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MARYLIN E. HELDMAN

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Creating Religious Art: The Status of Artisans in Highland Christian Ethiopia¹

MARILYN E. HELDMAN

In highland Christian Ethiopia, weavers, pottery-makers, tanners, carpenters, and metalworkers traditionally have been regarded as belonging to a low-status occupational group. While the following discussion is set in the past tense, one must note that traditional attitudes regarding craft workers have not disappeared today. Generally non-Christian, craft workers were disdained by the Christian peasantry whose means of support was farming. Thus, although craft workers were members of endogenous ethnic groups, they were marginalized members of society.² Such was the situation during the early sixteenth century when Francisco Alvarez, a member of the Portuguese delegation to Ethiopia between the years 1520 and 1526, observed a separate village of blacksmiths near Aksum.³ Of the same period is a decree by Lebna Dengel (r. 1508 to 1540)

¹ A version of this paper was delivered at the Twelfth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, East Lansing, Michigan, September 1994.

² On the low status of craft workers in contemporary Ethiopia: F.C. GAMST, *The Qemant, A Pagan-Hebraic Peasantry of Ethiopia* (New York, 1969), 53, 81; D. M. TODD, "Caste in Africa?" *Africa*, vol. 47, no. 4 (1977), 398-412; E. HABERLAND, "Special Castes in Ethiopia," *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, Session B, ed. R. L. HESS (Chicago 1979), 129-32; D. BURLEY, "The Despised Weavers of Addis Ababa," *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, Session B, 145-49; D. DONHAM, "Old Abyssinia and the new Ethiopian empire: themes in social history," in *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia, Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, ed. D. DONHAM and W. JAMES (Cambridge, 1986), 3-48; J. QUIRIN, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews, A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920* (Philadelphia, 1992), 30-31 and *passim*. These references are not intended to be a comprehensive bibliography on the subject.

³ C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, eds., *The Prester John of the Indies being the Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520 written by Father Francisco Alvarez*, The Hakluyt Society 2nd ser. no. CXV (Cambridge, 1961), I, 149.

stating that metalworkers should not receive communion, presumably because they were non-Christian.⁴ This paper will examine the status of artisans, i.e. those painters and metalworkers who produced religious works of art for the Ethiopian Church and for lay patrons, with an emphasis upon the period of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries, the early period of the so-called Solomonic dynasty.

Artisans painted murals on the walls of churches, painted miniatures and decorated the parchment pages of hand-copied manuscripts, and painted devotional images of Our Lady Mary and other saints on wooden panels. Artisans were metalworkers who produced processional crosses and the manual crosses of monks and priests, as well as chalices and patens to hold the Eucharistic offering of bread and wine. Although artisans, like craft workers, engaged in manual labor, they were not relegated to the low-status category of craft worker.

Artisans of the Ethiopian Church, with few exceptions, do not appear in the historical record, hence their anonymity after their deaths. The reason for this anonymity is humility. One does not seek fame while creating works of art for the glory of God. An Ethiopian priest cites St. Paul, "Whatever you are doing, whether you speak or act, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17)."⁵ Exceptions to this general rule of anonymity include several devotional images produced during the reign of Emperor Zar'a Yā'eqob, a period during which visiting Europeans apparently introduced the idea of signing one's name to a painting.⁶ A large devotional image at Dāgā Estifānos, Lake Ṭānā is inscribed with a note saying that it was painted in the days of Emperor Zar'a Yā'eqob by "Frē Ṣeyon, the meek sinner of Dabra Gwegwebēn," a monastery on the eastern shore of Lake

On the special powers of blacksmiths who possess highly valuable technological knowledge, see the brief comments of Haberland (as in n. 2).

⁴ GETATCHEW HAILE and WM.F. MACOMBER, *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa and for the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, Colledgeville* (Colledgeville, MN, 1982), VI, EMMML 2490, p. 526.

⁵ Written communication, Qasis Asteraye T. Nigatu, 5 May 1995.

⁶ An interest in European and Byzantine art as well as the practice of signing one's work is related to Zar'a Yā'eqob's Christian ecumenicism. See M. E. HELDMAN, *The Marian Icons of the Painter Frē Ṣeyon. A Study in Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Art, Patron-age, and Spirituality*, *Orientalia Biblica et Christiana* 6 (Wiesbaden, 1994), 159–62.

Ṭānā. Frē Ṣeyon, the “meek sinner,” was a monk. Another devotional image, an icon of St. George with Jesus Christ and Peter and Paul, which is datable to the mid-fifteenth century, bears an inscription that includes the name of its producer, “the sinner, the painter Takla Māryām.” Although this inscription names no monastery, the epithet, “the sinner,” indicates that this painter too was a monk.⁷

Alvarez wrote in the early sixteenth century of seeing the monk who had painted the murals of the royal church of Makāna Śellāsē in Amhara,⁸ and *Lives* of Ethiopian saints (*gadlat*) provide a few revealing insights concerning the production of sacred art. *Gadlat* corroborate the fact that monks were trained as artisans to produce sacred works of art for both monastic and noble patrons. As regards the devotional image of St. George signed by the sinner Takla Māryām, we read in the *Life of Mabāʿa Ṣeyon* that Mabāʿa Ṣeyon assumed the name Takla Māryām when he took his monastic vows. This monk lived during the reign of Zarʿa Yāʿeqob, and his parents, who lived in the province of Endagabṭān in Shoa, were both of noble families. In addition, his *gadl* relates that before taking his monastic vows, Mabāʿa Ṣeyon had received training in the arts of penmanship and painting at a monastery.⁹ Such a program of instruction would necessarily have included training in technical processes, such as the preparation of pigments and gesso,¹⁰ as well as lessons in iconographic traditions, i.e., in the theologically correct and visually recognizable way of depicting a particular person or event. No evidence suggests that this information was committed to painters’ handbooks.¹¹ Oral

⁷ HELDMAN (as in n. 6), 23–27, 52–54.

⁸ ALVAREZ (as in n. 3), II, 340. The church was founded by Nāʿod, but finished by Lebna Dengel.

⁹ E. A. WALLIS BUDGE, ed. and trans., *The Lives of Mabāʿa Ṣeyon and Gabra Krestos* (London, 1898), 3–5 [text], 31–34 [trans.].

¹⁰ Malcolm Varon, photographer of the objects in the exhibition catalogue *African Zion: the Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, matched hues of each painted object photographed with the Munsell Color Chart and noted that the colors used by Ethiopian painters from the fourteenth through the eighteenth century remained remarkably standard. This observation suggests that procedures for obtaining the pigments and preparing the paints varied little over this period of 400 years.

¹¹ Several model books of the later Gondarine period are known. A parchment model book with ink drawings (17 folios) is in the collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University, inventory number 5647.

tradition, transmitted from teacher to student during the student's apprenticeship, was the method by which iconographic traditions and technical information were preserved from generation to generation.

According to the *Gadla Iyyasus Mo'a*, a thirteenth-century monastic leader and founder of the prestigious monastery of Saint Stephen (Dabra Ḥayq Estifanos), Iyyasus Mo'a was trained as a scribe. Furthermore, he made "with his own hands" twenty-four lamps for the church of St. Stephen, lamps which he lighted for all the church festivals.¹² Because such church lamps are typically made of metal, one may conclude that Iyyasus Mo'a had received training as a metalworker. Skilled metalworkers also fabricated processional crosses of gold, silver, and brass used in the church services and chalices and patens of gold and silver. These ritual vessels were made of precious metals because they were used to hold the eucharistic offering, the bread and wine which during the liturgy becomes, according to Church teaching, the precious body and blood of Christ. It would have been most inappropriate to place the production of these sacred liturgical objects into the hands of non-Christian metalworkers, but this was unnecessary because, as the *Gadla Iyyasus Mo'a* indicates, monks were trained as skilled metalworkers.

Stylistic evidence suggests that processional crosses were produced in a monastic setting. A fifteenth-century brass processional cross incised with a drawing of Our Lady Mary with Her Beloved Son is very close stylistically to the work of the monk-painter Frē Ṣeyon, so close that it may be attributed to an artisan who worked with him or to one who was familiar with his devotional images.¹³ A close correspondence between the style of devotional images engraved upon processional crosses and contemporary painting is also characteristic of the art produced during the eighteenth century at Gondar. Indeed, paintings and incised metal crosses produced for Queen Mentewwāb,

¹² S. KUR, ed. and trans., *Actes de Iyasus Mo'a, abbé du couvent de St-Étienne de Ḥayq*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 259/260, script. aeth. 49/50 (Louvain, 1965), 21, 40 [text], 18, 32 [trans.]. For oil-burning church lamps of this period see *Religiöse Kunst Äthiopiens/Religious Art of Ethiopia*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Stuttgart, 1973), no. 90, p. 262. The photograph on p. 263 apparently shows an arrangement with two different lamps.

¹³ HELDMAN (as in n. 6), figs. 37, 42; 64-5.

regent of Iyyasu II (r. 1730–1755), present such close stylistic and iconographic correspondence that we may assume they are products of the same atelier.¹⁴

Thus, while metalworking in the secular world was an outcast occupation associated with the evil eye, religious artisan who worked in gold, silver and bronze or brass created liturgical objects within the confines of the monastery. Indeed, the terminology “wax and gold” is routinely associated with a form of Ethiopian religious poetry known as *qenē*. The *qenē* hymn has two semantic layers, the “wax” which refers to its apparent meaning and the “gold,” which refers to the more profound meaning. These terms reflect an easy familiarity with the metallurgical process known as lost-wax casting, the process by which church lamps and processional crosses were cast, and the application of these terms to a poetic form unique to clerical *literati* of the Ethiopian Church indicates that the process of lost-wax casting was by no means alien to their world.¹⁵

In a treatise on the history of the Oromo (*Zēnāhu La-Gällā*) written in 1593, the author Abbā Bāḥrey attempts to explain the advance of the Oromo within the boundaries of Ethiopia.¹⁶ He describes ten classes of Ethiopian society, nine of which take no part in waging war. This is not a treatise devoted to a discussion of the classes of Ethiopian society per se, but the discussion provides insights into the occupational bases of these classes. Abbā Bāḥrey’s ten classes include (1) monks, (2) *dabtarā*, the clerical *literati* who are not ordained as priests, (3) and (4) officials of the court, (5) lords and hereditary landowners, (6) peasant farmers, (7) merchants, (8) craft workers, (9) wandering singers,

¹⁴ Processional cross: M. E. HELDMAN et al., *African Zion: the Sacred Art of Ethiopia* (London and New Haven, 1993), no. 114; mural executed for Queen Mentewwāb at Nārgā Şellāsē: J. LEROY, *Ethiopian Painting* (London, 1967), pl. 40.

¹⁵ To the metallurgical metaphor of the *qenē* may be added an adage from the *Life of Marḥa Krestos*, abbot of Dabra Libānos (Asbo) from AD 1462 to 1496: “Fire purifies gold, and suffering makes a man righteous” [S. KUR, ed. and trans., *Actes de Marḥa Krestos*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium vols. 330–31, script. aeth. 62–3 (Louvain, 1972), 22 (text), 20–1 (trans.)].

¹⁶ For an brief analysis of Bāḥrey as author, see S. B. CHERNETSOV, “Who wrote *The History of King Sarsa Dengel* - was it the Monk Bahrey?,” in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. TADDESE BEYENE (Addis Ababa and Frankfurt am Main, 1988), vol. I, 131–36.

and (10) those trained in the art of war.¹⁷ Occupation is the basis of each of his classes of society; the merchant class is composed of those who engage in trade and gain profit thereby. He describes *tabibān*, which I translate as “craft workers,” as “*nahabt* (metalsmiths), *ṣaḥaft* (scribes), tailors, and wood and stone workers.” Belonging to the *dabtarā* class are those who study holy books and who clap their hands and stamp their feet during the divine service. However, for the category of monk, of which the author was a member, Abbā Bāḥrey provides no description of occupational activities. Of this category he writes merely that “there are those who become monks at an early age, drawn thereto by the other monks while they are studying, as indeed was the case with him who has written this history.”¹⁸

Abbā Bāḥrey did not elaborate upon what a monk does, because the definitive occupational role of the monk (and nun) is the pursuit of the monastic ideal — striving to join the realms of heaven and earth.¹⁹ Abbā Gabra Manfas Qeddus was an ideal monk. A man of heaven and an angel of earth, he attained an Edenic state in which wild animals lost their ferociousness.²⁰ In devotional images, his characteristic representation shows him in the company of wild lions and cheetahs tamed by his angelic presence.²¹ Men and women who take monastic vows abandon the secular world for a life that aims to join the realms of heaven and earth. This is the occupational basis of Abbā Bāḥrey’s category of monk. Copying manuscripts, casting processional crosses, or painting devotional images was but one facet of the monastic occupation. In one sense the monastic artisan was as marginalized as his lay craft-worker counterpart. However, the monk or nun was marginalized by the monastic vows and the life lived beyond the world of secular society. The religious was not marginalized

¹⁷ I. GUIDI, ed. and trans., *Historia Gentis Galla*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium vols. 20–21, script. aeth. 3-4 (reprint ed. Louvain, 1955), 229–30 [text], 204–06 [trans.].

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Bāḥrey adds that some become monks because they fear war. He does not list priests as an occupational category probably because lay priests routinely engaged in farming to support themselves and their families.

¹⁹ This classic definition of an ideal monastic is presented in *Gadla Habta Māryām*. O. RAINERI, ed. and trans., *Atti di Habta Māryām e di Iyāsu, Santi Monaci Etiopici*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 235 (Rome, 1990), 10–11.

²⁰ E.A. WALLIS BUDGE, *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church* (Cambridge, 1928), III, 755–72.

²¹ HELDMAN et al. (as in n. 14), nos. 102 and 116, pp. 244, 250–51.

by manual labors — viz. copying religious texts, casting liturgical objects, or painting murals and devotional images.²²

Thus there was a distinct contrast in highland Christian Ethiopian society between the secular, low-status and generally non-Christian craft worker and the Christian monastic artisan who produced sacred arts for both lay and secular patrons. On the other hand, Abbā Bāḥrey, in his category of craft worker, includes scribes (*ṣaḥaft*) along with carpenters, stone masons, and metalworkers. The reason for including the scribe in this category is unclear, for there is ample documentation for fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century monk-scribes copying religious texts. Saint Iyyasu Moʿa copied the Four Gospels while he was a monk at Dabra Dāmo.²³ Perhaps Abbā Bāḥrey included in his category of craft worker those scribes who worked *outside* the monastery, those who produced parchment scrolls which combine prayers and apotropaic designs. Because their production and use is not encouraged by the Ethiopian Church, it is unlikely that the scribes who produced amuletic scrolls worked within the monastery. Yet, presently the *dabtāra* or unordained cleric, another of his classes, as well as ordained priests produce these amuletic scrolls.²⁴ For lack of sufficient information or insight, Abbā Bāḥrey's reason for including the scribe in his category of craft worker remains unclear.

The importance of secular painting in Ethiopian society during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries is a question about which the record is silent. Although the court was peripatetic and lived in tents during periods of movement, rulers and nobles also established permanent residences. Emperor Zarʿa Yāʿeqob resided at Dabra Berhān for many years. Monk-painters accepted commissions to work outside their monastery,²⁵ but whether they undertook the decoration of royal or noble residences is undocumented. It

²² As for the training of nuns as scribes or painters, the hagiographies and historical records are silent.

²³ KUR (as in n. 12), 21 [text], 18 [trans.].

²⁴ The use of these scrolls has considerable antiquity. Alvarez in the early sixteenth century observed Ethiopian women wearing such amulets: ALVAREZ (as in n. 3), cited by J. MERCIER, *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls* (New York, 1979), 10. See also *Le roi Salomon et les maîtres du regard, Art et médecine en Éthiopie* (Paris, 1992).

²⁵ For example, in 1521 Francisco Alvarez was shown the recently completed royal church of Makāna Šellāsē in Amhara (begun by Emperor Nāʿod and completed by Emperor Lebna Dengel) in which were murals painted by a monk whom Alvarez had seen. ALVAREZ (as in n. 3), II, 340.

is possible that decoration of royal or noble residences, even the reception hall (*addārās*), was limited to hangings of precious textiles, and that paintings of the ruler or noble at war, hunting, etc. were incorporated into the scheme of mural decoration in the churches that they founded. Murals of the Šellāsē church at Čalliḳot in Tegre, founded by Rās Walda Šellāsē in the early nineteenth century, include among a row of equestrian saints a painting of his successful elephant hunt (fig. 1).²⁶ The implication of this context appears to be that Rās Walda Šellāsē's success in elephant-hunting is God-given, a parallel to the divinely-guided victories of the soldier saints over the forces of evil.²⁷ Such scenes of a ruler's activity within a church would have been not only more visible than in a reception hall to which fewer spectators would have had access, but also more impactful because of the contextual implication of God's blessing.

Monastic painters and scribes worked at royal courts in the production of sacred arts. The copying and illumination of religious texts at Emperor Dāwit's court is indicated in an account of a miracle wrought with the help of Our Lady Mary.²⁸ Careful analysis of the *oeuvre* of the monk-painter Frē Šeyon reveals that he produced devotional images for the court of Emperor Zar'a Yā'eqob. Not only did Frē Šeyon produce devotional images for the court, but also it is likely that he spent some time there attached to the court chapel of St. Mary.²⁹

Information provided by Alvarez raises questions concerning several painters that Lebna Dengel wished to have in his exclusive employ. According to Alvarez, a representative of Lebna Dengel accompanied the Portuguese delegation to their headquarters at Goa on the Indian coast where he left four slaves, two to be trained as painters and two trained as trumpeters.³⁰ These slaves, whom we can assume to have been non-Christian because they were slaves, were sent

²⁶ Most of these murals have not been published. On the town itself, see R. PANKHURST, *History of Ethiopian Towns from the Middle Ages to the Early Nineteenth Century*, Äthiopistische Forschungen 8 (Wiesbaden, 1982), 201, 206–07.

²⁷ For an analysis of the hunt, see ABDUSSAMAD H. AHMAD, "Hunting in Gojjam: the Case of Matakal 1901–1932," in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. TADDESE BEYENE (Addis Ababa and Frankfurt am Main, 1988), I, 237–244.

²⁸ The story of the golden ink was added to the collection of the *Ta'ammera Māryām*; see E. CERULLI, *Il libro etiopico dei Miracoli di Maria* (Rome, 1943), 87–88.

²⁹ HELDMAN (as in n. 6), chapters 5 and 6.

³⁰ ALVAREZ (as in n. 3), II, 483–84.

to Goa in 1526. Later, in AD 1555, a contingent of fifty-five Jesuits, members of the Society of Jesus, was established in Goa, among whom may have been a person able to provide training in religious painting. However, the Society of Jesus was not founded until 1534, and in the late 1520s there would have been little expectation of receiving instruction in European religious painting at Goa, while, on the other hand, instruction in Christian painting was readily available in Ethiopia.³¹ It seems more likely that the two (non-Christian) slaves were to be trained in local Indian traditions of painting. One can only surmise how their resulting skills would have been utilized, but, because Lebna Dengel placed a high value upon the production of luxury objects for courtly display, this must have been the ultimate goal of their proposed training program in India.³² The emperor also employed the Venetian painter, Nicolò Brancalion, to produce religious paintings, both devotional images and murals, for him.³³

Monastic artisans of the late thirteenth through the sixteenth century may be compared with the few European artisans who produced sacred works of art for Ethiopian patrons in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The foreign artisan was marginalized by the fact that he was an outsider, a stranger, but not necessarily because he fabricated paintings with his hands. Like the monastic artisan, he was not relegated automatically to the low-status class of craft worker. The best documented example of a European (*ferengi*) artisan who created religious art for Ethiopian patrons is Nicolò Brancalion. Alvarez reported that Brancalion, known as Marqorēwos in Ethiopia, was a painter at the royal court, a much respected person, and a great lord with many vassals.³⁴ His triptych in the collections of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies is signed “I, Marqoryos the Frank [*aferengi*].”³⁵ Alvarez saw murals painted and signed by Nicolò Brancalion at the church of Atronsa Māryām, the royal pantheon endowed by Baʿeda Māryām (r. 1468–1478).³⁶ Prince Semʿon, a

³¹ An important aspect of training in religious painting was learning correct knowledge of iconographic traditions.

³² My article, “A chalice from Venice for emperor Dāwit of Ethiopia,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, LIII/3 (1990), 442–45, explores the issue of foreign luxury objects at the royal court.

³³ See M. E. HELDMAN, “A Venetian Painter at the Ethiopian Court,” *Encountering the Other*, ed. E. C. SCHWARTZ (forthcoming).

³⁴ ALVAREZ (as in n. 3) I, 279, 313.

³⁵ HELDMAN et al. (as in n. 14), no. 88; HELDMAN (as in n. 6), 149–50.

³⁶ ALVAREZ (as in n. 3), II, 332–333.

patron of the arts and son of the venerable Nagada Iyyasus, the lay abbot of Dabra Ḥayq Estifānos, owned a painting by Brancalion. A tale of Our Lady Mary in a collection of the *Miracles of Mary* composed and copied for Prince Semʿon relates how his Brancalion painting was stolen and then miraculously returned with the help of Our Lady Mary.³⁷ The tenor of the story suggests that Prince Semʿon assigned a special value to the painting because Brancalion had painted it. In other words, the painting was more than a devotional image, it was also a valued status symbol because it was produced by Brancalion. Employing a foreign artisan or owning one of their works was like owning an imported luxury object, upon which nobles at the imperial court placed great value because they were symbols of status.

The story of the stolen Brancalion painting demonstrates that the non-monastic painter of religious art was not relegated to a marginalized low-status occupation group, although Alvarez may have exaggerated when he wrote that Brancalion was a great lord with many vassals. There is no doubt that the painter Takla Māryām (fl. mid-fifteenth century), also known as Mabāʿa Ṣeyon, was a highly respected member of society. Son of noble parents, he was saint or holy man, the chief ecclesiastic [*neburā ed*] of Endagabtān, and perhaps the author of the *Book of the Passion of Our Lord*.³⁸ Mention of his artistic activity in his *gadl* must have been prompted by the fact that Takla Māryām was a painter of note. He signed a devotional image of St. George.³⁹

The period under discussion has been the early years of the Solomonic dynasty, from 1270 to 1543, records of earlier periods having been destroyed.⁴⁰

³⁷ GETATCHEW HAILE, *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa and for the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, Collegeville* (Collegeville, MN, 1987), IX, EMMML 3872, pp. 191–199.

³⁸ This anonymous work, a homiliary on the Passion and Crucifixion of Our Lord known as *Maṣḥafa ḥemāmātibu*, appears in manuscripts with the *Gadla Abuna Takla Māryām*. GETATCHEW HAILE and WM. F. MACOMBER, *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa and the for Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, Collegeville, MN* (Collegeville, 1981), V, EMMML 1779; *idem* (Collegeville, 1983), VII, EMMML 2860-2.

³⁹ HELDMAN et al. (as in n. 14), 186-87.

⁴⁰ GETATCHEW HAILE, “Who is Who in Ethiopia’s Past, Part II: The Zag^we Royal Family after Zag^we,” *Northeast African Studies*, VII/3 (1985), 41, 47 n. 2; S. CHERNETSOV, “The Crisis of Ethiopian Official Royal Historiography and its Consequences in the 18th Century,” in *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, BAHRU ZEWEDE, R. PANKHURST, TADDESE BEYENE, eds. (Addis Ababa, 1994), I, 87.

The fairly consistent prevailing pattern of patronage and artistic production at prominent monasteries and at royal courts came to an end in the early sixteenth century, when a century of turmoil began. First, between 1531 and 1543, came the Adalite invasions, during which major monastic centers, such as Dabra Ḥayq Eṣṭifānos and Dabra Libānos (Asbo), were destroyed and never restored to their former glory. There also commenced a migration of Oromo peoples into previously Christian Ethiopian territories, which caused more disruption and hindered the restoration of monasteries.⁴¹ Furthermore, as senior monastics regrouped at the royal court, independent monasteries, where in early times distinctive styles had developed,⁴² were scarcely able to play major roles as centers of artistic production. It seems, therefore, that the sixteenth century marked a turning point in the pattern of production of sacred arts. Metalworkers and painters probably relocated along with the clerics and scribes at the royal courts of Galāwdēwos (r. 1540–1559), who established a capital in Waḡ, and of Sarza Dengel (r. 1563–1597) at Guzārā, which harbored such extraordinarily gifted clerics as Abbā Bāḥrey.⁴³ It is extremely difficult, however, to identify works of religious art produced during the reigns of these two emperors.⁴⁴

During the seventeenth century lay patronage of religious painting increased significantly. A new capital was established at Gondar in 1636 by Emperor Fāsīladas, after yet another disruptive event came to an end. After the reception of a small group of Portuguese Jesuit missionaries at court, the emperor Susenyos publicly announced his conversion to the Roman Catholic faith in 1625. The resulting turmoil forced Susenyos to abdicate in favor of his son Fāsīladas (r. 1632–1667), who expelled the Jesuits and restored the Orthodox Ethiopian

⁴¹ For a brief summary of the Oromo migration and its aftermath, see the introductory remarks of BAIRU TAFLA, in his edition and translation of *Asma Giyorgis and His Work. History of the Gällā and the Kingdom of Šawā*, Äthiopistische Forschungen 18 (Stuttgart, 1987), 47–53.

⁴² On the development of identifiable styles at different monastic centers during the fifteenth century, see M. E. HELDMAN, “An Ewostathian Style and the Gundā Gundē Style in Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Manuscript Illumination,” in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art* (London, 1989), 5–14, 133–39, figs. 1–29.

⁴³ On Bāḥrey’s position at the court of Sarza Dengel, see S. B. CHERNETSOV, (as in n. 16), 131–36.

⁴⁴ See HELDMAN (as in n.14), nos. 93–95.

Church. Although the Jesuit Order itself had no official policy of involvement in the production of religious art in the countries of their missions, the brief period of Jesuit ascendancy may have caused further interruptions in patterns of artisan activity.⁴⁵

Fāsiladas established his capital to the north of Lake Ṭānā at a site known as Gondar. Subsequent rulers remained there, building their castles, founding their churches, and Gondar became a permanent capital, the first since AD 1270 when the Zagwe dynasty was overthrown. Nevertheless, patterns of production of religious art did not return to the *status quo ante*, i.e. to the period before 1531. The most significant difference was the dominance of the court and landed nobility as patrons of religious arts.

Although new patterns of patronage of the Gondarine period (1636-1855) have not been sufficiently documented, the proliferation of portraits of emperors and nobles in icons, miniatures, and murals demonstrates the importance of lay patronage,⁴⁶ and the intrusion into religious painting of details taken from peasant or courtly life suggests that monks played a far less significant role in the production of religious painting.⁴⁷ Scribes probably continued to receive their training in monastery schools, yet monasteries independent of courts or courtly patronage were no longer centers where religious art of any great artistic significance were produced. The homogeneity of styles of Ethiopian sacred art produced during the Gondarine period leaves

⁴⁵ The Portuguese Jesuits brought devotional images of the “Roman Madonna” or the Ma-donna of Sta. Maria Maggiore as well as printed books with engraved illustrations; they may have introduced mortar for stone construction (C.F. BECKINGHAM and G.W.B. HUNTINGFORD, trans. and ed., *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593–1646*, Hakluyt Society, 2nd ser. no. CVII [London, 1954], 83-4, 188). Records of Portuguese missionary work in the Kongo suggest that the Portuguese equated the permanence of stone and mortar construction with their Christian faith, thus making stone and mortar uniquely appropriate materials for the construction of churches: JEAN CUVELIER, *L’Ancien Royaume du Congo* (Brussels, 1946), 71, cited by GEORGES BALANDIER, *Daily Life in the Kingdom of the Kongo*, trans. H. Weaver (London, 1968), 45. On imported masons for such building activity, see BALANDIER, *op. cit.*, 57. For the prestige factor of stone and masonry construction at the Ethiopian court, see S. B. CHERNETSOV, “The Role of Catholicism in the History of Ethiopia of the First Half of the Seventeenth Century,” *Études éthiopiennes, Actes de la X^e conférence internationale des études éthiopiennes*, ed. C. LEPAGE (Paris, 1994), I, 207.

⁴⁶ See HELDMAN et al. (as in n. 14), nos. 15, 114, 117, 119, 120, and 121.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, nos. 13, 120, 121.

no doubt that Gondar was the artistic center of the highland Christian state, the center to which artisans were drawn.⁴⁸

One query remains: who were painters and metalworkers that produced processional crosses, devotional images, murals, and illuminated manuscripts for the royal and noble patrons of Gondar? Until further searches of archival sources provide more complete answers to this questions, we must turn to twentieth-century painters of religious art, whose biographies indicate that they are deacons or priests, educated at church schools, and trained in the art of religious painting by either apprenticeship or by informal observation.⁴⁹ Evidence suggests that by the seventeenth century the production of religious art had ceased to be the primary domain of the monk, and, although the priest-artisans or deacon-artisans who produced religious art were not removed from lay society like monk-artisans, they, as creators of religious art, were not grouped with low-status craft workers.

In an interview recorded in 1932, a priest-painter, Qēs Kasa of Gondar, indicated that the work of a religious painter such as himself follows the venerable tradition established by St. Luke who painted a portrait of Our Lady Mary.⁵⁰ Although the legend of St. Luke painting the Virgin first appeared in Greek Orthodox literature of the Iconoclastic period, when its purpose was to defend the production and use of religious images,⁵¹ the legend of St. Luke the painter readily lends itself to enhancing the status of artisans who create religious pictures.

⁴⁸ See HELDMAN et al. (as in n. 14), section entitled “The Late Solomonic Period.” There was, however, during the seventeenth century an extremely talented painter or atelier in Wallo working independently of the Gondarine court. See HELDMAN et al. (as in n. 14), nos. 108 and 109.

⁴⁹ GIRMA KIDANE, “Four Traditional Ethiopian Painters and their Life Histories,” in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art* (London, 1989), 72–77; see also RAYMOND SILVERMAN, “Qes Adamu Tesfaw –a Priest Who Paints,” in *Ethiopian Traditions of Creativity* (forthcoming).

⁵⁰ *Le roi Salomon et les maîtres du regard* (as in n. 24), 145. Qēs Kasa makes a specific analogy between himself and St. Luke, saying that he painted a portrait of Our Lady Mary that works miracles. For a brief discussion of miracle-working icons of the Virgin attributed to St. Luke, see HELDMAN (as in n. 6), 152–56.

⁵¹ R. CORMACK, *Writing in Gold, Byzantine Society and its Icons* (New York, 1985), 121–31, 261ff.

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Addendum

Occasionally iron was used for processional and manual crosses. Several iron crosses, inventory nos. 4488 and 4998, are in the collections of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (E. MOORE, *Ethiopian Processional Crosses* [Addis Ababa, 1971], pp. 3–4, 7, 12), while others remain the property of churches in Tegrē province and in Eritrea. The more interesting of these are inset with brass or silver. See, for example: C. LEPAGE, “Le premier art chrétien d’Éthiopie,” *Les Dossiers de l’Archéologie*, No. 8, Jan.-Feb. 1975, p. 76. At the church of Endā Iyyasus at Aromo in Akele Guzay, Eritrea, is an iron cross inset with silver and gold (or brass), measuring 154 cm in height, while the cross less the slender shaft is 15 cm high and 10.3 cm wide. It is said to have belonged to the emperor Gabra Masqal, who is said to have endowed the church. See figures 2 and 3. Most iron crosses with such a long, slender shaft appear to have been produced before 1500. Although there is no reason to deny that these iron crosses were produced in a monastic setting, I am unaware of any literary reference that would support this assumption. It is likely that iron ores were smelted elsewhere by low-status, non-Christian craftsmen, who supplied monastic metalworkers with the resulting iron bloom, and the monks then forged the iron crosses by hammering. A brief description of the process of iron working appears in: E. W. HERBERT, *Iron, Gender, and Powder: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1993), 6–12.

Creating Religious Art



Figure 1. Rās Walda Śellāsē hunting an elephant. Mural, Śellāsē church at Čalliqot, Tetre. [Photo by M. Heldman – 1997]

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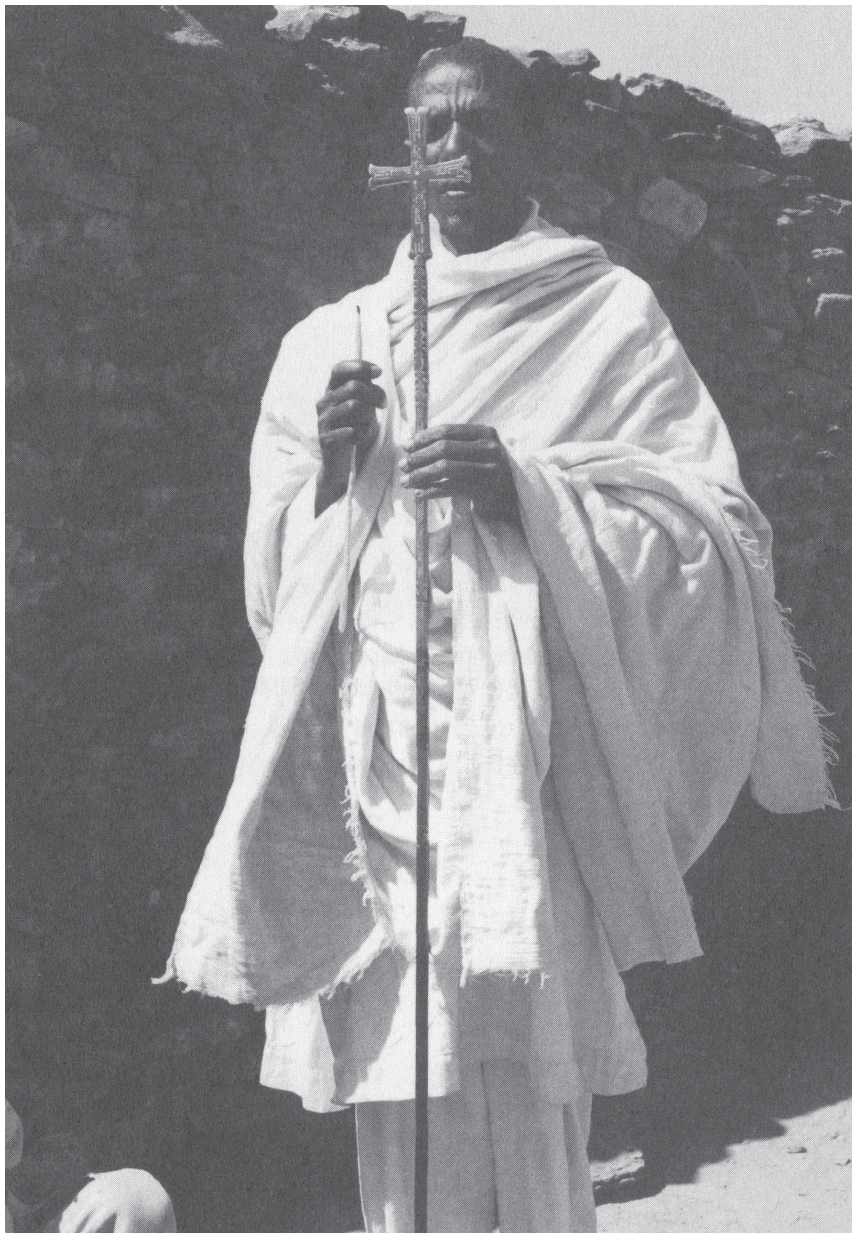


Figure 2. Iron cross. Church of Endā Iyyasus at Aromo, Eritrea.
[Photo by M. Heldman – 1997]



Figure 3. Detail, iron cross with inset decoration of silver and gold (or brass). Church of Endā Iyyasus at Aromo, Eritrea. [Photo by M. Heldman – 1997]