
Title of Object

Diptych icon

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: Ethiopia

Date of Object: about 1700

Country: Ethiopia

Accession Number: 2009.39.2

File Created: 10/1/2016

Material/Medium: Tempera on gesso-covered wood

Author of File: William Wilson

Department: Arts of Africa

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Last Updated/Reviewed: 8/1/2017

Tour Topics

Symbolism-art, Group 6, Highlights 1600 to 1850, symbolism-in-art, Christianity, Virgin Mary, woman, Christ, saints, Jesuits, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, ritual/ceremony, stories, cultural encounters/exchanges, spirituality/sacred

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

- 1) Describe the artist's use of color.
 - 2) Describe and compare the relative size of the figures. Why did the artist choose to make some bigger than others?
 - 3) Describe any objects that may appear to convey symbolic or religious symbolism. Describe any details about which you have questions or are unsure about their significance.
 - 4) Describe the artist's use of line and the placement of figures within foreground, middle ground, and background.
-

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

- 1) Figures are outlined in clear, strong black.
- 2) Colors are strong and flat/unmixed.
- 3) Some figures are larger, indicating some hierarchical importance.

- 4) The placement of figures, size of halos, attributes being carried, and other activities convey religious identity and symbolism.
- 5) The size and prominence of eyes signify wisdom/insight and importance of the figures.
- 6) The Ethiopian Orthodox Church – one of the first to be adopted as a national religion (compare Armenia), developed for many years in relative isolation from other Christian Churches due to the spread of Islam in northeastern Africa. In this secluded development, icons were constructed from a mostly predetermined set of religious subjects.
- 7) Starting in the 17th Century, Mary was often pictured holding a mappula (handkerchief) which is widely thought to be influenced by a rendition of Mary in the Santa Maggiore in Rome. This image is thought to have become popular in Ethiopia following missionary incursion by the Jesuits in the 17th Century who brought religious art from Rome with them.
- 8) Concerning this Santa Maria Maggiore style of icon painting: “Typically, Mary wears a blue shawl draped with folds and has a cross on her head and a star on her shoulder. She carries Christ, who is holding a book, in her left arm with her hands crossed. The blessing gesture of both figures is emphasized.” In Ethiopia, the handkerchief was a symbol of high status. (Ethiopian Icons)
- 9) Regarding the inclusion of St. George on the left panel: “Recoiling beneath the feet of the white steed, the dragon has a curling tail and a single eye, a hallmark in Ethiopian Orthodox painting of evil figures. Images of St. George the Dragon-Killer represent the triumph of good over evil, in which the warrior saint is a knight of Christ.” (Metmuseum)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

- 1) Religious art can be used to teach new concepts or to remind the faithful of subjects already learned.
- 2) While symbols in objects of art may be somewhat vague and non-specific (though no less in impact), symbols in Ethiopian Orthodox art are very specific and predetermined.
- 3) The bold use of line and flat color and figures may seem unsophisticated in this icon, but the impact can be seen as strong and very clear.
- 4) Ethiopian Orthodox art developed in isolation and is very distinctly its own style. This unique style remains even after its boundaries have been open to outside influences.
- 5) “Church patrons commissioned artist-priests to create icons in the form of single panels, diptychs and triptychs to donate to the church. It was the act of donation that was important, not personal possession. Stored with other sacred objects, icons were displayed on holy days and in public processions. With the donors' hopes of obtaining divine intercession, images of Mary, the Mother of God, are understandably the dominant theme. Saints, both universal figures such as St. George and those of local origin such as Abba Takla Haymanot, are also prevalent. Certain icons were credited with miraculous cures.” (Ethiopian Icons)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This remarkably vibrant icon was made large enough for processions and ritual display. Like all Ethiopian icons, its composition is based on a set pattern featuring scenes from the lives of Christ, Mary, and saints. The depiction of Mary with the Child is directly inspired by the famous icon in the Santa Maggiore church in Rome, which became known throughout Ethiopia since around 1600 when Jesuit missionaries began distributing reproductions.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Use a printed photo of the Madonna and Child from Santa Maggiore, Rome, to show the use of a mappula (handkerchief) in Mary's hand – as later adopted in Ethiopia.



Source for image: <http://www.reginamundi.info/icone/salus-populi-romani.asp>

Note: Image above is restored. To learn more on the original icon, see this article:

[Salus Populi Romani](#)

Information on Ethiopian Orthodox Church, from the World Council of Churches:

[Ethiopian Orthodox Church history](#)

See this online exhibition for more information on the history and production of Ethiopian icons, from the Smithsonian, National Museum of African Art:

[Ethiopian Icons](#)

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Pendant Icon: St. George, Virgin and Child Enthroned:

[Pendant Icon: St. George, Virgin and Child Enthroned](#)

If this is a tour which shows other icons, especially those of Eastern Europe, the docent could show how other cultures frequently had spare backgrounds and did not necessarily fill in all possible space.