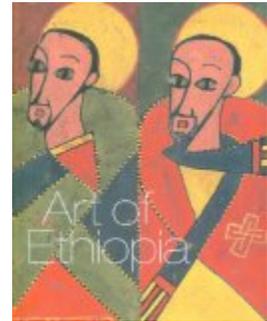


Sam Fogg, ed. *Art of Ethiopia*. Griffith Mann. Catalogue by Arcadia Fletcher. London: Paul Holberton, 2005. 128 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9549014-6-2.

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Identification and Dating of Crosses and Alleged Brancaleon Works

I always enjoy browsing through Sam Fogg's catalogues which feature superbly reproduced pieces of Ethiopian art. Moreover the 2005 edition by Arcadia Fletcher provides an introduction by C. Griffith Mann. The introduction was a disappointment, however. Six pages of Mann's text are more praise song than history, as he describes "a stunning array of processional crosses, illuminated manuscripts, painted wooden icons and murals" which are the "visible expression to the divine and render the sacred accessible" (p. 5). The Ethiopian processional crosses "exemplify Ethiopia's long engagement with Christianity" (p. 6), and the illuminated manuscripts "speak eloquently of the Ethiopian devotion to the sacred word and its embellishment and constitutes some of the most remarkable surviving monuments of Christian culture anywhere" (p. 7). He further elaborates that "as in other Orthodox Christian cultures, Ethiopia's veneration of the sacred likeness gave rise to a rich and varied tradition of icon painting" (p. 8).

While there is nothing wrong with a praise song, he then goes on to present the somewhat debatable evolution of "artistic production in Ethiopia" which depends heavily on the one presented in Marilyn Heldman's 1993 catalogue *African Zion*. He does not seem aware of other possibilities which have been documented more elaborately. Nor does he acknowledge the fact that the problem of periodization is still open for discussion.[1]

Moreover, he relies on a number of erroneous statements in other sources, raising serious questions about this text. He writes that "icons on panels [sic] are ex-

tremely rare before the time of King Dawit (r. 1382-1413), founder of the Solomonic dynasty. Dawit especially encouraged devotion to the Virgin, praying daily before a Marian icon and commissioning the first Ge'ez edition of *The Miracles of Mary* (*Nägärä Maryam*), which he had translated from Arabic" (p. 12). According to current research, the earliest panel painting was tentatively dated to the first half of the fifteenth century, which is definitely not "before the time of King Dawit." [2] Neither was King Dawit the founder of the Solomonic dynasty which came to power over a century before his rule. The statement that he prayed "daily" before "a Marian icon," is based on the authority of scholar Getatchew Haile. However, this scholar actually writes that Dawit had an image (icon) statuette made in her [Mary's] likeness and adorned it with gold and silver and precious stones. He prayed constantly to this image, day and night (p. 31). He rightly concludes that it cannot be determined with absolute certainty whether the object was an icon (painting) or a statuette (p. 26). [3] Furthermore, the *Miracles of Mary* and *Nägärä Maryam* are two different works of Ethiopic religious literature. Dawit initiated the process of translating the *Miracles of Mary*; however, the wording of the statement that he produced its "first edition," is a rather tenuous description for what was to have been a manuscript.

Turning to the general history of Ethiopia, Mann writes: "Before the rise of Islam, its position on the Horn of Africa enabled Ethiopia to control the merchant trade that moved up and down the Red Sea, bringing both wealth and contact with outside cultures" (p. 6). In

fact, during the first millennium, Southern Arabia had the monopoly of two of the most sought-after commodities of ancient times, frankincense and myrrh, both of which grow in eastern Yemen. Buyers were ready to pay for their weight in gold. The frankincense routes led from Southern Arabia to Ghaza in Palestine, running inland roughly parallel to the Red Sea. Also Asian spices and luxury goods were transported on that same route.[4] Aksumite Ethiopia certainly did not control the merchant trade in the Red Sea area, and to what extent she shared the sea routes with Egyptians, South Arabians, Indians and others remains an open question.

One could argue with other statements in the introduction, but let us turn to Arcadia Fletcher's catalogue. In her description of the objects on sale, she had to grapple with two major problems. One was to accurately designate the objects and the second to assign their dates of origin. In order to substantiate the attributions she gives a number of references, but instead of serving as useful aids, they tend to lead to confusion and possible doubt about the veracity of her information.

Regarding the dates of origin for crosses, I shall limit myself to three examples, the first being brass crosses; the second, numbers six and seven; and the third a wooden cross, number eleven. Cross number six is dated ca. 1480-1500 and cross number seven to ca.1500. They are similar in type, but the references which should support their dating contribute, instead, to further confusion. Waclaw Korabiewicz gives no date at all for such crosses.[5] The brass cross IES 4486 reproduced in *African Zion* is dated to the second half of the fifteenth century, Girma Fisseha attributes it to the fifteenth century, and Jacques Mercier in one instance ascribes the cross to the fifteenth century and in another to "ca. 1500" or the sixteenth century.[6] Why then are the crosses in question assigned the dating of "1480-1500" and "ca. 1500" in the catalogue description?

The answer is that Fletcher accepted Mercier's theory that around 1500 Ethiopians began to use brass for making crosses.[7] This theory, however, is contradicted by the existence of a cross with a confirmed date of origin between 1468-1478, coinciding with the reign of King Bā'edā Maryam who signed the cross.[8] Furthermore the cross donated to Tā'aminā Monastery in Tā'aminā, Ethiopia, by King Zār'a Ya'eqob (1434 to 1468), is most probably made of brass and is a variant of the type illustrated in the catalogue as crosses number six and seven.[9] Given that most Ethiopian crosses are unsigned and the changes made were part of a gradual process, es-

tablishing a precise date up to when the use of bronze ceased and from when the use of brass began is very difficult. For this reason, the dates provided by Fletcher for these two items require further study and the addition of a broader dating would be appropriate.

A third example is the wooden cross, number eleven, with a human figure as the handle. Both its identification and its date of origin are problematic. Again Fletcher gives several references in order to substantiate her statements. However, the reference ascribed to Georg Gerster's book[10] is questionable since it has only a loose connection to the cross in question. According to Waclaw Korabiewicz, the second authority cited, the handle representing the figure of Adam carrying the tree of Paradise is popular in Ethiopia and occurs in many Ethiopian crosses.[11] However, Jacques Mercier, the third authority, states that only a dozen such crosses are known, and all are dated to the nineteenth or twentieth century. He sees in the handle the victorious figure of Christ, although "one Ethiopian scholar [no name given] postulated the figuration of Adam." [12] The fourth authority, Girma Fisseha, editor of the catalogue of a 2002 Ethiopian Exhibition at the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich, assigns one such cross to the eighteenth century and a second from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century.[13] Fletcher however opts for Mercier's statement about the rarity of this type of cross and is of the opinion that "none of them seem to date from before the second half of the nineteenth century" (p. 33). Her information that the cross reproduced in the catalogue was carved "with the use of a drill" (p. 33), strongly supports a later dating for the cross. Thus the dating and identification of this small but interesting group of crosses is still an open question. Their places of origin are hypothetical as well, because all of them were acquired from Addis Ababa antique dealers. Nor is there evidence that any of them had ever been used for liturgical purposes. This in turn raises the question of who commissioned them and for what purpose. Furthermore, the explanations given to a foreign collector regarding various parts of the crosses may have been invented by dealers in the antique shops of Addis Ababa, or perhaps even by some country priests. Certainly, none of the explanations given have any confirmation in the Rules of the Ethiopian Church.[14]

Turning to the paintings, I shall also limit myself to remarks regarding two panel paintings which Fletcher attributes to an Italian expatriate painter in Ethiopia, Nicolò Brancaleon. The first, number sixteen, is alleged to be two wings of a Brancaleon triptych and is dated to the "second half of the fifteenth century" (p. 40, plate p.

41). The panels represent two scenes from the story of St. George. The second item, number seventeen, is a “Dip-tych icon [sic] of the Virgin and Child with the Apostles” dated ca. 1500, and also alleged to have been painted by Nicolò Brancaleon (plates and texts, pp. 42-43).

Fletcher notes that “only two or three manuscripts and an icon signed by Brancaleon survive, but it has been possible to attribute a further small group of paintings to him or his workshop on the basis of their similar style and technique” (p. 40). She continues, “To that group these luminous paintings can be surely added. They are especially close to one of the signed works showing the Baptism in the church of Wafa Yesus.” She further appends below a copy of the miniature to give visual support to her assertion.

Contrary to Fletcher’s assertion, there are only three works in existence bearing Brancaleon’s signature to the best of my knowledge, and they are without any doubt the artist’s works. One is the triptych IES No.4191, which appeared in 1968 on the Addis Ababa antique market but its authenticity was never doubted and Brancaleon’s Ethiopian name written in Geez characters is the best proof of the piece’s being genuine. The second is a diptych which, for centuries, was kept in the remote Gethesemane church in Gwonca District, Eastern Goggam and the artist’s signature appears on the back of both panels. Independent scholar Diana Spencer discovered the diptych in January 1973. It was still in the monastery when I saw it in 1995 and Paul Henze re-photographed it. About four years later this same diptych was found at the antique market in Addis Ababa. Much damage had occurred in transit, including an attempt at erasing the artist’s signatures. The third is a booklet of miniatures also discovered in January 1973 by Spencer at Wafa Iyäsus Church in Gwonca. On the twentieth page at the foot of the scene of the Baptism of Christ, the artist’s signature is in evidence. The booklet remains in the possession of the same church.

Two unsigned pieces are generally accepted as Brancaleon’s works. One is a manuscript of the Miracles of Mary with tinted line drawings which embody all the characteristics of Brancaleon’s style, including the depictions of human figures, arched structures and other types of European buildings, angels in swallow-dive flight, and the inclusion of various types of hats. The second ascribed work is a badly damaged Dormition triptych found in Gethesemane Church in Gwonca. Descriptions of these two are included here because of their importance for purposes of authentication.

The uniformity of style in the above five works is striking, although undoubtedly they were created at different times during Brancaleon’s forty years of life in Ethiopia. They are the basis for establishing the pattern of Brancaleon’s style and allowing comparisons with other works in the Italianate style to establish their relationship with works of the master.[15]

Turning now to the works which Fletcher believes to be by Brancaleon: In describing diptych number seventeen, Fletcher (p. 42) asserts that there is an inscription in red paint, in the Latin alphabet Nic[olaus Brancaleon] ve[netus], which represents a new discovery of great importance. She continues: “In this painting, which must date from a time when Brancaleon had been in Ethiopia for many years, his style and technique had developed considerably.” The references given include both my 1983 book *Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting* and Diana Spencer’s 1989 paper, “The Discovery of Brancaleon’s Paintings,” given at the First International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art. Spencer had already described the discovery in a previously published article and both reports include a certain factual mistake.[16] In 1973, Spencer visited the Gethesemane Church and found many ancient panel paintings. One of them was a triptych showing the Dormition of the Virgin Mary. She rightly believed it to be a work of the Italian expatriate and in her 1974 article she wrote: “On the reverse side of the main panel are the Roman letters NIC BRA to which unfortunately I did not pay sufficient attention nor did I record it with the camera.”[17] When I visited the church in 1995 and carefully inspected the Dormition triptych, I was unable to find the monogram NIC BRA. However, Spencer was only uncertain about the painting which bore the signature. In the same church was another painting which was undoubtedly the work of Brancaleon, and Spencer describes this with great precision: “A large diptych. On one side is the Holy Virgin and Child, she is seated ... in a wooden chair with knobs. The angels as described in previous item [that is, in swallow-dive]. The painting is rather clumsily executed, particularly in the manner in which the cloak is folded over the drawn-up legs. On the other panel are the twelve Apostles in two rows, facing each other in pairs.”[18] Spencer missed the signatures of Nicolo Brancaleon written on the back of both panels of the diptych.[19]

The intriguing point is that this diptych obviously served as a model for diptych number seventeen in Fogg’s catalogue. In fact its left panel is a very close copy of the left panel of the Gethesemane diptych although certain details are difficult to explain in terms of Brancaleon’s

work as we know it. The Child is shown holding a spike with narrow leaves and topped with a poorly executed version of a flower. In Brancaleon's portraits of the Holy Virgin and Child, the Child is occasionally shown holding an orb in his left hand but never a flower. The second anomaly is the chest on which the Virgin is seated. In Brancaleon's paintings and drawings, the Virgin is either seated on a cushioned Byzantine-style bench, occasionally with a footrest supporting her feet, or she is sitting on various types of ornate chair, such as the knobbed one in the Gethesemane diptych. The third relevant detail is the swallow diving angels favored by the fifteenth century Italianate schools of painting,[20] which in this case have changed into standing archangels with raised swords. What was the reason for these changes? Was Brancaleon not satisfied with his previous depictions of the Holy Virgin?

Fletcher explains that diptych number seventeen "must date from a time when Brancaleon had been in Ethiopia for many years, [and] his style and technique had developed considerably" (p. 42). Indeed in diptych seventeen, the Apostles are depicted in a manner which strongly differs from Brancaleon's style. Their figures are shortened and their faces elongated. The black eyebrows are drawn high above the eyes and clearly separated from the black line of the nose which is attached to the inner tip of the left or right eye depending on whether the face is turned to the left or right. The lower lips are distinctly larger than the upper and drawn at their lower part with a black sinuous line. Turning to the hair, it is parted on the Apostles' foreheads showing a pointed tip at the hairline. Roughly drawn pointed curls appear on the backs of their heads. The beards and moustaches are drawn with strong but crude lines. The hands are large in proportion to the figures. Finally the volume of the books they hold is shown with the pages marked in white, certainly an anomaly because this convention for the depiction of books does not appear until the seventeenth century in Ethiopian art.

In the Gethesemane diptych, the figures are clearly elongated and the faces tend to be round. The black line of the nose is drawn up to the arch of eyebrows and the space between eyes and eyebrows is shaded with dark brown colors that are a distinctive quality of Brancaleon's art. The lips are narrow and the upper and lower lips similarly shaped, again characteristics of Brancaleon's painting. The hairline above the forehead runs always as a smooth curve and is neatly trimmed in the back with no curls at all. The beards and moustaches are neatly trimmed and are either round or elongated. In general

the hair is drawn with very fine parallel lines that skillfully blend into the dark hues of the hair. The hands are very small in proportion to the figures, which is the hallmark of Brancaleon's hands. Finally the books are schematically drawn as flat rectangles with black lines running along the borders. Thus the depictions of the Virgin and the Child and the standing Archangels in diptych seventeen display substantial differences from the Brancaleon style.

Item number sixteen, a pair of panels alleged to be part of a triptych and featuring St. George, also presents problems in terms of its form and attribution. Fletcher writes that "each of the panels has slanted edges on one side so that they would have dovetailed together to close over the missing central panel" (p. 40). However, one would also expect them to have two sets of holes at their inner edges, which would be evident when the triptych or diptych was open, as is the case with item seventeen.

A more significant issue is that the subjects depicted in number sixteen's panels are absent in the works of Brancaleon and are generally unknown in the Ethiopian iconography of St. George. Fletcher writes "on the right panel [there is] a scene of the dismembered body of Saint George held by a crowd, with an identifying inscription, 'How the angel ... the body (or flesh) of (Saint) George,' the rest [being] illegible (p. 40). Another two inscriptions are "Michael"—probably the name of the archangel shown in the middle of the crowd—and "Zorontos"—a member of the crowd. The scene thus implies a well-known torture in George's martyrdom, namely the hacking of his body into ten pieces described in a Greek text that was widely distributed in Europe and the Near East after the tenth century and that was also translated into Arabic and possibly into Geez in 1487 or 1488.[21] However in its shortened version in the Ethiopian Church Calendar with brief hagiographical texts this torture is not mentioned.[22] In a longer version, the torture is described in detail as follows: "Forty men ground the wheel over George, crushing him so that he was broken into ten parts; all of these were buried in a pit, and the pit was covered with a huge stone." [23] George, however, reappeared fully formed in front of King Dudedanos who condemned him to endure over two dozen other tortures. The episode as depicted in item sixteen could not be drawn from the above texts because none mentions the "dismembered body of Saint George to be held by a crowd" (p. 40). Neither could the motif be drawn from the manner in which the Ethiopians depicted the torture. Brancaleon himself is correctly credited with the introduction of George's martyrdom into Ethiopian iconography. However, he made the im-

age more accessible by substituting a soldier chopping up the saint's body with an axe for "breaking [the body] on the wheel." Ethiopian painters followed the same pattern in subsequent centuries. The only detail remaining in the image from the text is the number of ten pieces into which the body of George was dismembered. The change in the narrative raises serious doubts about the attribution of this work to Brancalion. If this is a work by Brancalion, the question remains as to why he would change his approach to the story.

Similarly intriguing is the depiction of St. George's funeral in Ethiopian fashion on the second panel, which includes a lamentation and an inscription indicating that "the Bishops and the people" attended it. How does this scene relate to both the Ethiopic texts and iconography?

According to the texts, Christ or his angel appears to George several times in the course of his martyrdom and gives him a promise of the crown of martyrdom and glory. Seven years of trials and tortures pass and King Dudyanos finally orders George's decapitation. Its circumstances are described in detail in the Church Calendar as well as in other texts, but not the funeral or the lamentation. The depiction of St. George's beheading is neither found in Brancalion's triptych nor in any sixteenth-century paintings, but the theme captivated the imagination of later Ethiopian painters of the eighteenth century who began to depict it strictly following the texts. It follows then that the scenes of the funeral and lamentation in number sixteen do not find justification in the texts.

Nor do these scenes find justification in pictorial tradition. Ethiopian artists developed a rich iconography of St. George as the victorious knight of Christ on horseback and crowned with the incorruptible crown of martyrdom, with particular emphasis on St. George the Dragon-Killer. Compared with these glorious subjects in pictorial tradition, the prosaic representation of the burial of a corruptible body would have had little appeal to Ethiopian believers and artists. Moreover, the burial and lamentation contain motifs that are out of chronological context in terms of St. George's pictorial illustrations as we know it.

The contracted eyebrows as an expression of sorrow depicted in the figures of the left panel are unknown in Ethiopian paintings before the late seventeenth century and then they relate to the depiction of the image of Christ wearing a crown of thorns. Such eyebrows came into general use as late as the nineteenth century. The second anomalous detail is the strange flat helmet in-

tended to represent the bishops' ceremonial headcovers. They strongly differ from those depicted by Brancalion in the Tädbabä Maryam manuscript. In his paintings, Brancalion is very strict in his representation of the head covering appropriate to bishops of the Oriental Christian Churches. This is evident in a series of tinted drawings ornamenting the Miracles of Mary manuscript at the Tädbabä Maryam Monastery in Wällo. Although not signed, the drawings are firmly ascribed to Brancalion and they include several figures of bishops. All of them, except one bishop, are shown wearing one type of headgear which Brancalion obviously considered correct for bishops of the Oriental Christian Churches. The exceptional one is a Western European miter depicted in the miracle of the false bishop. Such a departure from Brancalion's normal practice casts doubt on his authorship of the panel images.

Finally, the depiction of houses with lunettes and open windows casts further doubt on his being the author of these images. Four houses with doors and lunettes are depicted in miniatures in the Wafa Iyäsus booklet. Brancalion depicted circular openings over doors correctly in the Venetian fashion, being of Venice origin. However, his students were less precise on this point because they were not familiar with such structures in Ethiopia. Is it possible that Brancalion himself, in depicting houses in the two panels number sixteen, could have forgotten their use and turned them into decorative pattern?

My discussion of the works numbered sixteen and seventeen indicates many questions that need to be answered before Fletcher can convince us that these are works are indeed those of Brancalion.

I have chosen to present a detailed argument in reference to the above panel paintings because of the importance of the Italian artist for the history of Ethiopian painting. This is not to suggest by any means, that such investigation should apply to other works listed in the catalogue, although a certain degree of circumspection is always advisable in collecting Ethiopiana in this day and age.[24]

Notes

[1]. Stanislaw Chojnacki, "Attempts at the Periodization of Ethiopian Painting: A Summary from 1960 to the Present," in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art, Addis Ababa, 5-8 November 2002*, ed. Birhanu Teferra [and] Richard Pankhurst (Addis Ababa : Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, 2003), pp. 3-30.

- [2]. Jacques Mercier, *L'Arche Ethiopienne, Art Chrétien d'Ethiopie, 27 septembre 2000 through 7 janvier 2001* (Paris: Pavillon des Arts, Paris Musées, 2000), p. 59.
- [3]. Getatchew Haile, "Documents on the History of Ase Dawit (1382-1413)," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 16 (1983): pp. 25-35.
- [4]. Werner Daum, ed., *Yemen : 3000 Years of Art and Civilisation in Arabia Felix* (Innsbruck: Pinguin, 1988), pp. 9, 322.
- [5]. Waclaw Korabiewicz, *The Ethiopian Cross* (Addis Ababa: Holy Trinity Cathedral, 1973).
- [6]. Roderick Grierson, ed., *African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 184, cat. no.79; Girma Fisseha, "Die christliche Kirche Athiopiens" in *Athiopiens Christentum zwischen Orient und Afrika* (Munich: Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, 2002), p. 103 cat. no. 94; Jacques Mercier, *Le roi Salomon et les maîtres du regard: Art et médecine en Ethiopie* (Paris: Reunion des musées nationaux, 1992), p. 67, fig. 31; Mercier, *L'Arche Éthiopienne* (Paris: Pavillon des Arts, Paris Musées, 2000), p. 76.
- [7]. Idem.
- [8]. Salvatore Tedeschi, "Una croce processionale etiopica conservata in Italia" in *Africa*, 46.2 (1991), p. 166.
- [9]. Stanislaw Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses: A Cultural History and Chronology* (Milan: Skira, 2006), pp. 134-135, fig. 82.
- [10]. Georg Gerster, *Churches in Rock: Early Christian Art* (London: Phaidon, 1970), figs. 38-39.
- [11]. Korabiewicz, *The Ethiopian Cross*, figs. 21, 91.
- [12]. Mercier, *L'Arche Éthiopienne*, p. 185. He also refers to the French publication *Ethiopie Millénaire: préhistoire et art religieux* (Paris: Musée du Petit Palais, 1974), fig. 168, in which a similar cross is dated to the eighteenth/nineteenth century, though with a question mark.
- [13]. Fisseha, *Die christliche Kirche Athiopiens*, p.110, cat. no. 106, 107.
- [14]. Marcel Griaule, "Règles de l'Eglise, Documents éthiopiens," *Journal asiatique* (juillet-septembre, 1932): pp. 1-42.
- [15]. Stanislaw Chojnacki, *Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting: Indigenous Developments, the Influence of Foreign Models and their Adaptations from the 13th to the 19th Century* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983), pp. 385-398.
- [16]. Diana Spencer, "Travels in Gojjam: St. Luke Ikons and Brancaleon Re-Discovered," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 12. 2 (1974): pp. 201-220.
- [17]. Ibid., p. 205.
- [18]. Ibid., pp. 205-206.
- [19]. Ian Campbell, "A Historical Note on Nicolò Brancaleon: As Revealed by an Iconographic Inscription," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 37.1 (2004): pp. 83-102.
- [20]. Stanislaw Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Icons: Catalogue of the Collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Addis Ababa University* (Milan: Skira, 2000), fig. 99.
- [21]. Ignazio Guidi, *Storia della letteratura etiopica* (Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1932), p. 64; E. A. Wallis Budge, *George of Lydda, the Patron Saint of England: A Study of the Cultus of St. George in Ethiopia* (London: Luzac and Co., 1930).
- [22]. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), p. 813ff.
- [23]. Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Icons*, figs. 92, 155, 148, 163, 211.
- [24]. The author is deeply grateful to Carolyn Gosage of Toronto and Jean M. Borgatti (H-AfrArts Review Editor) for their efforts in editing the text.

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