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In memoriam Marilyn E. Heldman (1935–2019)

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In memoriam Marilyn E. Heldman (1935–2019)

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Marilyn Eiseman Heldman died on 15 July 2019 after a distinguished career as an art historian, leaving behind extended family, many close friends, and numerous colleagues who will miss her greatly.¹

Born Marilyn Jean Eiseman on 12 June 1935 in St. Louis, Missouri, Marilyn retained the surname Heldman after her 1973 divorce from her first husband to insure continuity with her prior publications.² Raised in the St. Louis suburb of Kirkwood, Marilyn attended the University of Missouri at Columbia (known as ‘Mizzou’), where she received both her undergraduate degree as well as an MA in art history (1964). In the words of her devoted stepdaughter Nina Gilden Seavey, Marilyn ‘was a real Missouri girl’.

At first an art teacher for middle school students in St. Louis, Marilyn was excited by her first visit to an archaeological dig in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, followed soon by a summer at an archaeological dig in Columbia. But during 1966–1967, she moved definitively into new intellectual and artistic terrain when she accompanied her then husband, archaeologist Donald P. Heldman, to Ethiopia, and volunteered to serve as the curatorial associate at the Museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Abāba. Marilyn organized the icons and canon tables in the institute collection and was excited by their antiquity; she committed herself to learning more about their history and significance, moving enthusiastically into Ethiopian studies.

¹ I thank Nina Gilden Seavey, director of The Documentary Center in the School of Media and Public Affairs at The George Washington University, and Dr Almaz Baraki, Kotebe Metropolitan University, Addis Abāba, for their invaluable assistance in writing this obituary. Dr Jan Ziolkowski, Arthur Kingsley Porter professor of medieval literature at Harvard University and the director of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, graciously provided details of Marilyn Heldman’s work as a Dumbarton Oaks fellow during 2005–2006. Dr Getatchew Haile offered additional valuable suggestions to a draft of this text. We are all deeply indebted to Fentahun Tiruneh, senior reference librarian (Ethiopian Languages Collection) at the African and Middle Eastern Reading Room of the Library of Congress, for his devoted work to archive Marilyn Heldman’s research materials, personal papers, and photographs.

² Adhering to Ethiopian tradition, I will refer to Marilyn by her first name.

On her return to the United States in 1967, Marilyn entered a doctoral programme at Washington University in St. Louis. When she decided to write her dissertation about early Ethiopian Christian art, Marilyn encountered resistance from her professors, who advised her that her Ethiopian topic was both 'irrelevant' and 'dangerous' for a foreign woman needing to travel to 'Africa alone'. Marilyn stood her ground as a woman and an Africanist, pursuing her intended topic. She went on to travel extensively throughout Ethiopia and other parts of Africa (frequently alone), contributing to a more vibrant, feminist, art historical discipline. She completed her PhD in art history in 1972 with a dissertation titled *Miniatures of the Gospels of Princess Zir Gānelā, an Ethiopic Manuscript dated A.D. 1400/01*.

Marilyn returned to Ethiopia on her own during 1973–1974, when she received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities to support her travels to carry out research on Ethiopian churches and monasteries. This was the first of many visits she would make to Ethiopia over the years to follow. Marilyn and I met at the First United States Conference on Ethiopian Studies held in May 1973 at Michigan State University, several months before we both departed the United States to carry out research in Ethiopia. We shared many research experiences during 1973–1974, both during the fall of 1973, when we were still able to travel freely for research across the north of the country, and during the early months of the revolution in Addis Abāba.

While in Ethiopia during 1973–1974, Marilyn met many Ethiopians, including a young student named Almaz Baraki, whom Marilyn mentored and who remained a dear friend for the rest of Marilyn's life. Marilyn also met and established supportive relationships with many Ethiopian artists whose work she actively promoted. At the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopian Studies held in Chicago during April 1978, Marilyn's circle expanded to include distinguished Ethiopian scholars by then living in the rapidly growing Ethiopian American diaspora, most notably Dr Getatchew Haile, who became a deeply respected colleague and confidant.

In 1975, Marilyn accepted a tenure-track position as assistant professor of art history at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. But life had already intervened to bring her back to St. Louis, a story important to recount here. Before leaving for her year in Ethiopia in mid-1973, Marilyn had been in a car accident for which she was advised to consult a lawyer. In this way she met the man who would become her second husband, civil rights attorney Louis Gilden. They married in December 1975, and Marilyn resigned her San Antonio professorship to return to St. Louis. Marilyn remained dedicated to Lou Gilden until his death in late 2000.

For three decades from 1975 until 2005, Marilyn served intermittently as a visiting assistant professor of art history at Washington University in St. Louis and, subsequently, as an adjunct associate or adjunct full professor at the University of Missouri, St. Louis.

Marilyn's professional status thus became that of an independent scholar who devoted herself to research and writing without the support of university resources, rendering her many accomplishments all the more impressive. She garnered a number of major fellowships, research grants, and residencies, including funding from the American Philosophical Society (1996); the Sylvan C. Coleman and Pam Coleman Memorial Fund fellowship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2003); the Community Associates Research fellowship at the Art Institute of Chicago (July 2004); the fellowship in Byzantine studies at Dumbarton Oaks (2005). She was distinguished visiting scholar for medieval and Renaissance studies, University of California, Los Angeles (February 2006); and, from 2009 until her passing, visiting scholar-in-residence at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

Marilyn also curated important exhibits, including the international exhibit of Ethiopian sacred art entitled *African Zion*, initially presented at The Walters Art Gallery (now The Walters Art Museum), Baltimore, Maryland (1993) and *Alaqa Gabra Selasse, An Ethiopian Icon Painter*, which opened at the University of Missouri, St. Louis (2000). At the time of her death, Marilyn had conceived and begun editing a publication on Ethiopian devotional arts to accompany a modest and long-planned exhibition on the topic for the National Museum of African Art in Washington DC. The edited volume is nearing completion.

Over the decades, Marilyn devoted most of her energy to the world of scholarship in Ethiopian studies. Her interests were extraordinarily broad, spanning both long swaths of time and multiple locales in Ethiopia and beyond, enhanced by Marilyn's skill at linking historical and cultural data to visual imagery. She was the primary author of *African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, an exhibition catalogue published by Yale University Press in 1993. Her monograph, *The Marian Icons of the Painter Frē Seyon: A Study in Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Art, Patronage, and Spirituality*, was published by Harrassowitz Verlag in 1994. In addition to more than twenty-five important juried and invited articles and numerous entries for the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* as well as *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, Marilyn presented innumerable papers and lectures in international colloquia and at campuses worldwide.

Marilyn's research and writing—nuanced, deeply contextualized, and, often, provocative in its conclusions—has stimulated scholars from a variety of different disciplines. Her range of multiple media and topics, spanning

architecture, painting, and iconography, allowed her to offer a truly synthetic appraisal of whatever subjects she tackled. Marilyn's broad knowledge of church architecture across Ethiopia allowed her to provide important insights into the construction of new Ethiopian Christian churches in the rapidly growing Ethiopian American diaspora.

During her fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks during 2005–2006, Marilyn used the results of recent radiocarbon tests that dated the parchment of richly illuminated Byzantine canon tables from the monastery at Abba Gärima in northern Ethiopia to 300–600 CE, to confirm her stylistic analysis dating these Byzantine miniatures to this early period. It is best to let Marilyn's discussion of these miniatures, published in a Dumbarton Oaks newsletter during her fall 2005 residency, speak for itself, for one finds here that the early exposure to canon tables that launched her initial interest in Ethiopian art and architecture illuminates a broader field of findings:

Few decorated canon tables datable to before AD 600 are extant, either as fragmentary or complete sets. Hence the importance of the Abba Garima miniatures with richly illuminated Early Byzantine canon tables, the architectural frames of which, embellished with grasses, fruits, flowers and birds, suggest doorways to the path of salvation. One set of canon tables concludes with full-page miniature of a circular temple whose roof is upheld by four columns, an architectural device symbolizing the unbroken unit or harmony of the Four Gospels, the purpose of the canon tables themselves. The 'finispiece' of the second set of canon tables takes the form of a rectangular structure with steep stairway and is unique to our present knowledge of late antique canon table decoration, although architectural motifs play an important role in the iconography of extant floor mosaics of early Byzantine churches in the eastern Mediterranean. I argue that within the context of the Gospel book decoration, this unique composition suggests the symbolic temple of Christ's body. My fellowship research will result in a publication that establishes the strategic importance of these miniatures for the history of Bible illumination.³

³ 'Early Byzantine Miniatures Revealed', *The Oaks News* (2005), <https://www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/fellows/heldman-2005-2006>, last accessed on 24 September 2019. For subsequent publications about these extraordinary manuscripts, see J. S. McKenzie and F. Watson, *The Garima Gospels: Early Illuminated Gospel Books from Ethiopia*, Manar al-Athar Monograph, 3 (Oxford: Manar al-Athar, 2016).

Dr Marilyn E. Heldman contributed immeasurably to the understanding of Ethiopian art and architecture. She will be missed by the many close colleagues with whom she shared research experiences and collaborations over the years, and to whom she was the most gracious and generous of colleagues.

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⁴ An abbreviated English version of S. Uhlig, *Äthiopische Paläographie*, Äthiopistische Forschungen, 22 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1988).

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