



Aethiopica 22 (2019)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

ELISABETH BIASIO, Zürich

Review

CONSTANTIN KAÏTÉRIS, *L'Éthiopie à travers le regard de ses peintres:
Histoire et sujets de la peinture populaire éthiopienne*

Aethiopica 22 (2019), 286–289

ISSN: 1430-1938

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob-Ludolf-Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafla, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg, and Siegbert Uhlig

einem zukunftstauglichen geschichts-, sprach- und kulturbasierten Interessen- und Problemverständnis beiträgt.

Stefan Brüne, Hamburg

CONSTANTIN KAÏTÉRIS, *L'Éthiopie à travers le regard de ses peintres: Histoire et sujets de la peinture populaire éthiopienne* (Paris: Sépia, 2018). 172 pp., illus. Price: €22.00. ISBN: 979-10-334-0151-3.*

Constantin Kaitéris is, as noted on the publication's back cover, both poet and translator, also from Amharic. During the ten years he lived in Ethiopia he apparently met with traditional painters, discussed matters with them, and acquired their paintings. Predominantly, these were Bərhanu Yəmānu (c.1920–1989) and Qanna Sambata (1945–1991). Also, several pictures of ʿAlāmu Ḥaylä Maryam (c.1916–1991) und Wändəmmu Wänd (1917–2002) are presented. All the works depicted and described in this book are from the author's own collection, except for two older examples (p. 19, p. 23).

Unfortunately, there is sparse information about the contact with the artists. For example, Kaitéris mentions that he met ʿAlāmu in 1980 and held a conversation with him (pp. 19–20). Unfortunately nothing can be learnt of the discussions with Bərhanu and Qanna, the artists from whom most of the pictures in the book originate. However, there is an impressive description of Bərhanu Yəmānu's studio (pp. 29–32), the walls of which were covered with newspaper clippings, pages from magazines, portraits of rulers as well as Western style images of the Virgin Mary. According to the author, all these items are represented in elements that the painter incorporated into his paintings. Also pinned to the studio wall were photographs which Bərhanu used to paint commissioned portraits. The artist also used photographic material for completely new subjects, for example for a May Day parade or for the prehistoric excavation of Mälka Qunṭure.

In the first part of his book, Kaitéris addresses the emergence of so-called popular painting. He describes its development as coming from the wall paintings of churches in the nineteenth century. However, he always uses the word '*fresques*' for these wall paintings, which evokes the term 'frescoes', which is not an accurate description. The *fresco al secco* technique was

* This book review was translated from German by Michael Longthorn, MA, English lecturer.

only used here until the beginning of the seventeenth century; later, pictures on large canvases were stuck to the church walls.¹

Käitëris then further describes how many church painters moved to the newly founded capital Addis Abäba at the beginning of the twentieth century and there also painted for European clients, which led to the so-called popular painting. Popular subjects were the 'legend of the Queen of Sheba' and the 'Battle of 'Adwa' in 1896. In the 1930s, this repertoire was expanded; among the artists active at the time were Bälaččäw Yämär, the brothers Yätbaräk, and 'Alämu Ḥaylä Maryam. After the liberation of 1941, this so-called popular painting found new admirers among the troops of the Commonwealth. New themes appeared, such as 'Ethiopian partisans' or the 'capitulation of Italian troops'. Among the artists of this period were 'Alämu, Bərhanu, Wändämmu, Yoḥannəs Täsämma, and many others. 'Alämu, Bərhanu, and Qanna are mentioned as examples of artists from 1970 to 1990. Their common characteristic is that, while they remained faithful to the national heritage, they also included new themes in their repertoire.

Käitëris also points out that, after the beginning of the Revolution of 1974, artists received fewer commissions because the new regime now preferred North Korean posters. It should also be mentioned that, at that time, hardly any tourists came into the country and that academic painting in the style of socialist realism enjoyed precedence. The author also discusses the style of painting that developed from that of church painting. Sources for early, so-called popular paintings are mainly European travellers, of whom Käitëris lists several, partly with citations, for example by Kurt Lubinski (p. 19), though an adverse point is that the author does not give any bibliographical references. It can only be assumed that the citation is taken from the essay by Richard Pankhurst (1966), which can be found in the bibliography, but is not accompanied by any reference in the text.²

The description of the historical development of the so-called popular painting gives a good overview of the subject, but does not add any new research evidence and does not deal with the commercialization of these paintings.³ In my publications I have also questioned the term 'popular

¹ E. Balicka-Witakowska, 'Monumental painting', in S. Uhlig, in cooperation with A. Bausi, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, IV: O–X (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 97b–99b.

² R. Pankhurst, 'Some Notes for a History of Ethiopian Secular Art', *Ethiopia Observer*, 10/1 (1966), 5–80.

³ e.g. E. Biasio, *Heilige und Helden: Äthopiens zeitgenössische Malerei im traditionellen Stil* (Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung–Völkerkundemuseum der Universität

painting’, alongside ‘folk painting’, ‘traditional painting’, and ‘secular painting’.⁴

In the second part of the book we find the exposition of many themes with illustrations mainly from Bərhanu and Qanna. In historical themes (‘Aḥmad *Grañ*, the left-handed’, ‘Tewodros and the Battle of Mäqdäla’, ‘Mənilək’, the ‘Battle of ʿAdwa’, ‘Ḥaylä Šəllase’, and so on), the author gives a partially detailed introduction to the historical context and then goes on to describe the pictures. These themes are often depicted as well as ‘hunting scenes’, ‘banquets’, ‘the work of farmers’, ‘the island monasteries on Lake Ṭana’, or ‘religious celebrations’ such as Ṭəmḳät or Mäsḳäl; however, there are also less common themes. These include, for example, a tradition of the Oromo of Šäwa, an act of neighbourly help with farm-work called ‘*dabo*’. This act of helping is illustrated by Qanna, an Oromo (pp. 119–120). Another tradition of the Oromo of Šäwa is ‘*fəlsäta*’. On Assumption Day in August, young men swim across a river with a small basket of food on their heads. This is a celebration of solidarity between neighbours on both sides of the river. This tradition is depicted in a painting of Qanna and also of Bərhanu. It would be interesting for the reader to know whether such less common works were part of the artists’ repertoire or whether they were commissioned works. A translation of the inscriptions of these pictures would also be valuable. Nevertheless, the cultural background of all these themes is described in great detail, sometimes even poetically, such as the ceremonial preparation of coffee, where the author was present (pp. 145–148).

The reader thus receives an interesting introduction to Ethiopian culture. However, one could wish for a larger format of the book, since the illustrations of the large paintings on canvas are so small that the details are often difficult to pick out. As the title says, the book provides an imposing portrayal of how the artists perceived their country. With its numerous illustra-

Zürich, 2006) and E. Biasio, ‘Contemporary Ethiopian Painting in Traditional Style: From Church-based to Tourist Art’, *African Arts*, 42/1 (2009), 14–25.

⁴ My argumentation is as follows: ‘when categorizing artistic genres, we should always take into consideration a variety of criteria, including the training of the artist, style, technique, iconography, function, and not least, the art consumers themselves’. I continued, ‘The term “popular painting” should be used to refer to art that developed in urban settings, often created by self-taught artists and directed towards the local population. The category “popular painting” includes, for instance, hand-painted signs on trucks and buses or advertising for hairdressers or other businesses.’ Therefore, I proposed the category ‘contemporary Ethiopian painting in traditional style’, E. Biasio, op. cit. (2009), 14; cf. also E. Biasio, op. cit. (2006), 38.

tions, the work is aimed primarily at the layman who has an interest in Ethiopian life and the rich culture of the country. It may also be useful for curators of museums with Ethiopian paintings in the cataloguing of their collections.

Elisabeth Biasio, Zürich

ALESSANDRO BAUSI, with assistance from EUGENIA SOKOLINSKI, ed., *150 Years after Dillmann's Lexicon: Perspectives and Challenges of Gə'əz Studies*, Supplement to *Aethiopica*, 5 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016). xi, 238 pp. Price: €48.00. ISBN: 978-3-447-10783-9.

This interesting volume contains a selection of papers, plus one addition, from the international conference of basically the same name that was held at the Universität Hamburg on 16 and 17 October 2015. This conference was held under the auspices of the project TraCES: From Translation to Creation: Changes in Ethiopic Style and Lexicon from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, which has been supported by a European Research Council Advanced Grant (no. 338756).

The volume begins with a helpful Preface (by E. Sokolinski) and Introduction (by A. Bausi) that orient the reader not only to the contents of the volume but also to the broader ambitions of the TraCES project, including the development of a web-based digital lexicon of Gə'əz. These introductory pieces are naturally followed by a set of three papers that lay out in more detail the current status of the creation of an annotated corpus of Gə'əz texts that will be used in the creation of the digital Gə'əz lexicon, including discussion of the digital tools that have been created for this work: E. Sokolinski's 'The TraCES project and Gə'əz studies' (pp. 13–16); S. Hummel and W. Dickhut, 'A part of speech tag set for Ancient Ethiopic' (pp. 17–29); and C. Vertan, 'Bringing Gə'əz into the digital era: computational tools for processing Classical Ethiopic' (pp. 31–41). These papers are thrilling reading for those of us who long for the day when digital humanities tools can aide with the annotation and mark-up of Gə'əz texts, as they long have for Greek and Latin and are now doing for Coptic.

These three technical papers are followed by A. Bausi's more wide-ranging 'On editing and normalizing Ethiopic texts' (pp. 43–102). This is the only paper that was not part of the conference at the origins of this volume, and this reviewer for one is very thankful that it has been included here despite this. The paper is a programmatic history-in-brief of