

ICONS AND THE HIDDEN EMPIRE

By D.C. Christopher Gosey



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 collections of European and American museums. This neglect is understandable given the topographical remoteness of Ethiopia. For over 2,000 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.

In the last 60 years, however, Ethiopia's illuminated manuscripts have increasingly drawn the attention of a few specialists while its murals and the churches that house them have been documented by Dr. Georg Gerster in his book, *Churches in Rocks*. The existence of paintings on wood was virtually unknown until Ethiopia became

open to tourists in the '60s.

Icons kept hidden in churches and monasteries came to light, broadening our knowledge of this remarkable artform. Today, it is estimated that aside from 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 '70s.



Another reason these icons were virtually unknown 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. In 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.

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 its 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 or from the Wanza tree 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 of red cinnabar, yellow orpiment, charcoal, white gypseous chalk, and indigo blue, which was imported from India. These pigments were mixed with an animal protein forming a tempera 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, are still adhered to by artists. □

D.C. CHRISTOPHER GOSEY, founder of Holy Images and member of IFRAA, continues the ancient tradition of iconography. After five years of interning as an architect, he began his study in the classical tradition of iconography. He studied with Ksenia Pokrovsky whose work is in the collection of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Pope John II and Metropolitan Theodosius of all America and Canada. After embracing Russian Orthodox spirituality in 1988, he was drawn to Ethiopian iconography and his work today expresses this influence. His work can be seen in collections and churches in the U.S., Germany, Africa and New Zealand.