

Walls that speak in Ethiopia



Most of the people living in Alaba in Southern Ethiopia, a two-hour drive from Addis Ababa, are farmers. No tourists visit the area or even stop there.

The region is mostly Muslim and few Christians live there. But both communities have a special propensity to decorate the walls of their houses in a very unique style, both inside and outside.

The main goal of these paintings is to depict what the house owner likes, his life, his religion or his dreams.

Nobody knows when this art started, but many in Alaba say that this is the first Facebook!



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Inside, the only light comes through the small door – the very small windows are rarely opened. The beds are made with adobe and straw is used as mattress. The house is decorated on the side where people live.



The other side of the house is used for the cattle and is not decorated. Humans and animals live together under the same roof, a very Biblical setting.



Rejevo is only 17 but he is already a famous painter. He learned to paint with the elders and uses only natural pigments. The basic colors used are black, white and red – other colors are not traditional. He paints for both Muslims and Christians. When he is asked to paint something he is not familiar with, like for instance the Kaaba in Mecca, he browses the Internet to find out what it looks like so he can draw it.



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Surprisingly, the most requested designs he is asked to paint are... houses. The farmers house is their most valuable possession, so they like having a depiction of it, they explain.



The pattern that can be found on all houses are flowers. Not only because they are beautiful, but for another very good reason according to the artist: they are easy to paint, so they are cheap for the owners!



The walls are home to people's dreams and wishes. This young man had a bus painted on his wall because he wishes to buy one and sell tickets to passengers, a way to supplement his income as a farmer.



More and more people also like having personal messages written on their walls, a way to show their religion or simply to express their feelings. This young man says that it is his Facebook.



The area of Alaba is mainly Muslim. 1,000 madrassa (Islamic school) students were sent to this region in 1974 under the Marxist Derg and many later stayed as farmers, like this man.

The green walls also indicate that he is Muslim.



The Muslims who have made the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca proudly depict the Kaaba on their walls and they are very respected people. Very few can afford to do so as it is very expensive.



This Muslim man is praying inside his house. The walls are not decorated with religious symbols because his wife preferred to have love and flower patterns.



The houses are huge, with very high ceilings that allow the indoor kitchen smoke to rise to avoid suffocating the people sleeping inside.

These impressive houses must not hide the fact that many farmers are poor and own next to nothing. This old woman only has a bed and a coffee stall.



Christians are a minority in Alaba but their houses are highly decorated, including with quotes from the Bible.



The house of this Christian woman is decorated with a huge drawing. She has carefully chosen her bed sheets in a color that matches the fresco. She owns a large collection of coffee cups, a local tradition to show that you can welcome a lot of people in your home.



The woman is very proud of the painting of Jesus Christ inside her house. She is very poor but she paid 20 euros (nearly one month's salary) for this drawing that gives her hope every day, she said.



The only furniture that you can find inside many houses are chairs. All the money goes to the paintings, many say. People are very concerned with religion and many donate up to 10% of their incomes to their local churches.



Like in other parts of Ethiopia, people like decorating their walls with the plates, pots and trays they use for cooking. Most of them were received as wedding gifts.



People like having their favorite animals represented on their walls, like the cows and the camels they work with every day.

Lions are no longer found in the region, but they are still painted on walls as they are part of Ethiopia's history and are a symbol of power and strength.



Daily life is depicted on many walls. Seen on the right is milking, the first task of the day for the farmers. On the left is the famous Enset – it is a plant native to Ethiopia and called the “false banana.” Thanks to its edible roots, it contributes to improved food security for millions of Ethiopians every day.



Above this woman, the main items that people use in the region: an injera basket (the local bread made with teff), a milk container and a wooden pillow that people use to sleep.



The men from Alaba all wear a very unique-looking hat. Its height is intended to allow the heat from the head to escape while working in the fields.

The hat can be seen depicted on many walls.



Daily items are represented on the walls, such as a coffee table, the traditional long hat or a Kalashnikov. Guns can be found everywhere in the region – it is not a sign of war to paint a Kalashnikov. The owner of the house had a Kalashnikov painted to express his wish to own such a rifle. People have guns to protect their cattle.



Every newly-built house is decorated and painted by a local artist. People also paint news decorations for important celebrations such as the Christian holiday of Xmas or the Muslim one of Arafat. Heavy rains tend to destroy the paintings, so they will not last for many years.



A heavily-decorated house is a sign of wealth in the Alaba community, but it is done first and foremost for the pleasure of the eyes, everybody says.



Some locals hoped that the paintings could be a source of income and started taking care of their houses, mainly those living on the Addis road, which has become a commercial hub. But very few tourists stop. This mother sees an average of three cars stopping every week...



Religious posters have started appearing on the walls for a few years now. This may signal the end of the traditional paintings for many as these posters cost less and last longer...



eric lafforgue
lafforgue@mac.com
www.ericlafforgue.com