



Claire Bosc-Tiesse, Anais Wion. *Peintures sacrées d'Éthiopie: Collection de la Mission Dakar-Djibouti*. St-Maur-des-Fosses: Sépia, 2005. 132 pp. EUR 38.00 (paper), ISBN 978-2-84280-091-8.

Reviewed by Marilyn Heldman (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-AfrArts (June, 2006)

Ethiopian Religious Art: Gondar and Gondarine Painting Revisited

In his autobiography, *My Last Sigh*, the renowned Spanish film-maker, Luis Bunuel, revealed that the Vicomte de Noailles had invited him to join an expedition through sub-Saharan Africa being organized by his brother-in-law, the Prince of Ligna, at that time the governor-general of the Belgian Congo.[1] The expedition, organized in 1930 and which was to include anthropologists, geographers, and zoologists, would travel from Dakar to Djibouti. Alas, Bunuel declined the vicomte's suggestion to make a documentary film about the expeditionary mission; in fact, he also chose not to join it. Nevertheless, the expedition's impact survives in many manifestations, one of which is the subject of this publication, a beautifully designed and illustrated publication that is a welcome addition to the literature on Ethiopian religious art.

A group of French members of the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, including the anthropologist Marcel Griaule, spent a considerable amount of time during the early 1930s at Gondar, for several centuries the capital of highland Christian Ethiopia. The works of art collected there, primarily of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings, were deposited in Paris at the department "Afrique noire" of the Musée de l'Homme. This important collection has recently been cleaned and restored in preparation for its installation in the new Musée Quai Branly, which will absorb the collections of the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie and the ethnology section of the Musée de l'Homme.

The authors, art historians whose previous publications have focused upon Ethiopian religious art of the Gondarine period, place this little-known collection within the context of its historical and cultural setting. They begin with an historical outline of the city of Gondar from the establishment of the royal court there in the early seventeenth century to its eclipse as royal capitol in the mid-nineteenth century, followed by an introduction to the members of the Dakar-Djibouti mission

who worked at Gondar. Most of the book is dedicated to a series of essays upon the two major categories of the collection: icons and murals. Following a practice introduced to Ethiopia during the fifteenth century, murals were painted upon canvas and then mounted upon the interior walls of the church. Such practice made their removal relatively easy.

Devotional images in the form of paintings on wood panels, known as icons, also came to highland Christian Ethiopia in the fifteenth century and not long after, a mandatory ceremony of the veneration of an icon of the Virgin Mary was introduced as part of the liturgy of the Ethiopian Church. The use of smaller portable icons for private devotions arose around the same time, including those in diptych form. A very rare fifteenth-century icon in the Dakar-Djibouti collection, a small diptych of the Virgin and Child paired with Saint George, is equipped with a hollow inverted V-shaped lug through which a leather cord is threaded so that it may be worn. The inverted V-shaped lug imitates a typical form of silver-gilt cross pendants of the same period incised with portraits of the Virgin and Child.[2] By the seventeenth century, double-sided diptychs that could be worn suspended from a cord around the neck were produced for numerous patrons at Gondar. Although these icons were used for private devotions, they were also regarded as having an apotropaic or protective function. A development of the eighteenth century is a double-sided polypitic, which allowed an expansion of the number of devotional images. To the standard seventeenth-century scheme (that included the Virgin with her Beloved Son, Saint George, the Crucifixion, and the Raising of Adam and Eve or the portrait of an Ethiopian saint), the painter of the polypitic in the Mission Dakar-Djibouti collection added two Ethiopian saints (the hermit Gabra Manfas Qeddu and monastic leader Takla Haymanot) and a portrait of Michael the Archangel, resplendently garbed in the costume of the Ethiopian royal court. Numerous

color photographs allow the reader to follow the stylistic and iconographic developments in the production of small personal icons.

The Gondarine ruling elite provided important patronage for religious art, founding churches extensively decorated with murals and supplied with richly illuminated manuscripts and icons in the form of diptychs and triptychs. Several diptychs collected by the Dakar-Djibouti mission offer important examples of the expanding range of subject matter in icons produced at Gondar. The seventeenth-century miracle-working diptych from the church of Saint Abba Antony at Gondar shows two portraits of Christ, one as Man of Sorrows who suffered to redeem the sin of mankind and the other as serene Ruler of the Universe. The diptych is signed by the painter Walda Maryam; although nothing is known of his life, stylistic analysis leads the authors to attribute the murals of the church of Saint Abba Antony to him (pp. 39-41). The diptych collected by the mission from the church of Qaha Iyyasus at Gondar greatly expands the visual imagery of Christ's Passion and exemplifies the new interest in visual narrative. This may be observed not only in icons, but also in cycles of mural decoration as well as in such illuminated manuscripts as the *Miracles of Mary*, numerous copies of which were commissioned by the ruling elite for their private devotions and viewing pleasure.[3]

The restoration of collected murals (fragments as well as two more complete sets collected by the Dakar-Djibouti mission), notably the seventeenth-century murals attributed to the painter Walda Maryam at the church of Saint Abba Antony and a portion of the mid-eighteenth-century murals from the sanctuary of the church of Qaha Iyyasus on the outskirts of Gondar, allows Claire Bosc-Tiesse and Anais Wion to reconstruct the iconographic schemes of these two churches. Both follow the standard plan of the Ethiopian church adopted circa 1500 that consists of a square sanctuary at the core accessible only to priests. The four exterior walls of this enclosed sanctuary were routinely covered with wall paintings that include portraits of the saints and scenes from the life of Christ and of the Virgin Mary. These the

laity could gaze upon.

Some of the subjects, such as a grand vision of God the Father with the twenty-four Priests of Heaven and an iconic portrait of the Virgin and Child are standard; others may be unique to a particular church. The murals of the church of Saint Abba Antony include a portrait of the saint to whom the church is dedicated, the Egyptian holy man who established the institution of monasticism. His portrait shows him receiving the monastic cap and scapular from an angel. The authors place the murals of the church of Qaha Iyyasus within the context of the history of the development of the Qaha quarter on the outskirts of Gondar during the course of the eighteenth century. The murals of the church of Qaha Iyyasus are typical stylistically of the magnificent works of art produced under the patronage of Regent Queen Mentewwab during the reign of her son Iyyasus II (1730-55).

The book concludes with an excursus on painted church decoration of the eighteenth century and later, inspired by imported Dutch faience tiles, and a discussion of the ideal iconographic scheme of church decoration as recorded by Gondarine painters in the 1930s for the Dakar-Djibouti mission. The similarity between this ideal scheme of mural decoration and those extant schemes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflects an unbroken chain of traditional learning passed from master painter to apprentice.

Notes

[1]. Luis Bunuel, *My Last Sigh*, trans. A. Israel (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), pp. 137-139. First published in France as *Mon dernier soupir* in 1982.

[2]. For examples of metal pendant icons with the inverted v-shaped lug, see Marilyn Heldman and Stuart C. Munro-Hay, *African Zion: the Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), catalogue no. 1 and p. 91, figs. 3 & 4.

[3]. For a brief discussion with further bibliography of the introduction of the *Miracles of Mary* to Ethiopia, see M. E. Heldman, "St. Luke as Painter: Post-Byzantine Icons in Early Sixteenth-Century Ethiopia," *Gesta* vol. XLIV/2 (2005): pp. 125-148, especially pp. 137-138.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Marilyn Heldman. Review of Bosc-Tiesse, Claire; Wion, Anais, *Peintures sacrées d'Éthiopie: Collection de la Mission Dakar-Djibouti*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11894>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.