

# Boafo, the Black Artist Who Turned Art History Upside Down: "Finger Painting Is Uncontrollable and Joyful"

By Kim Bora

Amoako Boafo, a Ghanaian artist, held his first solo exhibition in Asia, "I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE," at the Wooyang Art Museum in Gyeongju to commemorate its reopening and APEC. He rose to stardom with his "finger painting" technique of depicting figures with his fingers, collaborated with Dior, and caused a sensation by painting on Jeff Bezos' rocket. After moving to Vienna, Austria, in 2014, he focused on Black portraiture and opened the "dot.ateliers" residency in his hometown of Accra, Ghana. "I aim to grow alongside talented emerging Black artists." Following exhibitions at the Denver Art Museum and Seattle Art Museum, he made his debut at the Belvedere Museum last year.

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Who is the most beloved Black artist in the art world today? Nine out of ten people would likely say: Amoako Boafo. His path, which created the "Boafo phenomenon" in the art market and academia for years, is now leading toward major institutions. Following last year's exhibition at the Belvedere Museum in Vienna, Austria, he came to Korea with his first solo institutional exhibition in Asia, "I Have Been Here Before." We interviewed him at the Wooyang Art Museum in Gyeongju.



Amoako Bofo, Artist Portrait, 2024, Photo by Alejandro Zaras, Courtesy of the artist and Mariane Ibrahim

The mysterious skin rendered with winding lines, the bright background tones and dazzling garments, and the embroidery and objects that enrich the scene have come to define the "Bofo style" over the past few years. The intentionally distorted faces are all painted with his fingers. His "finger painting" technique—using his hands instead of brushes—is his trademark. Even among many works, one can easily distinguish his paintings.



Self-Portrait-Floral Jacket, 2022, Oil on canvas, 228x164cm

## **A shooting star? A genius prepared for the "classics of the 21st century"**

Bofo quickly became one of the most talked-about artists in the art world. In 2018, African American artist Kehinde Wiley discovered his work on Instagram and recommended him to a gallery, which served as a catalyst. While in residence at the Rubell Museum in Miami, owned by renowned collectors Don and Mera Rubell, he signed exclusive contracts with Roberts Projects in LA and the Mariane Ibrahim Gallery in Chicago.



Amoako Bofo

It was a meteoric rise. The luxury brand Dior collaborated with him for its 2021 S/S men's collection, and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos sent three of his paintings into space on the exterior panel of the Blue Origin Rocket. In December 2021, one of his works, "Hands Up," sold at a Christie's auction in Hong Kong for over \$3.4 million, setting a new auction record for the artist. His works are housed in the Tate Modern in London, Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Albertina Museum in Vienna. In 2022, he was also selected by Gagosian, the world's largest gallery.

At this point, the label "overnight sensation" seems entirely fitting. Some may have thought, "He must be a third-generation African immigrant educated in the US or Europe."





Mr. Palm Green Wristband, 2022, Courtesy of Wooyang Art Museum



King Gloves, 2021, Courtesy of Wooyang Art Museum





white Teeth, White nail polish, 2023, Courtesy of Wooyang Art Museum

## Boafo meets Klimt and Egon Schiele in Ghana

Boafo was born in Accra, the capital of Ghana, in 1984. He lost his father, a fisherman, at a young age and was raised by his mother, who worked as a housekeeper in various homes. What he loved most was drawing. Until entering university, he was entirely self-taught.

“One of the things my friends and I did together was drawing. When I drew, it was complete mental rest. As teenagers, we held drawing competitions—it was like a game. Given my family’s financial situation, I never imagined becoming a professional artist in Ghana. I thought I’d earn money through tennis and painting after retirement.”

He also had a talent for tennis, starting as a ball boy and eventually becoming a semi-professional player. Then, a colleague of his mother offered to pay for a scholarship to the Ghana College of Art and Design in Accra, opening a new path. Seeing himself drawing even on the tennis court, he reaffirmed his dream of becoming a painter.



Amoako Boafo Pavilion, designed by architect Glenn Dross and built at Wooyang Art Museum

Some see the composition and decorative elements of his work and think of Gustav Klimt; the twisted, contorted expressions recall Egon Schiele. And rightly so. After earning his bachelor's degree in Accra, Amoako Boafo moved to Vienna in 2014. While completing a master's degree at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, he was inspired by Vienna's vast cultural heritage—and endured a long period of frustration.

**“Vienna is a city where artistic legacy lives and breathes everywhere. I was greatly inspired by Klimt and Schiele’s compositions, color sensibility, and vibrant palette. But I can’t forget the moments of discrimination I experienced as a Black man in Vienna. When I painted Black people as they are, I often heard, ‘Why are they so dark?’ Imagine being told that—to make them lighter.” (laughs)**





Bueno, 2024, Courtesy of Wooyang Art Museum

## Why Bofo paints with his fingers

Those humiliating moments ultimately became creative fuel. After experiencing racism, he created the "Body Politics" series, which received the highest praise among his early works. One piece features him holding a copy of Frantz Fanon's 1961 essay, "The Wretched of the Earth," which discusses the dehumanizing effects of colonialism. That painting became the work that introduced Bofo to the global art world.





Jean Michel Basquiat IV, 2020

He continued to incorporate themes from African photography and fashion, as well as everyday life among Black immigrants in Europe and the United States.

Looking at Boafo's paintings, one realizes how reductive and ignorant it has been to call an entire race simply "Black." His skin tones blend dark brown, ochre, purple, cobalt blue, moss green, and yellow—swirling in harmony under his fingers. "Finger painting makes what I want to express more beautiful. Sure, brushes offer more control and smoother results. But with my hands, simple gestures generate powerful energy. It's like a primitive human gesture. The sculptural forms in my painting are only possible because I use both hands."

Asked about his color choices, especially the bold use of blue for skin, he explained: "I've used countless blues, from cobalt to ultramarine. Brown evokes the earth and soil, while blue feels like light and life. What better colors could capture the human figure?"



Amoako Bofo, Self Portrait- Three Gold Chains, 2025





Amoako Boafo, Embroidered Roses, 2025



## **“It's my first time in Korea... The reason I said ‘I've been here before’ is...”**

Boafo was visibly excited about preparing for this exhibition in Korea. Opening on July 20 and running through November 30, the show is also part of the official schedule for the upcoming APEC summit in Gyeongju this October.

Boafo collaborated once again with Ghanaian architect Glenn DeRoche, co-designing a portion of the exhibition space. He titled the exhibition "I Have Been Here Before. »

Why that title?

“I'd seen videos of Korean collectors and visitors engaging passionately with my work at art fairs. This is my first time in Asia, but I believe mental and emotional connection matter more than physical presence. The way Korean audiences engage with my art, and the colors and patterns of traditional Korean aesthetics—they all felt very familiar to me.”



Amoako Boafo, "I Have Been Here Before," exhibition view

The exhibition is divided into four sections. *Shall Gaze* features intense portraits in which figures stare directly ahead, framed against blank backgrounds. *State of Being* explores internal complexity, featuring casual yet vivid portrayals—a woman resting her hands lightly on her waist, a man with his hand behind his neck. *Posturing and Posing* offers more exaggerated, stylized portraits. The final section, *Space for the Divine*, is located inside the Nsaa Pavilion—an architectural structure inspired by traditional hanok courtyards and Korean embroidery, co-designed with DeRoche.

“To me, embroidery is a form of meditation, completed through repetition and focus,” Boafo said.

Boafo did not hide his excitement while preparing for this exhibition in Korea. The exhibition, which opened on July 20 and will continue until November 30, is also included in the official viewing schedule for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit to be held in Gyeongju at the end of October. He designed part of the space himself in collaboration with Ghanaian architect Gled Drosch, with whom he has worked many times before. He also named the exhibition. "I've been here before." Why did he do that? "I've seen videos of Korean collectors and visitors who love my paintings enthusiastically enjoying the works at art fairs. This is my first time coming to Asia, but I think being mentally connected is much more important than physically being there. The way people enjoy the paintings and the energy conveyed through their expressions, as well as the traditional Korean patterns and colors, felt very close to me. »

This exhibition is divided into four sections. "Shall Gaze" features intense portraits of people staring straight ahead, with no background. Following the intense eye contact, "State of Being" shows people with different inner worlds coming to life. Ordinary but real people appear, including a woman sitting in a slouched position, a woman with her hands lightly on her waist, and a man with one hand behind his neck. The "Posturing and Posing" section features more exaggerated and boldly styled portraits. The final exhibition space, "Space for the Divine," is located inside the Nsaa Pavilion, which was inspired by the courtyard architecture of traditional Korean houses and embroidery, created in collaboration with DeRoche. Boafo said, "To me, embroidery is like meditation, completed through repetition and concentration."



One of three works by Amoako Boafo sent aboard Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin rocket

## Influencing the world beyond art

Having achieved global renown, Boafo is now looking beyond the art world. In 2022, he launched "dot.ateliers," a residency program in Accra for artists and curators. He also supports organizations like Black Girls Glow, a nonprofit helping female creatives in Ghana.

"There is so much talent in Africa, including Ghana. But we still rely heavily on the West. Now that interest in African art is growing, more educational exchange and collecting are needed." Though he learned to paint in school, Boafo remains a tennis enthusiast. He says he's never lost to anyone his age.

"Studying art taught me how to draw. But tennis taught me about life. You have to keep moving, no matter what happens."

Asked if he's interested in exploring sculpture or media art beyond portraiture, Boafo replied confidently:

"I already am a sculptor and abstract painter. Even when studying those genres in school, I was always developing my own style. Finger painting is like adding and subtracting from clay—it's both sculpture and architecture to me. Sometimes I imagine the background before abstracting it. Sometimes I borrow a still life composition. All of that lives inside my figurative work."