

Remembrance + Renewal (Oklahoma, 31 Mar–1 Apr 26)

Russell Center, Old Faculty Club, University of Oklahoma, Mar 31–Apr 1, 2026

Emily Burns

“Remembrance + Renewal: Celebrating Ethiopian-Oklahoman Connections through Art,” on March 31 and April 1, 2026, is co-organized between the Russell Center, University of St. Andrews in Scotland, and the Gebre Kristos Desta Art Center in Addis Ababa, with co-sponsorship from the Black Artists of Oklahoma Project at the University of Oklahoma. Much of the program will focus on Gebre Kristos Desta (1932-1981), an Ethiopian modernist painter who returned to his preferred abstract style after moving to Lawton, Oklahoma as a political refugee. The keynote lecture will be given by Heran Sereke Brhan, Deputy Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. The program will also explore recent and current projects to celebrate the legacy of this artist, as well as other aspects of exchange between the state of Oklahoma and Ethiopia, including OSU's links with agricultural education in Ethiopia beginning in the 1950s, collecting Ethiopian art and material culture by Oklahomans, Ethiopian-American artists currently practicing in the state, and wider histories of modernisms and African diaspora.

Russell Center sessions will be livestreamed on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/@OUSchoolofVisualArts-i9z/>.

Please register for in person or for online participation at <https://forms.gle/8UM1hJppQQqakQRJ8>.

Event Schedule

MARCH 31, 2026

9am

Coffee, breakfast, and registration

9:30am

Welcome from Prof. Emily Burns, Prof. Bekele Mekonnen and Dr. Kate Cowcher

10am-12pm

Panel One: Reflections on the life and times of Gebre Kristos Desta

Prof. Bekele Mekonnen (Director, Gebre Kristos Desta Centre, Addis Ababa University)

Konjlit Seyoum (Independent Curator) – Art, Space, and Legacy: Celebrating Gebre Kristos Desta

Wosene Worke Kosrof (Independent Artist) – Gash Gebre: My Mentor

Wendy Kindred (Independent Artist; former teacher at Alle School of Fine Arts, Addis Ababa) – Revisiting Gebre Kristos

Chair: Dr. Kate Cowcher

12-1.30pm

Lunch at the Russell Center

1:30-2:30pm

Lecture

Prof. Achamyelah Debela (Professor of Art & Director of Computing Center for the Arts, North Carolina Central University) – ‘Gebre Kristos Desta (1932-1981): A Transformative Figure in Ethiopian Contemporary Art’

3pm

Depart for Oklahoma City for memorial activity at Fairlawn Cemetery / Poetry Recital / Community reflections on Gebre Kristos’ life

Dinner hosted at Crown Heights Methodist Church, fellowship hall, 1021 NW 37th St, Oklahoma City, OK 73118, catered by Queen of Sheba

APRIL 1, 2026

9am Coffee, breakfast and registration

9:30am-11am

Panel Two: Creative Legacies of Gebre Kristos Desta

Elizabeth Habte Wold (Independent Artist) – Image-Making in Time and Space: Leaving Something Behind

Prof. Kebedech Tekleab (Associate Professor of Art (Tenured), The City University of New York [CUNY] / Queensborough Community College) – Lyrical Articulation: Gebrekristos Desta as a Painter and a Poet

Dr Kate Cowcher (Lecturer, School of Art History, University of St Andrews) – In Search of the Addis Spring in Exile

Chair: Prof. Dan Mains (Professor of Anthropology and African Studies, University of Oklahoma)

11am-1pm

Visit to the 3 OU exhibitions related to Ethiopia-Oklahoma exchange

Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West, Making and Collecting: Ethiopian Material Culture in Oklahoma Collections, Mar 11-May 15, 2026

SoVA, Spotlight Gallery, The Long Pour: Coffee and Decades of Ethiopian-Oklahoma Connection, Mar 23–April 3, 2026

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, Focus Gallery, Beyond the Sky: Ethiopian Artists in Oklahoma, Mar 27-Aug 15, 2026

Informal lunch at the Russell Center

1:30pm-3pm

Panel Three: Oklahoma-Ethiopia Legacies

Eyakem Gulilat (Tulsa Artist Fellow and Independent Artist)

Dr Olivia Murphy (adjunct instructor, art history and women’s and gender studies departments, and research lead for the Black Artists of Oklahoma Project, University of Oklahoma) – Histories

of Black Artists in Oklahoma

Prof. Jason Cytacki (Associate Professor of Painting, University of Oklahoma), and Prof. Bekele Mekonnen (Director, Gebre Kristos Desta Centre, Addis Ababa University) – A Memorial Mural for Gebre Kristos Desta in Norman, Oklahoma

Prof. Emily Burns (Charles Marion Russell Memorial Chair and Associate Professor of Art History, University of Oklahoma) – Exhibiting Ethiopian-Oklahoman Histories

Chair: Prof. Robert Bailey (Interim Associate Director and Associate Professor of Art History, University of Oklahoma)

3:15pm-5pm

Keynote Lecture

Dr. Heran Sereke Brhan (Deputy Director, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution) – ‘Gebre Kristos Desta: The “Eternal Flame” of an Era’

5:15pm

Closing reception at The Gebre Kristos Desta Mural, Porter and Main St., Norman, OK

Dinner at The Resonator Institute, 325 E Main St, Norman, OK 73069, Dinner funded by the Black Artists of Oklahoma Project at the University of Oklahoma, sponsored by the National Archives and the Mellon Foundation

Reference:

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