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ETHIOPIAN RELIGIOUS ART its significance and forms of expression

The advent of Christianity to Ethiopia in the 4th century marks the beginning of a tradition of religious painting that continues to this day. Until recently, however, the art of Christian Ethiopia has remained relatively unknown outside its borders. This has been due in part to the geographical position of Ethiopian state and its people who for centuries have lived on their high West African plateau removed from the currents of world history. Yet, in course of the past centuries Ethiopian artists produced a prodigious body of manuscript miniatures, church murals and icons. In the history of art these works hold a unique position.

There are three key elements that led to this singularity of artistic expression.

The first element is indomitable spirit of the Ethiopian people who succeeded to preserve their independence for the last two thousand years. Thanks to this remarkable historical fact, the Ethiopians were able to develop freely their culture and artistic aptitudes.

The second element is Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which belongs to the Eastern branch of Christianity and has been the wellspring of the religious art of Ethiopia. The pervasive spirit of Ethiopian painting is largely derived from its interpretations of the art of Eastern Christianity; expressing in an Ethiopian context a fervent confirmation of the Christian faith. Painting, as an act of piety, reflects another world, acting as an intermediary between the realms of the spiritual and the terrestrial to express the inexpressible in visible form.

The third element is the African soil on which the culture of Ethiopian people has grown and flourished. Yet, in some respect Ethiopian artistic expression is different from the art which is currently called African, that is the art of the people living in Western, Central and Southern Africa. Their main idiom of expression was sculpture, whereas the Ethiopian creativity was strictly limited to paintings. Together these three elements have worked in concert to generate a remarkable and distinctive artistic phenomenon.

Nor should changing styles in Ethiopian traditional art be considered comparable to stylistic changes in Western art; the underlying principles of this art always remain the same by virtue of its didactic and devotional character. Its purpose is to describe in colour and line the narrative of the Gospels, to portray hallowed personages in forms

that are intelligible to the believers and to make the votive prayer more effective by expressing the request by the painted image.

By virtue of its geographic situation, Ethiopian art belongs to Africa, yet its development over many centuries is interwoven with the introduction of models borrowed from Eastern as well Western Christian art. It absorbed the impact of Islamic culture and art and responded to the influence emanating from the vast area of the Indian Ocean. In other words, Ethiopian painters faithfully reproduced the most significant iconographic characteristics, while introducing at the same time a complete stylistic transformation according to principles of African art forms.

The convergence of these external influences occurred intermittently and, at certain times, simultaneously. The strength of Ethiopian attachment to the iconographic tradition of both Eastern and Western Christian art is evidenced by its sustained existence in Ethiopia. Ethiopian paintings - even relatively modern ones - often reflect, with simple fidelity, archaic types of iconographic art forms, that have long since been lost in the cultures of their origin. For example, images of the Virgin Mary, separated by three centuries, were reproduced with iconographic fidelity that is nothing short of remarkable.

A particularly fascinating aspect of Ethiopian art is its adherence to the expression of an objective truth independent of time and space. Subjects are depicted in what are considered their real immutable form. At the height of its stylistic perfection, Ethiopian art renounces the illusion of volume, depth and perspective. The paintings are „conceptual” and composed of a series of image-signs according to spiritual considerations. These image-signs arranged on a flat surface are meant to give the impression of an idea or a narration. Human figures, the epitome of Ethiopian art, are characterised by non-realistic head and body proportions and usually static poses.

Church decorations represent what is possibly the richest and yet the least studied element of Ethiopian art. They serve as a dramatic illustration of the development of many centuries. Illuminated manuscripts also constitute a highly significant portion of Ethiopia's artistic heritage. In Ethiopia, the ancient art of producing illustrated books on parchment is a tradition that has continued for centuries. In the light of the antiquity of their origins, these manuscripts are of exceptional artistic and cultural value.

To the best of our knowledge, most of the early illuminated manuscripts relate to the Gospels. From the 14th century onwards, however, a new tendency manifested itself in the growing thematic variety of miniatures; the Gospels gradually ceased to be the only source of subject matter and the range of manuscripts with miniatures widened to include Psalters, Acts of Saints and Martyrs, Rituals for the Passion Week and others. Portrayals of the Virgin Mary appeared in the early 15th century in the manuscripts containing the narration of her Miracles.

In the early 17th century, the city of Gondar was founded and it subsequently became the permanent capital of the Empire. The Imperial and provincial scriptoria produced a great number of manuscripts, some of which were lavishly embellished by a wealth of miniatures. Besides the Gospels, the Miracles of Mary, the Lives of Ethiopian Saints and the Litanies, many other kinds of illuminated manuscripts were also produced. One example can be found in the realm of popular religiosity, where the

texts of protective scrolls always included drawings, which were believed to possess magical properties.

The existence of a wealth of paintings on wood, on the other hand, is a comparatively recent discovery. Gradually the icons preserved in churches and monasteries over centuries have come to light; substantially broadening our knowledge of Ethiopian art and revealing a new dimension of Christian art in Africa. However, unlike other centres of the Eastern Christianity such as Russia or Greece, the practice of keeping icons in people's homes was never established. Even today, the icons considered as painted by St. Luke are carried by priests in procession only during the yearly feasts of certain churches and the exceptional occasions such as war or drought.

For several centuries privately commissioned icons were offered to churches in order to ensure the salvation of the supplicant's soul. These votive donations were attested by the solemn formulae inscribed on the icon. Until the 18th century, the actual figures of the supplicant seldom appeared; however, as the century advanced, Ethiopian rulers developed a desire to be depicted together with the sacred image of the Virgin or of Christ or with their preferite saints. This innovation was emulated, in turn, by the nobility as well as the clergy, and in the course of the last two centuries, the figures of the supplicants became a permanent feature of Ethiopian religious art. The essential attributes of the supplicant figures and their importance are indicated symbolically with size, positioning and pose determining relative stature and rank. In general, donors are shown at the bottom of the work and are depicted either prostrate or standing to the side. Ethiopian artists did not try to individualise the physiognomy; the inscription offers the principal if not only possibility to know of whom is the portrait. However, artists take great care in depicting costumes, ornaments, weapons and other accessories. Although usually in simplified form, these details truly reflect historical conditions and they are significant indication of the depicted person's social status and importance.

The themes and forms of religious paintings in Ethiopia have been handed down from one generation of monastic or clerical painters to another; the masters passing over to their students the themes and forms in strict accordance to local tradition. In exceptional occasions, the master produced a pattern book. This accounts for the remarkable continuity that has been maintained for centuries - virtually impervious to change as it applies to symbolic meaning and form, yet not without an element of flexibility. The timeless practice of copying, coupled with the simultaneous process of adaptation is integral to past artistic endeavour in Ethiopia. As the result, a powerful stylistic transmutation of external models, has come to uniquely characterise the creative expression of Ethiopia's artists throughout its extensive history.

This short article is a token of homage to the jubilee celebrant's great scholarship and of sincere thanks for his translation of Ethiopian hagiographies which greatly helped me in my research on Ethiopian art and culture.