

InterCultura

Red Sea, Blue Nile: Treasures of Medieval Ethiopia

Exhibition Description

Introduction

InterCultura, an international non-profit museum service organization, is organizing an important traveling exhibition entitled *Red Sea, Blue Nile: Treasures of Medieval Ethiopia*. This landmark exhibition will present the first opportunity for the masterpieces of medieval Ethiopian art preserved in the great collections of Ethiopia to be displayed in the United States. The exhibition will open at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, the leading American museum to specialize in the art of the Christian East, before beginning a tour of seven additional venues in the United States and Europe.

Recent discoveries of early medieval Ethiopian painting, once believed to have been virtually obliterated during the wars of the sixteenth century, have transformed our understanding of the history of Ethiopian art. This exhibition will provide an unprecedented opportunity to introduce the American public to a virtually unknown yet extremely significant tradition of art in Africa, and will make a valuable contribution to our appreciation of the diversity of the Byzantine milieu.

The Exhibition

The exhibition will include approximately 100 objects of the highest aesthetic quality from the third to the eighteenth century, selected to reveal the continuity of figurative and decorative techniques across a range of media: approximately 25 panel paintings, 25 illuminated manuscripts, 25 gold coins, and 25 processional and hand crosses in metal and wood. The objects will be chosen for their beauty and refinement of execution, as well as for their stylistic and iconographic significance, and will reflect the extent of state and church collections within Ethiopia. Gold coins from the third century Aksumite Period will be included in the exhibition in order to demonstrate the beginning of Christianity in Ethiopia as is witnessed by the images on the coins which change from early pagan symbols to later Christian symbols.

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Advisory Committee and Curator

The project is conceived as a cooperative effort involving scholars in the United States, Ethiopia, and several other countries. An international advisory committee of leading art historians and other specialists in Ethiopian and Byzantine studies is being assembled under the chairmanship of two distinguished authorities: Dr. Richard Pankhurst (founding director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, founding editor of the *Journal*

of *Ethiopian Studies*, and convener of the First International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art at the Warburg Institute in London) and Dr. Tadesse Beyene (present director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and permanent secretary of the International Conference for Ethiopian Studies). The exhibition will be curated by Dr. Marilyn Heldman, the leading historian of Ethiopian art in the United States, in consultation with the chairmen and members of the advisory committee, who will participate fully in all aspects of the conceptualization and formulation of the exhibition and the fully illustrated catalogue planned to accompany it.

Background

After the foundation of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in 1963, an extraordinary series of discoveries began completely to transform our knowledge of Ethiopian painting. From monasteries and churches in remote areas of the country, panel paintings and manuscripts of superb quality were brought to the Institute for preservation and study, and offered the first evidence that the devastating invasions of the sixteenth century had not in fact obliterated the great achievements of medieval Ethiopian art. As the first curator of the Institute described the impact of these discoveries: "In 1947, Monneret de Villard scornfully wrote about 'this poor Ethiopian painting.' Thirty years later we marvel about an art bewildering by its variety and aesthetic quality."

With large numbers of superb early Ethiopian paintings collected at the Institute, it has become possible to begin establishing sure foundations for the discipline of Ethiopian art history. We are now seeing a transformation not only of our understanding of an important African culture, but also of the extent of the international Byzantine commonwealth, and of the nature of Ethiopian contacts with Western Europe and India.

The highlands of Ethiopia, the source of the Blue Nile, lie to the west of the Horn of Africa, and are inhabited by a mixture of African and Semitic peoples who had crossed the Red Sea in ancient times from the fabled incense kingdoms of South Arabia. The classical language of Ethiopia, known as Ge'ez and written in a syllabic script of 287 characters, is closely related to the ancient languages of South Arabian kingdoms like Saba, whose name is recorded in the Bible as "Sheba". According to the Ethiopian national epic *Kebra Nagast* ("The Glory of the Kings"), the "Queen of Sheba" was in fact an Ethiopian queen who traveled to Jerusalem in search of the wisdom of Solomon, and it was through her son by Solomon that the rulers of Ethiopia until modern times claimed descent from the kings of Israel.

In the fourth century the Latin historian Rufinus Tyrannius described the recent conversion of the Ethiopian kingdom to Christianity by two young scholars from Syria, Frumentius and Aedesius, who were captured and taken as slaves to Ethiopia. After they were set free by the emperor, Frumentius traveled to Egypt to be consecrated bishop by the Patriarch of Alexandria, and until modern times the Ethiopian church remained closely tied to Egypt, with an Egyptian monk at its head. When the Patriarch of Alexandria refused to accept the doctrine of the two natures of Christ promulgated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, Ethiopia followed the Egyptian adherence to a belief in an undivided nature, a devotion strengthened by the arrival of the Nine Fathers from Syria, who established the monastic movement which was to provide centers of literary and artistic activity throughout the following centuries.

Legends of a powerful Christian kingdom at the ends of the earth began to reach Europe in the twelfth century, perhaps from Crusaders and other travelers who encountered Ethiopian monks at Jerusalem. This kingdom of "Prester John," who was said to live in a palace of

glass and to wear robes woven by salamanders, was a potent source of myth, and in 1487 a Portuguese embassy was sent to investigate. The embassy succeeded in reaching Ethiopia, shortly before the Christian empire was threatened by the assaults of Ahmed ibn Ibrahim, whom Ethiopians called Grañ ("the Left-handed"). Armed by the Ottoman Turks, Grañ was able to overrun most of the country, and when the Ethiopians in turn sought military aid from Portugal, a force led by the son of Vasco da Gama was dispatched from the Portuguese base in India and helped to defeat him.

In the wake of the Portuguese, however, came representatives of the newly established Society of Jesus, and eventually disputes between the ancient Ethiopian church and these ambassadors of the Church of Rome brought the country to the brink of civil war. The Jesuits were expelled by order of the emperor in 1632, and Ethiopia entered a period of comparative isolation from Europe until the nineteenth century.

Exhibition Themes

Such a varied history brought a series of diverse cultural influences, and the exhibition will examine:

- the significance of the Late Antique and Early Christian heritage, and the possibility of Ethiopian dependence upon Syrian and Armenian models;
- the influence of Byzantine style and iconography, and its employment in forming Ethiopian statecraft in the Byzantine image;
- the relationship of manuscripts like the Kebran Gospels to the later Copto-Arabic style, which has only recently begun to receive adequate attention from historians of Coptic art;
- the development of specifically Ethiopian subjects, like the life of the saint Takla Haymanot, who engineered the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty in 1268;
- the importance of imperial patronage, especially that of the emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob (1434-68), who transformed Ethiopian spirituality and art by promoting the cult of the Virgin, and provoked a controversy with the monk Estifanos which convulsed Ethiopia for most of the fifteenth century;
- the contribution of Venetian painters like Nicolò Brancalion, and the impact of Western European and Indian painting during the period of Portuguese activity, both of which were absorbed by Ethiopian artists working in the Gondarene style.

Through object display and interpretive devices, including graphic panels, labels, and a fully illustrated catalogue, the exhibition will reveal the significance of style, iconography, and patronage in medieval Ethiopian art, thereby providing an introduction to Ethiopian art history and to its political and social context within this fascinating medieval society. The exhibition will therefore provide an introduction to:

- the achievements of a tradition little known in the West, whose quality and diversity have only recently begun to be appreciated;

- the work of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and other collections in Ethiopia in preserving this heritage;
- the activities of an international community of scholars in revealing its significance.

Conclusion

Red Sea, Blue Nile: Treasures of Medieval Ethiopia will be an event of unusual importance both for the general public and for specialists. For the general public it will provide an unprecedented opportunity to see sumptuous works of art which will be traveling to the United States for the first time, and through the excitement of a visual experience of the first order, to be introduced to a fascinating chapter in the history of African art and culture. For specialists it will offer a stimulus towards the refinement of art historical methodology in a promising field of study, as well as providing a valuable forum for cooperation and discussion between experts from different countries.

Organization

Working in cooperation with the international advisory committee, InterCultura will oversee and administer all organizational aspects of the exhibition, including conceptualization and planning, selection of objects, fundraising, loan negotiations, exhibition design, formulation of interpretive devices, catalogue production, object photography, object registration and conservation reports, shipping, and insurance.