

BOOK REVIEW

Raymond Silverman and Neal Sobania. *Ethiopian Church Art: Painters, Patrons, Purveyors*. Los Angeles: TSEHAI Publishers, 2022. 332 pp. Illustrations. \$74.95. Hardback. ISBN: 978-1-59907-290-6.

This book presents an overview of about three decades of research on the visual culture of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC). For sake of clarity, I have retained the transcriptions used in the volume, even if this method, as the authors themselves recognize, does not offer an accurate transcription of the Amharic alphabet. Silverman and Sobania have conducted extensive fieldwork in Addis Ababa and around Aksum where, beginning in 1993 and continuing to this day, they had the opportunity to work with three generations of informants, including artists, patrons, and dealers. The authors share their extensive experiences enthusiastically and openly with their readers.

Chapter One introduces readers to a “family” of painters and dealers active in Aksum between the 1990s and first decades of the current century who are either related to, or were trained by, the painter Yohannes Teklu (1882–1979). This chapter surveys the work of about two dozen painters, starting from Yohannes Teklu and including his son Zeluel Yohannes (1920–2002) and grandson Berhanemeskel Fisseha (b. 1947). At first, one might be left disoriented by the abundant references to names of numerous hitherto little-known artists and shop owners, but the authors are right to provide them; not as a means to fit their work into Eurocentric categories of art which require artists to be named, but because their identification allows for the reconstruction of a hitherto understudied network of interactions between a group of individuals who “shaped the community of creative practice that is the subject of this book” (34). Moreover, if in the past EOTC artists often opted for anonymity for religious reasons, many of those interviewed in this book seem keen to waive it as a means to preserve their legacy and in the hope of strengthening their connections with the international market.

Chapter Two looks at the role played by patrons in the production of images. We are introduced to a range of sponsors ranging from a farmer, who commissions a single painting for his deceased son, to a businessman, who commissions an entire church in Aksum with paintings on its exterior that caused some local controversy. The chapter touches briefly on the interesting question of the cost of painting for devotees and we learn that the ability of patrons to influence the content of the images they commission is situational. The authors also discuss a loosening of those tenets that guided the use of the visual within EOTC churches, which they refer to as “laissez-faire patronage,” and the transformation of donor portraits in churches, which they note, in contrast to the past, may bear a close

resemblance to a patron or may occupy a prominent place in the pictorial scheme.

Chapter Three focuses on those purveyors who, starting in the 1970s, opened shops in Aksum to sell a range of objects to tourists. In addition to crosses and carvings, such objects include various types of wooden artefacts typically painted by the same artists involved in the production of religious imagery for EOTC patrons such as those discussed in the previous chapters. Such dynamics have affected the work of the painters considered in the book, though I would not go as far as suggesting that the painting of icons was “resuscitated” by tourist demand (60).

These objects are not always produced by artists who received a church education and may thus bear motifs that are not based on familiarity with the biblical sources or the traditions of the ETOC. Moreover, some objects discussed in this chapter have not customarily been painted in the context of EOTC practice (e.g. the lectern reproduced in fig. 3.14). I’ve never seen such objects, produced specifically for tourists, in an EOTC church, so this is perhaps an area that could have been investigated further in the context of a discussion around the subject-matter of the paintings. I would have been particularly interested in learning if the priests in Aksum approve of the sale of painted altars (*menbera tabot*) sold by souvenir shops, given that these objects are particularly sacred to Christian Ethiopians, and wondered whether the fact that the altars on sale do not resemble closely those found in churches was as much the result of a strategy to appease the clergy as to entice prospective buyers.

Chapter Four focuses on the impact of cheap religious prints on local religious practices and painting. It looks at the trade of such images and argues that their popularity among women may be related to the fact that they “historically have had limited access to the sacred spaces of the EOTC” (256). Although the use of such prints is widespread, many EOTC priests and artists disapprove of them because they depart from the country’s earlier visual traditions. Nevertheless, for the authors, the heightened realism of the saintly figures on the prints has contributed, especially in more urbanized areas, to the development of a realistic style of painting found in churches such as Bole Medhane Alem (figs. 4.39–4.40). Silverman and Sobania note that the artists responsible for these realistic works “received their education not in the church but in the art academy” (278) and argue that there is a link between their work and the social realism that was prevalent in the academy in Ethiopia during the Derg period.

The last chapter looks at the role of paintings in processes of identity formation of EOTC Christians who have migrated to the United States by considering several EOTC buildings in this country. Some feature images painted by artists who still live in Ethiopia, while others are works by members of the Ethiopian diaspora. In terms of style and use, these diasporic paintings have a lot of affinities with the visual imagery employed by the EOTC in Ethiopia, but the authors believe with reason that the choice of certain themes may express a “heightened sense of racial identity that Ethiopians have experienced living in the United States” (307).

Overall, this is a thoroughly engaging, accessible, and extensively illustrated book. On several occasions I felt that the authors could have engaged more with

the relevant literature. For example, labels such as “folk,” “tourist,” “popular,” “primitive,” or “traditional” have been used to discuss paintings like the ones described in this book, but the authors but do not outline their thinking around the use of such problematic categories. Additionally, since most of the artworks and artists discussed in this volume have suffered from neglect, the authors could have spent some time exploring the roots of this phenomenon. The more realistic paintings that appear in Bole Medhane Alem, for instance, have been especially overlooked in Euro-American scholarship, and I was left wondering whether this may be due to the fact that they do not conform to Western ideas about “traditional” or “modern” Ethiopian art, an issue only briefly alluded to in the introduction (18).

Lastly, it would have been interesting to find out more about why artists such as Berhanemeskel Fisseha consciously employ such a wide range of styles, and if their choices are dictated by patronage, subject matter, time constraints, or a combination of these factors. Something could have perhaps also been said about the changes that occurred in painting in Ethiopia after the arrival of photography in the country towards the turn of the twentieth century, since the diffusion of this medium contributed to the appearance of realistic forms of donor portraiture, akin to those discussed by the authors in Chapter Two.

On balance, however, these are all very minor suggestions that do not diminish the extraordinary value of this publication. Sobania and Silverman’s book is, as they themselves point out, “the first monograph that approaches the study of the visual practices of the EOTC using the methods of ethnography” (31). To this, we may add that theirs is also the first book to investigate the recent production of Christian paintings in Ethiopia in such detail and with such attention to local perspectives. Their work acts as a sounding board for the views, stories, and concerns of EOTC painters, patrons, and purveyors and, thanks to their carefully crafted narrative, these local opinions take the centre stage. Considering that even some very recent publications on Ethiopian art overlook contemporary Ethiopian views, it becomes clear that their inclusion here constitutes a commendable feature of this volume, which is clearly a must-have for anyone interested in the history of Ethiopian painting and the creative practices of the region.

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