

ETHIOPIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE
Recent Studies with focus on the 16th to the 18th centuries

International on-line symposium hosted by the University Complutense of Madrid
November, 9-11, 2021

ABSTRACTS

Inaugural Address: Of Words and Pictures. The long reach of art and architecture

Dorothea McEwan

School of Advanced Study, The Warburg Institute, University of London

Echoes and Evolutions: Ethiopian Artistic Agency and Global Imagery in the Early Modern Age

Dr. Kristen Windmuller-Luna

Curator of African Arts, Cleveland Museum of Art

Conservative; derivative; static; art historians have historically used all of these negative terms to describe Ethiopian Orthodox Christian visual arts. This is particularly true in terms of its relationships with non-African arts, especially those from continental Europe and the Byzantine Empire (itself a partially African enterprise). As a consequence, Ethiopian artists have been misperceived as both anachronistic and passive. In contrast, this paper argues that Ethiopian artists asserted considerable agency and innovation in their use of non-local models. It presents case studies of how Ethiopian artists selectively remixed, adapted, and even rejected foreign influences—whether contemporaneous European or Asian works or historical Byzantine precedents—in both architecture and in two-dimensional media. Ultimately, it demonstrates that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century artists only selected those imported forms that corresponded in some way to pre-existing aesthetic and religious guidelines. Further, it suggests that their inclusion of historical imagery, both homegrown and imported, was not a form of visual conservatism, but rather an important tactic for legitimizing their religious and royal patrons. In doing so, their work communicated not only important sacred messages, but also political missives.

Italian artists in Ethiopia between the 15th and 17th centuries: how many were they?

Gianfrancesco Lusini

Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo, University of Naples, “L’Orientale”

It is a well-known fact that Ethiopia welcomed an Italian school of art from the beginning of the 15th century. We know about the 16th-century well-documented personality of Nicolò Brancaleon and we have information about other figures such as Hieronimo Bicini. However, illuminated manuscripts and icons reflect the existence of artistic styles, which demonstrate the presence of “Italianising” workshops in Ethiopian monastic centres at the time. Conflicting interpretations of the documentary evidence occur in the literature, and the present paper reconsiders both Italian and Ethiopic sources in order to clarify some crucial points.

A Painted Panel of the Crucifixion Preserved in the Church at Agwäza (Təgray): Iconography and Stylistic Features

Ewa Balicka-Witakowska

Institute of Linguistics and Philology, Department of Byzantine Studies, Uppsala University

In 2011 an international group of scholars carried out a project dealing with recording, preservation

and conservation of an important collection of the artefacts kept at the site presently known as Agwäza, previously the Däbrä Šahəl monastery. One of the most valuable objects discovered at that occasion was a large panel representing the Crucifixion. The painting undoubtedly made by an Ethiopian artist closely follows the West European models in the form typical for Italian Quattrocento.

The aim of this paper is to establish, by means of the iconographical analysis and identification of the stylistic features of the painting, the place of the panel among the similar Ethiopian art objects, its complex artistic background and also present a hypothesis concerning the provenience and dating of the work.

A Painted Panel of the Crucifixion Preserved in the Agwäza Church (Təgray): Technical Analysis and Preservation Strategies

Jacek Tomaszewski
Polish Institute of World Art Studies, Warsaw

The painted panel representing the Crucifixion is one of the most precious and scholarly interesting artefacts belonging to the Agwäza church. Unfortunately, the physical condition of the painting is relatively poor, due to inadequate storage conditions which exposed the object to unstable temperature and humidity, as well as to damage by insects – a fate which it shared with the other art objects in the collection.

A careful examination of the panel resulted in a detailed analysis of the painting techniques, methods and practices employed by the painter, while the materials and the pigments were identified by means of chemical analysis of samples carried out at the Raman Laboratory of the Faculty of Chemistry, Warsaw University of Technology.

A record of technical data regarding the making of the panel allowed us to develop strategies dedicated to preservation of the object as well as potential intervention by the conservator. Moreover, a more systematic study of the painting methods used by the Ethiopian artist leads one to consider the possible influence on his work of technologies applied in European, most probably Italian painting tradition, a hypothesis supported by the results obtained from the iconographical and stylistic analysis of the painting.

Searching for vorlage. The Ethiopian illuminated manuscript book of The Revelation of John, painted 1700-1730. London: British Library, Or 533.

Dorothea McEwan
School of Advanced Study, The Warburg Institute, University of London

The manuscript book Or. 533, an illuminated manuscript of the *Book of Revelation*, kept in the British Library, is in the tradition of magnificent works of art, splendid manuscripts of sacred texts, written for a purpose far beyond being the required Easter Saturday reading matter for officiating clergy. It presents a unique window into the cultural environment of court circles in Gondär in the first half of the 18th century.

So far this is the earliest known of two illuminated manuscript books of *Revelation* in Ethiopia. As the commissioning patron for this work of art is unknown, it can safely be assumed that it must have been somebody in court circles as queen Məntewwab 's name was later added to the finished book. The prophecy of the visions Məntewwab claimed to have had or had suggests that Məntewwab thought of herself of being destined to make the right choices in her life for the succession to the throne of her son Iyasu II (1723-1755) and her grandson Iyo'as (c. 1749-1769),

for both of whom she acted a regent. The dedication to her in the book BL Or 533, thus, can be seen as an endorsement of the steps she had taken. However, her self-promotion by way of a sacred text may also have to be seen as her expression of gratitude for divine help.

As such, the text of *Revelation* with its twin goals, that of destruction and that of hope, might explain why it was selected for a de-luxe book of illuminations. What we do not know is who the artists, the manuscript makers, scribes and painters were and who had seen images by other artists to depict the events in *Revelation*. We do not know which books with illuminations or engravings of *Revelations* circulated in Ethiopia. This is important as some images among the more than 100 images hark back to compositions of images of *Revelation* well-known in Europe. So, what were the sources employed by the painters for the book Or 533? The paper presents a work in progress in search for vorlage.

Tracing the Early Development of Betä ʿĪsraʿel (Ethiopian Jewish) Prayer House Architecture

Bar Kribus

Center for Religious Studies, Ruhr University, Bochum

One of the most unique elements of pre-modern Ethiopian architecture is the concentric, circular church plan with a square sanctuary. The Betä ʿĪsraʿel (Ethiopian Jews) based their prayer house architecture on this plan, but shaped it to meet their unique religious needs and identity. The general features of Betä ʿĪsraʿel prayer houses have been briefly described in a few publications, but Betä ʿĪsraʿel prayer house architecture has never been examined in detail before, and its development over time has never been traced. With the twentieth-century immigration of the Betä ʿĪsraʿel to Israel, all their prayer houses in Ethiopia were abandoned. At present, only a small number of prayer houses preserved as tourist attractions are still intact.

This paper will trace the development of Betä ʿĪsraʿel prayer house architecture, from the earliest attestations in written and material culture sources to the twentieth century. It will also examine the impact of interaction with Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity on this process, and point to the contribution of a comparative study of prayer house architecture to better understanding the dynamics between these two communities. A detailed typology of Betä ʿĪsraʿel prayer houses will be defined and directions for future research will be outlined.

The meeting ground: Mosques in Somaliland during the Medieval period

Jorge de Torres

Institute of Heritage Sciences, Spanish National Research Center (INCIPIT-CSIC), Santiago de Compostela

Between the 13th to the 16th centuries, the Horn of Africa went through a series of major transformations which made of this zone one of the most politically, socially and economically dynamic regions in the continent. These historical processes included the emergence of Islamic principalities in the region, the consolidation of Islam among the Somali nomads, the development of an urban network and the strengthening of existing political and trade links with the rest of the world. Throughout all these changes, Islam and its material expressions –the mosque being the most obvious one– became one of the key factors of cohesion and stability in an increasingly conflictive world.

Based on six years of archaeological fieldwork in western Somaliland, this paper analyses for the first time the styles, architectural features and orientations of the mosques of the different

communities that lived in the region during the Medieval period –urban dwellers, nomads, foreign traders-, comparing them with neighbouring regions in western Ethiopia and Somalia It will also discuss the role of the mosques as a physical space which could be acknowledged by groups with very different lifestyles, leading to shared religious but also social and political identities. Special attention will be paid to mosques among the Somali nomads, whose conversion to Islam took place later than expected and for whom these buildings became not just a religious space, but a key part of their symbolic landscape.

The foundation of a polity and the writing of history in Awsa (Eastern Ethiopia, late 16th-17th c.): A Study of the ‘Awsa Chronicles’

Héloïse Mercier

Université Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne

The “Awsa Chronicles” are two texts covering the history of Awsa from the 1570s to the end of the 17th century. They have previously been edited and/or translated by historians Enrico Cerulli and Ewald Wagner. Critical analysis of Ethiopian Islamic manuscripts in which these chronicles were copied sheds new light on those texts as well as on the history of Awsa.

The first of these two “Awsa Chronicles” was written at the very end of the 16th century, little after the centre of power shifted from Harar to Awsa in 1576. The newly-settled polity of Awsa was then prey to raids from neighbouring groups and marked by internal feuds. In this context, the chronicle that was written puts forward *imām* Muḥammad Ğāsa, the founder of the Awsa polity, as a model: he fought a perfect *ḡihād* and was a faultless ruler. This ideal helps the writer of this text define what is legitimate, and thus condemn as rebels, traitors or usurpers those who oppose the rulers he supports.

In the 17th century, after Awsa lost its control over Harar and Zayla‘ and saw the emergence of a new dynasty, conflicts between the “people of Awsa” and neighbouring groups persisted. It is in this context of opposition with populations excluded from the oasis’ lands that the second “Awsa Chronicle” was written, towards the end of the 17th century. This text places the rulers of late-17th-century Awsa within a long and prestigious chronology, thus asserting their claim over the oasis against neighbouring populations.

The pre-Gondarine Jesuit architecture in Ethiopia: Western, Eastern and Local influences

Víctor M. Fernández

Dpt. of Prehistory and Archaeology, University Complutense of Madrid

The period of the Jesuit missions has been one of the most controversial in the history of Ethiopia. Despite a good beginning in which there was a certain harmony between the Roman (Chalcedonian) and Alexandrian (Miaphysite) currents of Christianity, the intransigent demand by Catholics of a total conversion of the Orthodox caused a violent reaction and the expulsion of the missionaries in 1632-33. It was precisely during the decade of greatest local resistance that the Jesuits founded most of their missions and built numerous buildings whose remains have partly survived to this day.

The study and interpretation of that architecture has suffered in its impartiality because of the conflict. During colonial times in Africa, in the first half of the 20th century, the Jesuit remains

were seen from Europe as a sign of Western superiority whose advances the Ethiopians took advantage of in part without ever recognizing their external origin. With the end of the colony, the natural reaction against that disastrous period led to attempts to diminish the importance of the Jesuit constructions, and even to misinterpret their origins and influences, both by local and many Western researchers.

The present work, combining the data of an in-depth archaeological and architectural investigation on the preserved remains and the analysis of their supposed models, both external (western and eastern) and local, attempts to approach an up-to-date and more reliable solution to the problem, aiming at leaving it settled and thus to advance in the approach to other, more significant issues of the period.

***Magseph Assetat* vs. *Mazgaba Haymanot*: The use of Biblical Literary Descriptions in Father Antonio Fernandes' Refutation of Ethiopian Christian Doctrine**

Leonardo Cohen

Ben Gurion University of the Negev

Mauricio Lapchik

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The Jesuit missionaries' encounter with Ethiopian civilization at the outset of the seventeenth century is well-documented. Much of this scholarship revolves around the cultural, political, and religious influence of post-Tridentine Catholicism on Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia. To get a better understanding of the interaction between these two Christian traditions, the proposed paper will focus on Father António Fernandes' *Magseph Assetat* ('Against the libels of the Ethiopians') in an effort to shed light on this proselytizer's attempts to debunk contemporaneous Ethiopian religious texts, with a focus on the use of biblical *literary imagery* as a tool for strengthening the Christological and theological position of the Catholic Church.

Despite its historical importance and singularity, *Magseph Assetat* has yet to merit commensurate attention from scholars. *Magseph Assetat* is the only book written by the Society of Jesus' representatives to have survived in Gə'əz. This treatise epitomizes the controversy that arose in the early seventeenth century over Christological-cum-theological issues and ritual matters between Jesuit missionaries and Ethiopian dignitaries.

After revisions by Father Luis de Azevedo, *Magseph Assetat* was published in Goa in 1642. For all intents and purposes, the book came in response to *Mäzgäbä Haymanot* ('Treasure of the Faith') – an Ethiopian treatise explaining the basic tenets of Monophysite Christology, such as the revelation of divinity in three separate entities. *Mäzgäbä Haymanot's* introduction surveys the first four ecumenical councils. Unlike the other three convocations, the decisions of the final one, the Council of Chalcedon, were rejected by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Throughout *Magseph Assetat's* 64 chapters, Fernandes undertook to refute the positions of the Ethiopian Church from a Catholic perspective through the use of several *biblical literary descriptions*, which were interpreted in a manner that would enhance the Catholic position at the expense of the Ethiopian Christological tradition.

The Fəlsäta lämaryam iconography, a Jesuit contribution to Ethiopian Art? A reflection on Art and Theology

Mario Lozano Alonso – Universidad Complutense de Madrid

It is well known that some iconographic models were previously introduced from Europe, and

several facts point in the direction that the Fəlsäta lämaryam iconography arrived during the Jesuit presence in Ethiopia (1557-1634), as there are no older examples found locally. The previous research that has been done regarding this topic has stated that the image is a European iconographic importation, but it has not been concluded how it reached Ethiopia.

Unmistakably Catholic, the iconography of the Immaculate Conception was adopted but also adapted by the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Church. In this case, a dogmatic issue was present: the idea of the immaculate conception of Virgin Mary is not observed by the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Church as it is in the Catholic Church. Due to this, the interpretation of the iconography had to be changed to accommodate to the Ethiopian ecclesiastical dogmas. In this paper we intend to compare some Ethiopian models to the Iberian ones, we will offer a revision of the Jesuit documents generated during the mission period that could serve to confirm this hypothesis, and we will also deal with the theological issues that its adoption caused in the Ethiopian Church.

The Life and Miracles of Abba Gärima in Ethiopian Visual Arts

Ilaria Zorzan

Department of Art History, University of Padova

At the turn of the 5th and the 6th century a group of foreign missionaries, known as the Nine Saints, arrived to Ethiopia to propagate for the Christian faith and monastic life. According to a tradition, they have spent some time at the royal court of Aksum before parting in order to found monasteries and churches in the Northern Ethiopia. One of them was Abba Gärima (also known as Yəşhaq), the founder of an important and still active monastery.

While the hagiographical works about Abba Gärima composed in the 15th century and containing his vita followed by a collection of the miracles are relatively well known, the imagery of the saint, mostly realised between the 16th and 18th centuries in the miniatures, murals, paintings on wood and decoration of crosses, has not been yet a subject of systematic studies.

The paper presents and analyses this various pictorial material with aim to delineate the development of Gärima's iconography in connection to the literary sources and to establish whether the process could be related to the spread of his cult.