Art of Ethiopia. C. Griffith Mann. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. 128 pp.[1]

Reviewed by Leah Niederstadt

Art of Ethiopia was published in conjunction with a 2005 exhibition of the same name held at Pace Primitive, a department of the Pace Wildenstein Gallery, in New York City. Organized by London-based dealer Sam Fogg, the exhibition presented examples of Ethiopian liturgical art from the twelfth through nineteenth centuries and followed a similar Fogg endeavor mounted in London in 2001.

It is important to be clear about the intent behind *Art of Ethiopia*. It is a sales catalogue, created to accompany what was billed as "the first-ever selling exhibition of Ethiopian art" held in the United States. As a publication intended to sell art, the book serves its purpose well. It is a beautiful catalogue with images of each cross, icon, and manuscript reproduced in full color, often with supplementary images of visual details. The catalogue text specifies the materials and techniques used to create each object and it describes the individuals and narratives depicted. The condition and any repairs to the objects are duly noted. The text also highlights stylistic elements, and whenever possible, links the objects to particular periods of liturgical art production in Ethiopia. Yet, although the catalogue text includes exhibition and publication history, provenance is lacking for all but three objects, all of which are manuscripts. This is a notable omission, especially given recent concerns in Ethiopia, not to mention worldwide, with the illicit trade in antiquities and cultural patrimony. Even the inclusion of the most recent provenance—for example, how Mr. Fogg acquired the objects—would have been useful to collectors and scholars alike.

Art of Ethiopia opens with an introduction by C. Griffith Mann, Co-Director of Curatorial Affairs and Associate Curator of Medieval Art at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. Mann provides a concise yet thorough overview of the history of artistic production within the Ethiopian Orthodox church. In doing so, he mentions the dynamism that characterized the relationship between indigenous beliefs and practices and foreign artistic influences. This dynamism resulted from Ethiopia's geographic location in the Horn of Africa and its place in the popular imagination as a Christian nation, home of the Queen of Sheba and land of Prester John, which long attracted diplomats, explorers, and missionaries and continues to appeal to present-day tourists. Mann then turns to a discussion of processional and hand crosses, illuminated manuscripts, and painted icons, explaining how changes in the economic, religious, and socio-political realms impacted the production and consumption of religious art in the 800 years covered by the scope of the exhibition. A rather curious oversight of the editor, the map on page 13 fails to demarcate the border of Eritrea, formerly an Ethiopian province and now an independent nation-state. Furthermore, in the interest of providing a truly comprehensive overview of the artistic traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, Mann should have made it fully clear that crosses, icons, and manuscripts continue to be produced and used in contemporary Ethiopia, particularly post-1991 when the Socialist government was overthrown.

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[1] Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* November 5, 2007. See: http://museumanthropology.wordpress.com/2007/11/06/mar-2007-2-30/.

Over the past sixteen years, the production and consumption of Ethiopian Orthodox art and ritual practices have significantly increased, and artists are creating works not only for new churches but also for long established ones, many of which are being refurbished. Mann's introduction does, however, allow even those unfamiliar with Ethiopian history and culture to gain a basic understanding of the context in which the objects in the exhibition were produced and, to a lesser extent, how they were used.

A catalogue of objects follows Mann's introductory comments. It is divided into three sections: crosses, icons, and manuscripts. Eleven crosses—nine of metal and three of wood—are featured in the first section. Notable among these are an extraordinary anthropomorphic wooden hand cross from the nineteenth century (catalogue object 11) and a fifteenth-century iron hand cross (cat. 3), much like the wooden ones carried today by priests for blessing the laity. Section two of the catalogue describes twenty-one icons ranging in size from small icons (cat. 12-15, 25) that would have been worn or displayed for personal devotions to large diptychs and triptychs created for display in churches and palaces and for public processions on holy days. Several of the icons (cat. 17, 28, 31) are signed, rendering them exceptional as church-trained painters did not typically sign their work until the late nineteenth century, which makes attribution difficult if not impossible. The final section of the catalogue provides detailed descriptions of sixteen manuscripts, only one of which can be attributed to a particular scribe (cat. 37). Among the manuscripts are several rare folding books (cat. 38, 42) and a manuscript (cat. 43) once in the collections of emperors Täklä Haymanot I, Dawit III and Tewodros II and later owned by William Randolph Hearst. This manuscript is one of the few objects for which provenance is provided.

Art of Ethiopia is the most recent in a series of well-illustrated and detailed catalogues produced by Fogg. The fact that the catalogue was created for a commercial gallery exhibition does not preclude its contribution to the study of Ethiopian visual culture, although a more accurate title, especially given Ethiopia's myriad other expressive traditions and strong contemporary art community, might have been "Art of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church." The clear, full-color images enable close study of the narratives and portraits represented and the materials and techniques employed in creating the crosses, icons, and manuscripts, while the accompanying texts provide insight into objects—and more broadly, artistic traditions—that have remained relatively unstudied until fairly recently. Although quite a few of the objects had previously been exhibited and a number had been published or at least referenced in other publications, the catalogue is the first time that many of the crosses, icons, and manuscripts have been so thoroughly documented. Given that many of the objects will have ended up in private collections as a result of this exhibition, the catalogue will serve for years to come as a resource for those interested in Ethiopian liturgical art.

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