

Kay Miller – April, 2012 OOM

"Diptych icon," Ethiopia, Artist Unknown, c 1700 - #2009.39.2



Wall label: The Ethiopian King Ezana made Christianity the state religion in the 4th century. That determined art production in the Ethiopian Highlands to this date. Painted icons in Ethiopia were associated with the rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary in the middle of the 15th century. This diptych (c. 1700) was of a size suitable for a procession and ritual display. It was composed according to a fixed pattern. There is part of a painted cross on the reserve (exterior). This depiction of the Virgin was directly inspired by the famous icon of Santa Maria Maggiore Church in Rome – believed to be the true portrait of Maria. That image was known through Ethiopia from around 1600. Reproductions were distributed by Jesuit missionaries.

Questions:

1. Describe the images you see.
2. What actions are taking place? What stories do the images suggest to you? What characters do you recognize? WDYSTMYST?
3. What colors, forms and formats has the artist used?
4. Compare the image of the Mother and Child to the illustration of a famous icon, the *Salus Populi Romani*, considered the oldest image of the Virgin Mary in Rome [below]. What similarities do you see? What differences?
5. Is the image of an icon stylized or realistic? What makes you say that?

Key Points:

1. Ethiopia is the oldest Christian country in Africa. Its history of the faith dates back to the first century and its art is almost exclusively religious. The Acts of the Apostles describes Philip the Evangelist as converting an Ethiopian traveler in the 1st century CE. And church historian Nicephorus tells us that the apostle St. Matthew preached the Christian Gospel in Ethiopia after leaving Judea. In the 4th century, King Ezana the Great converted to Christianity and made it the state religion in 330 CE. For centuries afterward, Christianity was the prime inspiration for Ethiopian art.
2. By the 17th century, Ethiopian artists were exposed to forms of religious expression from Europe. Double-sided diptychs became very popular among the nobility. This icon of Maria with Child is modeled on the *Salus Populi Romani*, a very large, very old icon in the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. It is perhaps the oldest Marian image in Rome and is believed to be the true image of Mary. Jesuit missionaries circulated engravings of the Italian icon throughout Ethiopia in the 15th and 16th centuries at a time that the Cult of Mary was especially strong. It became the model for Ethiopian panel paintings of the Madonna and Child for centuries. The Italian Maria, which may have been made in Greece, carries a handkerchief (*mappula*), similar to one visible in Mary's long fingers on the MIA diptych. This reflects a custom in the Ethiopian court of noble women, women of high standing in the court, carrying little white handkerchiefs. Many other details are echoed in the old icon and the diptych: the drape of the shawl, the movement of the child, the cross on Maria's head. This particular Madonna and Child image was incorporated with standard groupings of saints both in pendant icons worn by Ethiopians and for larger processional icons.
3. Ethiopian icons **follow a strict pattern**. The combination of saints is extremely important in Ethiopian religious paintings, serving to emphasize the close relationship between Mary and St. George, the soldier of God who was her constant companion. The set order:
 - ❖ **Virgin and Child** are seated – right side main panel, upper register
 - Mary looks out toward (but not directly at) viewer.
 - Christ child grasps the Gospels. Looks lovingly at mother. Placement of irises in corner enhances psychological impact.
 - Three-quarter view of faces
 - Mary crosses her hands while Christ Child raises his hand, blessing her.
 - Combination of Mary's crossed arms and his blessing depicts "Covenant of Mercy," in

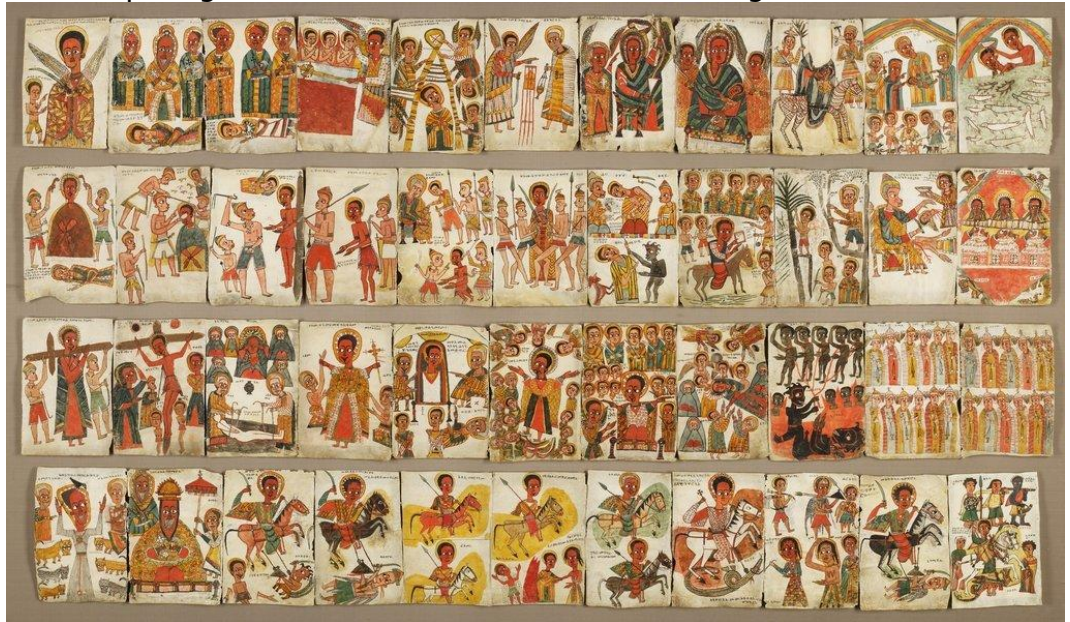
which Christ grants his mother the power to intercede for humanity.

- Ethiopians' devotion to Mary due in part to belief in her effectiveness as an intercessor.
- Flanked by two sword-wielding archangels, St. Michael on her right and Gabriel on her left.
- ❖ **Christ teaches the 12 Apostles** - lower right register.
 - Christ - gesture of benediction
 - Apostles shown seated in Moorish manner, instead of standing. Shows contact with Islamic culture.
 - Six apostles with gray hair appear old. Six, with dark hair, appear young. Apostles are not named.
- ❖ **Crucifixion** - left panel's upper register.
 - Grieving Mary and St. John stand at his sides
 - Mary is disproportionately large. Emphasizes Mary's presence at crucifixion. Ethiopian thought that her grief justifies request for power of intercession.
 - John's arms bend upward with hands resting on his shoulders – Ethiopian expression of grief.
 - Moon and sun typically appear over cross
- ❖ **Entombment of Christ** – middle register, left panel
 - Reflects Ethiopian burial custom of priest or monk.
 - Nicodemus, Mary and Joseph carry Christ shrouded in white cloth (*buluko* or *gabi*), tied with rope with a knot on the crown of the head
 - The two men support the body. Nicodemus holds Christ's head, Joseph his legs.
- ❖ **Christ's descent into Limbo/hell** (to left of crucifixion)
 - Monumental-size Christ raises tiny, naked figures of Adam and Eve.
 - Flag of victory signals Christ's victory over death
 - Idea of victorious Resurrection was developed during Italian Renaissance. Reached Ethiopia in 16th century.
 - Christ holds the staff in his left hand, Eve grasps his robe.
- ❖ **Three abbot saints** – middle register, left panel
- ❖ **Three saints below:** Saint Gabra Manfas Qeddus, an equestrian saint (probably St. Theodore) and St. George saving Birutawit ("the girl from Beirut"), who was to be sacrificed to the dragon – left panel, bottom register.
 - Gabra Manfas Qeddus – popular Ethiopian saint believed to have lived in 13rd or 14th century.
 - Known for extreme austerity.
 - Never wore clothing. As a reward, God covered his body with hair like a goat's.

- Befriended wild beasts – lions, leopards, hyenas.
 - Often represented with long, white mane and surrounded with animals.
 - Distinguished by hands uplifted in prayer.
 - St. Theodore on brown horse. Thrusts spear – possibly at monster beneath.
 - ❖ **St. George** on his white charger.
 - Horse's ears are pointed. Trapezoidal shapes fixed to band around horse's neck.
 - George slays dragon. Its head loops to face George.
 - Captive girl (checkered dress) is saved and freed.
 - ❖ **Painted cross remnants** on the reverse (exterior) side
4. The purpose of Ethiopian art is to describe in color the drama of the Gospels. The icons have been used for devotional purposes, as objects of power and votive offerings. They are believed to be permeated with the spiritual presence of saints, especially the Virgin Mary. Prayers made to an icon are offered directly to the specific saint or the Virgin. The icon can elicit either a **blessing** on the righteous or **punishment** to wrongdoers. The faithful often commissioned icons with the intention of obtaining God's mercy, as well as the intercession and protection of the Virgin.
5. This is large for a diptych icon, signaling that it was created for use in religious ceremonies, such as processions and ritual displays. It probably belonged to a monastery, rather than a private owner. The icon is a mature work of the First Gondarine style (17th-18th century), named after the city of Gondar, the trading center where King Fasiladas (1632-67) established his capital. The style's characteristic features include backgrounds divided into compartmentalized blocks of color, faces rendered with red patches of highlight over pink, and drapery rendered in parallel lines. These incorporated elements of style and iconography from Western Europe and India, brought by Jesuits who traveled between Europe and Goa. The iconic image was reproduced in great numbers.
6. Visitors to Ethiopia are often surprised that Ethiopian artists make no attempt to distinguish skin color of the saints depicted. While Arab poets clearly thought of Ethiopians as black, the Ethiopians usually saw no difference between themselves and heroes of the Bible. The clear distinction between black and white that has proven so distressing in the modern world rarely troubled ancient Ethiopians in their relations with the neighboring Christian states and European travelers, such as Francisco Alvares. [PBS]

7. Similar iconography is employed in two other MIA objects – a small, personal pendant and 44 plates from a Christian illuminated album. Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, African Arts Curator, called the larger work the “most important Ethiopian object” that the MIA has acquired. It had to undergo extensive restoration and conservation before being put on view:

- ❖ ***Forty-four plates from a Christian Illuminated Album, Artist unknown, 17th century Amhara, #2009.39.3a-rr.*** Monumental work requiring extensive restoration before viewing.



- ❖ ***Icon polyptic and leather case, artist unknown (Ethiopia), 18th-19th century, #98.244.41,b.*** Personal icon. Would have been folded, put in a case and hung as a pendant around a devotee’s neck:



8. The painted likeness of a sacred figure was thought to provide a means of communicating with the divine: a way of bridging the gap between the faithful and sacred figures being venerated. During his visit to Ethiopia in the early 16th century, the Portuguese Chaplain Francesco Alvares described the ritual veneration of the Virgin Mary: When a priest, flanked by two candle-bearers presented the icon to assembled worshippers, they processed in front of the picture, singing and paying it great reverence. Earlier rites from 1441 stipulated that the priest waft incense around the Virgin icon while singing hymns of praise in her honor. During Sunday Sabbath, churches with Marian icons were to display the Virgin on a throne below a canopy, together with a cross. Such narratives provide striking reminders of the importance of icons within the devotional life of Ethiopian Christians. [Mann]
9. The development of the painted icon in Ethiopia was intimately connected with the rise of the **Cult of the Virgin** in the mid-15th century. There was a thriving demand for Marian icons in Ethiopia, paintings with different functions – devotional, ceremonial and protective – for individuals and institutions. Some were large enough for processions and ritual displays. Others were small enough to be carried by owners, providing a constant reminder of their devotion and a guarantee of their security. Most important, the painted icon provided Ethiopian Christians with a likeness of a sacred figure they could venerate and an object they could cherish. It is extremely rare to find an icon painted before the reign of the Emperor Davit [1382-1413], the founder of the Solomonic Dynasty. Davit encouraged devotion to the Virgin, praying daily before a Marian icon. But it was the Emperor Zara Yaqob [1434-68], the son of Davit's third wife, who integrated the veneration of Marian icons into the services of the Ethiopian church.
10. There are numerous versions of the **legend of George** fighting the dragon and saving a sacrificial princess. According to tradition, George was a 3rd century Roman soldier from Syria Palaestina in the guard of Emperor Diocletian, who honored him with awards for bravery. But when Diocletian began persecuting Christians, George confessed that he had been a Christian since childhood. George survived the resulting brutal torture, his faith and miraculous survival causing many to convert to Christianity. But after Diocletian's wife Queen Alexandra converted, he had George beheaded. Many miracles were performed in St. George's name, following his death.

In one version of "**St. George and the Dragon**," the satan-like creature makes its nest at a spring that provides water for a city in the Holy Land. Naturally, the town is terrorized. The citizens must dislodge the dragon from its nest to collect water. So, every day they offer the dragon a sheep. When they run out of sheep, maidens are offered. The victim is chosen by drawing lots. One day, the princess wins the unlucky lottery. The king begs for his daughter's life to be spared, to no avail. She is offered to the dragon. Meanwhile, George has heard about the town's dilemma from a poor hermit and rides in on his white horse to save day. Protecting himself with the sign

of the Cross, George slays the dragon and rescues the princess. Grateful citizens abandon their ancestral paganism and convert to Christianity. In the Middle Ages the dragon was commonly used to represent the Devil. George's slaying of the dragon was first credited to him in the 12th century, long after his death. It is therefore likely that the many stories connected with his name are fictitious.

11. St. Philip the Evangelist appears several times in the Acts of the Apostles. He was one of the Seven Deacons chosen to care for the poor of the Christian community in Jerusalem (Acts 7). He preached and performed miracles in Samaria, converted Simon magus, and met and baptized an Ethiopian man, an eunuch, in Gaza, traditionally marking the start of the Ethiopian Church (Acts 8). He is first mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (6:5) as one of "the seven" who were chosen to attend to affairs of the church in Jerusalem when Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews.

The Diptych:

1. Relates stories of the Gospels well known to Ethiopian Christians, especially those of Christ's passion.
2. Virgin and Child are portrayed frontally with slightly turned heads and simple, iconic gestures. They are superimposed on neutral backgrounds. Bodies are delineated with thick black outlines and the areas are filled with flat color. Faces are composed of flat areas of pink and orange and are mostly represented in three-quarter view with large, almond-shaped eyes and long, finely drawn Semitic noses. Curving lines and attenuated arcs are employed to evoke the folds of draped robes and mantles.
3. Painted in tempera on gesso-covered wood. Probably this was a collaboration between two types of artisans: the carver, who prepared the panel, and the painter who drew upon a repertoire of biblical themes.
4. Probably was housed in a monastery and carried in religious ritual processions.
5. The images are static and formal, timeless and otherworldly. They reveal Christian influences from Medieval and monastic Europe, as well as those from Coptic, Islamic and Indian cultures.
6. Images and placement follow a proscribed pattern in which the Virgin and Child and St. George appear with other saints at specific places in the diptych [see description above].

Resources:

Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, African Arts Curator, New Accessions lecture, Nov. 11, 2011, and class notes.

Met's Heilbrunn: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1997.81.1>

Wikipedia on Santa maria Maggiore, where the original icon is located:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basilica_di_Santa_Maria_Maggiore

"Ethiopian Art: The Walters Art Museum," C. Griffith Mann, Zanvyl Kreiger Curatorial Fellow, Walters Art Museum.

"Ethiopian Icons," <http://www.thefolkartgallery.com/icons.htm>

"Wonders of the African World – Episodes – The Holy Land – Wonders."
<http://pbs.org.wonders/Episodes/Epi4/4wondr2.htm>

"Two Ethiopian Icons," S. Chojnacki, African Arts, 1977, pp.44-87.

Compare: The Mary Icon in Rome



Very similar imagery appears in many Ethiopian icons of this era:



Pendant Icon, 17th–18th century, Ethiopia; Amharic, Wood, tempera paint, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY