A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ETHIOPIAN ICON OF THE VIRGIN AND CHILD BY THE MASTER OF THE AMBER-SPOTTED TUNIC

JACOPO GNISCI
Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies – Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana
j.gnisci@live.com

Abstract

This article focuses on a significant and hitherto unpublished icon painted around the mid-fifteenth century by the Master of the Amber-Spotted Tunic. By analysing its style and iconography, it furthers our understanding of history of panel painting in Ethiopia during this period. The study shows that Fəre Ṣəyon was not the only talented artist who created works in compliance with the policies of Zär'a Yaʾəqob and that the Master of the Amber-Spotted Tunic was an equally accomplished painter. The latter's work was in fact capable of conveying complex theological ideas in a visually accessible manner.

Keywords

Ethiopian art – Fəre Ṣəyon – Ethiopian icons – Virgin and Child – Iconography

The study of the history of Ethiopian icons is still at a stage where one is forced to choose whether to be vague about its development, leaving a number of questions unanswered, or, by being more specific, incur the risk of being proven wrong in the future. In other words, the field is not yet advanced enough for generalizations to be made with confidence. This is hardly surprising, since systematic research on Ethiopian icons began only in the 1960s, largely stimulated by the discovery of several previously unknown works from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

These discoveries were made in conjunction with efforts to acquire a large corpus of icons for the Museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa), for its representatives had realized that artworks were being illegally exported out of the country with increasing frequency due to the

expansion of tourism (Chojnacki 2000: 13-17). A key figure in both the discovery and recovery of several early Ethiopian icons was the founder and curator of the Museum, Stanislaw Chojnacki, who thereafter devoted much of his life to studying their history.[1]

Chojnacki's research efforts, which led to the publication of a series of articles on Ethiopian icons (1970; 1999; 2007), culminated in two influential books: *Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting* (1983) and *Ethiopian Icons* (2000). The other seminal monograph on Ethiopian icons is *The Marian Icons of the Painter Frē Ṣeyon* by Marylin E. Heldman (1994), who also published several articles on the topic (1998). While references to Ethiopian icons are found in a number of other publications, the current understanding of the history of panel painting in Ethiopia rests largely on the work of these two authors.

Chojnacki (2000: 22) has argued that «the art of panel painting was introduced into Ethiopia towards the middle of the 15th century». A conclusion based largely on the fact that «no panel painting has been found which can be attributed to any earlier period» (*ibidem*). Likewise, for Heldman (1994: 165), Ethiopian artists «did not ordinarily produce panel paintings» before the mid-fifteenth century. Both authors point out that the relevant written sources identified so far suggest that Ethiopians may have been familiar with icons a little before the mid-fifteenth century but offer no evidence to argue that they were being produced in Ethiopia prior to the fifteenth century. Moreover, both scholars relate what Chojnacki (*ibidem*) describes as a «sudden surge in the production of icons» to the political and religious activities of the Ethiopian emperor Zär'a Yaʿəqob (*r*. 1434-68) and to his devotion to the Virgin Mary (Heldman 1994: 112, 198-99).[2]

Although it remains to be determined whether the art of panel painting in Ethiopia was truly first practiced under the reign of Zär'a Yaʿəqob, as Cho-

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[2] The literature on this topic is too extensive to be mentioned in full here, but for an overview, with further bibliography, see also Getatchew Haile (1992), Kaplan (2002).

jnacki and Heldman are inclined to believe, there is substantial evidence that this emperor actively encouraged the use and production of painted panels. For instance, in the work known as the *Book of Light*, he instructs the clergy and faithful to assemble in church and venerate an icon of the Virgin and Child placed on a high 'throne' (*mänbär*) and covered by a canopy (Conti Rossini, Ricci 1965: 2). A small number of very large fifteenth-century icons painted on a single wooden panel which have come down to us (Fig. 3), were, in all likelihood, created in compliance with such instructions (Heldman 1994: 167-69).

While we may evaluate new evidence through the framework of Heldman's and Chojnacki's research on Ethiopian icons, it must be emphasized that several critical issues remain unresolved in their work and, more generally, within the literature. One fundamental issue that neither author addresses is the question of why the art of panel painting developed only during the fifteenth century, if this was indeed the case. Another key issue concerns the style of fifteenth-century Ethiopian panels. According to Heldman (1994: 69) an artist called Fəre Ṣəyon «developed a distinctive style which influenced Ethiopian art of the second half of the fifteenth century». However, some, including this author, believe she attributes too much importance to a single artist when there is no substantial evidence to support the idea that he played a more prominent role in the development of a new style of painting than other artists of the time (Chojnacki 2000: 22-29). And it is on the work of one of these other artists that this study focuses, presenting a hitherto unstudied Ethiopian icon from a private collection (Fig. 1). The presentation and study of unpublished material, as noted elsewhere (Bausi 2007), is of fundamental importance for the field since scholars often have access to limited evidence. This is particularly true for fifteenth-century Ethiopian icons, as pieces from this period are exiguous.

The icon in question (from here on RCI-1) can be roughly ascribed to the mid-fifteenth century on the basis of its style. Indeed, the proportions of the figures, as well as their facial features and expressive hand gestures, evoke a number of works from this period, including a panel by Fəre Ṣəyon that has been firmly dated to the reign of Emperor Zär'a Yaʿəqob on the basis of an inscription (Heldman 1994: 23-27).

Similarities with Fəre Ṣəyon's work (Fig. 3) include: the round (moon-shaped) faces; the almond-shaped eyes tapering at the edges; the pursed lips;

the abundant use of bright colours; and the manner of painting the nose and ears (Fig. 2). However, the style of the icon also differs from the work of Fəre Ṣəyon in several ways. In RCI-1 hand details, such as the fingernails and knuckles, are not depicted; the outlines are heavier; shading and highlighting are not used; the profile of the heads is drawn with a single curvilinear stroke; and the eyebrows feature a distinctive comb-like pattern.[3] In fact, RCI-1 is not sufficiently close to any hitherto published fifteenth-century icons to justify its attribution to a known artist. The author of this panel will thus be referred to as the Master of the Amber-Spotted Tunic, a name inspired by the distinctive pattern he used to paint the Virgin's dress.

Almost square in shape (36 x 34 cm), RCI-1 is carved out of a single block of wood. The absence of holes in the sides of its integral frame suggests that it never had wings. The entire panel was coated in gesso for painting, but there are no longer visible traces of decoration on the back. The Virgin is depicted holding the Christ child with both arms. She is dressed in a coral red tunic decorated with amber dots and a light blue maphorion. The inscription in Gəʿəz on her halo reads: «Mary with her beloved son». The Child, clothed in a pale green garment, embraces his Mother by wrapping his left arm around her shoulder and his right arm over her chest. Two angels with brightly coloured wings, who are identified as Michael and Gabriel by inscriptions on their halos, stand behind them. These two archangels are present in most fifteenth-century Ethiopian depictions of the Virgin and Child, although they are generally represented with swords.

Thirteen Apostles, depicted in an attitude of worship and lined along the border of the frame, surround the group of the Virgin and Child. Their solid heads are their most noticeable feature, though in some cases their shoulders, arms or hands, are also visible. The name of each Apostle was originally written in black at the top of his halo, but the ink has now fallen off or faded. Nevertheless, their names can still be discerned as the black colour was applied over the white coating of the panel (Fig. 2).[4] The Apostles in clockwise

[3] This peculiar way of painting the eyebrows appears in several Ethiopian works between the mid-fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries.

[4] Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the inscription which originally run along the upper and right border of the frame: the paint has been rubbed off and only a few letters are still visible. It may have originally contained information about the donor or dedication of the icon.

order, starting from the bottom left corner, can thus be identified as Luke, Matthew, Thaddeus, Philip and Bartholomew, Peter and Paul, Jacob and John (sons of Zebedee), Andrew, Mark, John Beloved of God, and Jacob the brother of the Lord.

While the Apostles are not represented as consistently as the two archangels in Ethiopian depictions of the Virgin and Child, they feature in a number of mid-fifteenth-century icons (Chojnacki 2000: 27). Their number varies, but they are often thirteen as in RCI-1. This is the case, for instance, in the icon attributed by Heldman (1994: 29-31) to Fəre Ṣəyon (Fig. 3), and in two other icons, probably painted by the same artist, now respectively in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (Chojnacki 2000: 359-60, Coll. no. IES 3980) and in the Walters Art Museum (Fig. 5; Mann 2001: 124-25). The names of the Apostles also vary. For instance, in IES 3980 one has Peter, Paul, James, John, Bartholomew, Andrew, Phillip, Thaddeus, Nathanael, Thomas, James son of Alpheus, Matthew, and Matthias.

In the above-listed examples the Apostles are either painted on a separate panel from the Virgin and Child or depicted below them. RCI-1, on the other hand, exemplifies a more intimate approach to the subject, in which the Apostles surround the central group of figures. The painter may have elected to depict the Apostles in this manner simply because of the shape of the panel he was using, but it quite possible that he arranged the figures in this way to convey a specific symbolic meaning.

It has long been recognized that in Ethiopian painting of the early Solomonic period (1270-1527) the Virgin and Child can be taken to symbolize respectively the altar and the eucharist or, alternatively, the Ark of the Covenant and the Tables of the Law (Heldman 1979: 116-17; 1993). This type of symbolism gives visual form to a metaphor which is also frequently encountered in Ethiopian literature of the period (Amsalu Tefera 2015; Munro-Hay 2005: 153-69). In Ethiopian painting, the earliest example of the theme of the Virgin as an embodiment of the altar is found in an illuminated Gospel book from the late thirteenth century (Fig. 4), in which she is placed under the dome of a church or sanctuary and is flanked by two angels who are shown holding a chalice and paten, thus making the liturgical significance of this scene even clearer. Their outstretched wings, in this illumination as well as in the icon, function as a baldachin and as an allusion to the descriptions

of the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:20; 1 Kings 8:7; 1 Chronicles 28:18).[5]

Michael and Gabriel, or more generally depictions of angels, are often spatially linked to the area of the sanctuary not just in manuscript illumination of the early Solomonic period but also in Ethiopian churches. This is the case, for instance, in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century church of the Saviour of the World, in which Michael and Gabriel are depicted on the two pillars which separate the nave from the sanctuary, a position which highlights their role as mediators between the earthly and the heavenly and as guardians of the holiest part of the building where the altar is found (Balicka-Witakowska 2004: 22). Thus, in RCI-1, as in other fifteenth-century icons, Michael and Gabriel act, on the one hand, as guardians of the Virgin and Child. On the other hand, they make ostensible the symbolic links between Mary and the church and between Christ and the altar tablet.

This type of symbolism is particularly appropriate for an object that was in all likelihood placed near, or possibly even on top of, a church altar.[6] Indeed, the fact that RCI-1 was conceived as a single panel, and that it is too big to have been used as a portable icon, makes it very likely that it was created in compliance with Zär'a Yaʿəqob's aforementioned order to place an image of the Virgin on a *mänbär* in church and venerate it. If this was indeed the case, then this argument can be taken a step further by suggesting that the Apostles embody the foundations of the church and thus that the painting as a whole stands as a metaphor for the church and the liturgy which takes place within it.

The symbolic value of the Apostles in RCI-1 becomes apparent when their visual function in Ethiopian churches is taken into consideration. The distribution of paintings in Ethiopian churches during the early Solomonic Period was seldom a matter of chance. To give an example, representations of the Entry into Jerusalem are typically placed next to the entrance to the sanctuary, for in this way, as Christ proceeds towards the city of Jerusalem, generally depicted as church or sanctuary, he also advances towards the ac-

[5] The motif of the extended wings, employed also in early Christian representation of the Ascension, is perhaps derived from Coptic art (Balicka-Witakowska 2004: 19; Bergman 1990; Chojnacki 1983: 179-87; Werner 1972: 8), though, as noted elsewhere, the motif is also attested in Armenian art (Gigar Tesfaye 1974: 62; Thierry, Donabédian, Thierry 1987: 371).

[6] It remains to be determined in which part of the church the icons were placed for veneration.

tual sanctuary of the church (Gnisci 2015: 258-62; Balicka-Witakowska, Gervers 2001: 26). More generally, as has been aptly illustrated by Tribe (2009; 1997), the spatial arrangement of images in Ethiopian churches of the early Solomonic period is carefully calculated to convey soteriological, hierarchic, paradigmatic, or symbolic meaning.

In such a context, in which the visual and the architectural are interwoven and invested with profound religious significance, the frequent depiction of holy men, including the Apostles, on the pillars of Ethiopian churches (Tribe 2009: 18, pl. 4; Balicka-Witakowska 2004: 23-24, figs. 17-18) acquires a figurative dimension which materializes their role as parts of the body of the church, offering a pictorial transposition of the passage from Ephesians which states that God's household is 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord' (Ephesians 2: 20-21).

To return to the icon, in the light of the numerous parallels between the Virgin and Child with the two Angels and the architectural parts of the church which are evident in the art and literature of the early Solomonic period, it seems reasonable to conclude that the thirteen Apostles embody the church's 'foundations' and function, together with the other figures, as a manifestation of the 'body' of the Church, thus giving material form to those biblical passages (1 Corinthians 12: 12-14; Ephesians 4: 1-16) which employ architectural metaphors to convey theological messages about ecclesiastical unity. A call to unity in Christ must have seemed particularly appropriate at a time, the mid-fifteenth century, when the Ethiopian Church was on the verge of splitting due to division on issues concerning the Sabbath and the veneration of images (Beylot 1970; Taddesse Tamrat 1966), and the Emperor was intent on quelling voices of dissent that disagreed with his programme of religious and political reforms.

The idea of including a more or less symbolic depiction of an object on the object itself, in this case a symbolic depiction of the church on a panel that was meant to be viewed within a church, is found already in Ethiopian art prior to the mid-fifteenth century. It appears, for instance, in a series of wooden altars which have been roughly ascribed to the fourteenth century and feature carvings depicting a small copy of the altar placed within a sanctuary (Bosc-Tiessé 2010: 69-72; 2011: 258-61).

However, the icon does not only function as an allegory of the church, it also helps visualize and conceptualize the liturgical instructions of Zär'a Yaʿəqob. The Apostles, in fact, have a paradigmatic role, since they are depicted in the act of venerating the Virgin and Child which also the faithful were expected to perform. Therefore, in its devotional setting, the icon would have worked as a visual prompt, which materialized the performance that had to be directed towards it and confirmed the orthodoxy of the practice. The believers who turned to this image to venerate the Virgin and Child would have felt reassured to see their actions mirrored by the Apostles. The use of multivalent imagery, such as the one at play in RCI-1, is typical of art produced during the early Solomonic period.

To date, there is at least another work that can be attributed to the Master of the Amber-Spotted Tunic: a small diptych of the Virgin and Child with St. George from another private collection (Fig. 6).[7] A comparison between the depictions of the Virgin and Child in the two works reveals substantial similarities in the treatment of the subject, folds of the drapery, and features of the figures thus leaving little room for doubt about the attribution of both works to the same artist. For the sake of comprehensiveness, it is also worth mentioning another small portable icon which was published a few years ago in a catalogue by Sam Fogg (2001: 22-23). Although this piece was not painted by the Master of the Amber-Spotted Tunic (the curves are not as smooth; the faces are more angular; etc.), its iconographic and stylistic features suggest that it was executed by an artist who imitated or worked in close contact with him.

The Master of the Amber-Spotted Tunic had some difficulty in rendering the human form. This can clearly be seen by looking at Christ's awkwardly painted left leg and foot or at the hands with an upside-down thumb. Nevertheless, the elegance of the lines, the balance of the composition, the delicateness of the shapes, the use of bright colours, the absence of shading combined with the intense gaze of the figures impress those who behold his work with a sense of piety and spiritual serenity. The quality of his work,

[7] Bosc-Tiessé has described a small painted panel in the Musée du quai Branly (inv. no. 71.1931.74.3024.1) as the 'oldest known portable icon' from Ethiopia (Bosc-Tiessé 2009: 4). However, as the icon reproduced here shows, the work in the Musée du quai Branly, which belongs to the mid-fifteenth century, is just one of several surviving portable icons from this period.

combined with his capacity to express complex doctrinal ideas in a simple visual language, make the Master of the Amber-Spotted Tunic one of the most significant Ethiopian artists of his time. His work is not second to that of Fəre Ṣəyon and, although the two artists employ a similar iconographic and stylistic language, there is nothing to suggest that the latter influenced the former. Rather, it is more likely that both Fəre Ṣəyon and the Master of the Amber-Spotted Tunic contributed, together with other artists, to the creation of that distinctive style of painting that was developed during the reign of Zär'a Yaʿəqob.

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