



Aethiopica 28 (2025)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Review

RAYMOND SILVERMAN and NEAL SOBANIA, *Ethiopian Church Art: Painters,
Patrons, Purveyors*

Aethiopica 28 (2025), 295–297

ISSN: 1430-1938; eISSN: 2194-4024

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

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Susanne Hummel, and Alexander Meckelburg

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Reviews

from these relationships also challenged the racist order. In summary, a comparison of legal practices reveals a ‘particularly radical attitude’ of Germany as a colonial power (p. 254).

With his study, Camilleri has made an important contribution to the legal history of colonial Eritrea and German East Africa. The study is compelling by virtue of its clear structure, systematic analysis, and convincing argumentation. The transnational and transimperial comparisons reveal similarities and differences between various European forms of colonial rule. It shows that—although there were notable differences in questions of legal treatment—racist theories were a central element of both Italian and German colonialism and were reflected in their legal definition of citizenship.

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RAYMOND SILVERMAN and NEAL SOBANIA, *Ethiopian Church Art: Painters, Patrons, Purveyors* (Los Angeles, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2022). 332 pp., over 300 figs., Price: \$74.95 (Paperback), \$94.95 (Hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-59907-290-6 (Paperback), 978-1-59907-291-3 (Hardcover).

This volume presents a survey of contemporary paintings and art practices within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), integrating visual analysis research with ethnographic methodologies. The book results from a long-term research project conducted between 1993 and 2020 in both the historic northern city of Aksum and the capital, Addis Abäba. Through fieldwork, interviews, and a thorough examination of iconographic traditions, the authors document and contextualize current artistic production in Ethiopia. The book is organized into four main chapters, framed by an introduction and an epilogue. The narrative is further enriched by a series of thematic interleaves—short essays interspersed between the main chapters that clarify key terms and concepts central to Ethiopian art and visual culture. The inclusion of a glossary provides additional support for readers unfamiliar with specialized terminology. Although it serves only as a basic guide, due to the lack of an accurate transcription of the Amharic alphabet, it nonetheless makes the text more accessible to a wider audience.

The first chapter focuses on the city of Aksum as a center for artistic production. It pays particular attention to the traditional apprenticeship model practiced in Aksum, where learning occurs through close, hands-on mentorship. The chapter introduces a diverse group of painters spanning four generations, beginning with Yohannäs Täklü (1882–1979), a foundational figure in the region’s visual culture. It provides an account of Teklu’s artistic practice and legacy, emphasizing the impact of his techniques and teachings through his children, grandchildren, and other apprentices trained in his studio. Additionally, the chapter highlights

the contributions of Gäbräkrəstos Gäbrägzi'abəher, another significant artist active in Aksum. The lasting influence of these painters is evident not only in their artwork but also in the networks they helped establish in Aksum. Although the detailed mention of numerous artists enriches the narrative, it may feel overwhelming for readers who are unacquainted with the local art scene.

The second chapter examines the wide range of patrons involved in commissioning religious artworks. It utilizes a series of case studies to reveal the broader motivations and frameworks underlying the patronage system. The chapter illustrates how patronage was influenced by social status, personal circumstances, and the patron's connection to the location of the commission. For instance, a peasant commissioned a painting for a church after the death of his son, seeking spiritual salvation; a female entrepreneur sponsored paintings for the new Maryam Şəyon church, Aksum's most revered religious site, as a public act of devotion and visibility; while a businessman financed both the reconstruction of Aksum's Ĕnda Iyäsus and the decorations of its façade, reflecting a mix of civic pride and religious commitment. Lastly, the authors introduce the concept of *laissez-faire* patronage, in which the EOTC 'abdicated its authority for managing the visual environment of many of its churches' (p. 154). While the introduction of the concept of *laissez-faire* patronage is intriguing, the chapter could have delved deeper into the implications of the Church's diminished control over religious imagery. Exploring the tensions between traditional ecclesiastical authority and contemporary artistic freedom, for example, would have enhanced the analysis.

The third chapter looks at purveyors in Aksum and their pivotal role in the development of a tourist-oriented market for a wide range of cultural objects. From the 1970s onwards, these purveyors opened shops that offered goods that extended beyond traditional religious items, such as crosses and icons, to include wooden artefacts and paintings. While many of these objects were crafted by artists trained within the EOTC, others were produced by artists with different educational backgrounds. Drawing on interviews with shopkeepers, the authors explore the different sellers who employ specific strategies to appeal to a broad spectrum of buyers, from casual tourists to more discerning collectors. As noted by a purveyor, 'there are different tastes, so we have paintings with different styles' (p. 194). A key theme of the chapter is how purveyors position themselves within the market by presenting recently produced items as ancient or traditional, capitalizing on the tourist desire for authenticity (fig. 3.18). The chapter also touches on the economic dynamics behind the scenes, including payment arrangements between purveyors and artists, and highlights how some artists operate as independent agents, making pragmatic choices that reflect a shift toward market-driven artistic production.

The fourth chapter explores the rise of the *ḥətmāt wārāqāt*, inexpensive, mass-produced religious prints, that have significantly transformed the visual and devotional culture of the EOTC over the past fifty years. These images are produced using offset lithography by printers in Ethiopia, China, and India. Especially popular among women, these prints have democratized access to religious imagery and enable more believers to participate in devotional practices, such as donating images to churches. Despite their popularity, many priests and traditional artists disapprove of the prints for deviating from long-established Ethiopian artistic norms. The chapter concludes with a presentation of religious realism, a recent artistic movement characterized by heightened naturalism and lifelike representation in church painting, exemplified by churches such as Bole Mādḥane ‘Alām in Addis Abāba (fig. 4.41). While not framed as a direct outcome of mass-produced devotional prints, the authors suggest a possible connection. Some artists acknowledge being influenced by these printed images, though they remain controversial among more traditional members of the EOTC. Notably, the role of photography is absent from this discussion.

The concluding section examines how visual art influences the identities of EOTC believers residing in the United States. Focusing on several church communities across the United States, it highlights murals and paintings produced by both artists based in Ethiopia and members of the diaspora. According to the authors, while these works retain the forms and functions typical of traditional EOTC art, ‘they appear to reflect a growing awareness of diasporic identity’ (p. 310).

I find it striking that these last two chapters make no mention of photography. This absence does not necessarily imply a lack of influence but suggests that mass-produced prints were considered more significant by the authors in their discussion of the developments. In summary, this book stands out for its extensive fieldwork over nearly three decades, and the authors capture the social dynamics that shape artistic production. Overall, *Ethiopian Church Art: Painters, Patrons, Purveyors* is a timely and significant contribution to the study of contemporary Ethiopian visual culture. Richly illustrated and grounded in ethnographic research, it presents religious art as a dynamic field shaped not only by devotion and tradition but also by social, political, and economic forces. It will be an indispensable resource for scholars of African art, as well as for curators, museum professionals, and readers with a broader interest in African religious and contemporary visual cultures.

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