

NFTs and African art representation

There is a space on the web that has begun to create opportunities for prosperity across all demographics, making it an equitable means to generate wealth amongst previously disenfranchised groups. This reality stems from the non-fungible assets better known as NFTs.

NFTs in not too many words

NFTs translate the same aspects of physical ownership, rarity, and value of artwork to a digital metaspaces format. As for NFT artists, they thrive on uniqueness and originality to sell their art, including a distinctive cryptographic signature that lends an air of exclusivity - rarity is a big part of what drives the NFT market after all.

An inclusive global platform with a big side of African heritage protection

Born in the heat of the digital society, this relatively new being can mean a world of opportunities for artists excluded from conventional art circuits. African artists have a long history of getting profit-blocked from the tangible gains of their work, with many being forced into unfair contracts or

involuntarily signing away their intellectual property rights. Additionally, due to a lack of thorough documentation, African cultural heritage is under threat.

Fast-forward to the advent of the metaverse: numerous artists of African or Afro-descendant origin have since started to exhibit and upload their artistic creations on NFT platforms in an accessible way, notably too without encountering the barriers or racial prejudices that exist in many physical spaces. NFTs present the African community with a distinctive possibility to promote and protect African art, as being non-fungible means each NFT is unique and cannot be exchanged for an identical one. At the same time, financial opportunities for perpetual royalties are also created, where, for example, artists can earn a commission for each resale.

Rise to fame, fortune and family

African artists first became involved in a major NFT conversation last year when prominent Nigerian crypto artist Jason Osinachi's art was featured and sold at Christie's London for a handsome sum. Since then, a flood of young African creators have been flocking to NFTs.

In 2021, artists from across the African continent created ripples in the NFT space and had their works minted on several platforms like Super Rare, Opensea, and Foundation, to name but a few. African digital artists have also built communities such as Black NFT Art and Afro Future DAO, which serve as platforms to promote collaborations and idea/resource sharing, therefore supporting new artists whilst also fostering a community of black heritage promotion.



Pool Day II, created by Jason Osinachi using Microsoft Word



Perils persist - climate matters and authenticity in tatters

It's important to note that many proponents are skeptical of the value that NFTs bring to the art world. Criticisms center on concerns around the already abundance of scams running through the NFT space such as fraudulent copies of other NFTs and the reproduction of famous artworks without permission.

An additional criticism rests on environmental concerns as NFTs are based on the same technology behind cryptocurrency. This makes them open to the same environmental issue that digital currencies face regarding how energy intensive they are to create and verify on the blockchain. Indeed, some digital artists have already voiced detraction for NFTs or completely boycotted the medium surrounding concerns about the effect on the planet's climate.

Further food for thought now lies on the viability of the NFT market, especially seeing as the crypto market has taken a severe tumble in recent weeks. Could the fate of the NFT markets mirror such events? And what could that mean for historically marginalised artists in Africa and beyond who have recently gained more equitable access to the art world?