

## New African art wows international collectors

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

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ILE-IFE, Nigeria (AP) — Babajide Olatunji sold his first portrait for about \$7. Seven years later, his charcoal renderings of faces with tribal markings sell for thousands of dollars.

This 24-year-old's success is part of a new global recognition of the value of contemporary African art.

"It's the new 'Scramble for Africa,' no longer for land, gold or diamonds, but for art," said Giles Peppiatt, who holds the only auctions of modern African art outside the continent, at Bonham's in London.

"It's a rather different kind of tussle that is making art a viable occupation for artists across Africa," he said.

Nigeria, with the continent's largest economy and population, is leading the art field, too, with a host of established and up-and-coming painters, sculptors, printmakers, potters, photographers, glass and bead workers and batik masters.

Olatunji struggled through art school, with help from his mother, who runs a small grocery stall from her home. He managed to sell some portraits. "But some days, I went to college on an empty stomach," he told The Associated Press at his apartment-studio in Ile-Ife, a city about 200 kilometers (125 miles) northeast of Lagos, the commercial capital, that is one of several art centers in Nigeria.

The artistic success of this West African nation better known as the continent's biggest oil producer is no surprise to Adhiambo Odaga, who promoted the work of Nigerian artists when she headed the country office of the Ford Foundation.

"It's all part of the 'Africa rising' narrative and I don't think you should divorce it from the increasing interest in investment in Africa," she said.

For a century, African art was belittled. As late as 1994, poet and writer Okwui Enwezor bemoaned the fact that "The most enduring myth of all ... is the specious assertion by many in the Western art establishments, that there really is no such thing as modern art from Africa."

Enwezor, a Nigerian, this year became the first African to curate the Venice Biennale.