

ETHIOPIAN ART:  
CHRISTIAN NARRATIVES FROM THE KEBRA NAGAST

by

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## ABSTRACT

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King Ezana declared Christianity as Ethiopia's state religion in 330 C.E. Ethiopia was the first country to mint a coin with the symbol of a cross. The Christian religion was established as a political move to strengthen economic ties with the Mediterranean world. Christianity has been used to keep Ethiopia independent. The Ethiopian artworks discussed here depict themes based on Christian narratives with multiple groupings of similar motifs and identical religious iconography. The Ethiopian art market still creates these motifs today to spread a repeated political message of the country's pride, history, and represent their rulers' legitimacy. I explore these religious messages by interpreting the artworks through Ethiopia's sacred text, the Kebra Nagast, which therefore presents the works in an Ethiopian context. The message is clear throughout these works: Ethiopian rulers are direct descendants of King Solomon, and therefore King David, and Ethiopia shall remain prosperous and victorious.

To Chadwick Ellsworth,  
a faithful Christian and a loving father

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## **Introduction:** National Myth and Narrative

This exhibit displays religious and political artworks with the Kebra Nagast, Ethiopia's sacred Christian text. Most of these works date from the twentieth century, but the religious motifs are ancient. Ethiopian emperors claim political authority through a lineage traced to King Solomon and that Ethiopia holds God's chosen people, not Israel. Twentieth century art reflects these themes by presenting the past, present, and future in one scene and uses imagery to depict symbolic struggles between good and evil.

The narratives repeat throughout the Ethiopian art market, like in the pairings of *The Battle of Adowa I* and *II* (see fig. 1 and 2) and the *Saint George and the Dragon* (see fig. 3 and 4). Why would artists produce so many works of the same image and narrative? To spread and emphasize a message to tourists: Previous Ethiopian rulers are direct descendants of King Solomon and King David, thereby validating their power and Ethiopia's religious significance. The message of Ethiopian pride was already established in church paintings from the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, like in the rock-hewn churches at Lalibela.<sup>1</sup> As Ethiopia welcomed tourism in the 1950s, artists pulled iconography from established works and began repeating narratives still found today in Addis Mercato.

The study of Ethiopian art is a relatively young field, beginning in the late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Ethiopian art has been researched, exhibited, and published in two ways in this field. The first focuses on the artworks' western influences; the second presents the works' "authenticity."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Biasio, Elisabeth. "Contemporary Ethiopian Painting in Traditional Style: From Church-based to Tourist Art," *African Arts* 42, no. 1 (2009): 16.

<sup>2</sup> Peri M. Klemm, Review for "The Indigenous and the Foreign in Christian Art: On Portuguese-Ethiopian Contacts in the 16<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries," ed. Manuel Ramos with Isabel Boavida, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 39, no. 1 (2006): 162.

<sup>3</sup> Authenticity is defined as "the quality of being authentic" and, in my opinion, has never had a clear definition of what being "authentic" means. It is a problematic adjective to describe 20<sup>th</sup> century works.

Scholars have often examined Ethiopian Christian art in relation to foreign prototypes like Byzantine, Greek, and Russian art.<sup>4</sup> The first exhibition of Ethiopian art to travel to the United States was *African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia* at The Walters' Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. This exhibition "perfectly complement[ed] the museum's rich holdings of Byzantine, Russian and western European art."<sup>5</sup> It is clear that museums group the works with others as complementary pieces, perhaps to appease donors.

I found other research and display methods that view Ethiopia as an "untouched" and "authentic" African culture uninfluenced by the West, seen most in coffee table books and photography. The photographs create an image of Ethiopians as "the coy smiles of the exotic, young women in opulent beadwork and body paint and semi-nude men with hair mudpacks and feathers."<sup>6</sup> This coffee table essentialism, the belief that all things have set characteristics, conflates all of Ethiopia into a single group. I recognize that any United States institution exhibiting and publishing the art of Ethiopia is beneficial to my research. However, neither the "influence" nor the "authentic" approach renders Ethiopian art on its terms, as a blend of established societies and religions with outside influences that create representations unique to Ethiopian Christian art.

This exhibition pairs passages from the Kebra Nagast with narrative paintings to exhibit Ethiopian art from an Ethiopian framework. That includes how Christian narratives and localized biblical legends depicted in these artworks helped to resist colonialism. By

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<sup>4</sup> Peri M. Klemm, Review for "The Indigenous and the Foreign in Christian Art: On Portuguese-Ethiopian Contacts in the 16<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries," ed. Manuel Ramos with Isabel Boavida, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 39, no. 1 (2006): 162.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Vikan, Foreword to *Ethiopian Art: The Walters Art Museum*, ed. Deborah E. Horowitz, Baltimore: The Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery (2001): 9.

<sup>6</sup> Peri Klemm and Leah Niederstadt, "Beyond Wide-Eyed Angels: Contemporary Expressive Culture in Ethiopia," *African Arts* 42, no. 1 (2009): 12

See also: Elizabeth Langmuir, Stanislaw Chojnacki, and Peter Fetchko, *Ethiopia: The Christian Art of an African Nation*, the Langmuir Collection at the Peabody Museum of Salem, (1978): 1-17.

pairing the Kebra Nagast with visual art, this exhibition and catalog provide new understandings of Christianity and African art. Jules Leroy, one of the first art historians to specialize in Ethiopian art, writes,

“Confronted with outlines and volumes which are neither entirely African nor entirely Byzantine and Western, scholars who have been trained according to different aesthetic assumptions, as propounded in universities, have found it impossible to assign to Ethiopian art an appropriate place in the categories with which they are familiar.”<sup>7</sup>

This exhibition halts the frequent association of Ethiopian Christian works and the unknown. Ethiopia is either described as an old African Nation, “untouched” by outside influences, or derivative of Western religion. This catalog presents twentieth century Ethiopian works from the Schenk Collection that represent historical narratives blended with a long, local tradition of Christianity.

### **The Schenk Collection: Ethiopiana and its Dichotomy**

In 1988, Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk donated their collection of Ethiopian art to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.<sup>8</sup> Two years later, it was displayed by curator Mark Chepp in *The Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk Collection of Ethiopiana*. Chepp writes the “stylistic and iconographic elements which narrate the pieces are direct descendants of the Byzantine traditions which help manifest UWM’s extensive collection of Greek and Russian icons.”<sup>9</sup> Chepp also defined the Schenk collection as “objects of a little-known and poorly

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<sup>7</sup> Jules Leroy, *Ethiopian Painting, in the Late Middle Ages and During the Gondar Dynasty*, New York, F. A. Praeger, (1967): 56.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Chepp, Introduction for “The Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk Collection of Ethiopiana,” University Art Museum, Vogel Hall, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (1990): 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

understood part of the world.”<sup>10</sup> That was the first and last time, until now, that the Schenk Collection was displayed at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Chepp unintentionally incorporates both poles of the dichotomy found in Ethiopian scholarship, both positively and negatively. Chepp negatively invokes the diffusionist approach that separates Ethiopian art from Ethiopian motivations and the “Ethiopian untouched” approach that conflates all of Ethiopia into a single group. More positively, Chepp connects the collection to our previous holdings which validates the acquisition. He also connects the art to broader religious and political contexts because Ethiopia’s history has long been intertwined with broader African and Mediterranean histories. This exhibition presents the Schenk Collection in a new way: educational, historical, and through association with the Kebra Nagast.

Elizabeth Biasio prefers to call the art produced for tourism “contemporary painting in the traditional style.”<sup>11</sup> Biasio’s term indicates that the genre is currently being produced but has changed from the church-based genre of artistic production. Simultaneously, artists are creating works for art markets, but are trained traditionally, often through a familial lineage that once strictly painted for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.<sup>12</sup> Three phases of Ethiopian history are not only reflected in this exhibition but are still depicted in contemporary painting in the traditional style.

First, there is an overview of the beginning of Christianity in Ethiopia and its political and economic motives. Second, a section on Medieval Ethiopia that explores how the Kebra

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Chepp, Introduction for “The Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk Collection of Ethiopiana,” University Art Museum, Vogel Hall, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (1990): 2.

<sup>11</sup> Biasio, Elisabeth. “Contemporary Ethiopian Painting in Traditional Style: From Church-based to Tourist Art,” *African Arts* 42, no. 1 (2009): 14-25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Nagast was written, how it provides a narrative framework for the artworks and establishes a holy lineage for Ethiopia's orthodox churches and emperors directly to King David. Finally, this catalog describes the shifting function of art in late-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century nationalism from being created for religious purposes to becoming a souvenir. The repeated themes displayed in this exhibition show the Ethiopian values of biblical lineage, strength, independence, and religious and cultural pride.

### **Beginnings of Christianity: Seed of a Myth**

Introduced to Christianity in the fourth century, the Aksumite Empire, like most other Christian countries, used the religion as a force to unify Ethiopia under a common cause and identity: that they were chosen to rule and conquer.<sup>13</sup> According to the Ethiopian church tradition, Christianity was introduced by two Syrians, Frumentius and Aedisius, who converted King Ezana.<sup>14</sup> When King Ezana came to power (ca. 303 CE), Frumentius requested the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria to send a bishop to Ethiopia to speed up the conversion process of the populace. The Patriarch responded by declaring Frumentius himself as the first Ethiopian bishop.

The country-wide conversion to Christianity can be dated between 325-350 CE during the evangelical activities of Frumentius.<sup>15</sup> King Ezana began to mint coins stamped with a cross, becoming the first Christian country to do so, to quickly spread the message of conversion (and of God) internally and externally through trade.<sup>16</sup> This is a very early

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Langmuir, Stanislaw Chojnacki, and Peter Fetchko, *Ethiopia: The Christian Art of an African Nation*, the Langmuir Collection at the Peabody Museum of Salem, (1978): vii.

<sup>14</sup> Harold G. Maruc, *A History of Ethiopia*, Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2002): 11.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, Peoples of Africa, Oxford; Malden, Mass., Blackwell Publishers, (1998): 25.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Mercier, "Ethiopian Art History," *Ethiopian Art: The Walters Art Museum*, ed. Deborah E. Horowitz, Baltimore: The Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery, (2001): 45.

example of Ethiopia's claim to earthly authority. The change of religions had many repercussions, the most notable being how Ethiopians formed a new idea; they are a chosen people placed upon "heathen nations" to maintain belief in Christ. The political effects of Christian Ethiopia included cutting off trading sources with Arabia to establish strong relationships with the Christian Mediterranean world, including Rome.

Between 800 and 1200 CE, there is a "void" in Ethiopian religious history.<sup>17</sup> During this time, Ethiopia strategically isolated itself from the expanding Islamic empires, remaining somewhat hidden from the busy world.<sup>18</sup> Art historical evidence of Christianity resurfaces during the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Zague Dynasty.<sup>19</sup> This is when the marvelous rock-hewn churches at Lalibela, carved from living rock, were constructed (see fig. 5). There must have been a strong religious presence in Ethiopia and its re-opened trade routes for the Zagues to create such powerful Christian monuments. However, the dynasty had difficulties maintaining unity throughout the country as the monarch heavily taxed farmers, Ethiopia's main source of exports.

In 1270, the last Zague emperor was assassinated by Yekuno Amlak in front of an altar at the parish church in Gayint, who then proclaimed himself as emperor.<sup>20</sup> This did not sit well with his country's people. Not because the last Zague was murdered, but because he was murdered in a church. To gain popularity as a ruler, Yekuno and his supporters began to circulate a fable about his descent from King Solomon and Makeda, the Queen of Sheba (the south, or Ethiopia). This rumored genealogy gave the emperor traditional legitimacy and power still honored by Ethiopia's national history. These rumors created the Kebra Nagast

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Mercier, "Ethiopian Art History," *Ethiopian Art: The Walters Art Museum*, ed. Deborah E. Horowitz, Baltimore: The Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery, (2001): 47.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2002): 33-34.

(Glory of Kings), which holds the genealogy of the Solomonic Dynasty and is still seen as sacred to Ethiopians.<sup>21</sup> During early Christianity, rulers used Christian symbols, like the coin, to justify authority. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a new step was taken to link the king to Solomon and Makeda explicitly. The creation of the Kebra Nagast forever affected the production of art in Ethiopia.

### **Kebra Nagast: The Queen of Sheba**

According to author Harold Marcus, the Kebra Nagast was written by six scribes. Yishak, the chief compiler, claimed that he and his colleagues were merely translating an Arabic version of a Coptic work into Ge'ez, a South Semitic language that originated in Ethiopia.<sup>22</sup> Recent scholarship suggests that his team blended local and regional oral traditions derived from the Old and New Testaments, Jewish and Islamic writings, and various fictional texts.<sup>23</sup> The scribes acted as agents to legitimize the ascendancy of Emperor Yekuno and the “restored” Solomonic line, and contemporary artists continue as agents.

The most detailed and arguably most important legend of the Kebra Nagast is how the Queen of Sheba (Queen Makeda of Ethiopia) met King Solomon, which is all depicted in the complex *Queen of Sheba Visits King Solomon* painting (see fig. 6). Below is a summary of that legend.

Makeda's story begins with a seemingly unrelated chapter on Arwe, the Prince Serpent. Arwe is born from the waters of the river where a woman washed herself after

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<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that while the creation of the Kebra Nagast stems from political objectives and rumors of Yekuno, the text is just as real as the western Bible to those who believe in it; filled with historical figures, designed to spread a message of faith. See also, Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, Peoples of Africa, Oxford; Malden, Mass., Blackwell Publishers, (1998): 27.

<sup>22</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2002): 45.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 50-52.

sleeping with her lover, as seen in the first panel. The serpent becomes the ruler of the country and demands regular human sacrifices. A man named Agabos offers to end the sacrifices of humans by feeding a goat poison and then feeding that goat to the snake.

There is a lot of dialog that is exchanged between men and presumably the woman who caused Arwe to be created. They point to the sky as if to discuss the origins of the snake, or to reference the pagan gods they worshiped. The characters begin by feeding Arwe regular goats, earning its trust. The man and women mix the poison for the last goat, which is then fed to Arwe. Other men arrive to find Agabos next to the dead serpent. Agabos is praised and made king. Time seems to fast forward to Agabos on his death bed, declaring his daughter, Makeda, as his rightful heir.

The Queen of Sheba (or south) is enjoying her time as ruler when a travelling merchant returns to Ethiopia from Jerusalem. The merchant tells Makeda of the wisdom and wonders of King Solomon. The Queen of Sheba sends a message to King Solomon asking to visit and learn from him. Scenes of boat travel are dispersed throughout the painting to emphasize the great distance between present-day Axum and Jerusalem. The message arrives at the walls of the Temple of Solomon and the king sends a message back to Makeda. Biblical text messaging.

The queen travels on camel and boat to arrive at the same temple wall, finally meeting King Solomon. He teaches her of Christianity and other concepts of his royalty. He requests to sleep with her. She denies him. So, he forbids Makeda to steal any “goods” from his palace for if she does, she must give in to his sexual demands. Makeda easily accepts these terms, perhaps thinking what could a queen want to steal that isn’t hers already? They sit for dinner, and King Solomon serves strictly spicy/salty foods. Later that night, jugs of water were strategically placed next to Makeda’s and her servant’s bed. They become too thirsty to resist

and are thus tricked into sleeping with Solomon: “What good, he says, is more precious than water?” (Kebra Nagast, 14)

The queen wishes to return to Ethiopia and before she does, Solomon gives her two rings (sometimes referred to as a mirror), one gold and one silver. He explains that she must give the gold if she births a boy, and silver if she births a girl so that he may recognize his heir. Makeda and her servant return to Ethiopia pregnant, giving birth to two (almost identical) half-brothers who grow up to wonder who their father was. Menelik, the son of the queen, goes to his mother for guidance. She gives him the golden ring and allows him to meet King Solomon in Jerusalem.

The inclusion of travel is again depicted, only further emphasizing the long distance between the two cities. The two sons arrive at the Temple of Solomon. The king recognizes his son and the ring and kisses him on the cheek. He asks them to stay and become his successor. The two sons decide to return to Ethiopia instead. Begrudgingly, the king agrees and decides that the firstborn sons of Israel should travel with Menelik and found an Israelite kingdom in Ethiopia. To the fury of Solomon, the moving party formed a coup and stole the Ark of the Covenant from the Temple and brought it to Ethiopia. At their arrival, Makeda resigns and Menelik is crowned as the “king of Judah” in Aksum.

“And all the provinces of Ethiopia rejoiced, for Zion sent forth a light like that of the sun into the darkness wheresoever she came.” (Kebra Nagast, 84)

Unlike most Christian works that praise Mary’s virginity, Ethiopian Christian art and the literature like the Kebra Nagast are centered (almost literally on the canvas) around the rape of the Queen of Sheba. The painting celebrates and illustrates the act as visual proof to a legitimacy of emperors. The repeated visual representation of sex not only begins Makeda’s

narrative, as it does with all our stories, but explicitly includes the rape of Makeda's servant as well.

To display the deceitful act of King Solomon, a figure who is revered in the Christian Bible, twice is to project Makeda's righteousness, Ethiopian emperors' lineage, and Ethiopia's triumph and holiness. Another message the Ethiopian Orthodox Church interprets from the legend is that God has allowed his Ark to belong to Ethiopia, making the country Israel's successor. Ethiopians became the new chosen people, reinforcing an honor created by their early acceptance of Christianity. One of the Kebra Nagast's messages is clear: Menelik I bested his father, avenging Makeda's rape. I argue this message acts as an interpretation of Christianity triumphing over other religions like Islam, Judaism, and later the Italian Catholic Empire.

Another message the Ethiopian Orthodox Church interprets from the legend is that God has allowed his Ark to belong to Ethiopia, making the country Israel's successor.<sup>24</sup> Ethiopians became the new chosen people, reinforcing an honor created by their early acceptance of Christianity.<sup>25</sup> The legend was solidified in the Kebra Nagast to validate Emperor Yekuno's reign and possibly protect himself from assassination, produce patriotism and acceptance of a new leader, and to glorify Ethiopia and religiously place the country above others.

As these artworks are discussed in relation to the Kebra Nagast, it becomes clear that this message of triumph is repeated throughout the works. Like the first cross minted with a

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<sup>24</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2002): 45.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, Peoples of Africa, Oxford; Malden, Mass., Blackwell Publishers, (1998): 28-32.

coin, Ethiopian Christian art is created to spread a message of power and validity through Christian symbolism.

### **The Kebra Nagast: Scripture as Power**

During the sixteenth century, the land-locked country experienced a drought, causing an extreme shortage of food and land throughout.<sup>26</sup> Ethiopia experienced civil unrest as the country became separated into the Christian empire in the highlands and the Oromo/nomadic tribes and Muslim city-states in the lowlands. As the drought grew worse for those living in the lowlands, they attempted to migrate to the highlands, only to be thrown back by Christian armies protecting the selfish empire.<sup>27</sup> This created distrust and weakened the empire, leading to a rise in political disputes in Muslim city-states of the lowlands.

Disputes between Ethiopian Muslim and Christian groups led to countless defeats by Emperor Lebna Dengel's (strategically nicknamed King Dawitt, or David II, perhaps to emphasize his lineage to King David) Christian armies.<sup>28</sup> In 1527, Ahmad Gran in an attempt to expand the Muslim religion declared a religious war between Muslim Adal and Christian Ethiopia.<sup>29</sup> The Christian empire was defeated in just one year. This battle scene is depicted in *The Jihad of Ahmed Gran* (see fig. 7) and incorporates religious significant locations during the past, present, and future of that historic event.

*The Jihad of Ahmed Gran* depicts the Gran War, and Ethiopia's defeat, which started in 1527, but the unique architecture painted near the center of the canvas is of Emperor Fasiladas' castle in Gondar (see fig. 8). This castle was built almost 100 years later during his

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<sup>26</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2002): 16-19.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

rule of 1632 to 1635. This is painted to reference to Fasiladas, who would later banish all foreign religions and peoples, just like the Christian empire would eventually win back Ethiopia from the Muslims. While the Muslim army sets fire to the churches of Lalibela, the Christian empire flees across Lake Tana, which is in Bahir Dar. In these boats, some Christians are carrying rifles, which would be later donated by the Portuguese to help win back the country.

Before the Christians escape and are defeated, they use long spears to slay a serpent in the lake. This is a clear call to how Saint George slays the dragon and triumphs over evil (see fig. 3 and 4). The same serpent is repeated as the Arwe in *Queen of Sheba Visiting King Solomon* (fig. 6). This elongated dragon/serpent represents Satan slain before the Christians retreat, eluding to the future assassination of Gran and the end of the war. This dragon/serpent motif acts like a string that connects the artworks to the Kebra Nagast and outside religions to understanding the works' message: that Ethiopia, if not now, will be victorious because they are God's chosen people. The representation of time passing and the inclusion of future events aid to the Ethiopian religious belief that they were destined to rule, be independent, and to conquer.

By 1535, Gran headed a vast, yet short-lived Islamic empire stretching on the coast of Eritrea and interior Ethiopia.<sup>30</sup> However, Dawitt was still surviving in the highlands protected by the remaining Christian soldiers. The fallen Christian king appealed to Portugal to send soldiers to counter the victorious Muslim troops. In 1541, under Dawitt's successor

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, Peoples of Africa, Oxford; Malden, Mass., Blackwell Publishers, (1998): 78.

Galawdewos (Claudius), 400 Portuguese soldiers disembarked at Mitsiwa and immediately engaged the enemy.<sup>31</sup>

The defeat and death of Gran in 1543 marked the salvation and victory of Christian Ethiopia. However, when the war was over, many Portuguese decided to remain in Ethiopia, started families, and altered the country's cultural destiny.<sup>32</sup> European Jesuit missionaries soon arrived at Ethiopia to support the Catholic Portuguese and convert the rest.<sup>33</sup> This almost worked, as King Susneyos (r. 1607-32) converted to Roman Catholicism, but unlike many colonized countries, the religion did not stay for long. Susneyos' son, Fasiladas, organized a conspiracy and forced him to abdicate.<sup>34</sup> When Fasiladas became king, he banished the Jesuits and reinstated the traditional Ethiopian Orthodox Church.<sup>35</sup>

For two centuries, foreign influence and religion were forbidden to enter Ethiopia.<sup>36</sup> While this is an extremely abridged version of Ethiopia's political and religious history, its influences on these Ethiopian Christian artworks has hopefully been made apparent.

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians*, Peoples of Africa, Oxford; Malden, Mass., Blackwell Publishers, (1998): 78.

<sup>32</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2002): 40.

<sup>33</sup> Peri M. Klemm, Review for "The Indigenous and the Foreign in Christian Art: On Portuguese-Ethiopian Contacts in the 16<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries," ed. Manuel Ramos with Isabel Boavida, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 39, no. 1 (2006): 162.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 172.

## 20<sup>th</sup>-century Ethiopia: Painting and National Memory

After years of battles and emperors, Ethiopia in its roughly current form began under the reign of Menelik II from 1889 until his death in 1913.<sup>37</sup> Baptized as Sahle Maryam, Menelik II changed his name to establish his legitimacy to rule, to directly relate himself to Menelik I, the Queen of Sheba's son.<sup>38</sup> This only reaffirms Ethiopia's long history of leaders connecting themselves to national myths that rest upon the Solomonic dynasty, repeatedly asserting Ethiopians as a chosen people. During his reign, Menelik II made advances in road construction, electricity and education; the development of a central taxation system; and the foundation and building of the city of Addis Ababa – now the capital of the Shewa province.<sup>39</sup> Menelik II is still heralded as a national hero.

In 1930, Menelik II adopted the Lion of Judah as his symbol, and a statue of the Lion holding a staff stands in the city's main square today to honor him. A similar motif of this lion can be seen in the statuette *Lion of Judah* (see fig. 9). According to the *Kebra Nagast*, King Solomon descended from the biblical Tribe of Judah, and his son Menelik I continued the line. This tribe of Judah lineage is passed directly down from king to king, and according to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, continued in Ethiopia. Haile Selassie's full title in office was "By the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, King of Kings of Ethiopia, Elect of God".<sup>40</sup> This title reflects Ethiopian dynastic traditions, which hold that all monarchs must trace their lineage to Menelik I, the offspring of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

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<sup>37</sup> Stanislaw Chojnacki, "Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting: Indigenous Developments, the Influence of Foreign Models and their Adaption from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century," (1984): 31.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

In May 1889, Menelik II signed the Treaty of Wichale with Italy, stating the Italians could control part of Eritrea if they recognized Ethiopia's sovereignty.<sup>41</sup> In return, Italy was to provide Menelik II with weapons and support him as emperor. The Italians used the time between the signing of the treaty and its ratification by the Italian government to expand their territorial claims. On March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1896, conflict erupted into the Battle of Adwa (or Adowa, the Italian spelling), which the Ethiopians won.

The victory secured Ethiopian's Christian empire for another forty years and thwarted Italy's campaign to expand in the Horn of Africa. As the only African nation to successfully resist European conquest, Ethiopia became a pre-eminent symbol of the pan-African movement and international opposition to colonialism.<sup>42</sup> It is understandable, then, that The Battle of Adwa is frequently illustrated in Ethiopian paintings throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The UWM Art Collection has two versions that are displayed in this exhibition (see fig. 1 and 2).

In both *Battle of Adowa (Version I)* and *(Version II)*, the inclusion of Saint George framed above the battle scenes convey it was God's plan for them to remain independent and Christian. The layers of bodies could be seen as layers of time as the battle progressed, leading to Ethiopian armies even attacking the wounded in the bottom right corner of *Version I*. The distinct hills painted amidst the battle scene in *Version II* represent the legend of the Battle of Adwa. It is said that the Italian army knew where the Ethiopian army was camped and planned to ambush them. The Ethiopians heard of this and ambushed them between three mountain passes. Northern Ethiopia is a rather mountainous region. Although these

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<sup>41</sup> Stanislaw Chojnacki, "Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting: Indigenous Developments, the Influence of Foreign Models and their Adaption from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century," (1984): 47.

<sup>42</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2002): 69-70.

mountains aren't to scale, their inclusion displays the Ethiopians' clever battle strategy. Ethiopians took pride in their victory; however, it was not the last time Italy would start a war with Ethiopia.

The scale of these works is another indication of historical importance of the scenes. However, there is a distinct style difference between the two versions as more time, shading, and attention to detail was spent on *Version II*. While it is uncertain how these works were procured by the Schenks, I argue that because there is a clear hierarchy of time spent on *Version II* than *Version I*, *Version II* was most likely created for a higher purpose than for the purchasing of tourists, such as a donation to the church. Many artists painted religious works for the sole purpose of donating them to their local church as a blessing, never signing them as that would be associating their name with God's. None of these works are signed.

The early 20<sup>th</sup>-century was marked by the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, who, like his predecessors, claimed to be descended from King Solomon.<sup>43</sup> Under Selassie's reign, Ethiopia's independence was interrupted by the second Italo-Ethiopian war, beginning when it was invaded by Fascist Italy in 1935.<sup>44</sup> Italian occupation of the country lasted from 1936-1941.<sup>45</sup> During this time, Selassie appealed to the League of Nations, delivering an address that made him a renowned figure and the 1935 *TIME Magazine* Man of the Year.<sup>46</sup> The Lion of Judah was also used as Selassie's symbol and as a symbol on the Ethiopian flag from 1897-1974, and the Tribe of Judah lineage ended with his reign in 1974.

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<sup>43</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2002): 97.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

The infamous Benito Mussolini forced Haile Selassie into exile and Mussolini declared victory.<sup>47</sup> Italian soldiers, however, faced continued resistance and ambushes in urban centers throughout their occupation.<sup>48</sup> Under the peace treaty of 1947, Italy finally recognized Ethiopia as a sovereign, independent country.<sup>49</sup>

While in exile in England, Selassie took part in a memorial service for those killed in the Abyssinian war at a parish church called St. George's, Bloomsbury in Bloomsbury, London. Tradition says he brought the tales of the saint back with him. Saint George became the patron saint of Ethiopia, has been depicted throughout most Christian literature and artworks, and is still a popular figure in contemporary culture. The Addis Ababa football team, Saint George S.C., is named after him.

The legend of Saint George and the Dragon describes the real-life Saint George (d. 303 CE) taming and slaying a dragon that demanded human sacrifices, rescuing the princess chosen as the next offering. There are two main iconographic types, the concise form showing only George and the dragon, and the detailed form including the princess with spectators witnessing the miracle. The two *Saint George and the Dragon* paintings in this exhibition are an example of the "detailed" approach with the princess tied to a tree (see fig. 3 and 4). One of which includes additional Christian figures of Madonna and Christ floating above the scene in a cloud, crowing Saint George with a wreath, and a small devil beside the slain dragon which are all symbols of good and evil (see fig. 3).

Not only is Saint George a figure repeatedly painted and praised in Ethiopia, but the Kebra Nagast scribes may have been referencing the saint when writing the legends of the

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<sup>47</sup> Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Updated ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2002): 47.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Mercier, "Ethiopian Art History," *Ethiopian Art: The Walters Art Museum*, ed. Deborah E. Horowitz, Baltimore: The Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery, (2001): 52.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

Queen of Sheba. In the beginning of the legend, Makeda's father becomes king by slaying a serpent and saving his daughter from being sacrificed, seen in the first panels of *Queen of Sheba Visits King Solomon* (fig. 6). This makes Makeda's father act as Saint George, legitimizing the family's rule and therefor the Solomonic dynasty even further.

Images of Saint George slaying a dragon/serpent became popularized in the Ethiopian art market and churches as a symbol of good triumphing evil. I argue the image of Saint George repeatedly depicted during the trial of slaying a dragon represents Ethiopia triumphing over Italy. Saint George is also depicted in *Archbishop Abuna Abunthasa Visitation of St. George* (see fig. 10). Here Saint George is pictured again on horseback along with his fellow soldier-saints Demetrius, Maurice and Theodore, who are all thought to have been a part of the First Crusade. The archangel Gabriel ushers the archbishop forward to meet Saint George. Instead of a spear slaying a dragon, Saint George holds a staff to bless Abuna Abunthasa, another name for Abuna Basilios (b. 1891-1970), who was the first Ethiopian-born archbishop and later the first Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Depicted here with his distinctive beard, this 20<sup>th</sup> century figure meets a 4<sup>th</sup> century one, blending the past and present.

### **Today: My Encounters with the Christian Art of Ethiopia**

The religious iconography and narratives in *Ethiopian Art: Christian Narratives from the Kebra Nagast* are still repeated in today's art market that serves the tourist population. Western tourists may find comfort in familiar Christian imagery in a not-so-familiar environment. It is important to emphasize, however, that these 20<sup>th</sup> century artworks were most likely not constructed for Western tourism, like the ones offered today; rather the legends rendered into images repeatedly serve to symbolize a united Ethiopia and the legitimacy of specific leaders. Thanks to a generous gift from the Jeffrey R. Hayes Graduate

Research Award, I earned the opportunity to gather direct translations of these works and other Ethiopian myths and histories that are thriving in their current art market.

Before my journey, I had the preconceived notion of a general lack of value towards the Ethiopian art sold to tourists. I questioned how the Schenk's acquired the artworks and for how much money, and I was determined to establish a sense of value in the Ethiopian tourist art market. However, upon my arrival, I realized a clear difference between the large-scale artworks from the UWM Art Collection and the small, quickly produced trinkets that are sold today. Although the art offered was no doubt mass-produced at a distant location, they still depicted the repeated iconography of Saint George slaying the dragon, the Queen of Sheba visiting King Solomon, and numerous angel heads for protection. I also discovered an artist, Smachew Mesfin, from Lalibela who creates original works of the same, repeated themes. The contrast in skill, detail, and quality between the mass-produced tourist vendors and his works is astounding and it was a pleasure to meet and discuss the market with him. What is most interesting is that his works and the works of some distant factory cost the same amount of money.

I was able to tour and witness Ethiopia during one of its most significant religious events in January, Timket. Timket is a three-day-long festival that celebrates the baptism of Christ. During the ceremonies, the Tabot, a model of the Ark of the Covenant, which is present on every Ethiopian altar, is wrapped in rich, red cloth and placed in procession on the head of the priest, shown three times in *Timkat* (see fig. 11).<sup>50</sup>

There is a two-day, elaborate parade with processions, floats, and feasts. Priests often decorate hand and processional crosses by stringing colorful fabric through the loops and

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<sup>50</sup> Timkat, where the UWM Art Collection painting gets its name, is the Italian spelling, whereas Timket is the Ethiopian spelling.

holes found at the base of the cross. The fabric, often in green, yellow, and red (the colors of the Ethiopian flag), would cascade and flow down during ceremonial processions. There are three types and styles of Ethiopian crosses. There are processional, neck (or necklace), and hand crosses and they are styled depending on where they were made in either Gondar, Lalibela, or Axum. The two brass crosses from the UWM Art Collection are both examples of a Gondar cross, so they were most likely purchased in Gondar (see fig. 12 and 13).

On the third day of Timket, at Fasilidas' Bath in Gondar, babies are baptized first, bishops from all over Ethiopia chant the scripture of Jesus' baptism, and at the end of the ceremony, men line up to jump in the pool and become baptized with the holy water, making sure to fill bottles up for the women and children in the crowd. In the painting *Timkat*, there are nude men swimming, men racing and jumping horses, while women drum for the chants and the archbishops are seated to witness and bless (fig. 11). The ceremony I witnessed unfortunately lacked the horses, so this depiction is more historical than current. While it was my main goal to gather research on the works exhibited, I was able to experience the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, the palace ruins of the Queen of Sheba, the church that holds the Ark of the Covenant, and many other historical monuments.

Since the beginning of this exhibition, I became determined to exhibit these works in a complete Ethiopian context and to discover their broad themes. These themes include the continuation of the Christian narratives in art that legitimize the power of their rulers; presenting those narratives' pasts, presents, and futures all on one canvas to display prophetization of their 'rightful' victories; and to have these themes and messages spread throughout the Ethiopian art market and therefore the world. This exhibition does not focus on the works' influences from other countries nor does it glorify their authenticity. By

displaying these works in relation to the Kebra Nagast, my interpretation is neither diffusionist nor essentializing.

I hope that you have found *Ethiopian Art* provided expanded insight into Ethiopia from an Ethiopian perspective, moved beyond the dichotomy, and that it supports the institutional missions of research, teaching, and engagement.

FIGURES



Figure 1: Unknown artist. *The Battle of Adowa (Version I)*, 20<sup>th</sup> Century, oil on canvas. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk, 35.25 x 54.5 in. 1988.165.06.



Figure 2: Unknown artist. *The Battle of Adowa (Version II)*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century, oil on canvas. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. 36 x 74.25 in. 1988.165.07.



Figure 3: Unknown artist. *St. George and the Dragon*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century, oil on canvas. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. 55.25 x 35.5 in. 1988.165.05.



Figure 4: Unknown artist. *St. George and the Dragon*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century, oil on Masonite. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. 38 x 33.5 in. 1988.165.01.



Figure 5: Morgan Ellsworth. *Church of Saint George*. Lalibela, Ethiopia. Taken 01/2020.



Figure 6: Unknown artist. *Queen of Sheba Visits King Solomon*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century, oil on cloth, UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk, 1989.039.24.



Figure 7: Unknown artist. *The Jihad of Ahmed Gran*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century, oil on canvas. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. 34.75 x 55 in. 1988.165.03.



Figure 8: Morgan Ellsworth. *Emperor Fasilidas' Castle*. Gondar, Ethiopia. Taken 01/2020.



Figure 9: Unknown artist. *Lion of Judah*. N.d., earthenware. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. H: 5.5 in. 1988.008.08.



Figure 10: Unknown artist. *Archbishop Abuna Abunthasa Visitation of St. George*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century, oil on canvas. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. 35.5 x 56.25 in. 1988.165.02.



Figure 11: Unknown artist. *Timkat*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century, oil on canvas. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. 33.75 x 47 in. 1988.165.04.



Figure 12: Unknown artist. *Engraved Cross*. 19<sup>th</sup> Century, brass. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. L: 12 in. 1989.039.05.



Figure 13: Unknown artist. *Hand Cross*. N.d., carved wood. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. 12.5 x 5.125 in. 1989.012.09.

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

1. Unknown artist. *Madonna and Child*. 20<sup>th</sup> century, oil on cloth. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. 16.5 x 12 in. 1989.039.26.
2. Unknown artist. *Engraved Cross*. 19<sup>th</sup> Century, brass. UWM Art Collection, Gift of Quentin and Emmy Lou Schenk. 1989.039.13.

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