



The Sub-Saharan African Art Market: Challenges, Opportunities and Future Directions.

سوق الفن في إفريقيا جنوب الصحراء: التحديات، الفرص والاتجاهات المستقبلية.

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Received: 02/10/2024 Accepted: 12/02/2025 published: 22/03/2025

تاريخ الاستلام: 2024/10/02 تاريخ القبول: 2025/02/12 تاريخ النشر: 2025/03/22

Article abstract:

The study explores the dynamics of the Sub-Saharan African art market, focusing on its historical evolution, current trends, and economic impact. It analyses data from art market reports, scientific articles, and interviews to understand market structures, challenges, and opportunities. The research highlights global interest in African contemporary art, driven by digital platforms and rising auction prices. The study emphasizes the need for improved support systems, legal frameworks, and strategic investments to sustain growth. It aims to empower Sub-Saharan African artists for future market success.

Key words: Sub-Saharan African Art Market ; Contemporary Art ; Market Dynamics; Digital Platforms; Economic Impact.

ملخص المقال:

تبحث هذه الدراسة ديناميكيات سوق الفن الإفريقي جنوب الصحراء، مسلطة الضوء على تطوره التاريخي، الاتجاهات الحالية وتأثيره الاقتصادي. تعتمد الدراسة على تحليل بيانات من تقارير سوق الفن، مقالات علمية، ومقابلات لفهم هيكل السوق، التحديات التي تواجهها، والفرص المتاحة، كما تسلط الضوء على الاهتمام العالمي المتزايد بالفن الإفريقي المعاصر، والذي يعززه الانتشار الرقمي وارتفاع أسعار المزادات. تؤكد الدراسة على الحاجة لتطوير أنظمة دعم أفضل، أطر قانونية محكمة واستثمارات استراتيجية لضمان استدامة النمو، مع التركيز على تمكين الفنانين الأفارقة جنوب الصحراء لضمان نجاحهم المستقبلي في السوق.

كلمات مفتاحية: سوق الفن الإفريقي جنوب الصحراء؛ الفن المعاصر؛ ديناميكيات السوق؛ المنصات الرقمية؛ التأثير الاقتصادي.

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Introduction

The Sub-Saharan African art market has increasingly become a focal point of interest, both within the continent and globally. For centuries, African art was often dismissed as ethnographic or merely symbolic, overshadowed by Western-centric perspectives in art history (Chika, 2015). However, this has dramatically changed in recent decades as African artists gain international recognition and African art is included in major global art exhibitions and auctions.

This paper examines the historical trajectory of the African art market, its present state, the economic implications for artists and collectors, and future prospects for the industry. By exploring both the challenges and opportunities, we seek to provide a comprehensive analysis of the unique dynamics shaping the art market in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Recent developments in technology, digital platforms, and an increasing interest in contemporary African art have created new opportunities for African artists to engage with global markets. Yet, despite this rise in visibility, significant challenges persist, including market fragmentation, logistical hurdles, and the enduring effects of colonialism on art ownership and valuation. Understanding these challenges is crucial for stakeholders seeking to improve the representation and economic potential of African artists. This paper aims to contribute to this understanding by addressing these issues and offering insights into how the African art market might evolve in the future.

• The questions of the study:

This section outlines the key questions guiding the study of the Sub-Saharan African art market:

- What are the defining characteristics of the Sub-Saharan African art market today?
- How do cultural, economic, and political factors influence art valuation in Sub-Saharan Africa?
- In what ways do global trends, such as digital platforms and NFTs, affect Sub-Saharan African artists and the market?
 - What are the major challenges faced by Sub-Saharan African artists and collectors in navigating the art market?

• Hypotheses

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: The Sub-Saharan African art market is significantly influenced by cultural heritage and local traditions, impacting the pricing and valuation of artworks.
- H2: Economic factors, such as investment levels and market demand, play a crucial role in shaping the Sub-Saharan African art market.
- H3: Digital platforms and global trends enhance the visibility and accessibility of Sub-Saharan African art, leading to increased sales and market growth.
- H4: Structural challenges, including issues of provenance and authenticity, hinder the growth of the Sub-Saharan African art market.

• The Objective of the study:

The study aims to:

- To analyze the current landscape of the African art market and its evolution over time.
- To identify and assess the factors influencing art valuation in the African context.
- To explore the impact of digital innovations on the accessibility and visibility of Sub-Saharan African artists.
- To investigate the challenges faced by artists and collectors and propose potential solutions.

• The importance of the study:

The significance of this study lies in:

- Providing a comprehensive understanding of the Sub-Saharan African art market, which is essential for artists, collectors, and stakeholders.
- Highlighting the unique cultural and economic factors that shape the valuation of art in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Offering insights into the role of digital platforms in democratizing access to the art market, which can empower artists and foster growth.
- Contributing to the broader discourse on art markets globally, emphasizing the relevance of Sub-Saharan African art in the contemporary art scene.

• **Methodology:**

○ **Research Framework**

This study employs a **qualitative research framework** designed to examine the Sub-Saharan African art market's evolution, key trends, and emerging challenges. The qualitative nature of this research allows for an in-depth exploration of the social, cultural, and economic aspects shaping the market, especially in the absence of substantial quantitative data.

○ **Data Sources and Collection**

- **Secondary Data:** The primary source of data is derived from a thorough review of existing literature—including academic journals, books, market reports, and historical texts—on African art and the global art market. Key reports from organizations such as Art Basel and ArtTactic, as well as auction house data from Christie's and Sotheby's, are used to provide insights into sales trends and economic contributions of Sub-Saharan African art.
- **Archival Research:** Historical documents, including exhibition catalogs, auction records, and archival materials from prominent African galleries, are examined. This method helps trace the origins and transformations in the Sub-Saharan African art market, alongside the impact of colonial histories and post-independence movements.
- **Case Study Method:** The research integrates case studies of successful Sub-Saharan African artists, galleries, and art fairs. These case studies offer examples of market dynamics at work, focusing on the strategies Sub-Saharan African artists use to gain international recognition, the role of local galleries, and the influence of international collectors.

○ **Data Analysis**

The study adopts a comparative analysis approach, where information gathered from different regions and market sectors is compared to draw distinctions and highlight commonalities in the art market across African nations.

Additionally, thematic analysis is used to identify and analyze recurring themes such as the impact of technology, issues of provenance, and the growing global interest in contemporary Sub-Saharan African art.

○ **Validity and Reliability**

To ensure the validity of the study, data from multiple sources are triangulated. By comparing market reports, case studies, and archival data, the research establishes consistent findings.

Reliability is maintained through systematic data collection and analysis processes, which can be replicated in future studies on the Sub-Saharan African art market.

1. Historical Context

1.1 Pre-Colonial and Colonial Eras:

Sub-Saharan African art history is diverse, complex, and deeply intertwined with cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. Long before European colonization, African communities produced

sophisticated artworks, including sculptures, textiles, and pottery, which played important roles in rituals, societal structures, and political hierarchies.

From the terracotta sculptures of the Nok culture in Nigeria 500 BC to the intricate bronze casting of the Kingdom of Benin 12th century AD, Sub-Saharan African art was marked by technical mastery and aesthetic significance (Picton, 2004). These early works were not only expressions of creativity but also held functional, political, and religious significance.

With the advent of European colonization in the 19th century, Sub-Saharan African art was systematically looted, often ending up in private collections and museums across Europe and North America. Colonial powers stripped African nations of their cultural heritage, and African art was reframed within Western contexts as ethnographic artifacts rather than works of fine art (Steiner, 2004).

This colonial legacy has had lasting repercussions on the valuation of African art, with many significant pieces still housed in Western institutions, often with contested ownership.

1.2 Post-Colonial Rebirth:

The post-colonial period saw a reawakening of interest in African art, driven in part by independence movements across the continent in the mid-20th century. African artists began to engage more with the global art scene, incorporating modernist influences while retaining connections to traditional themes. Artists such as Ben Enwonwu from Nigeria and Ibrahim El-Salahi from Sudan played pivotal roles in bridging traditional Sub-Saharan African aesthetics with contemporary art movements.

During this period, African governments and cultural institutions also took steps to reclaim their art and promote it on the global stage. For example, the establishment of the Dakar Biennale in 1990 provided a significant platform for contemporary African artists, highlighting the richness and diversity of modern Sub-Saharan African art (Harney, 2004). These efforts were part of a broader movement to reframe African art as an integral part of the global art world, rather than a peripheral curiosity.

Despite these advancements, the global art market was slow to recognize the value of contemporary African art. Sub-Saharan African artists continued to be marginalized within the global market, often earning less than their Western counterparts for similarly acclaimed work. This undervaluation is rooted in historical biases and the limited presence of African art institutions in global art centers such as New York, London, and Paris.

2. Current State of the African Art Market

2.1 Growth of African Art Hubs:

In recent years, several African cities have emerged as key centers for art production and trade. Lagos in Nigeria, Dakar in Senegal, and Johannesburg in South Africa are among the cities that have developed vibrant art markets, driven by galleries, auction houses, and private collectors. The rise of platforms such as Art X Lagos and the Johannesburg Art Fair has significantly increased the visibility of Sub-Saharan African artists within global markets.

These fairs serve as critical spaces for artists to showcase their work to international collectors, curators, and art enthusiasts, helping bridge the gap between Africa and the global art world (Chika D. , 2019).

One of the leading contributors to the African art market's growth is the increasing number of Sub-Saharan African artists gaining international recognition. Artists such as El Anatsui, Yinka Shonibare, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby have seen their works featured in prestigious galleries and auctioned at high prices.

For example, in 2018, Njideka Akunyili Crosby's painting "Bush Babies" sold for \$3.4 million at Sotheby's, a clear indication of the growing demand for Sub-Saharan African contemporary art (Sotheby's, 2018). This recognition has sparked a renewed interest in the African art market, both from collectors within the continent and internationally.

2.2 Auctions and Global Visibility:

The Sub-Saharan African art market has also seen increased visibility in major international auction houses. Sotheby's and Christie's, two of the world's most prominent auction houses, have begun holding specialized sales of African art. In 2017, Sotheby's held its first auction dedicated solely to modern and contemporary African art, with many works surpassing their pre-sale estimates.

This trend highlights the growing appreciation and value placed on Sub-Saharan African art within the global market.

Despite these successes, the African art market remains relatively small compared to other regions. Africa accounted for less than 1% of global art market sales in 2024, indicating the potential for growth but also the structural challenges that continue to limit the market's expansion (McAndrew, 2024).

The lack of established galleries, museums, and collectors in many Sub-Saharan African countries hinders the ability of artists to reach larger audiences and achieve sustainable income from their work.

2.3 Digital Platforms and NFTs:

The advent of digital platforms and NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) has also played a significant role in democratizing access to the art market for Sub-Saharan African artists. Platforms like Artsy and SuperRare allow African artists to bypass traditional gallery systems and sell their work directly to collectors around the world. NFTs, in particular, have created new revenue streams for artists by allowing them to mint and sell digital versions of their works, often at significantly higher prices than physical pieces.

For example, Nigerian artist Osinachi became one of the first African artists to gain international recognition through NFTs, selling his works for tens of thousands of dollars in cryptocurrency. The rise of blockchain technology and digital platforms has provided African artists with unprecedented access to global markets, offering new possibilities for revenue generation and artistic expression (Rosenberg, 2021). However, while these platforms offer opportunities, they also present challenges, particularly regarding digital literacy, internet access, and the infrastructure required to participate in the digital art economy.

3. Economic Impact and Challenges

3.1 Market Valuation and Economic Opportunities:

The Sub-Saharan African art market, though still emerging, presents significant economic opportunities for artists, collectors, and investors. The global value of Sub-Saharan African art continues to rise as interest in the continent's contemporary art scene grows. According to Art Basel & UBS 2024, the global art market reached a total of \$65 billion in sales (McAndrew, 2024), but African artists accounted for only a fraction of that figure, highlighting the untapped potential of this market.

The Sub-Saharan African art market's economic impact extends beyond individual artists to galleries, auction houses, and art fairs that are integral to the market ecosystem. Galleries such as Goodman Gallery in South Africa and Rele Gallery in Nigeria are playing key roles in promoting Sub-Saharan African artists, both locally and internationally.

These institutions help provide a sustainable income for artists while nurturing the art market's development within their respective countries. The growing interest from international

collectors also drives economic growth, creating a demand for more structured art markets across the continent.

3.2 Structural Challenges:

Despite the market's growth, numerous challenges hinder the full realization of its potential. One of the most significant challenges is the undervaluation of Sub-Saharan African art, both within Africa and internationally. For centuries, Sub-Saharan African art has been viewed through an ethnographic lens, limiting its appreciation as contemporary fine art. This has resulted in lower auction prices for Sub-Saharan African artists compared to their Western counterparts, even when their work is critically acclaimed.

Another key challenge is the lack of infrastructure to support the art market. Many Sub-Saharan African countries lack established art institutions, such as museums, art schools, and galleries, which are crucial for developing and sustaining the market. In addition, issues such as the high cost of transportation, complex customs regulations, and limited access to international markets create barriers for Sub-Saharan African artists seeking to participate in global art fairs and auctions (Sylvester, 2019).

Moreover, intellectual property protection remains a critical issue for African artists, many of whom face difficulties in securing their rights to their works. Without strong legal frameworks to protect their creations, artists are vulnerable to exploitation, especially when selling their work internationally (Adler, 2020). Addressing these structural challenges is essential for the long-term growth and sustainability of the Sub-Saharan African art market.

4. Case Studies

4.1 Art X Lagos:

Art X Lagos is one of the most prominent art fairs in Africa, held annually in Lagos, Nigeria. Since its inception in 2016, Art X Lagos has become a key platform for showcasing contemporary Sub-Saharan African art, providing artists with international exposure and opportunities for networking and sales (Chika D. , 2019).

The fair features a diverse range of artworks, from painting and sculpture to photography and digital media, reflecting the rich artistic diversity of the continent.

Art X Lagos has been instrumental in elevating the profile of Sub-Saharan African artists, with many participating artists seeing significant increases in their visibility and market value. For example, artist Laolu Senbanjo gained international recognition through his participation in Art X Lagos, leading to collaborations with global brands (Gural, 2023) . The fair's success underscores the growing importance of Sub-Saharan African art hubs in the global art market and highlights the potential for similar initiatives to support the continent's artistic community.

4.2 El Anatsui:

El Anatsui is a Ghanaian artist whose innovative use of materials and techniques has garnered international acclaim. Known for his large-scale sculptures made from recycled materials, such as bottle caps and aluminum, Anatsui's work challenges traditional notions of Sub-Saharan African art and its materiality. His installations, including "Gravity and Grace", have been exhibited in major institutions such as the Venice Biennale and The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (contemporaryand, 2015).

Anatsui's success exemplifies the global recognition African artists can achieve. His work has been sold for significant sums at auctions, with pieces fetching millions of dollars (Sotheby's, 2021). Anatsui's career highlights the increasing appreciation of contemporary African art and the potential for artists from the continent to make substantial impacts on the global stage.

4.3 The Rise of NFTs and Digital Art:

The rise of NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) has created new opportunities for Sub-Saharan African artists to enter the global market. NFTs provide a way to sell digital art directly to collectors, bypassing traditional gallery systems and reaching a broader audience.

Nigerian artist Osinachi is a notable example of an African artist who has leveraged NFTs to gain international recognition. His digital artworks have sold for significant amounts, demonstrating the potential for digital platforms to democratize access to the art market (Katende, 2021).

NFTs also offer new revenue streams for artists, allowing them to earn royalties from secondary sales of their work. This aspect is particularly advantageous for African artists, who may face challenges in traditional art markets. However, the NFT space also presents challenges, including issues related to digital literacy and access to technology, which must be addressed to ensure equitable participation.

5. Future of the African Art Market

5.1 Technological Advancements:

The future of the Sub-Saharan African art market is likely to be shaped significantly by technological advancements. The rise of digital platforms and blockchain technology offers new avenues for artists to reach global audiences and monetize their work. Online galleries, virtual art fairs, and NFTs provide African artists with opportunities to showcase their work beyond traditional gallery settings.

Technological advancements also facilitate greater accessibility for artists and collectors. Platforms such as Artsy and Saatchi Art enable artists from Sub-Saharan Africa to reach international buyers without leaving their home countries (Mbatha, 2021). These platforms also help bridge the gap between Sub-Saharan African artists and global collectors, fostering greater inclusivity in the art market.

5.2 Growing Global Interest:

The increasing global interest in African art is expected to continue driving market growth. As awareness of Sub-Saharan African contemporary art expands, more collectors, curators, and institutions are likely to engage with Sub-Saharan African artists and their work. This trend is supported by the growing presence of Sub-Saharan African art in major international exhibitions and auctions.

Additionally, the emergence of African art biennales and fairs, such as the Dakar Biennale and Art X Lagos, contributes to the market's visibility and growth. These events provide platforms for artists to gain exposure and connect with collectors, enhancing their opportunities for success (Adler, 2020).

5.3 Addressing Structural Challenges:

To realize the full potential of the Sub-Saharan African art market, addressing structural challenges is crucial. Improving infrastructure, such as establishing more galleries and art institutions, is essential for supporting artists and fostering market growth. Additionally, efforts to enhance intellectual property protection and streamline logistical processes can help artists navigate the global market more effectively (Mensah, 2021).

Supporting education and training for artists and art professionals is also important for developing a robust art market. By providing artists with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the global market, stakeholders can contribute to the long-term sustainability of the Sub-Saharan African art market.

Conclusion:

The Sub-Saharan African art market has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades, evolving from a marginalized niche to a vibrant and growing sector with global recognition. The historical trajectory of African art, marked by pre-colonial practices, colonial exploitation, and contemporary resurgence, has shaped its current perception and valuation. Colonial legacies and the undervaluation of Sub-Saharan African art continue to cast a long shadow, but recent efforts to reclaim and reframe African art have spurred significant growth.

The emergence of vibrant art hubs in cities like Lagos, Dakar, and Johannesburg has significantly enhanced the visibility of Sub-Saharan African artists on the global stage. Art fairs, auctions, and digital platforms, including NFTs, have opened up new avenues for exposure and sales. However, despite these advancements, the Sub-Saharan African art market remains relatively small compared to other regions, necessitating further development.

The economic potential of the Sub-Saharan African art market is substantial. Growing global interest and rising auction prices are indicative of a positive trend. However, structural challenges such as undervaluation, inadequate infrastructure, and logistical barriers hinder sustainable growth.

To fully realize its potential, the Sub-Saharan African art market must address these challenges and capitalize on emerging opportunities. Technological advancements, coupled with increasing global interest and the development of art hubs, are poised to drive future growth. Investing in education, training, and infrastructure will be crucial in creating a more robust and equitable art market.

The Sub-Saharan African art market stands at a pivotal moment. While significant progress has been made, ongoing efforts to overcome challenges and seize opportunities are essential for its future success. By fostering a supportive environment for artists, collectors, and institutions, the Sub-Saharan African art market can solidify its position as a significant player in the global art economy.

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