La Biennale di Venezia
61. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte
Partecipazioni Nazionali

ETHIOPIA PAVILION

61st INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION – LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

Shapes of Silence

Commissioner: Ambassador Demitu Hambisa Bonsa
Curator: Prof. Abebaw Ayalew
Exhibitor: Tegene Kunbi
Assistant Curator: Yohannes Mulat Mekonnen
Institutional Partners: Ethiopian Ministry of Tourism
Supporters: Primo Marella Gallery

May 9 – November 22, 2026

Palazzo Bollani
Castello, 3647, Venice

EMBASSY OF THE FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA
ROME, ITALY

Ethiopia
LAND OF ORIGINS

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MINISTRY of TOURISM
ኢትዮጵያ - Ethiopia

INTRODUCTION

"*Ethiopia's representation at the Ethiopia Pavilion, through the works of Ethiopian artist Tegene Kunbi, brings a unique artistic expression to this renowned exhibition, offering the world a glimpse into the uniqueness of Ethiopian Art.*
Titled "Shapes of Silence", his works creatively portray the diverse faces of Ethiopia's cultures. Beyond showcasing the latest international trends in contemporary art, the Venice Biennale fosters cultural exchange by bringing together artists from all corners of the globe.
The Ethiopian government is working hard to further accelerate the growth of art and tourism industry. In recent years, major state-led destination development projects have been launched by the initiative of Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed. Significant efforts are also underway to ensure the sector's overall development and boost its contribution to Ethiopia's socio-economic growth".

H.E. Selamawit Kassa
Minister of Tourism of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

"*Ethiopia is one of the world's fastest-growing countries and one of the most important investment destinations in East Africa. Under Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed's initiative, art and tourism are becoming a major engine to accelerate economic growth, followed by the growing infrastructure of newly developed and enhanced tourist destination projects that have created the impetus for culture and tourism to become one of the country's poverty reduction strategies to create greater employment opportunities.*
Ethiopia has participated in this major international art exhibition for the second time to expand the art field and make our tourism fortunes more competitive internationally. Such international exhibitions are also where countries can introduce their potential to others and consult with them on new art development, so in this place where a significant number of world art lovers gathered, our country has set up its own Pavilion to reintroduce the art that further inspires the tourism and artistic development of our country".

H.E. Demitu Hambisa Bonsa
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ethiopia to Italy, Representative of FAO, WFP and IFAD and Commissioner of the Ethiopia Pavilion

PRESS RELEASE

ETHIOPIA PAVILION

61st INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION – LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA
May 9 – November 22, 2026

Shapes of Silence

An exhibition by **Tegene Kunbi**
Curated by **Abebaw Ayalew**
Assistant Curator: **Yohannes Mulat Mekonnen**

Commissioner: **Amb. Demitu Hambisa Bonsa**

Palazzo Bollani
Castello 3647, Venice

Venice, May 2026 – The **Ethiopia Pavilion** at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia presents ***Shapes of Silence***, an exhibition by **Tegene Kunbi** (b. 1980, Addis Ababa), curated by **Abebaw Ayalew**, open to the public from May 9 to November 22, 2026, in the prestigious setting of **Palazzo Bollani**.

The Ethiopia Pavilion will be inaugurated on **Thursday, May 7 at 11:30 a.m.** by **H.E. Demitu Hambisa Bonsa**, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ethiopia to Italy, Representative of FAO, WFP and IFAD and Commissioner of the Ethiopia Pavilion, **Tegene Kunbi**, artist, **Prof. Abebaw Ayalew**, curator, and **Yohannes Mulat Mekonnen**, assistant curator.

Representing the culmination of Kunbi's thirty years of studio practice, *Shapes of Silence* explores **silence as a social and political condition** through a new series of **over 30 works**, most of them monumental in scale, that mobilizes abstraction, textiles, and assemblage. Working with painting as a layered material archive, the artist approaches silence not as absence, but as a charged space shaped by cultural expectation and material history.

Set within the curatorial framework of the 2026 Biennale Arte, *In Minor Keys*, Koyo Kouoh calls for an engagement with forms of expression that move beyond the primacy of language and the dominance of spectacle: "minor keys" conceived as a space for marginal voices, submerged narratives, and micro-histories. *Shapes of Silence* approaches Tegene Kunbi's practice as a *minor key* in the field of painting today: a quiet yet insistent register in which silence takes material form, by evoking the history and power dynamics of his country.

Silence as a social practice in Ethiopia often draws its justification from the country's rich folkloric traditions. Within these traditions, silence holds an ambivalent and paradoxical status, praised as a virtue while simultaneously regarded as a potential misdeed.

The proverb *ዝምታ ወርቅ ነው* ("Silence is gold") frames advised silence as a sign of wisdom and restraint, yet this valuation is tempered by caution. Other expressions warn that *በሽታውን ያልተናገረ መድሀኒት የለውም* ("He who does not name his illness finds no cure") or that *ካለመናገር ይጅ አዝማቾነት ይቀራል* ("By not speaking, one risks exclusion from opportunity").

Silence thus emerges not as a mere absence, but as a **space of restraint, tension, and ethical negotiation**. This space is **also deeply political**, as the right to speak and to interpret is unevenly distributed along entrenched social and political binaries—male over female, center over periphery, sacred over ordinary. Those positioned on the latter side are denied discursive authority, making silence a contested political condition.

In Tegene Kunbi's work, **the political enters through material choice**: his practice invites these asymmetries into the pictorial field. His paintings bring together textiles of starkly contrasting provenance and significance, hand-knitted fabrics made by his mother alongside industrial textiles produced for African markets; sacred garments used in religious contexts alongside utilitarian materials designed for mattresses. **Drawing on Ethiopia's cultural diversity**, once described by Carlo Conti Rossini as a *"museum of peoples"*, Kunbi also incorporates **weaving traditions from different regions**, where clothing and costume have historically marked cultural and political autonomy, forcing these

distinct practices into a shared visual field. Each material carries specific histories of labor, belief, and political positioning. When assembled on the pictorial surface, these categories fracture, and painting becomes a site where **socially and culturally segregated materials are compelled into proximity and renegotiation**.

These questions of silence as a hierarchical and political condition extend to exhibition practice itself. In exhibition spaces, artworks are routinely framed by explanatory texts, labels, captions, and curatorial narratives that claim interpretive authority. Language speaks for the artwork, while the visual and multimodal are rendered silent, reinforcing a hierarchy in which written language becomes the primary site of meaning-making.

Against this backdrop, Kunbi approaches painting as a platform where such regimes of silence are both enacted and unsettled. His works refuse the conception of painting as a passive or purely visual medium; instead, painting functions as a **layered archive of labor, memory, and history**, operating in a minor key in which silence takes material form and meaning emerges through duration, proximity, and material presence rather than explanation.

Promoted by the **Ethiopian Ministry of Tourism** in collaboration with the **Embassy of Ethiopia in Italy**, *Shapes of Silence* marks **the country's second participation at La Biennale di Venezia**, following its debut in 2024, underscoring Ethiopia's commitment to promoting contemporary art and international cultural dialogue.

The exhibition is also made possible with the support of **Primo Marella Gallery**, an art gallery based in Milan and Lugano that represents the artist.

Shapes of Silence will be accompanied by a dedicated catalogue featuring in-depth essays and images documenting the exhibition layout.

General information
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ARTIST STATEMENT

As the artist commissioned to represent the Ethiopian Pavilion at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, I present *Shapes of Silence*, a body of large-scale works that bring together the textures, traditions, and material contrasts of my country. My paintings are built through layered surfaces, oil, textile, and pigment, where fabrics play a central role. I work with materials of contrasting origin and significance: hand-knitted textiles made by my mother alongside industrial fabrics produced for African markets; sacred garments alongside everyday utilitarian materials.

Each carries histories of labor, belief, and daily life. When brought together on the pictorial surface, these differences begin to shift, and painting becomes a space where socially and culturally distinct materials meet and are renegotiated.

In my work, silence is both lived and practiced. First, it exists within painting itself. In my artistic training in Ethiopia, abstraction is often understood as silent because it does not conform to a linguistic system of meaning. For me, abstraction opens a space where meaning is not immediately fixed, where painting resists translation into language and gives form to silence.

The second is personal. Living and working in Europe, I experience silence through the body, where difference is marked by visibility. At times this produces hypervisibility; at others, a form of erasure. In both cases, silence is not the absence of voice, but a condition shaped by how one is seen and positioned in public space.

My works reflect the imposed muteness of these conditions while also functioning as a resilient practice. Through sustained, patient labor, painting becomes a way of enduring external pressures, gradually inviting the world in, one material, one textile layer at a time, while working toward clarity and harmony.

Tegene Kunbi

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

The history of Ethiopian visual art can be understood as operating across two intertwined trajectories: the history of art as discourse and the practice of art as making. These two modes continually shape one another, yet they are not equally valued. The history and theory of art, mainly textual, often assumes the role of framing authority, interpreting, categorizing, and representing, while artistic practice is visual and multimodal, rendered secondary, frequently treated as silent and in need of explanation. Written language has long occupied a privileged interpretive position over the image.

This hierarchy also extends beyond artistic discourse to broader social structures, where forms of manual labor have historically been devalued. In Ethiopia, Artisans have often occupied a marginal position within the social hierarchy, particularly regarding property ownership and access to land. Artisanal and material practices have been positioned below intellectual and discursive forms of work. A notable exception, however, is found in the tradition of painting.

Until the early twentieth century, painting in Ethiopia was primarily oriented toward religious subjects. Painters were not merely craftsmen but were often trained within ecclesiastical institutions, working closely with sacred texts such as biblical narratives, hagiographies, and homilies. In this context, the painter occupied an ambiguous position, both maker and interpreter, working at the intersection of word and image. In this sense, they functioned as mediators, giving image to the word. This dual role afforded them a distinct status, aligned with the clergy, and granted privileges not typically extended to other forms of artisanal labor.

Historically, Ethiopian painting does not foreground itself as image or call attention to its own form. Rather than representing material reality, it seeks to manifest spiritual presence, inviting the viewer to look beyond the image toward the phenomena it reveals. Time and space are suspended through the absence of perspective, background, and illusionistic depth, privileging instead a flattened pictorial surface. This emphasis on the plane has shaped local understandings of abstraction, where abstraction is seen not as a departure from representation, but as an extension of an already existing visual logic.

Tegene began his painting practice within the tradition of church iconography, establishing a parallel between his individual work and the broader history of Ethiopian painting. His later engagement with abstraction, through flatness and all-over composition, continues a longstanding nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ethiopian pictorial tradition.

Shapes of Silence takes this condition as its point of departure. Drawing on the long history of Ethiopian painting, particularly its negotiation between word and image, the exhibition approaches Tegene Kunbi's work as a platform where these relations are unsettled and reconfigured. His paintings refuse the conception of the image as passive or subordinate. Instead, through layered, materially dense surfaces that draw on diverse visual and textile traditions, his work operates as an archive of labor, memory, and embodied knowledge. Materials and practices historically marginalized or silenced are brought into visibility and proximity.

In the spirit of a minor key, where meaning emerges through modulation, restraint, and resonance rather than declaration, Kunbi's paintings activate silence as a site of presence. Rather than yielding to language, they resist immediate translation, inviting a sustained, sensory encounter in which meaning remains open, relational, and materially grounded.

Prof. Abebaw Ayalew, Curator
Yohannes Mulat Mekonnen, Assistant Curator

BIOGRAPHIES

Tegene Kunbi

Ethiopian artist Tegene Kunbi, born in 1980 in Addis Ababa, completed his studies in 2004 with a degree in Painting and Art Education from the Fine Arts School at Addis Ababa University. Following his graduation, he served as a lecturer at Kotebe College of Education. In 2008, he was awarded the prestigious DAAD scholarship, which enabled him to leave Ethiopia and continue his studies in Germany at the Universität der Künste Berlin. There he pursued a Master of Fine Arts, which he obtained in 2011. Since then, Kunbi has been living and working between Addis Ababa and Berlin.

Tegene Kunbi has participated in numerous international solo and group exhibitions, presenting his signature abstract works in a variety of contexts, including collaborative international projects and workshops. His work has been exhibited in cities such as Milan, Paris, New York, Lugano, Berlin, Amsterdam, Tokyo, Nagoya, Nairobi, Accra, Dakar and many others. The Artist gained international recognition after receiving the Grand Prix Léopold Sédar Senghor, the main prize of the Dak'Art Biennale 2022 – one of the most significant platforms for contemporary African art. The award was presented to him by Macky Sall, President of the Republic of Senegal, during the opening ceremony of the 14th Biennial of Contemporary African Art in Dakar.

His work is distinguished by intense chromatic contrasts, textured brushwork, and the integration of traditional Ethiopian textiles, which imbue the canvases with ritualistic and sacred resonance, strengthening the connection to his homeland. Kunbi works across a range of scales, from intimate compositions to monumental formats, combining instinct and structure, color modulation, and rhythmic patterns to develop a distinctive style that bridges African tradition and international modern art. His palette evokes vegetation, clay-rich soils, and the immensity of sky and sea, while the material layering of paint and textiles creates a powerful visual and sensory experience. His works express memory, rituality, and cultural identity, balancing tension and harmony while affirming the vitality of Ethiopia's artistic and cultural heritage.

Prof. Abebaw Ayalew

Abebaw is born in 1976 province of Gojjam, Ethiopia. He graduated from Addis Ababa University, Department of History with a BA degree in History in 1998. In the same year he was employed as a Graduate Assistant in the Department of History at the same university. In 2002 Abebaw has his MA degree in History from Addis Ababa University. He did his MA thesis on Ethiopian art history, "A History of 18th and 19th Century Ethiopian Painting; A Study of the Second Gondarine Style of Painting in Selected Chrches of East Gojjam". Following his graduation, he became full faculty member of the Department of History, Addis Ababa University. Abebaw has made an extensive field work and research on Ethiopian art in northern and central Ethiopia. He has taught Ethiopian history and Ethiopian art history at Addis Ababa University and the Ale School of Fine Arts and Design which is part of Addis Ababa University. He has participated in several heritage conservation projects most of which are Ethiopia's famous monuments and church mural paintings. In recent years Abebaw was instrumental in the realization of the Unity Park and Museum project, the Adwa Victory Memorial Museum, The National Palace Museum Project. In 2019 Abebaw was appointed Deputy Director General of the Ethiopian Heritage Authority. Since 2022 he has been Director General of the Authority.

Yohannes Mulat Mekonnen

Yohannes Mulat Mekonnen is an Ethiopian filmmaker and curatorial researcher working at the intersection of visual anthropology, film, and exhibition practice. He is currently a Gerda Henkel Research Fellow at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne and a Visual Anthropology Fellow at the Global Heritage Lab, University of Bonn. His work engages the ethical and political dimensions of representation, with particular attention to the asymmetrical relations produced through representational practices. Drawing on a background in visual arts and formal training in visual anthropology, he approaches representation as both a narrative and analytical practice, combining ethnographic research with the methodological possibilities of contemporary art.

SUPPORTER

PRIMO MARELLA GALLERY

Founded in 1992, Primo Marella Gallery has been dedicated from its very beginning to the promotion and documentation of emerging artists and movements from several non-Western regions. This commitment takes shape through a dynamic programme of exhibitions as well as through the development of a significant body of publications, books and catalogues, conceived as documentary and archival tools, tracing the evolution of the artists and contexts the gallery has engaged with over time, often in close collaboration with local curators and critics.

Starting with China in the late 1990s, the gallery's programme has expanded to different emerging regions, from India and Southeast Asia to, more recently (2007), Africa, always with the aim of being a pioneer in presenting such complex and rapidly evolving art scenes, while fostering broader international awareness and attracting the attention of museums, institutions, and collectors.

Among the artists from the African continent, Tegene Kunbi (b. 1980, Addis Ababa) has been represented by Primo Marella Gallery since 2021. Over the years, the gallery has dedicated to his work three solo exhibitions and one group show, supporting the development and visibility of his practice. Primo Marella Gallery is honoured to accompany Tegene Kunbi to the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, where he will represent the Ethiopia Pavilion.

Contacts
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GENERAL INFORMATION

ETHIOPIA PAVILION

61st International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia
In Minor Keys

Exhibition Title: *Shapes of Silence*
Commissioner: Ambassador Demitu Hambisa Bonsa
Curator: Prof. Abebaw Ayalew
Exhibitor: Tegene Kunbi
Assistant Curator: Yohannes Mulat Mekonnen
Institutional Partners: Ethiopian Ministry of Tourism
Supporters: Primo Marella Gallery

Venue: Palazzo Bollani, Castello 3647, Venice

Preview days: 6 – 8 May 2026, 10:00 am – 7:00 pm
Open to the public from May 9 to November 22, 2026

Opening hours:
From May 9 to September 27: 11:00 am – 7:00 pm
From September 29 to November 22: 10:00 am – 6:00 pm
Closed on Monday
Special opening days: 11 May, 1 June, 7 September, 16 November.

Free admission

Websites:
www.ethiopianpavilion.com
www.tegenekunbi.com
www.labiennale.org

Social media:
IG @ethiopianpavilion
#EthiopianPavilion #BiennaleArte2026 #InMinorKeys #ShapesOfSilence #TegeneKunbi

General information
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