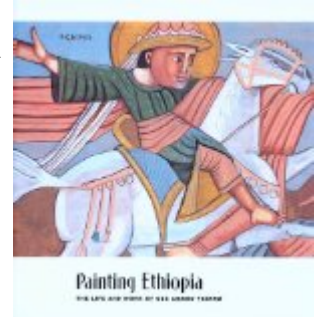


Raymond Aaron Silverman, with Qes Adamu Tesfaw, Leah Niederstadt, and Neil W. Sobania. *Painting Ethiopia: The Life and Work of Qes Adamu Tesfaw.* Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2005. Illustrations. 119 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-9748729-2-6.



Reviewed by Tania Tribe

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This handsome catalog produced by Raymond Aaron Silverman to accompany an exhibition at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Fowler Museum of Cultural History, with contributions by Neil W. Sobania and Leah Niederstadt, is a welcome addition to the library of art historians, cultural historians, and anthropologists alike. Extending the field he first covered and edited in the important catalog to the exhibition *Ethiopia: Traditions of Creativity* (1999), Silverman has here chosen to focus on the work of one particularly significant Ethiopian artist, the priest (Qes) Adamu Tesfaw, with whom he has worked closely for many years.

The catalog opens with forewords by Marla C. Berns, director of the Fowler Museum, and Elsa-bet Wolde-Giorgis, director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) in Addis Ababa. The latter points out the need for Ethiopian art, particularly Christian art, to be understood and appreciated on its own terms, deeply rooted in the specificities of the cultural-religious practices and conceptual world within which this art is produced. Many of

the works reproduced here are, in fact, part of the IES collections, affording members of the wider public what may be their first contact with this important Ethiopian institution, and introducing them to works considered to be of sufficient importance and quality to be included in its art collections. These opening texts are followed by a candid statement by the artist, in which he alludes to his personal circumstances, including his first wife's infidelity and the nature of his sufferings, as well as his creative process. Silverman's analysis of the significance of his oeuvre follows, showing how it fits into the art scene of contemporary Addis Ababa. The body of the catalog comprises reproductions of the works, accompanied by entries written by Silverman, Sobania, and Niederstadt. The works are grouped into three sections: religious works, scenes interpreting Ethiopian historical events, and paintings interpreting the everyday life surrounding the artist.

The general tone of the catalog reveals an approach that is similar to the one proposed by anthropologist Michael Jackson in his key edited

work, *Things As They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology* (1996), in which he emphasizes the need for direct description of the experience of cross-cultural understanding, one that avoids the trappings of an objectifying gaze when accounting for the uniqueness of individual human experiences. Such an approach has been successfully used, for instance, by Marjorie Shostak, whose attempts to understand the !Kung hunter-gatherer people of the Kalahari Desert led to a book (*Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* [1981]) that functions primarily as a vehicle for the views expressed by Nisa, a !Kung woman. Edited and translated by Shostak, Nisa's views are accompanied by the anthropologist's description of relevant aspects of !Kung life. Though drawing on the resources of her discipline, Shostak never loses Nisa's voice in her explanations, which function rather as a discreet and sensitive attempt at translating difference into her own particular codes of understanding. In a similar way, Silverman's catalog has the merit of essentially providing a vehicle for Qes Adamu to express himself directly. Responding to Wolde-Giorgis's concerns, it gives him space to discuss in a more unmediated way his aesthetic motivations, the criteria he employs when creating his works, his understanding of his pictorial compositions, the significance and meaning(s) of his art, the contemporary art scene in Addis Ababa, and the highs and lows of the Ethiopian art market and the patronage process.

Silverman's substantial analytical essay examines the nature of his long-term interaction with the artist, while also contextualizing the wider patronage process and the art scene in Addis Ababa. In turn, the catalog entries, written by Silverman, Sobania, and Niederstadt, while rightly emphasizing the aesthetic appeal of Qes Adamu's works, also point out the relevant ethnographic details in his compositions, effectively contextualizing his iconographic choices and explaining them to a largely foreign viewing and reading public. In this sense, like the exhibition it-

self, these essays and entries afford a glimpse into a still little-known and fascinating aspect of modern world art history. Appropriately, questions of quality, aesthetic taste, and judgment enter curatorial practice here through the inherent judgments at work within Qes Adamu's creative process, which is respected and treasured by all the catalog contributors.

Of particular importance as a contribution to the wider philosophical debate and to the issue of cross-cultural categorization is Qes Adamu's main aesthetic judgment, expressed in terms of Bahilawi (the traditional canon in which religious artists are expected to work) and Zemenawi (contemporary attitudes, rooted in the present time). These categories point to a man poised between the rigorous approach to the visual required by his religious training and the complex and dynamic negotiations between local and global practices, with calls for creative freedom, which have characterized the Ethiopian artistic environment over the last twenty years. Religion still plays an important role in shaping the framework of existence for Ethiopian Christians, and particularly for a priest like Qes Adamu, whose works and personal comments provide a good insight into how the Ethiopian Orthodox Church affects the contemporary visual practices of Christian artists, and how art powerfully mediates the encounter between two worlds. This encounter generates a subtle tension between the requirements of a religious art that has to be produced according to strict parameters of theological and formal correctness and the needs of an individual who also, at least partly, yearns to adopt some Western-derived notions of individuality and actively respond to its requirements for a critical eye, freedom of invention, and originality of form.

The works included in this excellent catalog provide a clear indication of this tension between the rigorous practitioner of religious art and an independent creative mind. The first dimension comes through in the artist's iconographic choic-

es, as in his portrayal of many well-established holy figures and events, such as Saint George spearing the dragon and scenes from the Old and New Testaments, or in his historical narratives, which uphold a teleological belief in Ethiopia's destiny and its perceived biblical origins. It can be seen, for example, in his representations of the Queen of Sheba in her traditional political and symbolic role as King Solomon's partner and the founding mother of the Ethiopian Solomonic royal line. He also, however, recreates the portrayal of Solomon and Sheba as benign metaphysical rulers in his depictions of the nineteenth-century founding royal couples of modern Ethiopia, Tewodros and Tewabetch, and Menelik II and Taitu. Qes Adamu repeatedly reinterprets the well-established composition depicting the key epic historical event that has marked Ethiopia's social consciousness and identity in modern times--the battle of Adwa (1896), in which Menelik II's army defeated the Italians. Then, however, in his portrayal of the Italian troops retreating from Adwa, he blends in his personal experience by dressing them in the uniforms that he observed firsthand during the Italian occupation of the late 1930s. In addition to the religious and historical themes, there are depictions of drought and famine, and a portrayal of a stick fight popular among ethnic groups who inhabit the country's southern regions. Such paintings extend the artist's apparently schematic and teleological view of history, allowing him also to confront the Ethiopian "other" and engage with the full extent of human cares and experience.

In formal terms, Qes Adamu's colorful linear paintings appear at first glance to reproduce simply and uncritically well-established formal and iconographic paradigms. On one level, they are indeed rooted in the art style that emerged in and around the eighteenth-century capital city of Gondar--an important center for the emergence of new schools of theological and *qene* (poetry) interpretation, as well as ritual, musical, and artistic practice. Perpetuated in the nineteenth and twen-

tieth centuries in forms of so-called traditional art, such a style has provided the basic formal language for Ethiopia's orthodox religious paintings and well-established epic historical scenes. A more careful examination of Qes Adamu's painting style and use of canonical conventions, however, reveals the tension generated by his existential double-implication. In response to the tragedies he witnesses or the experience of "the other" that he portrays, Qes Adamu is able to infuse the canon with new, albeit subtle, formal devices with which to express or comment on the specificities of the human condition. His descriptions of recent traumatic events, like drought and famine, for instance, portray elongated and emaciated bodies in a formal language endowed with all the expressionistic qualities needed to convey pathos and intensity. In addition, his compositional arrangements allow him to comment on the situation he depicts, as when he places those elongated, emaciated figures alongside well-fed officials--the benign and noble agents who, according to the artist, are there to take the problem into their hands and resolve it.

This catalog, written by leading specialists in the study of contemporary Ethiopian arts and cultures, makes a fascinating contribution to the wider field of African and "World" art history, which will remain valid for many years to come. Its illuminating essays are supported by useful bibliographic references, while the color reproductions enable the reader/viewer to experience some of the impact caused by the beauty and artistic integrity of Qes Adamu's works.

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