works are known the world over, told me, "are linked with bomb explosions and rows of uprooted trees with fire-mutilated branches. It seemed like some game, but at the same time there was pain—I was wounded by a fragment. I was two years old when the war with Italy broke out. I grew up amidst its horrors. Ever since then I've hated war."

I listened to the story of this middle-aged man with delicate features and amazingly youthful eyes as we sat in his small studio which had only one window, a desk piled high with books, a brown flowered screen in one corner, and a step-ladder. He spoke rather slowly, choosing his words carefully, like colours for his paintings, bright but not flamboyant.

"That the world around me is full of colour I've known ever since I remember myself," Afewerk continued. "Sound and colour burst into my heart and emerged from it in the form of images, then still vague and timid. But they were not images of evil—a child apparently sees only what is good. I drew what all children draw: trees, animals, people, flowers. My canvases were house walls and dusty pavements, my brushes—pieces of coal and wood. They looked all right, and my first 'exhibitions' gave me tremendous satisfaction. They have long been obliterated by the sun and the wind, but my childhood remains in my memory as my first step in art."

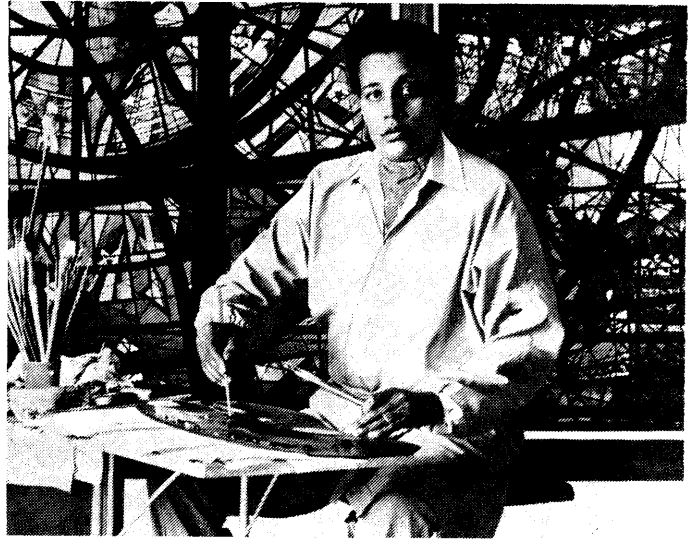
"Later I studied a lot. In London, Florence, Paris, Madrid and Lisbon. But it was those first perceptions, my people's traditions in my blood, which became the nutrient medium for the images in my paintings... I look at the world with wonder. I constantly learn from people, from the earth, from the sky. What can compare with the sensation one gets when one succeeds in looking into a man's heart and sharing his

happiness and grief? Or seeing a rose petal in a cloud? Or inhaling the air of one's country and feeling its breath in it? When I travel—and I love to travel—I look at people's faces and wonder if they feel joy and pain as my people and I do. And then I sketch a portrait, verifying my guess with a pencil."

When Afewerk was painting "Sunrise over the Semain Mountain," he suddenly saw in the chaos of rocks the figure of a young black-haired woman in the traditional wide-pleated Ethiopian dress, with a child asleep in her arms. He saw the tender look in her eyes, her soft slender hands and the patterns on her dress. So beautiful was the vision that he felt that Mother Ethiopia herself had appeared before him. That was the title he gave to the picture.

"I have painted about 500 pictures in my life," Afewerk said. "Only a few were easy to paint and took little time. Inspiration and the image blended and seemed to impress themselves on the canvas, and all I had to do was to impart life to them with a few strokes of the brush. But most of the pictures involved hard work."

"I don't take up the brush the moment an idea occurs to me. I put the idea to a test and if it passes this test, I spell it out on paper: words cleanse and enrich thoughts. Only then do I start painting. But—as every artist knows—whenever you finish a work, you feel there is something important you have not said, something you have omitted, something you have been unable to do. And then, at that moment, a new idea is born and you are sure that this time you will be able to do all you are thinking of."



Afewerk Teklé in his studio. In the background is a fragment of his monumental work "Unity."

"Who does not dream of his best painting, book or play in which he will say all he has to say, make people cry, laugh, suffer, think, love and remember his work. So far I have not produced such a painting, but every new one is a step towards my best."

Afewerk has several canvases which he can rightly call his best—"The Maskal Flower," "Mother Ethiopia," "Sunrise over the Semain Mountain," the monumental "Unity" which won a gold medal at the African Art Exhibition in Algiers and, lastly, a stained-glass panel for Africa House in Addis Ababa on the theme of the Africans' liberation struggle which is well known beyond the bounds of Africa.

"One must be a philosopher to produce a work that will move people," Afewerk said. "There must be faith in man, goodness, equality and justice in every stroke of the brush. I look for such ideas, for without them my work would be sterile."

"In 1964 I met Pavel Korin and Martiros Saryan in Moscow. We talked about the development of the painting art, and from what they said I gathered that we shared the same ideas. And I realized once again that the right thing was to seek inspiration from people and



"Sunrise over the Semain Mountain."

from nature: this is where the key to the real truth of art lies."

The artist and the revolution. This problem squarely confronted the Ethiopian cultural workers. Many of Afewerk's colleagues left the country—some with the hope that it would soon be over, others with hate for the people's government. Afewerk remained. His name had been associated more closely with the imperial regime than that of any other Ethiopian artist. He was one of the elite and his departure would not have surprised anyone. But he stayed behind, knowing well enough that he would meet with distrust and that it would be hard to prove that his decision was sincere.

"I did not have to choose between going and staying," he said firmly. "Ethiopia is my Motherland, I can't live without it. I must admit that it was not easy at first. Sometimes I felt so discouraged I couldn't work. There was that persistent feeling that I had not been accepted. It was only later that I saw I had been mistaken.

"The revolution has a place and work for everyone—artist, doctor or engineer. I sincerely wanted to understand it and to prove my worth in new Ethiopia. The revolution has given me much as an artist, for it's one thing to look into a man's heart and quite another to see how the heavy age-old fetters are smashed and how those considered downtrodden, crushed and incapable of living and thinking as free men, are rising to their full stature. My people have changed, so has Ethiopia. In these past few years I have seen how little I really know about people. And I've realized that I

must work to make up for the time I inadvertently lost."

Afewerk recently completed his first big work since the revolution, "New Ethiopia," for the Palace of Heroes of the Revolution in Debre-Zeit. In this painting he has tried to show his attitude to the revolutionary reforms, depicting realistically how the Ethiopian people live, work and fight their enemies.

"I have painted this picture in such a way as to make the image of New Ethiopia clear to

everyone, even the illiterate peasant," he said. "In these early post-revolution years the arts must be made accessible to every Ethiopian, but without, of course, losing their intrinsic value. They must educate people, give them hope, teach them to live.

"In my paintings I also use traditional methods of Ethiopian fine arts which help to reveal the complex nature of our ancient country and its people. I would like to believe that there will be many artists, truly people's artists, in our country. I know they will be given every encouragement and support."

Afewerk Teklé's first exhibition in the Soviet Union took place 15 years ago. He is preparing to pay us another visit and expects much from it.

"For me, Moscow is a severe but just examiner," he said at the conclusion of the interview. "After the 1964 exhibition many of my paintings became known all over the world. I will select about thirty of my best works for the new display. I am very happy that I shall see Moscow again and meet old friends who stood by me in the most difficult times and helped me with their friendship and understanding. I owe a great deal to Soviet people."

Taking a reproduction of "Sunrise over the Semain Mountain" from behind the screen, he said: "This is for New Times readers. Unfortunately, I have no reproductions of my latest paintings, but I hope that Muscovites will soon see the originals."

Addis Ababa