

ETHIOPIAN ICONS : THE SACRED ART FORM OF THE HIDDEN EMPIRE

Legend traces Ethiopian Christianity back to the time of the Apostles. Some hold that it began with the meeting of St. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch of Queen Candace's retinue (Acts 8:26-40). Others say that when Peter preached to the mixed crowd on the day of Pentecost, Ethiopian Jewish pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for Passover, heard his message, and were baptized (Acts 2:1-13). Tradition holds that one half of Ethiopia's population professed Judaism during this time, and since the pilgrims spoke Ge'ez (the ancient Semitic language of Ethiopia), they understood the sermon of Peter in Hebrew (Aramaic) which was made clearer to them by the Holy Spirit. After their conversion, they then returned to Ethiopia as missionaries. Still others allege that Matthew, Bartholomew, or other disciples of Christ traveled to Axum to preach.

Though all these legends contain some truth about the relation of Ethiopian Christianity to the early Church, no Ethiopian or foreign historical records speak of a Christian presence before 330 A.D.. Evidence supports the fact that it was introduced by two shipwrecked Syrians who became influential at the Axumite Court and eventually succeeded in converting the Emperor's son. After converting the whole imperial family, one of the Syrians, Frumentius, traveled to Alexandria to request that the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria send a Bishop. Patriarch Athanasius responded by investing Frumentius as the first Bishop of Ethiopia. Upon his return to Axum, Frumentius was named by the people Abuna Salama, "Our Father of Peace." Since the time of the establishment of the Church, no substantial doctrinal change has taken place. It can be said that the present theology of the church is that of the first three major councils of Christendom, all of which took place before 451 A.D.

In 451, however, the Council of Chalcedon convened to define the orthodox doctrine regarding the person of Christ, and ended in the first major division in the Christian Church, (the second one would come in 1054 between the "Eastern Orthodox" churches and the "Roman Catholic" church). The doctrinal position mistakenly attributed to the Copts, Armenians, Syrians, and Ethiopians was that there was only one nature in Christ, his humanity being inseparably absorbed in his divinity.[1] The view held by the council was that there were two natures, one human and the other divine. Those Orthodox Christians accepting the teachings of the council came to be known as the Chalcedonian or Eastern Orthodox churches, while those rejecting it were called non-Chalcedonian or Oriental Orthodox churches.

To date, the Armenian, Egyptian, Ethiopian, Syrian and Indian Orthodox churches make up the latter, while the Greek and a host of other churches make up the former. An end to that 1500 year-old division between the Eastern and Oriental churches appears imminent. Despite centuries of mutual alienation, both sides have claimed fidelity to the famous Christological teachings of St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444 C.E.). This teaching, which holds Christ to be "one incarnate nature of God the Word," now has become the basis for theological rapprochement between these two churches!

HIDDEN TREASURES COME TO LIGHT

Though little known in the West, icons depicting Christian themes have been reproduced in Ethiopia for a much longer period than in any other center of Christianity in Africa. The achievements of Ethiopians in the creation of illuminated manuscripts, church murals, and icons on wooden panels are equal to those of Egyptian and Nubian Christians.

Unfortunately, these achievements have rarely been mentioned in art publications, and representative works are equally rare in the collections of European and American museums. This neglect is understandable given the topographical remoteness of Ethiopia. For over two thousand years, far from the currents of world history (as we know it), these people remained hidden atop their African high plateau. During the Middle Ages the very existence of this hidden empire was a subject of mythology.

[1] For a clear explanation of what these Christians really believed, see Archbishop Yesehaq's book *The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church, an Integrally African Church*, (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1989) 101-103.

In the last sixty years, however, Ethiopia's illuminated manuscripts have increasingly drawn the attention of a few specialists while its murals and the churches that house them were documented by Dr. Georg Gerster in his book, *Churches in Rock*, published in 1968. As for paintings on wood, their existence was virtually unknown before Ethiopia became open to tourists in the sixties. Gradually, icons kept hidden in churches and monasteries came to light, thereby broadening our knowledge of this remarkable art form. Today it is estimated that aside from the 300 icons housed in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, some 600 more are in the hands of collectors throughout Europe and the U.S.. The discovery of these works became an exciting event among Europeans when a landmark exhibition, gathered from this collection, traveled across continental Europe in the early seventies.

Another reason why these icons were virtually unknown to foreigners is found in their liturgical use by the Oriental Orthodox Church in Ethiopia. There are no icon screens with doors that separate the Beta Mekdes (Holy Place) from the nave as in Eastern Orthodox churches. As a general practice, icons are not exhibited during the liturgy except on rare occasions. So holy are these images in the eyes of the faithful that there would be no thought of having them in their homes.

In the older tradition, an individual desiring an icon would commission it from an iconographer-priest and then offer it to a church as a form of personal piety. The iconographer would fast and pray while painting. After its completion, inscriptions or prayers were placed on its back and the icon, then donated to the church, was permanently placed in the Beta Mekdes with holy books, crosses, etc. Often clad in leather, some icons have been kept for centuries without being exhibited or moved; hence their surprisingly perfect state of preservation.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES THE ETHIOPIAN ICON?

Though the traditional definition of the word icon is "God's word in lines and color," iconographers rarely transposed images directly from the Holy Scriptures. They borrowed from Eastern and Western models while retaining the flavor of Byzantine iconography. As a result, the Ethiopian Church, like the Coptic Church, developed an iconography distinctly their own.

What are its distinguishing features? First, the panels on which they were painted are either diptychs or triptychs while Eastern Orthodox painters primarily used single panels. Traditionally, Ethiopian panels were made from the olive tree (*olea africana*) or from the Wanza tree (*corida abyssinca*) and were usually square-edged with intricately carved patterns forming a framelike border. These patterns would also decorate the exterior of the triptych employing crosses, interlaces, and diamond shapes. Some iconographers, however, would paint these patterns over gesso rather than carve them.

Another difference is the limited palette of the Ethiopian painters. This palette consisted mainly of red cinnabar (red mercury sulphide), yellow orpiment (arsenious trisulphide), charcoal, white gypseous chalk, and indigo blue which was imported from India. These pigments were mixed with an animal protein forming a tempera which was applied directly to the prepared panel.

The primary distinction of Ethiopian icons lies in the canonical rules governing every inch of subject matter. These unwritten rules, firmly established by the 17th century, were adhered to by artists.

THE CENTER PANEL

Mary was always depicted in the center and the apostles, when they appeared, were in the lower register of the painting. In the Ethiopian church, Mary serves as an archetype for the church community or "called out ones." "Let what you have said be done to me," she says (Luke 1:38).

The earliest depictions of Mary were derived from the Copts who always showed her wearing a Syrian maphorion or veil that covered her body and head. In the 16th century she began to be shown wearing a red maphorion as in the Cretan icons which were imported to Ethiopia at that time. In these the child is seated on Mary's right arm and blesses with his right hand.

However, the form that became the established one was that introduced by Jesuit missionaries, modeled on the well-known image in the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, which is attributed to St. Luke the Evangelist. This image has remained unchanged, though several additions have been made to the prototype by Ethiopian iconographers,

who undoubtedly would have sought the advice of a seasoned priest or master icon painter, before doing so.

Below Mary, the twelve apostles with Jesus Christ were depicted because they form the sure foundation on which the church community rests. Speaking of this community St. Paul says, "You are ... a building that has the apostles and prophets for its foundations, and Christ Jesus himself for its main cornerstone," (Eph 2:19-22).

Starting in the 15th century, the Apostles Peter, Paul, and Andrew had clearly defined traits, while the other Apostles were depicted identical and were distinguished by inscriptions. In general, all the Apostles, with the exception of St. John, were depicted as mature bearded men. In the 16th century, however, a large number of them were depicted as beardless youths.

RIGHT PANEL

The form of the crucifixion shown here was developed in the 16th century and became canonical for painters. Above the cross, the sun is shown "darkened" and the moon red "as blood" in accordance with church commentaries and scriptural references such as Joel 2:31, Luke 23:45, and Revelation 6:12. In the 18th century, falling stars against a dark blue sky were added as a reference to Rev. 6:12. Christ is shown as crucified outside of Jerusalem's walls, at "the place of a skull" (John 19:17 and Matt. 27:33). Since Orthodox Christian tradition holds that this "place" is the very spot of Adam's burial, Adam's skull is shown at the foot of the cross signifying his redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Below the crucifixion are shown two local religious leaders, St Takla Haymanot (1215 -1313) and St. Ewostawos (1273 - 1352). Each founded one of Ethiopia's two most venerable monastic communities, namely Dabra Damo and Dabra Salam. In the 16th century, St. Gabra Manfas Qiddus began to be depicted. Believed to have lived in the 13th or 14th century, he practiced extreme asceticism - never wearing clothing. In return, God is said to have covered the saint's whole body with hair "as that of a goat." Beginning in the 17th century, he is often depicted in the company of the lions, leopards, and hyenas that he is believed to have tamed.

Below these saints are usually depicted one of the many equestrian saints other than St. George. Though not shown in this sample icon, they are usually depicted as follows: St. Minas (blue horse), St. Abadir (red or brown horse), St. Yostos (white horse) spearing a nude man, St. Eusebuis (tan horse), St. Fasiladas (white horse spearing a nude man, St. Fictor (red or brown horse) spearing a bronze ox, St. Marqoryos (black horse) spearing Julian the Apostate, St. Theodore (red or brown horse) spearing an armed man, and St. Galawdewos (black horse) spearing a man.

LEFT PANEL

In the depiction of the resurrection, the Ethiopian church accepted the Eastern symbolic image of the Redeemer's descent into Hades to liberate the righteous from decay and death (the Athanasian Creed). Ethiopian painters reduced the Byzantine - Greek scheme to Christ in the middle and that of the first parents, Adam and Eve, on either side of him. Moreover, they added the banner of victory which Christ holds in his left hand.

Below is usually depicted the Kidana Mehret (Covenant of Mercy) which is believed to be the only iconographic composition indigenous to Ethiopia. It appeared in icons of the 17th century and since then has been a standard theme in Ethiopia. The composition represents an alleged promise given by Christ to His mother that whatever she asks "will be granted." This belief in Mary's extensive power of intercession, important in Ethiopian Orthodox spirituality, contributed greatly to her veneration. In depictions of the Covenant of Mercy, Christ either holds Mary's hand or blesses her (or both) thus passing on symbolically the power of intercession.

Finally, below the Covenant of Mercy is the depiction of St. George, who is traditionally depicted on a white horse and is venerated as the patron of Ethiopia. In the 15th century, he was depicted as riding with his spear slanting upwards. At the end of that century, he was popularly depicted at combat with the dragon while he rescues Beirutwit (daughter of the King of Beirut).

