

ART MARKET

African art

Nigeria:
the next
big thing?

As the oil-rich country's economy begins to boom, its art is attracting increased interest across the US

TRENDS

New York. As Nigeria marks its centenary this year, it is being billed as one of the four MINT countries – along with Mexico, Indonesia and Turkey – that economists are tipping as emerging powerhouses. Demand in the US for art produced in Nigeria is also on the rise. “A lot of people see it as the next China; one of the next big markets that’s going to explode,” says Giles Peppiatt, Bonhams’ director of contemporary African art.

Although the continent’s leading galleries and art fairs are still in South Africa, Nigeria’s expanding economy, which is projected to grow 6.8% this year, has made the oil-rich country a potential rival. Nigeria’s main bridge to the Western market has traditionally been the UK, thanks to geographical

Nigeria by numbers

175 million The country’s population

\$263bn Nigeria’s GDP today

6.8% The projected rate of growth in GDP this year

\$6.2m (1bn naira) The gross amount earned in Nigeria’s auction market since 1998

• Statistics courtesy of the World Bank, the Omooba Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon Art Foundation and the CIA

proximity and colonial history, but “the focus is shifting to America”, says the London- and New York-based art adviser Bomi Odunade. “I get a lot of US dealers asking if I know any Nigerian artists – they’re actively looking.” Take, for example, the Nigerian-born painter Njideka Akunyili, who graduated from

the MFA programme at the Yale University School of Art three years ago. “Everyone’s fighting for her” work, which sells for between \$12,000 and \$40,000, Odunade says.

Americans also appear to be buying more Nigerian art at auction. Christie’s New York set the auction record for Nigeria’s best-known artist, El Anatsui, last May, when *Another Plot*, 2007, one of his signature found-metal tapestries, sold for \$1.18m (est \$600,000-\$800,000).

It is commercial, rather than curatorial, instincts that are driving American interest in Nigerian artists, says Skoto Aghahowa, who was among the first New York-based dealers to show work by El Anatsui, in 1996. “A lot of the real support for emerging African art is still coming from Europe, while the US has just a commercial interest.

El Anatsui’s aluminium and wire tapestry *Another Plot*, 2007, set an auction record for the artist of \$1.18m last year



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Ones to watch

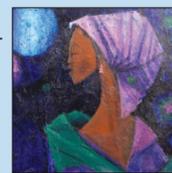
El Anatsui The Ghana-born sculptor moved to Nigeria in 1975 and has since established himself as the country’s most famous and expensive artist. His auction record – \$1.18m, for his aluminium and wire tapestry *Another Plot*, 2007 – was set at Christie’s New York last May



Odili Donald Odita The abstract painter and professor has followed in the footsteps of his father, the historian and artist E. Okechukwu Odita. His prices are still accessible: his auction record is \$13,420, for the painting *Six Degrees of Separation*, 2002, which sold at the Rago Arts and Auction Center, New Jersey, in 2009

Yusuf Grillo

The painter’s auction record of \$81,000, for the painting *Blue Moon* (right), 1966, was set at Arthouse Contemporary Limited in Lagos in 2008



Until there’s value attached to a work, people here tend to ignore it.”

US museums are playing catch-up, however. “We’ve recently had quite a few institutional sales,” says the New York-based dealer Jack Shainman. Three institutions in the city – the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum and the Studio Museum in Harlem – and the Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama, have bought work by the Nigerian artists he represents, including El Anatsui, Odili Donald Odita and Toyin Odutola.

Meanwhile, the Newark Museum, New Jersey, has emerged as an unlikely hub for contemporary African art. Its recent exhibition “The Art of Translation” featured works from the collection of the Seattle-based professor and collector Simon Ottenberg, who donated 145 Modern and contemporary Nigerian works to the institution in 2012.

The Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia commissioned the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare to produce a large-scale installation for the show “Magic Ladders” (until 21 April), and the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach is due to host a travelling survey of works by El Anatsui (“Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui”, 11 April-10 August), which will then go to

“A lot of people see Nigeria as a market that’s going to explode”

the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (5 March-28 June 2015). Brooklyn’s Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts is showing drawings by six female Nigerian artists (“Six Draughtsmen”, until 6 April).

Curators from many of these institutions attended the first edition of the African art fair 1:54 in London last October, says Touria El Glaoui, the founder of the event. She is now thinking about a New York edition of the fair. It will not happen this year, but “we are considering the best formula for a 1:54 pop-up event in the US”, she says.

Auction houses are also bidding their time. The US market is not yet large enough to “warrant having a sale there now”, Giles Peppiatt says. Bonhams has held a dedicated contemporary African sale in New York only once, and with limited success; the auction house is instead continuing to focus on London, where the Nigerian artist Yusuf Grillo could set a record at its sale on 21 May. His painting *The Flight*, 1972, is estimated at between £50,000 and £80,000.

Nigerian art is “definitely becoming more valuable”, Peppiatt says. “The last sale was our first to gross more than £1m, and I have every reason to expect that the next will do the same. When you get to those levels, it starts to become interesting to other people.”

Rachel Corbett

In brief

Artvest revamps New York spring fair



The art advisory firm Artvest Partners has rebranded the Spring Show NYC as Spring Masters, New York. The company, which took over the three-year-old fair last year, hopes to “create an exciting new visitor experience in putting more traditional and Modern art together in a contemporary context. We’re promoting an eclecticism in collecting that has recently been more popular in Europe,” says Michael Plummer (left), the co-founder of Artvest. A panel of experts will vet every work of art, and the fair will open with a facelift at the Park Avenue Armory on 30 April (until 4 May), featuring a new design by the architect Rafael Viñoly. C.B.

Outsiders join the pack

The organisers of the Outsider Art Fair, which has taken place in January or February for the past 21 years, have changed its dates (8-11 May) to coincide with Frieze New York. The gallerist Andrew Edlin (right), who bought the fair in 2012, says the move is geared towards curators. “We find most of the overlap in the hands of visionary curators” buying for institutions, he says. P.P.

