

belvedere

AMOAKO BOAFO
PROPER LOVE

Lower Belvedere
25 October 2024 to 12 January 2025



Amoako Boafo, *White Nail Polish*, 2021
Photo: Roberts Projects
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This comprehensive show presents key paintings — portraits, but also a series of self-portraits — by Amoako Boafo (* 1984 in Accra), dating from 2016 to the present day. As one of the most important voices of a new generation of Black artists, Boafo portrays friends, acquaintances and public figures who convey contemporary notions of Black self-empowerment and self-conception.

General Director Stella Rollig: Following a quick rise on the international art market and overwhelmingly rapid fame, Amoako Boafo deserves a serious inspection of his work: and, indeed, it does convince. At the Belvedere, Boafo's unmistakable style can be viewed alongside the icons of Viennese Modernism, whose influence the artist draws on and which he translates into contemporary art.

After studying art in Accra, Boafo studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna from 2014. Here he not only experienced his formative artistic years, he also developed his distinctive style, which is characterised by the unconventional use of finger painting. As a result, we see a sculptural depiction of the human body that creates a strong painterly contrast with the image's flatly rendered sections.

The people portrayed by Boafo embody an idea of Blackness that is nurtured by its own culture, which signals an act of resistance against racist attributions by white majority society. This form of Black subjectivity is also found in the expressions of those portrayed, who confront the viewer as self-assured individuals and often seek direct eye contact. Boafo stages clothing like a collage with ornamental details that are transferred to the canvas using a printing process. The artist's intensive preoccupation with Black history is subtly reflected in the paintings where works by key thinkers of Black emancipatory movements occur as motifs.

Amoako Boafo's constructive way of dealing with the experiences of rejection and hostility, especially at the beginning of his career, has led to an artistic return to himself. This kind of self-empowerment runs like a common thread through his paintings. The people portrayed not only symbolise a new

form of Black self-esteem, but also always reflect a part of the artist. Consequently, Proper Love centres on works that express this attitude: they celebrate the family spirit within a community of solidarity, show moments of joy and lightness and celebrate Blackness, says curator Sergey Harutoonian.

The Belvedere has brought together more than 50 works that reflect Boafo's oeuvre to date. In addition to the exhibition in the Lower Belvedere, three works will be integrated into the display collection *Vienna 1900* in the Upper Belvedere in order to present Amoako Boafo in the context of central art historical figures like Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt, whose works have had a significant influence on the artist's practice.

Supported by



BIOGRAPHY AMOAKO BOAFO

Amoako Bofo (b. 1984 in Accra/Ghana) portrays friends, acquaintances, and public figures who embody a contemporary image of Black identity and self-perception. As a member of the African diaspora, Amoako Bofo places the Black body at the center of his artistic work. In doing so, he actively participates in reframing and realigning the global perception of Black culture that has broken free from the external influences of white mainstream society. His painterly style is characterized by a stark contrast between two-dimensional and ornamental pictorial elements and the three-dimensional rendering of his subjects, which he achieves through his signature finger-painting technique rather than using a brush. His sitters, often placed strictly frontal in his compositions, seek direct eye contact with the viewer and confidently meet them at eye level.

The artist graduated from Ghanatta College of Art & Design in Accra in 2008 and continued his studies in 2014 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Amoako Bofo was awarded the Walter Koschatzky Art Prize in 2017 and the STRABAG-Artaward International in 2019.

His solo exhibitions include the Denver Art Museum (Denver, Colorado), Seattle Art Museum (Seattle, Washington), Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (Houston, Texas), and the Museum of African Diaspora (San Francisco, California), among others.

Amoako Bofo's works are included in national and international museum collections such as the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou (Paris, France); Leopold Museum (Vienna, Austria); Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, California); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York City, New York); Denver Art Museum (Denver, Colorado); Blenheim Foundation (Woodstock, Oxfordshire, United Kingdom), and the Rubell Family Collection (Miami, Florida).

The artist lives and works in Accra and Vienna.

EXHIBITION TEXTS

Amoako Boafo's images speak of affection. In his portraits, the painter captures people who inspire him: friends, acquaintances, and public figures from the African diaspora or from the continent. His vivid paintings convey a contemporary and self-determined image of Black identity.

With *Proper Love*, the artist's biography comes full circle. After studying art in Accra, Boafo studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna from 2014 to 2019. It was there that he began to focus on key artists of Viennese Modernism such as Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, and to develop his own unmistakable formal visual language through his finger-painting technique. In addition to forming his sitters' skin using his fingers instead of a brush, he sometimes collages the clothing on the canvas. Fashion becomes an important signifier in Boafo's oeuvre, and the artist makes use of both clothing and core texts of Black emancipation as references to Black culture and history.

Boafo's international breakthrough came in 2019. This was followed by major solo shows in the United States. In acknowledgment of his artistic stature, this exhibition at the Belvedere is Amoako Boafo's first solo show at a European institution. The extensive exhibition presents major paintings from 2016 to the present, including portraits and a series of self-portraits.

These works convey what he stands for as an artist: *Proper Love*, namely his love of art, his self-love, and not least his love of the Black community, to which Amoako Boafo dedicates this show.

The Answering Gaze

"All I do is document the good people around me," Amoako Boafo declares. He creates vivid images of important figures in the Black community, filling both the pictorial and the exhibition space with a tangible physical presence. In his paintings, Boafo shifts the Eurocentric perspective that prevails even beyond Western art history, making a strong political statement.

He often stages the person portrayed against a monochrome, abstract background and adds selected personal objects. The palette in each case is restricted to just a few tones interrupted here and there by individual highlights. Nothing distracts viewers from the artist's focus on the intense moment of an encounter.

Boafo's portraits of contemporaries from the Black community present individuals who radiate self-confidence, serenity, and strength. They respond calmly and directly to the viewer's gaze.

Viennese Women

During his time at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Amoako Boafo painted portraits of women from Vienna's art and cultural scene including artist, author, and scholar Belinda Ade Kazeem-Kamiński; artist Abiona Esther Ojo; and musician Enyonam Tetteh-Klu. He knows all three of them personally.

In his years studying at the academy, Boafo also explored Viennese art from around 1900 and used it as a source of inspiration. Characteristic traits of Viennese Modernism resurface in many of Boafo's portraits, including the stringent frontal structure of the compositions or the use of decoratively patterned surfaces. By representing contemporary members of Vienna's Black community, Boafo ensures their activities are visible and inscribes them into the history of the city.

Proper Love

Amoako Boafo's work was initially met with little appreciation in Vienna. The white-dominated society repeatedly relied on racist prejudices in their reactions to the artist from Ghana. Above all, Boafo felt a sense of belonging within the Black community and among creatives of color living in Vienna. He was soon interacting with these communities, a process that resulted in countless portraits.

Boafo frequently gifted his images to the people he painted—what arose through the community was meant to remain part of the community. While still a student, he supported colleagues through a variety of projects. Since 2022, Boafo has been promoting young artists in the art center he founded in Accra, the dot.ateliers.

Works that express this mindset form the heart of the *Proper Love* exhibition: the paintings commemorate the friendly cohesion and support within a community that rests on solidarity, depict moments of joy and lightness, and celebrate Blackness.

Masculinities

Amoako Boafo stages himself and other men with a nose ring, painted fingernails, and fashion accessories, challenging customary social notions and gender stereotypes. His paintings convey a complex view of Black masculinity that embraces vulnerability and sensitivity. He reflects in equal part on patriarchal and racist ways of thinking and influences. Strong colors and patterns point to the importance of fashion as a means of expressing a self-determined construction for one's own Black identity.

Boafo's works repeatedly reference other artists. Within the Austrian context, Boafo cites the body consciousness painting of Maria Lassnig as an important source of inspiration, as well as Egon Schiele's interest in a nuanced representation of masculinity and use of body language and facial gestures to evoke ambivalent emotions.

Self-Portraits

The earliest pieces in the exhibition date back to 2016, when Amoako Boafo was busy studying in Vienna. During this period, the artist frequently produced self-portraits in intimate studio settings, presenting himself seated naked on a chair in three-quarter profile as he looks at himself in the mirror, his gaze directed straight at the viewer, and repeatedly with a book in his hand. Boafo expresses how he sees himself and how he wants to be seen.

However, the images are not just responses to the art market's prior rejection of Boafo's paintings. Over and above personal experiences, in his self-portraits he reflects on stereotype notions of hypersexualized Black male bodies. He explores postcolonial theoretical works and contemporary Black literature, which he also presents in his paintings. With his combination of physicality and intellectuality, Boafo creates a differentiated image of Black identity that runs counter to white Western prejudices.

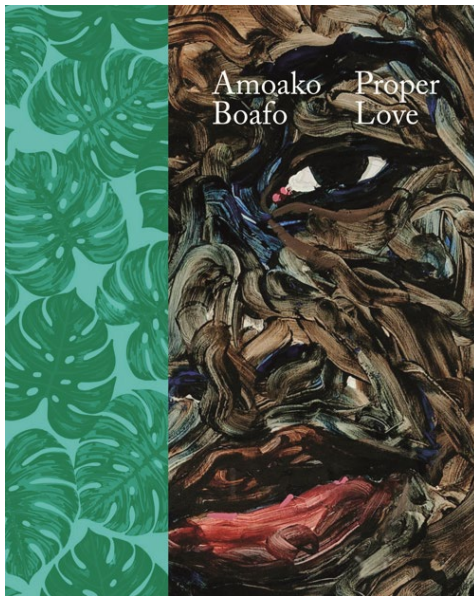
Why Do You Only Paint Black People

In Vienna, Amoako Boafo was constantly asked why he only paints Black people, often coupled with the tenuous suggestion that portraits of white people would sell better. No one ever posed a similar question in Ghana, where he first trained at an art college and chose portrait painting as his preferred genre. In the diaspora Boafo has consistently produced figurative portraits of Black public figures that tell a story of self-empowerment and eventually made him known on the international stage.

In his painting *Why Do You Only Paint Black People* (2017) Boafo depicts a fashionably clothed person who can only be vaguely discerned. Instead of a face, we see a dark surface. In front of their upper body, the figure holds up a sign with the question from the title. Boafo thus bounces the question back at the viewers and encourages them to be conscious of their own perspective.

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EXHIBITION CATALOGUE



Amoako Boafo. Proper Love

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AUDIO OFFERS

Spotify Playlist – Amoako Boafo

The exhibition's Spotify playlist, curated by Amoako Boafo.



Podcast – Amoako Boafo. Proper Love

WHAT does Proper Love mean to you? Anna Gaberscik in conversation with Joy Adenike Breiner, Abiona Esther Ojo, Denise Van De Cruz and Sergey Harutoonian. A cooperation with *Im Museum*-Podcast.



Audiotour Turning the Page. Representations of Blackness

Who is (in)visible? Whose history do we remember? And how do images from the past influence our present? The free audio tour through the Belvedere by historian Tayla Myree focusses on representations of Black people in art. In-depth interviews with Nicole Fölß (art mediator), Simon Inou (journalist), and Vanessa Spanbauer (historian).



PROGRAM

Talk: Proper Love and Legacy

Saturday, 30 November / 6.30–10 PM / LOWER BELVEDERE

Anna Gaberscik talks to Joy Adenike Breiner, Leni Charles, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, Cheri O. and Abiona Esther Ojo about love, representation and joy. After the talk, there will be guided tours of the exhibition and drinks as well as music.

Moderation and organisation: Anna Gaberscik

Reading: The Strangers

Friday, 6 December / 7–8 PM / UPPER BELVEDERE

Reading with Ekow Eshun *The Strangers: Five Extraordinary Black Men and the Worlds That Made Them*

GENERAL INFORMATION

Exhibition	Amoako Boafo. Proper Love
Curator	Sergey Harutoonian
Assistant curator	Vasilena Stoyanova
Duration	25 October 2024 to 12 January 2025
Location	Lower Belvedere, Rennweg 6, 1030 Vienna
Opening Hours	Monday to Sunday, 10 am to 6 pm
Education	Belvedere Education T + 43 1 795 57-134 M public@belvedere.at
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For more information on the exhibition and high-resolution press photos please visit www.belvedere.at/en/press