

Art and design in London 2025

Collecting

Touria El Glaoui blazed a trail for African art. There's still a long way to go

The Morocco-born art collector and founder of 1-54 on where her continent-spanning fairs might go next

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When I talk to Touria El Glaoui, founder of the 1-54 contemporary African art fairs, she has just returned from Brazil, glowing from the trip. “The experience of the artists of African descent there is so familiar, the story and the culture of the African continent is still very present,” she says, emphasising the fact that the mission of 1-54’s three fairs, in London, New York and Marrakech, is to promote the visibility of not only artists from the African continent but the whole huge diaspora. The name may evoke the 54 countries that make up the African continent itself, but the reach is even wider.

So, I have to ask straight away, is she considering another edition of the fair in Brazil? “I flirted with the idea two or three years ago,” she replies. “I don’t think I would go for a fully fledged fair there but the idea of a pop-up or a curated show is something we might do in the future.”

But we're jumping ahead, and I ask El Glaoui to go back to the start and explain how she — educated in management and international affairs — came to found the world's only international art fair dedicated to Africa. She credits the inspiration to her father, Hassan El Glaoui, a prominent artist in Morocco but with almost little recognition elsewhere in the world. She was born in Casablanca in 1974 and studied at Pace University in New York; by 2011 she was working in the corporate world — for investment bank Salomon Smith Barney in Manhattan, then for Cisco Systems in London — but also supporting her father's career abroad, and began to see that his story was by no means unusual.



'Nuit de Noël' (1963) by Malian photographer Malick Sidibé © Courtesy of Tristan Hoare Gallery



'A Tale of Two Scooters' (2025) by Nigerian painter and designer Damilola Onosowobo © Courtesy of Affinity Gallery

“I discovered Africa for business reasons, and at the same time I was discovering the art scene there,” she says. “But when I went back to London or the US, I found that all those fantastic artists I’d seen had absolutely no visibility outside Africa.” There was, with only a tiny handful of exceptions, “lack of access, lack of visibility, lack of appreciation”.

“I was quite green, it wasn’t my world,” she admits, “yet as soon as we started in 2013” — at Somerset House in London, timed to coincide with Frieze to take advantage of the collectors and art-lovers in town — “the fair was extremely successful. It sold out, so it gave us the opportunity to double in size the following year.”

This year's London edition, the 13th, features more than 50 galleries from 13 countries. Emboldened by the early reception, “we decided we needed to be in the US as well, so we replicated the model in New York”, opening there in 2015. “And we suddenly encountered a pool of African-American collectors who were very specific in their collecting and they were eager to discover more Black artists.”



Art in action at the 1:54 Marrakech art fair in 2024 © Mohamed Lakhdar

Then in 2018 it was “back to Africa” — which, El Glaoui says, was “always in the plan”. Marrakech was chosen as the location for 1-54's third fair not only because Morocco was her home and she felt able to negotiate the logistical problems and restrictions. She also didn't want to compete with the continent's few established art fairs — ArtX in Lagos, or the fairs in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Even so, she feared there wasn't enough of a collector base in Africa to sustain the fair, and she knew she would have to entice international buyers. Again Marrakech was a good solution, since the attractions of the city and the fair's location (the legendary Hotel Mamounia) are a lure for galleries and buyers alike.

After six successful editions in Morocco, how does El Glaoui feel about the fair's record there? She's pleased, she says, that there has been an appreciable impact on the local market, with galleries and new cultural platforms opening and expanding in Marrakech, and excited to see the — admittedly, pretty slow — development of an arts ecosystem.



'Avatar' (2022) by Beninese artist Romuald Hazoumè, who creates West African-style masks using found objects, usually plastic jerry cans © Romuald Hazoumè

“We have seen an amazing growth in the collector base — but local collectors often support their local art market in ways that are very different,” she explains. She points to a collector in Senegal who directly supports all the local artists, providing an entire livelihood for some — more an old-school patron than a modern-day collector. These are the “Medicis of Africa”, El Glaoui says, giving as another example the [Macaal museum in Morocco](#), a family-run independent not-for-profit. Sponsorship is also growing: the Cairo-based African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) is this year's new lead sponsor of 1-54, as well as establishing its own art collection.

It can't all be good news, though, even if El Glaoui makes relatively light of the knotty logistical problems of working on the African continent. Her mission to build a consistent year-round market for African and African diaspora art leads her to travel almost continuously, seeking out artists and visiting galleries. As with all art fairs, gallery selection is a key issue — and even some of 1-54's supporters admit to occasionally variable quality.



'Don't You Want To Live Before You Die V' (2024) by Vanessa Endeley, a Lagos-born, London-based painter and photographer © Courtesy of Affinity Gallery.

It's a balancing act, she explains, between experienced galleries and those who might not have the means or knowledge to apply, or to deal with visas and shipping: "They might be very new at it and not aware of the processes or how to negotiate the realities of art fairs, but if they're doing an amazing job we try to help and guide them a bit more, supporting them if necessary". There's also a special project section of each fair, to showcase not-for-profits, or very young galleries.

And so, I ask El Glaoui — what next? Despite the steep global downturn in the art market, her ambitions seem undimmed and she's up for disrupting the art fair model. Her recent Brazil trip, for instance, was in the company of 25 collectors, effectively an advisory tour involving the São Paulo Bienal, visiting studios, scouting the local art scene. All, she says, made purchases.

"Collectors knew that I travel all the time and they would ask if they could come with me," she says. Although this business model, she admits, isn't fully formed, beyond the participation fee, there are already plans for next year's Dakar biennale in Senegal; other possible destinations on the continent include Côte d'Ivoire.



'Human Spring 11' (2023) by Cameroonian painter Barthélémy Toguo © Courtesy the artist and HdM Gallery



'Oikonomos' (2011) by Angolan photographer Edson Chagas © Courtesy the artist and Apalazzo Gallery

Two years ago, El Glaoui also dipped her toe into the Asian market, mounting a curated exhibition in Hong Kong under the auspices of long-term sponsors Christie's. Coinciding with Art Basel Hong Kong, it was, she says, "quite a learning curve". Differences in tastes and expectations were distinctive: while paintings sold well, multimedia pieces, especially those created from rubbish and recycled objects, proved "not very saleable". Interestingly, though, on a trip to Shanghai with uber-gallerist Pearl Lam, El Glaoui "felt the market [for African art] could be even more ready than in Hong Kong".

As for the pop-up experiment, which she has also staged in Paris: “I see more future in that model,” she says, “especially in places where we’re not yet sure about the reaction to the local scene.” And “if we’re talking about Europe, I’ll admit I’m considering Paris. It is attracting more collectors now, people from the US for instance going to Paris but not coming to London.”



Gallery view of 1-54 Paris in 2022, held at Christie's, featuring three works by Moroccan painter Anuar Khalifi © Michael Huard

Looking back over the 13 years since she founded 1-54, can she point to much positive change? “Yes, I do feel the landscape has changed. More galleries and institutions are including African artists in their mainstream programmes, without necessarily labelling it as an African exhibition.”

Yet, especially when it comes to prices, there's a deep chasm to bridge. She quotes new artists emerging from art schools selling for between £5,000 and £25,000 — and points out that is the price range for artists on the African continent who have half a lifetime of experience and shows and fairs already to their credit. The best thing that galleries and the fairs can do, she says, is not only making sales but pushing artists towards museum shows, ensuring they are placed in important collections, and so growing their reputations. “Compared to the rest of the world, it is still a huge journey.”

October 16-19, [1-54.com](https://www.1-54.com)

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