



Yatreda, *The Sacrifice of Andromeda*, from "Andromeda of Aethiopia, Volume 1," 2022.

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## Living Legends

For the Yatreda collective, NFTs are a way of bringing Ethiopia's past into the present—and preserving it for the future.

The Amharic word *tizita* refers most often to a musical scale. One of the *Qanat* modes that govern much of the secular music of north and east Ethiopia, it's often described as a kind of Ethiopian blues. *Tizita* is usually translated into English as "nostalgia"—though perhaps that word doesn't carry quite the same force. The Kenyan-American writer Mukoma Wa Ngugi has said: "It's not about nostalgia. It's about the soul of the country—like a collective memory that's bigger than anybody who is listening."

However *tizita* is defined, you might have thought it something you'd be more likely to find in the bars and lounges of Addis Ababa than on Foundation or Nifty Gateway—but that's where Yatreda comes in. This collective, which describes itself as a "family of artists from Ethiopia making art in the style of *tizita*," has found wide acclaim for the meticulously staged and shot films and photographs it mints as NFTs. Together, these conjure up a vision of Ethiopia that draws its strange and considerable power from the fusion of seemingly contradictory elements: a land that at once belongs to ancient kings and queens, stargazers and wanderers, but that is also resolutely contemporary, rendered with the most cutting-edge technology. With verve and skill, Yatreda gives Ethiopian history an immediacy that brings it right into the present.

Founded in Addis Ababa, the collective headed up by Kiya Tadele released the first part of *Kingdoms of Ethiopia* on Foundation in April 2021; while subsequent projects have grown in scale and ambition, Yatreda's signature style emerged pretty much fully fledged in this inaugural collection of six "looping motion portraits" of historical figures, some real, some imagined. Tightly focused, high-definition shots of royals and warriors are given added glamor and clarity in monochrome. Costumes and props came from a local antique shop run by a friend of the family: a warrior prince in feathered headdress wields a spear, a curved jile blade strapped to his wide leather belt; an "Adwa fighter"—named for decisive victory over the Italians that secured Ethiopian sovereignty in 1896—turns slowly to meet the viewer's gaze. Tadele's sister Roman is in charge of historical research, while another sister, Suzy, looks after costumes, bringing to life the characters Roman dredges up from the annals of Ethiopia's past. Kiya Tadele directs photography and post-production, while also modeling; in two of the first NFTs, she appears as the Queen of Sheba, decked out from head to toe in jewels and precious metals.



Yatreda, *Ethiopian Warrior Prince, Queen of Sheba, and Adwa Fighter*, from "Kingdoms of Ethiopia I," 2021.

As she has pointed out, art like this would not have had a home before NFTs. "We are recording what we can't capture in a still photo, what we can't print into a book," Tadele told *Vogue* in July 2021. *Kingdoms of Ethiopia* was followed, in August 2021, by *Movement of the Ancestors*—a way, the group has explained, of "merging traditional Ethiopian dance with the blockchain." Women dance in elaborately embroidered *kemis*; a *Tingriya* drummer collapses to the floor in frenzy, while the player of a *krar* lyre moves his fingers delicately across the strings. One filmed portrait opens with a shot of two upended, sandaled feet, before zooming out to reveal a dancer stood on his head, who begins to shake and "clap" his legs together in time to drums and lyre.



Yatreda, *Masengo Nostalgia*, from "Movement of the Ancestors," 2021.

Sales of Yatreda's work have been solid, but success hasn't solely been financial. Combining the ephemerality of historical dance or dress with the permanence promised by the blockchain, Yatreda's work has made an impact with its innovative use of web3 as a new means of recording and archiving intangible cultural practices. Their approach was recognized earlier this year by the committee of the prestigious *Prix Ars Electronica* in Linz, which gave an award of distinction in the "Digital Communities" category to *Strong Hair*, a group of one hundred looping portraits that depict hairstyles from a wide range of ethnic groups across Ethiopia, where hair remains an important signifier of tribal belonging and social status. "When we lose a hairstyle, we lose a visual language, an expression that has been created in over thousands of years that may never be repeated again," the committee wrote.



Yatreda, *Strong Hair: 061*, 2022.

And yet, if Yatrede's work is infused with a documentarian impulse, it isn't driving at anthropological objectivity. There is too much style here. Followers of Yatrede will get to know the features of a recurring cast, led by the glamorous figure of their founder; these are theatrical productions, restaging as well as representing the past, delicately toeing the line between history and fiction. In this regard, the group's most recent project, *Andromeda of Aethiopia*, is their most knowing, diving head-on into the world of myth. It is a retelling of the tale of Perseus, son of Zeus, known to the Greeks as the slayer of the Medusa and the founder of Mycenae. Perseus took Andromeda as his wife after saving her from the clutches of the sea monster Cetus, whom Poseidon had set loose on the coasts of Aethiopia in punishment for the actions of Andromeda's mother, the Aethiopian queen Cassiopeia, who had boasted that her daughter was more beautiful than the Nereids. The figure of Andromeda, bound in chains to a desolate rock as a sacrifice to assuage the monster, is familiar in Western art history from hundreds of paintings since the Renaissance—perhaps most famously, Titian's *Andromeda* of 1554–56—and yet almost invariably these paintings show Andromeda as a white-skinned nude, chained in a mythic otherworld that might just as easily be the Adriatic or the Tyrrhenian as the Gulf of Aden.

*Andromeda of Aethiopia* brings the mythical princess home. It's a lavish production—Tadele stars as the heroine, pictured with the king and queen, in traditional regalia; sailing with an entourage across the Erythraean Sea to her fate; chained before the raging Cetus, rendered massive by overlaid perspectives. Marking Yatrede's debut on Nifty Gateway, it was released in two volumes. The first consists of eight chronologically unfolding "chapters," or scenes from the story, and the second of ten looping portraits of the characters involved, minted in a random drop structure with the incentive of an exclusive airdrop dangled before collectors who managed to snap up all of them. There is also an accompanying video that presents these *tableaux vivants* together in full, with narration in English and Amharic.

Perhaps the clearest measure of Yatrede's achievement could be the Ethiopian crypto artists who follow in their footsteps, treating web3 as a means both of preserving their collective past and reimagining it for the future. Others working in this vein include Fanuel Leul, whose digital artworks likewise depict figures from Ethiopia's traditional past, but transplanted into space-age settings that owe much both to Afrofuturism and science fiction. With an eye to inspiring the next generation, Yatrede, meanwhile, have set up "Yatrede-Ekub"—a wallet into which 15 percent of the group's earnings is deposited, reserved for other Ethiopian artists to mint work on the blockchain (and to collect works by those who have). An *ekub* is a mode of communal saving in Ethiopia: a shared piggybank, where contributors to the pot are rewarded at random with the total on a revolving basis (Tadele has said that such a scheme with her friends enabled her to buy her first car). It's yet another indication of how Yatrede is imbuing web3 with time-honored traditions, and showing that the future of the NFT space may well lie in the new possibilities it offers us for engaging with the past.