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Patronage and the Theological Integrity of Ethiopian Orthodox Sacred Paintings in Present Day Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Edwin Hamilton Johnson

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in Art History

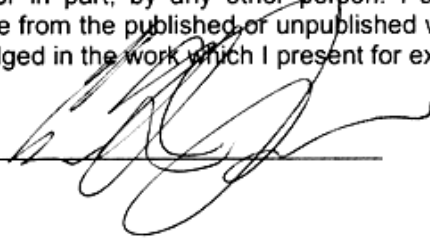
2011

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis provides a picture of the dynamic of the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, based on fieldwork conducted between 2001 and 2003. The content of this study fills a gap in existing academic research regarding the production of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings. In addition to providing a description of the patronage process from beginning to end, this thesis is an analysis of the dynamics of the means for maintenance of the theological integrity of these images by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. While the roles of all of the participants in the patronage process are analyzed in this study, it is the role of the priests that receives special attention, as they are central to the facilitation of the patronage process and the oversight of the doctrinal correctness of the images created by artists producing Ethiopian Orthodox religious images in the 20th and 21st centuries.

My analysis of the dynamics of power with the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings in Addis Ababa is based on Michel Foucault's concepts of the *pastoral* dynamic of power and the policing role of pastoral authorities found in his two-part lecture series titled *Pastoral Power and Political Reason* presented at Stanford University in 1979.¹ By switching from the civic emphasis of his own work towards an ecclesiastical context appropriate to the study of production of religious imagery, light was shed on the role that Ethiopian Orthodox priests play in the patronage of sacred paintings within the context of the maintenance of theological integrity of religious observance. From Foucault's own picture of pastoral power and the 'policing' role or oversight of this tradition by the priesthood, this theoretical foundation served as a springboard for gleaning an understanding about the relationships between priests, art and the maintenance of theological integrity in religious practice.

¹ Foucault, Michel. "Pastoral Power and Political Reason (1979)." Chap. 11 in *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault*, selected and edited by Jeremy R. Carrette, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.

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Detail of Madonna and Child by Aragawi Kahsay, Photograph by author (fig. 1)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Sometimes the best way to understand something is to take it apart and look inside. I know that when I was little I did this with any gadget I could get my hands on. This was a symptom of youthful curiosity. My process of developing a deeper understanding about Ethiopian Orthodox art, which went beyond the standard academic literature on the topic, began with a liturgical approach toward the study of this art. This discourse is a continuation of patronage that uses the study of the patronage process as a means of dissecting important qualities and issues connected with Ethiopian Orthodox religious imagery, its nature and its use.

At the time of this study, there was to my knowledge no literature that described the recent state of the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox art in any depth. While I was blessed with the excitement of breaking new ground in the study of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings, I was also confronting art historical territory that was unfamiliar to myself and barely explored by academia as a whole. The result was a gauntlet of trial and error that occurred before I gained a reasonably secure grasp of this topic, arriving at the realization of the central importance of priests in the patronage process in addition to an understanding of the typical course of the patronage process from beginning to end. The gathered information and analysis of the dynamic of power that exists within the patronage process has not only shed light simply on the production process of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings in Addis Ababa, it has also revealed indigenous views and attitudes about the relationship between imagery and religious doctrine.

For me, and hopefully other academics, the results of this study will lead to a new perspective on the sacred paintings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as well as the patronage of these works and the roles played by the participants in the production of religious images. The function of priests in the patronage process in the 20th and 21st centuries that I find most fascinating is that they contribute as much to the production process and the resulting work of art as patrons and painters. The priests' contribution to the process though is not material as is the case with the other two types of participants. A priest brings authority and knowledge to the dynamic of the

patronage process. They serve a multifaceted function of counselor, teacher and judge. This study is intended to draw attention to the pivotal contribution that Ethiopian Orthodox clerics play in the preservation of the artistic legacy of their faith.

Creating a Complete Picture of Art Patronage

This emphasis on priests in the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox painting was by no means obvious for a standard model of art patronage, particularly in a modern and western context, which would have involved simply a patron and an artist. The incompleteness of this picture of the patronage process becomes apparent when examining what makes the imagery correct, and therefore usable, according to ecclesiastical authorities. The integral involvement of priests was made apparent in research conducted by Jacques Mercier. Although he is most famous for his studies of magic scrolls, which lie at the periphery of the authorized religious practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, a combination of his investigations into Ethiopian Orthodox icons and the research techniques he used made his work both relevant and influential for my own research. Instead of viewing these paintings from a single historical, aesthetic or iconographical point of view, he utilizes a combination of ethnological/sociological and theological approaches. This lends itself to a research path that is conducive to contextualization of information as well as opening channels for new and challenging information presented by indigenous sources.

In his book *Art that Heals*.² Mercier consults interviewees about different elements in the creation and use of imagery by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Part of his research examines the role that asceticism plays in the creation and power of sacred images. During his research about the relationship between paintings and asceticism, Mercier interviewed a

² Mercier, Jacques. *Art that Heals: The Image as Medicine in Ethiopia*. New York: Museum for African Art, 1997.

professor of theology at Addis Ababa University, named Professor Goha-Tsebah.

In the old days, painters were pure [they led the lives of monks]. Their works were brought to the church and immediately set in a holy place. Today, in the age of science, anyone can paint. So that when a painting enters a church, it must be blessed and anointed. The works of the pure and the impure are not the same; but the blessing equalizes them.³

It is Mercier who described the practice of priests blessing paintings so they would be suitable for ritual use. According to Goha-Tsebah, paintings have to be blessed "...by any abbot, monk or priest known to be pure."⁴ before they can be used in a ritual manner. It is interesting that a statement intending to answer a question about asceticism serendipitously serves to bring to light a better understanding about art patronage and most of all emphasizes the importance of the priest in the production of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings.

What I gleaned from Mercier's research was that without the involvement of the priesthood, these religious images would not be authorized as sacred and therefore be inappropriate for religious use. While this portion of Mercier's study introduces the important role that clerics play in the production of sacred paintings, his writings do not provide a complete picture of the role of the cleric in the patronage process. They do present, however, the additional ramifications that result from the need for a cleric to bless paintings before they can be used for religious purposes. My research aims to reveal that while asceticism plays a role in the production of Ethiopian Orthodox art, the images adherence to doctrine in the eyes of the priest responsible for judging the correctness of the result of a particular commission takes precedence above all else.

³ Mercier [quoting Prof. Goha-Tsebah]: 1997, 73-4.

⁴ Mercier: 1997, 74.

Professor Goha-Tsebah is not the only person who stresses the importance of the blessing of images before they can be used in a ritual context authorized by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. While conducting research in Addis Ababa, I had an opportunity to have an audience with *Abuna* Garima,⁵ a central ecclesiastical figure within the curia of the patriarch. During the interview, I inquired about the practice of blessing paintings before they could be used for ritual purposes. He stated that according to the dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, all images intended for use in religious practice must be brought before a priest to be blessed. The archbishop also informed me that it is not a given that an image, which is presented to a priest, would receive his blessing at all.

Before the blessing could take place, the images had to be judged as to their correctness. Images that are seen as correct according to the criteria of the priest, based on the dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, are blessed. Those that are seen as incorrect are rejected, do not receive a blessing and therefore are useless for ritual purposes⁶. According to *Abuna* Garima, these images have to conform to the dogma of the Church and it is the responsibility of the individual cleric to determine what a ritually correct image is and what is not deemed acceptable. He said that these clerics are “supposed” to have developed a sufficient knowledge about sacred imagery so that they could make an accurate assessment as to the ritual correctness of a painting.⁷

It must be noted that although he felt that the majority of these clerics were knowledgeable about sacred imagery, not all of them possessed the same level of aptitude with this kind of knowledge.⁸ As a whole though, I received the impression during the course of my fieldwork that the priests of the

⁵ *Abuna* Garima describes his role in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as that of an archbishop. He is a man of great ecclesiastical authority and is part of the inner circle of the patriarch His Holiness *Abuna* Paulos. The archbishop's role in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is more akin to the Catholic ecclesiastical title of cardinal.

⁶ *Abuna* Garima (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, January 2003.

⁷ *Abuna* Garima, (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, January 2003.

⁸ *Abuna* Garima, (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, January 2003.

Ethiopian Orthodox Church were well informed about religious imagery. The statements made by *Abuna* Garima further confirmed the intrinsic role that clerics play in the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings and served as a catalyst for my further pursuit of this topic.

Sacred Paintings and Pastoral Power

As is the case in all other means that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church uses to communicate theological concepts, such as the liturgy, scripture and preaching, these painted religious images are subject to the scrutiny of the priesthood. It is through them the Church is able to regulate peoples' perception of the divine. No matter what aspect of the observance of this faith, clerics of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are the keepers of the integrity of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith despite the challenges of an increasingly modernized Ethiopia, particularly in this nation's capital.

In addition to the ethnological/sociological and theological information collected from informants, between the years 2001 and 2003, the interpretation of this evidence on the role of clerics in the production of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings is set within the analytical model of *pastoral power*, described in Michel Foucault's two part lecture series, *Pastoral Power and Political Reason* presented during the *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* at Stanford University in California in 1979.⁹ While the overall spirit of Foucault's original theories on pastoral power remain intact, for this thesis I have modified them from their emphasis on civic power structures so it would be relevant for use in the ecclesiastical context.

In this study, the rational body of the state and the science of statecraft are replaced by the oversight of the priesthood, their role in the process of liturgical catechesis and the theological underpinnings of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. It is through Foucault's model of the dynamics of pastoral power that both the overall picture of the production of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings

⁹ Foucault, Michel. "Pastoral Power and Political Reason (1979)." Chap. 11 in *Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault*, selected and edited by Jeremy R. Carrette, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.

and the crucial role of clerics in this process may best be understood in regards to the maintenance of the theological integrity of this creative tradition in the urbanized and cosmopolitan environs of present day Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. What particularly caught my attention was the term *pastoral*, which seemed most fitting for an ecclesiological study that included the oversight of priests regarding the creation of religious imagery. The term itself conjures images of the *Good Shepherd* and biblical imagery regarding the oversight, care and tending of something. In a clear way, these priests serve a shepherding role in the religious observances in their congregations as well as the maintenance of the living ecclesiastical traditions associated with religious belief, including the graphic representations that complement other aspects of liturgical catechesis experienced by the members of the congregation.

Ethiopian Orthodox Painting Tradition Past and Present

Professor Goha-Tsebah's quote presents another point, which I heard repeatedly from both priest and the laity regarding the current state of Ethiopian Orthodox religious painting, particularly in the more modern and cosmopolitan environs of Addis Ababa. His view was that a stark contrast exists between the kind of artists who created these images in the past and the painters who are active in the present. The old days that Professor Goha-Tsebah referred to predates the twentieth century when monks or secular priests produced sacred paintings.

Historically, the centers of art production tended to be monasteries or workshops that were sponsored by the royal court from the fourth century until its demise in 1974. The religious paintings, created in the past would have been painted by people who tended to be rigorous in their piety and were a part of the intellectual elite, steeped in the traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. What marked these painters of a previous age was that they either functioned within the monastic setting or conducted themselves in an ascetic fashion that closely resembled the life within the monasteries of the Ethiopian highlands.

According to the research, which I had conducted in Addis Ababa, the circumstances regarding the nature of the painters of sacred images are different from the idyll of past times. This is particularly the case in respect to the monastic orientation of the artists of old, which in Addis Ababa has been largely replaced by artists who live and work in the secular world. While this does not mean that these painters are any less savvy regarding knowledge of ecclesiastical dogma, their lives outside of the confines of the monastic precincts are different from their monastic counterparts as was described by Professor Goha-Tsebah.

Although none of the painters I interviewed was a priest that does not mean that no priestly painters work in Addis Ababa. They do still exist, as can be seen in Dr. Raymond Silverman's research on Ethiopian Orthodox painting in his book *Ethiopia, Traditions in Creativity*, when he interviewed the priest and painter, Kes Adamu Tesfaw.¹⁰ Despite not finding an ordained priest who paints religious images, I did find a deacon, the painter Aragawi Kahsay, who had received an extensive monastic religious education. While he was the only painter I had interviewed who carried an ecclesiastical title, he was not unique regarding his educational background steeped in monastic education and theological studies shared by their priestly counterparts.

I found that members of the laity were actively painting Ethiopian Orthodox images and they had varying degrees of education in religious dogma. In light of Jacques Mercier's writings on ritual purity and the production of Ethiopian Orthodox images, I noticed that a few of these painters did not practice asceticism while they painted images of saints. Some of these painters stated that they did not believe this lack of observance of ascetic practices was a problem either for their patrons or for clerics. It was revealing that artists did not see asceticism as being necessary during the creative process even though they understood that this was a common practice for

¹⁰ Silverman, Raymond. "Qes Adamu Tesfaw- A Priest Who Paints." in *Ethiopia, Traditions in Creativity*, edited by R. Silverman. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999.

the generations that preceded them.¹¹ This led to further inquiry about practices associated with the creative process as it was related to the painting of religious imagery.

After speaking to these painters, I presented the issue of asceticism and the creation of paintings to a couple of clerics. *Abuna* Garima was realistic about this issue when I questioned him. He stated that ideally, painters should conduct themselves in an ascetic manner when creating religious paintings. He followed this statement by revealing that it did not always happen.¹² It was the hieromonk, *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan, who expressed the opinion that asceticism was a contributing factor in the appearance of a painting.

A painter who eats worldly food makes paintings that are worldly in appearance. A painter who eats spiritual food makes paintings that are spiritual in appearance.¹³

This hieromonk was critical of painters who abandoned the tradition of fasting, abstaining from sexual activity and prayer when they were painting images of saints. This statement also reveals a perception that a person's frame of mind, whether it is spiritual or otherwise, has a real affect on the appearance of the paintings they create. This kind of thinking goes beyond just the idea that asceticism merely affects the ritual purity of a painting. According to *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan, the ascetic practices of a painter have an effect on the form¹⁴ of the painting as well as its nature due to the painter's mindset while creating the painting.¹⁵

¹¹ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002; Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002; Alle Felleghie Selam (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002; Tekesta Yibeyin, November 2002.

¹² *Abuna* Garima, (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, January 2003.

¹³ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁴ The term that Goha-Tsebah used is the "body" or "*akal*" of the painting (Mercier [quoting Prof. Goha-Tsebah] 1997, 74).

¹⁵ The term that Goha-Tsebah used is the *tabay* or "character" of the painting (Mercier [quoting Prof. Goha-Tsebah] 1997, 74).

Abuna Garima said that priests should know what a suitable painting looks like, such as the visual representation of ecclesiastical dogma.¹⁶ Taking what *Abuna* Garima into consideration, I interviewed other members of the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy, including nine priests and one teacher of divinity who was not ordained, but who was a preacher and mentor of notoriety at Saint George Church in the *Piazza* section of Addis Ababa. The consensus of these various churchmen confirmed what *Abuna* Garima stated. In order for a painting to receive the blessing of a priest, it must be deemed as a work that possesses theological integrity thereby consistent with Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine.¹⁷

The Ways and Means of Understanding this Artistic Phenomenon

This interview with *Abuna* Garima, followed by further interviews with other holy men, represented a significant turning point in the trajectory of my research from what could be seen as a 'conventional' art historical study to one that takes on an ethnological/theological emphasis commonly seen in the study of sub-Saharan, West African cultures. What could not be ignored though are the unique nuances of Orthodox Christianity that have a substantial bearing on the art that is produced, the doctrinal foundation it is built upon and how it is used.

Because of this, my art historical research methodology is informed by the laudable scholarship of such academics as Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Lossky and Anton Vrame, my research paradigm incorporated theology with art historical inquiry conducted in the manner of an empirical study. I combined this with qualitative inquiry based on phenomenological hermeneutic induction and analysis of gathered information. Adapting familiar models of art patronage to the dynamic I witnessed during my study was pivotal to my progress. Instead of steadfastly adhering to structuralist, pre-

¹⁶ *Abuna* Garima, (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, January 2003.

¹⁷ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003; *Memher Abba* Aëmro Birru (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Abuna* Garima (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan (monk and administrator, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes gebez* Nahu Sanai (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church) in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes* Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

existing models of art patronage, I viewed the patrons, painters and Ethiopian Orthodox priests as my mentors who contributed to my education about Ethiopian Orthodox art and patronage. They were instrumental in shaping my perceptions of Ethiopian Orthodox art, patronage and the regulation of its tradition by priests. The data I gathered on the ground had a distinctly greater influence on my study than the existing literature due to an apparent dearth of writing on the subject of patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings at the time I conducted my research. The important sources of information I collected in Addis Ababa enabled me to develop a clear picture of the dynamic of the patronage process. They enabled me to develop a new model that illustrates the interactions that occur during the patronage process of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings in Addis Ababa.

This thesis is predominantly an empirical study grounded largely on gathered information derived through interviews, combined with the study of historical, cultural and theological academic literature. The adoption of a theological angle, in addition to formalistic and ethnographic approaches to art analysis, enabled me to better see the fundamental qualities of these works in a manner closer to the way that Ethiopian Orthodox individuals, who use, create and sanction these religious images do. I was aware that my own perceptions about these works of art and their religious context would never completely match those of the people I interviewed for this study. Through a self-critical reflexive approach to the analysis of gathered information, there was a sizeable reduction in the perceptual distance between the findings of this study and what actually occurs within this particular environment.

The picture I eventually developed during the dynamic of the patronage process evolved through the course of my research. I began with models derived from preliminary readings in art history and used them as templates and springboards from which I conducted interviews of patrons, painters and priests. As newly acquired information began to construct a picture of the patronage process, my mental image of this dynamic gradually transformed. Like a malleable substance, my perceptions began to morph around the circumstances as they existed on the ground rather than, in a stalwart

fashion, holding to a model of a social dynamic that did not apply to the specific art historical phenomenon into which I was delving. Although I was aware that sea changes would cause my research to flounder, I found that adaptability was a virtue that rewarded me with a unique insight into the subjects of art patronage and the maintenance of the integrity of Ethiopian Orthodox artistic tradition that has been left untouched by academia.

I, among many other art historians, cut my academic teeth on the art of the Renaissance. Two influential figures who initially served as inspiration for approaching the study of the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox art were Michael Baxandall as well as an art historian, who for a long time epitomized the rational analysis of religious art, Erwin Panofsky. Both scholars equally served as provisional models that facilitated my inquiry into the production of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings in Addis Ababa in addition to being a starting point for the development of an approach used to study this particular type of art.

Baxandall made me think about the social dynamics of art patronage. From his writings on the patronage of Italian Renaissance art, I attempted to use his model that revolved around the interaction between the patron and the painter, in order to build an understanding about participants and their role in the patronage process. As useful as this bipartite model was for a time, during the course of my fieldwork, I began to realize that there was an additional and significant party who contributed to the process who I underestimated, the priests. Looking back on my fieldwork with perfect hindsight, this aspect of the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings should have been clear, but was not when I began my research. It required me to recognize the significance of clerics in the production of images through a combination of the findings of Jacques Mercier and my own interviews with patrons, painters and the priests themselves. This course of inquiry shaped the tripartite model and my interview strategies used to glean more information about the dynamics of patrons, painters and priests in the creation of religious imagery.

During the early stages of this study, I thought that the extent of the participation of priests in the patronage process was as a patron or perhaps a painter. After further inquiry I began to understand their role in the internal mechanism used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that oversees the theological integrity of imagery used in religious practice in addition to Foucault's model of *pastoral power* that highlights the priest's role in the oversight of the spiritual wellbeing of the community. This integrity has less to do with such formal qualities as style, but rather its adherence to dogma and an ability to convey a sense of spirituality summed up in the Amharic word, *menfasawi*. This need for oversight of iconographic detail and overall narrative of a religious painting was well illustrated by Panofsky in regards to a work by the Italian Baroque painter, Francesco Maffei (see figure 2).



Francesco Maffei. *Salomé/Judith*,
from the College-de-Vevey (fig. 2)¹⁸

Panofsky highlighted the mixing of symbolic elements that serve to baffle the viewer as to whether this image is depicting the narrative of *Judith and Holofernes*, highlighted by the woman in the picture holding a sword, or the story of *Salomé* and the beheading of Saint John the Baptist, with the severed head on a platter. Rather than providing a coherent graphic depiction of a singular religious narrative, this image perplexes the viewer

¹⁸ Sourced from http://college-de-vevey.vd.ch/auteur/inédits/mutation_des_signes/chap12-4.htm.

due to its deviation from implicit iconographic conventions and therefore utterly lacking in integrity regarding its narrative qualities.¹⁹

If such a painting, containing a religious narrative, were presented for the scrutiny by an Ethiopian Orthodox priest, the cleric would have rejected this image because of its deviation from textual sources and accepted visual precedent. Images like this highlight the function and the importance of the priest's role in maintaining the theological integrity of religious imagery. In the case of the painting by Maffei, the lack of ecclesiastical intervention allowed for the creation of this odd and bewildering Baroque painting. This image was the result of the primacy of artistic license over its function as a means of religious indoctrination. Due to the apparent importance of oversight regarding the production of religious imagery, priests became incredibly valuable resources in developing a better understanding about the Church's views on the essential character and use of these paintings. Through their contributions, I was able to develop a greater understanding about the art so central to their faith. Moreover, I also began to understand more about *their* role in the production of these images, predominantly in regards to the maintenance of the theological integrity of these religious paintings.

Although Saint John of Damascus, Saint John Chrysostom and Michel Foucault may sound like an unlikely grouping of thinkers, aspects of their writings have had a tremendous effect on the more theoretical aspects of this study regarding imagery and religious practice as well as vigilant oversight over the integrity of this artistic tradition in the context of mystagogic catechesis. In addition to his crucial role in countering the tide of iconoclasm in Christendom in Byzantine Constantinople, Saint John of Damascus' understanding about the role that images play in the larger scope of religious observance is crucial. It is easy to view the Byzantine iconoclastic debates as a setback for the tradition of Christian imagery, but in light of the problematization of the liturgical use of this imagery, he eloquently illustrated a stronger sense of the image's role in catechesis and theosis. In essence, in

¹⁹ Panofsky: 1972, 13.

an environment that was sceptical of the validity of the use of images in religious practice, those who were proponents of the use of icons bore the burden of proof and had to present a compelling case. This attitude can be seen clearly in the following quote.

I say that everywhere we use our senses to produce an image of the Incarnate God himself, and we sanctify the first of the senses (sight being the first of the senses), just as by words hearing is sanctified. For the image is a memorial. What the book does for those who understand letters, the image does for the illiterate: the word appeals to hearing, the image appeals to sight; it conveys understanding.²⁰

We can see that in contrast to the iconoclasts, and their aversion to the use of religious images, which they considered idolatry, Saint John of Damascus saw icons as an essential companion to all other means of catechesis as a strategy for developing a understanding about religious dogma and fostering a relationship with the saints. In essence, the continued use of religious imagery, combined with other didactic methods, is an Orthodox, holistic and effective way of facilitating the process of catechesis.²¹ The Ethiopian Orthodox Church also adheres to this sentiment, where images are seen as bearing the same didactic importance as the written and spoken word.²²

The need for theological integrity in religious imagery further accentuates the importance of clerical oversight and ritualistic blessing of religious images. For the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, as with any other sect in Christendom, it would be deemed unthinkable for a priest to utter contradictory teachings during his sermon. Likewise images must also remain consistent with ecclesiastical tradition. In addition to providing an understanding about the patronage process, the contribution this thesis makes to Ethiopian art history is to make clear the role of priests in the maintenance of all aspects of religious observance and understanding, whether through the written word, the liturgy or religious imagery.

²⁰ St. John of Damascus: 2003, 31.

²¹ Vrame: 1999, 16-7.

²² Ware: 1993, 31; Vrame: 1999, 1.

Regarding the role of priests as the guardians of ecclesiastical tradition, Saint John Chrysostom, clearly described the vigilant role of the priest in the larger scope of the theological continuity of ecclesiastical tradition and religious practice. It includes a host of priestly responsibilities, which should be embraced, and temptations, which should be avoided. His series of books, *On the Priesthood*²³ was a tremendous aid in understanding the role that priests play in the parish that they are responsible for. Further reinforcing the importance of Foucault's model of pastoral power in understanding the role of priests in the maintenance of theological integrity is the following regardless of whether this actual text had any influence on Ethiopian Orthodox theology or not. This point is emphasized in the following quote.

Our present inquiry is not about dealings in wheat and barley, or oxen and sheep, or anything else of the kind. It concerns the very Body of Jesus. For the Church of Christ is Christ's own Body, according to Saint Paul, and the man who is entrusted with it must train it to perfect health and incredible beauty, by unremitting vigilance to prevent the slightest spot or wrinkle or other blemish of that sort from marring its grace and loveliness. In short, he must make it worthy, as far as lies within human power, of that pure and blessed Head to which it is subjected.²⁴

This quote places the priest in the role of a guardian or even a doctor, who watches over the wellbeing of the 'Body of Christ' or the Church and all facets of the ecclesiastical tradition.

In *On the Priesthood*, Saint John Chrysostom does not specifically address the importance of imagery within the whole of the larger picture of the Church, as did Saint John of Damascus. We see that his concerns involve all aspects of religious dogma and practice, which would include religious images as part of this 'Body of Christ' that requires vigilant supervision by the priesthood. The priests I interviewed embodied the vigilant guardians of the 'Body of

²³ John Chrysostom. *Six Books On the Priesthood*. Translated by Graham Neville. Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002.

²⁴ John Chrysostom: 2002, 114.

Christ' who knew full well that "For the neglect of a small detail in these matters upsets and spoils the whole scheme."²⁵ As I have found through my interviews with patrons and painters and clerics, the priesthood is vested with the responsibility and power to harness the beneficial qualities of religious imagery and regulate their theological integrity.

The patristic writers were not the only theologians who concerned themselves with analysis of the means for the maintenance of the wellbeing of a social, or in this case a religious, body through the use of didactic and supervisory means. The French deconstructivist theorist on the dynamics of power, Michel Foucault, also managed to touch upon this subject, but from an understandably different angle than the previously mentioned patristic theologians. Although it would seem out of place to include a contemporary philosopher on the dynamics of power within socio-political contexts in the study of ecclesiastical subject matter, he has something to contribute to this dialogue. One of his lecture series titled *Pastoral Power and Political Reason*²⁶ contains a pearl of insight that is useful in understanding the relationship between power and the oversight of a community, such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

This lecture series was intended to be a study of the cultural and historical origins of *pastoral power* within a civic context; it examined the biblical and ecclesiastical predecessors of a pastoral approach toward maintaining the well-being of post-Enlightenment societies. Foucault's picture of the dynamics of power and oversight resembles the vigilant supervisory function of the priest, presented by Saint John Chrysostom, within a "shepherd-sheep"²⁷ metaphor that he used to describe the "...evolution of pastorship, i.e., the technology of power" derived from medieval Christian practice and later utilized in civic governance.²⁸ While Foucault did not dwell on the

²⁵ John Chrysostom: 2002, 114.

²⁶ Foucault, Michel. "Pastoral power and political reason (1979)." Chap. 11 in *Religion and culture by Michel Foucault*. Selected and edited by Jeremy R. Carrette, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, 135-152.

²⁷ Foucault: 1999, 142.

²⁸ Foucault: 1999, 142.

ecclesiastical, because of the socio-political emphasis of his lecture series, threads of these analytical models of the dynamics of pastoral power can be modified and utilized in an ecclesiastical context.

Foucault's analysis of a sheep-shepherd dynamic of pastoral power hinges on the shepherd's knowledge of and attention to each member of his flock to whom he is responsible for providing assistance toward salvation. In turn, the shepherd's flock owes to him their discipleship so that they may benefit from his knowledge of their individual needs and his guiding hand.²⁹ This dynamic of power, grounded in the oversight of the well-being of the community, correlates with the need for vigilant attention expressed by Saint John Chrysostom. His emphasis on the importance of instruments of guidance, such as the edifying use of religious imagery combined with textual sources of ecclesiastical tradition, described by Saint John of Damascus.³⁰ For the shepherd, in the form of the priest, the use of images as a means of guiding his flock is potent. This didactic tool itself requires supervision so that it does not misguide the flock. In turn, the obedience of many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in Addis Ababa springs from respect for the institution and tradition of the Church and the soteriological benefits it can provide for them.

Just as Foucault examined the ecclesiastical origins of pastoral power in civic society, something can be gained in the analysis of ecclesiastical examples of pastoral power from his examination of its use in the modern state.

Foucault's assessment of "policing theory" was most fitting.³¹ His look into 'the police' focuses on statecraft during the time of the Enlightenment that sought a rational means of regulating society for the sake of the strength of the nation-state. As explained by Foucault, the concept of *police*, *policing* and *Polizeiwissenschaft* of early modern Europe, adopted by such political

²⁹ Foucault: 1999, 142.

³⁰ In the case though of the history of Ethiopian Orthodox art, a crisis regarding the use of religious imagery epitomized by the Byzantine iconoclasm never surfaced in the Ethiopian tradition where the importance and use of religious imagery was never questioned or threatened. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church never needed a person, such as Saint John of Damascus, to remind them of the role and importance of religious imagery in the practice of the Christian faith. Instead, religious imagery had always been central in the observation of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith without the interruption experienced in the Byzantine world in the eighth century.

³¹ Foucault: 1999, 142.

scientists as Turquet de Mayenne and Delamare, is different from a criminal justice system made up of a constabulary that we are familiar with in the present day. Instead, policing was understood as a holistic “government technology”³² used in the maintenance of the social, economic and physical health of the community. The importance of the pastoral role of a policing entity is connected to the notion that the well-being of the state is directly tied to the wellbeing of its citizenry, which requires constant oversight.

The ritual of blessing images, before their use in religious practice, is a type of policing strategy used to ensure the wellbeing of the *ecclesia*, or community of the Church. As embodiments of the ecclesiastical tradition, in addition to the critical eye of the Church, priests use their knowledge and judgment to promote images consistent with religious dogma and reject those that deviate from ecclesiastical tradition so that these commissioned paintings synchronize with other facets of mystagogic catechesis.

Priests as Keepers of the Tradition

The ritual of the judgment and blessing of religious imagery displays a clear differentiation between paintings that simply possess religious content and those that are authorized by the ecclesiastical authorities. While Professor Goha-Tsebah focuses on the importance of ritual purity in a sacred painting, the priests and hieromonks I interviewed provided me with a different picture. The priest who I interviewed stressed the importance of a painting’s adherence to the “dogma”³³ or “tradition”³⁴ of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. For them, these paintings had to represent a correct interpretation of the *living tradition* of the church comprised in both *written* and *unwritten sources*.³⁵

Paintings worthy of a priest’s blessing are ones that reflect the priest’s *own understanding* of the prevailing interpretation of the visual representation of

³² Foucault: 1999, 147.

³³ Abuna Garima, (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, January 2003.

³⁴ Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai (high priest of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁵ Memher Fisseha Tsion Tegegne, (teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

living tradition. There are no official guidelines provided by the patriarchate that explicitly dictate what should and should not be present in religious imagery. These guidelines are the product of the priest's own theological education and his interpretation of the summation of this information he possesses. To these members of the ecclesiastical elite, the conveyed content of the painting must possess theological integrity in order to receive their blessing and become *bona fide* sacred paintings that can be used in the liturgy and other official religious rituals. These paintings possess divine power and contribute to the salvation of the adherents of the faith.

Images, which are seen as adhering to dogma by a cleric, receive his blessing. When a painting of a saint is blessed, it is viewed as having mystical powers and would enable people to nurture their relationship with the saints of the Church.³⁶ Images that do not receive the blessing of a priest, do not conform to ecclesiastical tradition, are seen as being powerless.³⁷ These rejected images are deemed unacceptable for religious use and do not have the power to gain the divine intercession of a saint.³⁸ The result of the labors of the painter would perhaps be a beautiful picture, but one that is useless in a religious context. These rejected paintings are not allowed into the church interior and if the painting should happen to appear on the walls of the church, it is obliterated and replaced with a painting that does conform to ecclesiastical tradition in the mind of the priest who is in the position of giving it his blessing.³⁹ Through this selection process clerics maintain the theological integrity of the images used by their respective congregations and thereby collectively maintain the theological integrity of the artistic tradition as a whole while conducting their duty of maintaining the theological integrity of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity in their parish.

³⁶ Abuna Garima (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁷ Kes Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁸ Abuna Garima (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Kes Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁹ Kes Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

This differentiation would normally be seen as a dichotomy between artwork that is useful and that which is useless within the religious context. A priest that I spoke to preferred to describe this differentiation using the language of mysticism rather than academic jargon. Instead of using adjectives such as ‘functional’ or ‘useful’, he instead preferred to describe these distinctions in the description of images as either possessing or not possessing *hayl* or “power”.⁴⁰ This belief corresponds to an image’s ability to facilitate a relationship between the viewer and the saint, which will then foster divine intercession.⁴¹ The need to bless a painting, for it to become sacred, by a priest makes the cleric an essential participant in the production of sacred paintings, contrasting with patronage relations that include solely the patron and the painter. While patrons and painters are essential participants in the patronage process, ignoring the pivotal role of the cleric would create an incomplete picture of the patronage of sacred paintings in the context of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the present day. The role of the cleric as a gatekeeper of the tradition of Ethiopian Orthodox painting places him in a position of considerable power. These circumstances position the priest in the role of one who substantially determines how religious imagery should appear.

Another important issue is that it is an individual priest’s discretion that determines the painting’s conformity or deviation from ecclesiastical tradition. The judgment of the cleric is based on his own interpretation of how ecclesiastical tradition is to be rendered in a visual manner. Two additional factors shape this interpretation, which are the current prevailing trends in the visual interpretation of ecclesiastical tradition as well as the personal biases of the individual cleric. The former factor ensures that if a painter creates images that are consistent with current acceptable practice, it is more likely that the paintings that they create will win the approval of the priest. In addition to prevailing practice, personal bias also plays a role in the judgment process. Since this is a factor that can strongly affect whether a painting will

⁴⁰ Kes Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴¹ Kes Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

receive a priest's blessing or not, the personal bias of the cleric is a factor that cannot be ignored. Contributing factors in the personal bias of a cleric can pertain to their knowledge about ecclesiastical tradition, their awareness of prevailing trends in the visual depiction of ecclesiastical tradition and their openness to different visual interpretations of ecclesiastical tradition. All of these factors can generate conflict. One priest may see a painting that was deemed acceptable by another cleric as unacceptable. According to my research, depending on the priest and the circumstances surrounding the judgment process, there have been differing verdicts on particular paintings. The conflict regarding judgment has occurred even when a particular painting had received the blessing of one cleric, but later received the condemnation of another.

As will be described later in this thesis, a cleric's personal bias does not always affect the appearance of the painting itself. Artists' reputations can also determine how a painting is received. A painting created by an artist currently held in high regard by other priests and or bishops may be judged less harshly than a painting that was done by a relatively unknown artist. Because of its inherently subjective nature, the degree that personal bias can affect a cleric's verdict on the correctness of a painting can vary depending on both the individual priest and other circumstances that arise when the cleric judges a particular religious painting.

Despite the possibility that a priest's judgment could be subject to factors that go beyond a correlation between theology and image, steps can be taken by patrons to better ensure that the painting that they commission would receive his blessing. One thing that the patron could do is find a painter who has a reputation for possessing a deep knowledge of theology. If this capable painter also possesses a laudable reputation among the priests, this would further contribute to the success of the commission.

Although patrons can consult friends who have commissioned a sacred painting in the past, people who intend to become patrons can also consult the priests themselves as to whom they should hire as a painter. While the

former source of information can result in the potential patron finding an excellent painter, seeking recommendations from priests is both suggested and encouraged because added knowledge and insight possessed by members of the clergy regarding which painters have already proven themselves in previous commissions. This manner of priestly involvement highlights the role of the cleric during the patronage process as one who is not only involved in the judgment of the commissioned painting. These members of the priesthood can also play a beneficial role in other aspects of the patronage process for the other parties involved in the production of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings, whether they are patrons or the painters themselves.

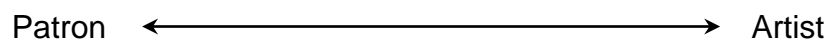
While the involvement of clerics in the patronage process may seem stifling for both the patrons and the painters who are involved, it is the pastoral role of the priest during the patronage process and ultimately their blessing of the painting that ensures that these images are consistent with the dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church based on a cleric's knowledge of theology derived from a monastic education and experience with the use of religious imagery throughout his lifetime. Details concerning the exact time that this practice started and the specific circumstances relating to its commencement are not presently known.⁴² What can be deduced is the importance of this practice in the patronage and production of sacred images. Rather than being on the periphery of this creative tradition compared to the patron and the painter (see figure 2), they are integral to the production and appearance of religious paintings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Because of the particular circumstance surrounding the patronage of sacred paintings, a new model has to be developed in order to illustrate the observed social dynamic that exists within the context of the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox Christian sacred paintings. This new model must incorporate the priest as a pivotal figure in the dynamics of the patronage

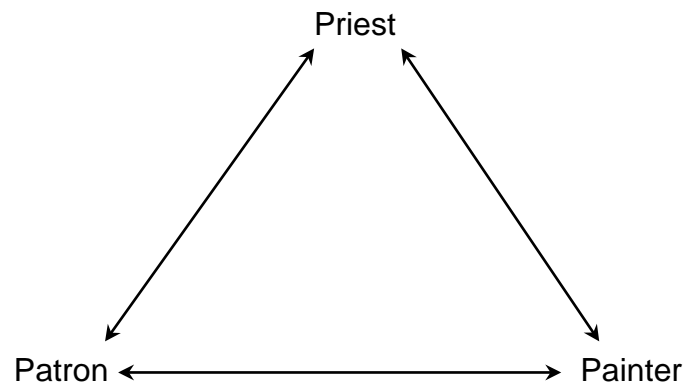
⁴² Surviving Church records before the 19th century are very rare and so are eye witness accounts on the finer points of Ethiopian religious practice so the future chances of knowing the history of this practice is unlikely, but crucial in our understanding about sacred paintings.

process who directly and indirectly affect the appearance of the art that is produced. This is why this new model is made up of three parts including the priest as one of these pivotal participants, in addition to the patron and the painter. The social dynamics of the patronage process is represented by this tripartite model (see figure 4).⁴³

(Fig. 3) A typical *Bi-partite Model* Representing the Typical Picture of the Social Dynamics of Art Patronage.⁴⁴



(Fig. 4) The *Tripartite Model* Representing the Typical Pattern of the Social Dynamics of the Patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox Sacred Paintings Observed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.⁴⁵



The tripartite model, which is illustrated above, involves the necessary inclusion of the priest in the dynamic of the patronage process. The arrows shown on this model illustrate the directions of discourse that occurs. The tripartite model will be described in detail later in chapter three of this thesis.

⁴³ This is the term that will be used throughout this thesis to describe this observed pattern of art patronage.

⁴⁴ Figure drawn by author.

⁴⁵ Figure drawn by author

Argument of the Thesis

The argument of this thesis is that priests act as a monitoring body, which oversees the theological integrity of imagery utilized in religious practice just as they do with all other aspects of Ethiopian Orthodox religious observance. They are the ones who play a significant role in maintaining this venerable religious and artistic tradition, even within the cosmopolitan environment of Ethiopia's capital city. This argument highlights the inherent durability of this tradition due to the internal means of oversight regarding the integrity of the tradition. These priests represent an indispensable part of the patronage process as agents of this oversight of the theological integrity of religious imagery. Like the painters of these sacred images, priests have been endowed with the knowledge of the traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. How these clerics differ from painters is that they represent the last word whether a commissioned image is consistent with the larger context of the dogma of the Church.

The idea behind *pastoral power*, presented by Foucault, is when figures of authority are in a position of responsibility for the oversight of the well-being of the larger community and is described in the two lectures that *Pastoral Power and Political Reason* is comprised of. The first lecture explained the nature of "pastoral power" as it was described by ancient oriental, classical⁴⁶ and Judeo-Christian sources.⁴⁷ The second lecture focused on the role of the 'police', or rather a policing body, in the fulfillment of pastoral responsibility through the monitoring of and intervention into human behavior. This policing body described by Foucault bears a close resemblance to Ethiopian Orthodox priesthood and its relationship to religious imagery and the production of these works of art. As was the case with Foucault's previous works, such as *Discipline and Punish*,⁴⁸ the emphasis of these lectures was

⁴⁶ Foucault: 1999, 137.

⁴⁷ Foucault: 1999, 137 & 141-4.

⁴⁸ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979.

the dynamics of power within civil society. I took the concept of a policing body from Foucault's civic context and modified it for use within an ecclesiastical context. In essence, the cleric polices the theological integrity of all religious practice within his parish, including the nature of sacred images used in these religious practices.

The use of the content of these lectures may sound like a reference to the more apocryphal aspects of the *oeuvre* of Foucault, but I chose the *Pastoral Power and Political Reason* lecture series because of its relevance to this study as it concerns the dynamics of power within the patronage process. This was particularly the case when analyzing the role of clerics within this social dynamic. While Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish* looks at the nature and development of western penal systems and civil society, the collection of works and interviews, *Power/Knowledge*⁴⁹ continues on a similar strain of analysis of knowledge and control in civic society. *The Birth of the Clinic*⁵⁰ is an analysis of the social dynamics of a type institution, in this case dealing with illness and treatment.

Although these texts deal with the relationship between knowledge and power, as well as the establishment and maintenance of norms, they are not suitable models to apply to this study in contrast to the theoretical discourse within *Pastoral Power and Political Reason* lectures. The reason for their exclusion is the current inability to adapt these models from their basis in civics, sexuality and social exclusion to the ecclesiastical environment I was researching. Based on this adapted analytical model, involving pastoral power, this study is fortified with empirical evidence of the social dynamic that occurs during the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings in Addis Ababa. Through both textual sources and examples collected through interviews, this thesis will position clerics in their appropriate place, which is

⁴⁹ Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited and translated by Colin Gordon. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980.

⁵⁰ Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. translated by A.M. Sheridan. London: Routledge, 2003.

in the very centre of the patronage process as guardians of the age-old tradition of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings.

The body of academic writing on contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings is sparse compared to treatises on this artistic tradition prior to the eighteenth century, and there is indeed very little specifically written about the patronage of this type of artwork. During the period of time I was writing this thesis, there had been no published literature on the patronage of contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings. This thesis is not intended to dismiss the contribution made by a past emphasis on aesthetic, historical and iconographic aspects of these paintings, but to contribute to a fuller understanding about these works of art produced and used today.

In addition to accumulating information about the patronage process, through the study of the commissioning, production and authorization of sacred paintings, I developed a better understanding about the images themselves. The social dynamics that occur are not only the result of the patronage process. They also take place because of the nature of the images themselves within the overall picture of ecclesiastical tradition and practice. Sacred art by its very nature is laden with both the mystical imagination of a culture and an integral part of the belief system. As an instrument of the mystical imagination, its form and nature are dictated by its function within this matrix of belief. Through a holistic approach toward this topic, which utilized information derived from interviews combined with art historical and theological literature, a fuller knowledge about contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox art, its creation and its place within the larger picture of religious observance is achieved.

Chapter 2: Practical Theory and Applied Method

The conclusions of this study are the result of interpretation of information that I gathered while conducting fieldwork in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 2001 to 2003. Like a court of law, the results of this study are findings based on presented evidence, which available academic literature and interviews with patrons, painters and members of the clergy provided. The integrity of this study can be found in its incorporation of the knowledge of people who are personally involved in the issues covered. For me, the patrons, painters and priests became my teachers and provided instruction on patronage, sacred paintings and religious practice. During this process, my own perceptions about the topic changed as I accumulated new information during the research process.

Although I am the person who instigated this study, which turned it into a body of research that expands the boundaries of understanding about the topic, it was the people whom I interviewed who took centre stage revealing to me a new perspective on Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings and their production. These patrons, painters and clerics who helped me to realize the importance of priests in the patronage process, what function they perform and how they conduct their duties.

Vanity, prestige and rights of possession are all involved in this splitting of the subject from a world of objects. Objective knowledge bestows a semblance of order on one's world, but at a price.⁵¹

It is currently fashionable in academia to assert paradigmatic departure from previous research approaches centered on optimistic aspirations of objectivity. In relation to the comparatively less ambiguous world of mathematical deductions, the sphere of human perception and action can be enigmatic and problematic. It is not easily penetrated by inquiry and understood by analysis. Add to this the typically untidy realities of fieldwork and it would seem that qualitative research on material culture is highly

⁵¹ Jackson, Michael, ed. *Things As They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology*. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1996, 5.

problematic, which it truly is. In contrast to our structuralist predecessors, post-structuralist theory of inquiry and interpretation recognizes the chaotic realities of research muddled with personal bias combined with the erratic availability and capricious personalities of interviewed sources.

The sociologist, Colin Robson, makes a clear differentiation between the relatively controlled environment of a laboratory and the “real world”.⁵²

In the ‘real world’ – or ‘the field’, as the part of the world focused on is often referred to by social researchers (conjuring up visions of intrepid investigators in pith helmets) – that kind of control [found in a laboratory] is often not feasible, even if it were ethically justifiable. Hence, one of the challenges inherent in carrying out investigations in the ‘real world’ lies in seeking to say something sensible about a complex, relatively poorly controlled and generally ‘messy’ situation.⁵³

I am not a person who feels wholly comfortable about adopting labels such as *post-structuralist* or *postmodernist* because such labels do more to provoke misunderstanding rather than mark held epistemological positions. What I am is a researcher who is suspicious of modernist concepts of objectivity and universality that have been defining features of modernism, and also that of structuralism. Instead of seeing myself as a post-structuralist or postmodernist researcher, I prefer to wear the label of an epistemological pragmatist who is aware of the folly of delusions of having access to universal truth while making coherent sense of the information gathered during my inquiries in the field.

What I found to be additionally important to consider when researching about art is the fuller context in which it exists. Accepting such an approach as the integration of contextual information may seem obvious in art historical inquiry, but the challenge comes when determining what kind of contextual information to include in direct support of the central subject matter of the

⁵² Robson, Colin. *Real World Research*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002, 4.

⁵³ Robson: 2002, 4.

study. By their very nature, sacred images are part of a network of relationships that go beyond discussions of formal qualities, as impressive as they are. Sacred art, within its indigenous sphere, should be seen as an integral part of theological beliefs and cultural practices. Consequently, a fuller understanding about a particular type of art is necessary in order to develop a complete understanding of the theological basis upon which these commissioned images have been created. Regarding this particular study, my perspective on Ethiopian Orthodox imagery was colored by my studies while working on my taught Master's degree at SOAS, when I focused on the use of art through the course of the liturgy. A liturgical approach toward understanding Ethiopian Orthodox art, in addition to any other facet of ecclesiology, is how priests typically view this type of material culture. This brings one's understanding about these images at least one step closer to an indigenous view of this type of art. In addition to contributing to a greater level of coherence to the results of the study, this type of understanding is invaluable to the research process itself.

While a theological background offers an insight into ideal picture of common religious belief and practice, it should be combined with sociological research methodologies. These approaches facilitate investigations relating to the actual circumstances that affect both the production and use of art within the context of its specific environment. Gathered sociological information about human behavior, in relation to sacred imagery, such as the blessing of, prostration before or offerings to images, highlights the importance of these images in the lives of people and their role in peoples' perception of theological concepts.

Interdisciplinary Approach toward Sacred Painting

As both the research and the writing process continued, it became apparent that this study was not going to be a straightforward art historical research. It is also an inquiry into the theological reasoning behind the patronage process and how the Church operates in relation to the manner that sacred paintings are produced. As a result of the issues discussed in this study, an

interdisciplinary approach was required and implemented, which incorporated a background in theology and sociological/ethnographical inquiry.

The theological nature of the art I researched drove me towards Ethiopic scripture and liturgy, the writings of E. A. Wallis Budge⁵⁴ and Getachew Haile⁵⁵ as well as Eastern Orthodox theologians such as John Meyendorff,⁵⁶ Vladimir Lossky⁵⁷, Anton Vrame⁵⁸ and Bishop Timothy (Kalistos) Ware.⁵⁹ Despite the focus of the latter four scholars on the Greek and Russian rites rather than the Ethiopic Rite, their theological writings did help to elucidate overarching Orthodox Christian theological concepts, which I found to exist in all three sects. This similarity was particularly the case regarding the theological principles behind icons and the role that apostolic tradition plays in religious doctrine. These subjects further highlighted the role of the cleric and non-textual sources of the ecclesiastical tradition described by scholars of Greek and Russian Orthodox Christianity as well as the teacher of theology at Saint George's Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Addis Ababa, *Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne*.⁶⁰

Further reading about Eastern Orthodox theology from non-Ethiopian sources revealed that there was a striking similarity between these various writers and what *Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne* communicated to me about the sources of Ethiopian Orthodox dogma. The Eastern Orthodox scholars as well as *Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne* persistently emphasized that scripture played only a part in the larger picture of Church tradition and that the Church relied on priests to play a crucial role as

⁵⁴ Budge, E. A. Wallis. *The Book of Saints of the Ethiopian Church*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1976.; Budge, E. A. Wallis. *George of Lydda*. London: Luzac and Company, 1930.

⁵⁵ Haile, Getachew. "Ethiopic Literature." in *African Zion, the sacred art of Ethiopia*, edited by R. Grierson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

⁵⁶ Meyendorff, John. *Living Tradition* Crestwood. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978.

⁵⁷ Lossky, Vladimir. *The Image of the Likeness of God*. Crestwood, New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974; Lossky, Vladimir. "Tradition and Traditions." in *The Meaning of Icons*. edited by Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky. Crestwood, New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999; Lossky, Vladimir. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Cambridge: James Clark and Company, Ltd., 1991.

⁵⁸ Vrame, Anton C. *The Educating Icon, Teaching Wisdom and Holiness on the Orthodox Way*. Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999.

⁵⁹ Ware, Timothy (Kalistos). *The Orthodox Faith*. London, Penguin Books, Ltd., 1993.

⁶⁰ *Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne* (teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

resources of non-written elements of ecclesiastical tradition as well as authorized interpreters of scripture.⁶¹ Bishop Kalistos Ware made me realize the interdependence of written and unwritten sources and how they form the unified *Tradition* of the Orthodox Church, which is the manifest continuity of the faith that is carried by and communicated through its bishops and priests.⁶²

Despite the fact that scholars like Lossky and Bishop Kalistos Ware come from a different sect of Orthodox Christianity than *Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne*, their descriptions of the sources of dogma are consistent with each other. At this level, it seemed that certain theological aspects of both of these sects that could be seen as simply an Orthodox approach to Christianity resulting in striking similarities in their fundamental aspects of theological belief. This is particularly the case regarding the use of imagery in iconic/mystagogic catechesis. Care though had to be practiced, despite the similarities that do exist between the various Byzantine-inspired and Ethiopic rites, the former can only be used as a means of better understanding the other, but cannot serve as a substitute source for the theological doctrine and practices of the latter.

The second interdisciplinary aspect of this study is its sociological/ethnographical basis. My past interdisciplinary study and working with exhibitions of West African art as well as research in local and oral history were significant catalysts that inspired me to undertake this study in a manner that emphasized cultural context and the use of the interview as a primary source of information. This adopted approach directed my focus onto human dynamics of art patronage and theology as much as it did on the paintings themselves. Being that the pivotal source of information about human perceptions regarding their cultural environment came from the people themselves, I adopted sociological methods of inquiry. The applied research methods that were used in this study were influenced by the

⁶¹ Lossky: 1991, 11.

⁶² Ware: 1993, 197.

qualitative Constructivist Paradigm of Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln⁶³ and Thomas A. Schwandt,⁶⁴ which are described in the following section on phenomenological hermeneutics.

I am not unique in this regard as a significant number of scholars of West African art and culture, such as Martha Anderson's *Wild Spirits, Strong Medicine*,⁶⁵ which combines art analysis with anthropological inquiry. Despite Jacques Mercier's focus on Ethiopian art rather than West African art, I see him as being a part of a similar approach toward art history in his works *Ethiopian Magic Scrolls* and *Art that Heals*. These academics place a heavy emphasis on the religious context associated with works of art in order to provide a deeper understanding of these pieces.

A sociological inquiry into the patronage of contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings is not only an analysis of the social dynamics of the act of patronage. It is instrumental in building a profound understanding about the art itself. In this way, sociology becomes fully integrated into the discipline of art historical inquiry resulting in an approach that facilitates contextualization of art historical phenomena. This inquiry did not become a quantitative study involving the use of questionnaires and statistics. Instead, it was conducted in a qualitative manner that placed an emphasis not on numeric ratios, but on the rich detail I was able to gather from my interviewees regarding their perceptions about sacred paintings and the patronage process.

Phenomenological Hermeneutics and Understanding Patronage

While this study was indeed largely empirical in nature, its theoretical underpinnings critically assess the integrity of the induction, accumulation and interpretation of information. Eschewing the overtly esoteric elements of

⁶³ Guba, Egon G. and Yvonna S. Lincoln. "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research." in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. London: Sage Publication, 1998.

⁶⁴ Schwandt, Thomas A. "Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human Inquiry." in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, edited by N. K. Denzin and L. S. Lincoln. London: Sage Publications, Inc., 1998.

⁶⁵ Anderson, Martha. *Wild Spirits, Strong Medicine: African art and the Wilderness*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989.

deconstructivism made popular during the 1980's, I embraced epistemological theories, based on phenomenological hermeneutics, that could be utilized in a qualitative sociological study. As cumbersome as the name for this epistemological approach is, I found its implementation to be intuitive, while at the same time self-analytical.

Perception is consummated when one addresses oneself to something as something and addresses it as such. This amounts to interpretation in the broadest sense; and on the basis of such interpretation, perception becomes an act of making determinate. What is thus perceived and made determinate can be expressed in propositions, and can be retained and preserved as has what been asserted. This perceptive retention of an assertion about something is itself a way of Being-in-the-world; it is not to be interpreted as a 'procedure' by which a subject provides itself with representations of something which remain stored up 'inside' as having been thus appropriated, and with regard to which the question of how they 'agree' with actuality can occasionally arise.⁶⁶

While the act of ontologically *Being-in-the-world* epistemologically 'within-the-world' presented by Heidegger can be considered a sub-conscious act,⁶⁷ it is a self-conscious and critical use of inherent ontological and epistemological faculties that are valuable in the process of acquiring and interpreting information. Perception can be effectively and responsibly used toward a reflexive *understanding* of a phenomenon through observation and inquiry. Heideggarian epistemology and phenomenological hermeneutics is in stark contrast to positivism and other related research paradigms that centered on the idea that the objective of research was to discover the 'truth' about a particular phenomenon unveiled through objective inquiry.⁶⁸

My use of *phenomenology* is a means of being self-conscious about my own biases and differentiating between my own misconceptions from what I

⁶⁶ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper Collins, 1962., 89.

⁶⁷ Heidegger: 1962., 89.

⁶⁸ Schwandt: 1998., 236.

experienced while conducting research. It is the *horizon* described by Hans-Georg Gadamer⁶⁹ that best describe a holistic picture of the state of the thinking consciousness and accumulated knowledge. Instead of one's eyes being able to determine *truth*, they are seen as only perceiving the world through a personal and subjective lens.⁷⁰

Gianni Vattimo presents a criticism of hermeneutics in that "...there are no facts, but only interpretations..."⁷¹ that result in a kind of epistemological nihilistic chaos. While I agree with Vattimo regarding the possible hazards of a purely subjective approach towards the production and induction of knowledge, an equal amount of folly can be found in being uncritical of the concept of detached objectivity. Although Vattimo focuses on the hermeneutic of the individual, consideration of the collective hermeneutic of academia is necessary. In the course of this collective dialogue, through the spotting of consistency in findings we may achieve some level of academic integrity.

As a researcher, I have inherited what could be called the eternal hermeneutic spiral from scholars, such as Mercier, Silverman and Chojnacki, who have shaped my initial perspective about Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings and their production. I view the fruit of my own research as something that is incorporated into combined perception in order to form interpretations that validate, nullify, and build upon previously made interpretations. Hopefully, others will further the hermeneutic cycle perpetuated by my own efforts that would continue to snowball into a richer body of knowledge with an ever-increasing level of validity and integrity. This thesis takes the conclusions about Ethiopian Orthodox sacred painting and its production made by these previously mentioned scholars further by the incorporation of new knowledge and new conclusions based on a combination of their work and the data that I have collected during my own

⁶⁹ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. London: Continuum, 2004, 301.

⁷⁰ Gadamer: 2004, 301.

⁷¹ Vattimo, Gianni. *Beyond Interpretation*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997, 2.

fieldwork, combined with my particular direction of inquiry and interpretation. This continuity of the collective hermeneutic argues against the epistemological and methodological doomsday scenarios, such as Vattimo's nihilism. While total objectivity is inherently unattainable due to the subjective nature of human perception, perpetual and collective development and verification of interpretations counter the negative aspects of purely subjective interpretations about researched phenomenon.

Likewise, the knowledge that I present in this study is the product of the observation of phenomenon as it is perceived by others collected through interviews and interpretation. I went through a continuous cyclical process of induction and analysis of information about Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings and their production that continued until my findings were displaying signs consistency with coherent patterns beginning to appear resulting in informational integrity forming in the results of my research. While the foundation of my study consists of information from informants, it is a combination of the type of informants and serendipity of the content of our dialogues, as well as the current development of my own understanding about the subject, which plays a role in the conclusions of this study. The resulting approach is a pragmatic middle ground between biased subjectivity and uncritical objectivity, both of which are problematic, by being based on gathered evidence tempered by a critical self-consciousness of the limitations posed by the circumstances of the study as well as the state of my own knowledge and bias. As is standard in the phenomenological epistemological approach, the critical aspect of this study revolves around the situated-ness of the perception of the perceiver and a critical outlook regarding how the perceiver understands his environment.

My initially limited knowledge of the patronage process caused me to see it from a particular perspective different from that of the patrons, painters and priests I interviewed. The importance of a priest's intervention in the patronage process, in order to ensure the theological integrity of the work, was obvious to the Ethiopian interviewees I spoke to, but was not altogether obvious to me early on in my research. Over time, my mental picture of the

patronage process changed and I began to see the role of priests in the oversight of religious art in a new light.

Throughout the research process, I maintained a critical view regarding the gathered evidence collected from interviewees as well as my interpretation and understanding about the social dynamic that I was researching. This resulted in follow-up interviews combined with constant comparisons between the bits of information received from these interviewed subjects. The trap that I did not want to fall into was an unchecked faith in my own preconceptions about the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred art and the role of the different parties involved in this process.

This phenomenologically derived information served as the building blocks of my hermeneutic understanding that constructed an organically developing picture of art patronage. Sometimes the process of incorporating new knowledge into my pre-existing world-view was easy and merged well with my preconceived notions about the patronage process. There are also times when new knowledge does not rest easy upon these preconceived notions. This conflict or *hermeneutic challenge* provided me with an opportunity to reassess my picture of the patronage process at that time and encouraged me to delve further for information that would bring my mental picture closer to that of my sources.

The most monumental hermeneutic challenge was my revelation concerning the important role played by priests in the patronage process. On the basis of the findings of Jaques Mercier, I initially saw them, within the parameters of this study, as patrons or were initially seen by me as personages who were obliged to give images their blessing in order to purify them. This originally held, and eventually dispelled, perception placed the responsibility for the appearance of sacred images solely in the hands of the painter within a scenario of self-regulation. During my research I realized that priests were indeed pivotal players in the production of images, particularly after speaking

with *Abuna Garima*⁷² and *Aleka Abba Haregweyan*.⁷³ They performed the role of overseers of the theological integrity of the liturgical, devotional and votive art of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This hermeneutic challenge, contrary to being a stumbling block to the progress of my research, propelled my inquiry in a new direction toward an *emic* understanding that works within the logic of a specific cultural group within a certain set of circumstances. I was thus able to avoid imposing my own *etic* logic based on non-indigenous sources and my own preconceptions.⁷⁴

Informants and the Interview Process

When I was amassing names of informants, my intention was to acquire information from as many sources as possible. Due to realities faced during fieldwork, there were some missed opportunities regarding comprehensive interviews with some painters, such as Mengistu Cherenet and Afewerk Tekle. This is particularly regrettable because these two artists represent two quite different approaches toward the maintaining of the artistic tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Mengistu Cherenet represents an artist whose style is a product of the evolution of style that can be seen as part of a larger continuum of transformation. In contrast to this, stylistically, the London educated Afewerk Tekle adopted an unapologetically modernist approach toward the depiction of saints and religious narratives that is influenced by such artists as Pablo Picasso and other European modernists. These omissions were unfortunate, but not detrimental to the project. I have no doubt though that their contributions to the study could have added color and depth to the content of this thesis, even if their input could have not changed my conclusions regarding the role of the priest in the patronage process. The nature and breadth of the informants who I did manage to interview in addition to the hermeneutic verification of information, enhanced the data

⁷² *Abuna Garima* (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁷³ *Aleka Abba Haregweyan* (monk and administrator, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁷⁴ Pike, Kenneth L. "Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behavior." in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, edited by Russell T. McCutcheon. London: Cassell, 1999, 28.

gathered resulting in sufficient external validity in light of what occurred in actual practice in Addis Ababa at the time that this study was conducted.

Although the conclusions of this study can only realistically represent the recent past, the resulting findings, such as the blessing of these icons found in present practice, represents ritual that has been recorded by western scholars as long ago as the seventeenth century.⁷⁵ This evidence regarding the venerability of this tradition is in contrast to Mercier's findings that suggest that the blessing of religious images is a ritual designed to deal with a more recent crisis concerning the sacredness of religious imagery. The correlation between the results of this study with findings that pre-date this study by three centuries further contributes to the external validity of this study, and therefore its academic usefulness to future researchers.

Fieldwork consisted of interviewing patrons, painters and priests who were at the beginning of their careers as well as those whose work spanned several decades of the twentieth century. Of course the ideal circumstance is always to interview as broad a cross section of each group utilized for this study, but this objective was difficult to accomplish. The group of informants, whom I was able to interview were included largely as the result of a combination of serendipity, availability and their willingness to be interviewed at that time. This difficulty was more apparent when I was conducting fieldwork during Lent and Easter. Many priests were either away to other portions of Ethiopia at this time or were very busy carrying out their liturgical duties. Even if I could schedule one interview with a priest, it was uncertain whether I would be able to conduct a follow-up interview to confirm previously gathered information or to glean additional data.

Even though I knew enough Amharic to take care of essential needs, my ability was far from adequate to handle sophisticated linguistics associated with art and theology. Consequently, I had to resort to the services of a translator, which was not a decision that I took lightly. Not just anyone with a

⁷⁵ La Grand, M. *Relation historique d'Abissinie du* R.P. Jerome Lobo. Paris: 1728.

mastery of both English and Amharic would do. Familiarity with the subject being studied was beneficial. In my case, I needed someone who was knowledgeable about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The interpreter had to appear professional and comport himself in a particular manner that would not offend or alienate interviewees. I found that no matter how politely I behaved or conservative I appeared if a priest felt that my interpreter was unsavory, the interview process was undermined.

As fussy as the account above may sound, I would have not been able to accomplish what I did if it were not for these qualities in the interpreter who assisted me. After using a couple of unsatisfactory interpreters, I serendipitously found the schoolteacher Yonas Beyene. In addition to his mastery of English and gentlemanly bearing, his studies included research on ecclesiastical administration. These proved to be beneficial to the progress of this study. Thus, we were able to make clerics and others whom we interviewed feel comfortable enough to express their knowledge and views freely.

Yonas Beyene's abilities went beyond the narrow confines of the role of a translator. Before the interview took place, we would discuss the objective of the study and the goals of the imminent interview. I wrote out questions before the interview to serve both as a means of starting the dialogue as well as a guide for the structure of the interview. With Yonas, not only would I review with him the questions, I would also explain the reason for this direction of inquiry within the overall scheme of the research process.

As a result, instead of Yonas serving as a subordinate during the interview, I informed him of the inner workings of my research strategy, which empowered him to be able to make critical decisions in the manner in which he phrased my questions to the interviewee. He also alerted me to information relayed by the informant that went beyond the question presented to them. As a result, the list of questions was not always followed. During the course of the interview the informant would often present new and invaluable information. These new directions, that my interpreter detected

and I pursued revealed information that went beyond academic literature or gathered from the field up to that point. This new information contributed greatly to both the unique perspective of this study and the truly contemporary nature of its content.

During the interview process, Yonas Beyene and I took notes. While he translated what the informant was saying, I noted that information down, Yonas Beyene also noted down statements and phrases that would require further explanation after the interview, which simplified his translation enough to allow me to direct the interview process. After the interview, Yonas Beyene provided me with full explanations of the subtle language of the informant in response to questions, which enabled me to gain a richer picture of the information provided by the informant. I added this additional information to the field notes I took during the actual interview.



View of Addis Ababa from Entoto to the north of the city. (fig. 5)⁷⁶

Environment of the Study

As opposed to structuralist anthropological approaches utilized during the last century, this study does not seek to establish conclusions that suggest universal patterns of human behavior applied over large geographical regions and enormous spans of time. In order to achieve a greater level of detail and

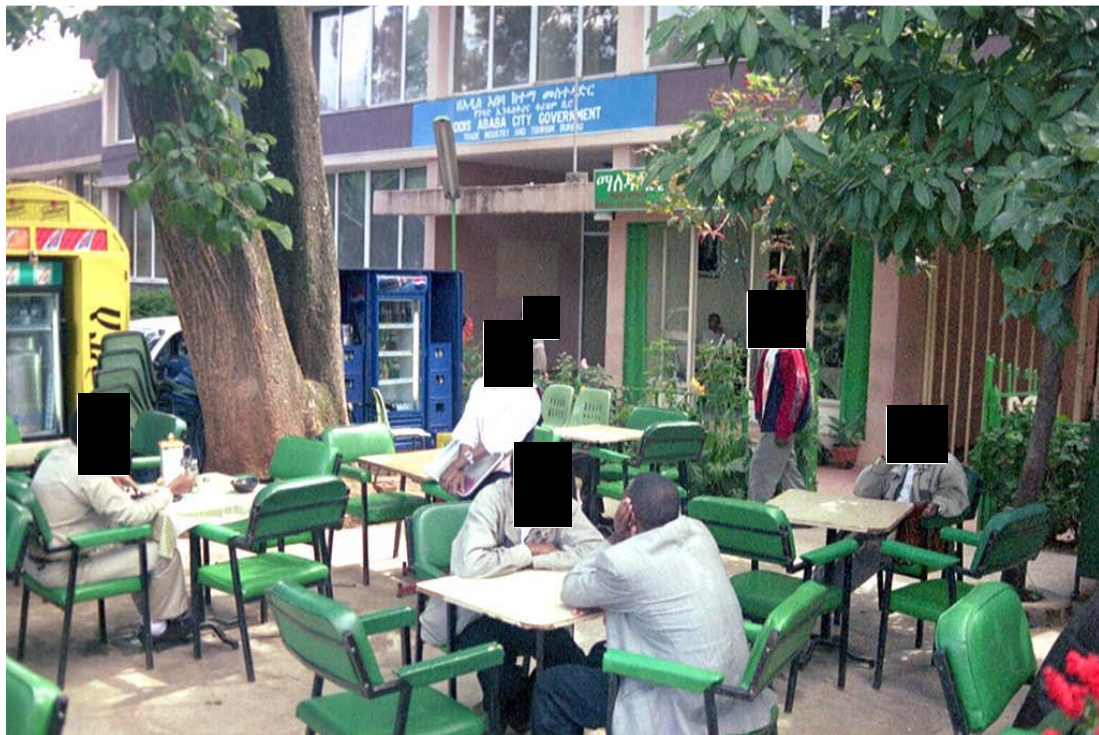
⁷⁶ Mark Horrell Copyright © 2002-2005, Online www.markhorrell.com. (June 2, 2011)

validity, the parameters of this study are limited to a particular cultural phenomenon that occurs within a narrow temporal and spatial environment. Focusing on one specific cultural group within this point in time and space aided in achieving a greater degree of depth about this cultural phenomenon.



Street scenes of Bolé Road. Photograph by author (figs. 6 & 7)

Another reason why this study is limited to the city limits of Addis Ababa is the unique nature of the city itself within the larger scope of Ethiopia as a whole. While Ethiopia does have other cities and large towns such as Aksum, Gondar, Bahar Dar, Lalibela and Harar, these municipal entities are different from Addis Ababa. Founded in 1887 by Menelik II, emperor of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa has grown and developed exponentially. Massive building campaigns have had a significant effect on the development of this city. Addis Ababa was the first Ethiopian city to have electricity, a postal system, telephones and an airport. To this day, Bolé Airport at the southern end of the city is the only international airport in the country. All of these factors contribute to the role of Addis Ababa as Ethiopia's portal to the rest of the world.



Café in *Ammist Kilo*. Photograph by author (fig. 8)

The Habesha

As with any study of an artistic tradition, there is always a cultural source from which this artwork springs. Particularly due to Ethiopia's imperialist and expansionist past during the late nineteenth century under Emperor Menelik II, has made it a country that is populated by a great variety of different

peoples who have their own artistic traditions. The cultural source of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred painting is a cultural group who refer to themselves as the *Habesha*. While the *Habesha* is only one cultural group among many in the ethnic tapestry of Ethiopia, this particular group has made an enormous impact on the cultural landscape.

According to the Ethiopian scholar Tadesse Tammerat, this dominant group that is part of the “*Habesha* cultural synthesis”⁷⁷ is like a torch lit by the Tigrean peoples in what is now the far northern corner of Ethiopia by King Ezana of Aksum in the fourth century C.E. when he declared that Christianity would be the official faith of the kingdom. With the fall of the Aksumite Kingdom, the Agaw peoples from present day Lasta and Lalibela carried the cultural practices of the Tigreans of the Aksumite kingdom, including the Christian faith from 1137 to 1270.⁷⁸ Beginning in the final years of the thirteenth century, the Amharan population from the centre of the modern state of Ethiopia assumed the Aksumite legacy and serve as the adherents and protectors of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith.⁷⁹ Due to this long line of a certain level of cultural continuity between these three ethnic groups, present day Ethiopian Orthodox Tigreans, Agaw and Amharans consider both themselves and all things associated with this overarching culture as *Habesha*.

In his writings on *Habesha* culture, including *Wax and Gold* and *Greater Ethiopia*, the American scholar Donald Levine used the term *Amharan-Tigrean* to describe this dominant culture of the Ethiopian highlands. “The *Amhara-Tigrean* group is the historical bearer of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and of the Solomonid monarchy.”⁸⁰ Although not technically wrong in any way since the Amharans and the Tigreans have both been pivotal in the development of this cultural tradition, the term does not

⁷⁷ Tamerat, Tadesse. “Church and State in Ethiopia, The Early Centuries.” in *African Zion, the sacred art of Ethiopia*. edited by R. Grierson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 36.

⁷⁸ Tamrat: 1993, 35; Heldman, Marilyn. “The Zagwe Dynasty: 1137-1270.” in *African Zion, the sacred art of Ethiopia*, edited by R. Grierson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, 133.

⁷⁹ Tamrat: 1993, 36.

⁸⁰ Levine, Donald. *Greater Ethiopia, The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974, 37.

completely describe the historical and cultural continuity of *Habesha* culture. Levine statements about the Agaw in *Wax and Gold* underscore this idea by stating that the Agaw peoples are made up of subgroups that included the Jews of Ethiopia or *Beta Israel*⁸¹ and others who have maintained indigenous religious practices. In contrast to the previously mentioned subgroups of the Agaw peoples, there are those who “follow a style of life that closely resembles that of their Amhara-Tigrean neighbors”.⁸² Because of the Agaw’s adoption of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith, language and overall lifestyle underscored by a tradition tied to the Orthodox Church and the Solomonic monarchy of the Amharans and Tigreans, it is more constructive to use a more overarching term that includes all three cultural groups.

In his book *Greater Ethiopia*, Levine continues to recognize the difficulty in the use of the “supraethnic term *Habesha*”. He notes that in common Amharan and Tigrean usage, the term *Habesha* roughly means “native Ethiopian”, which could be interpreted as overly encompassing and general. Another meaning of Levine’s term refers to the traditional culture of the Amharan and Tigrean people, which includes adherence to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, and loyalty to imperial dynastic rule no matter what culture adopts this manner of life and cultural identity.⁸³

This latter definition is not dissimilar to that of Taddesse Tammerat and is the most useful in the context of this study that is more concerned with a way of life and religious belief system that goes beyond ethnic affiliation. A diverse array of ethnic groups, cultures and religious systems that coexist in Addis Ababa, but it is the *Habesha*, regardless of their ethnic origins, who are unified by their adherence to the Ethiopian Orthodox faith and would find themselves sharing space within the same church precinct when observing religious rituals. Indeed, since the demise of the Ethiopian imperial dynasties, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has remained a central traditional institution

⁸¹ Translated as “House of Israel” and consists of indigenous Ethiopians who identify themselves as Jewish. This group is also known as the *Felasha*, but this is a pejorative term that means “foreigner”.

⁸² Levine: 1974, 37.

⁸³ Levine: 1974, 118.

and unifying entity for the *Habesha*. This sense of *Habesha* identity bound up with the institution of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is most clearly seen within the demographically diverse environs of Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa.

This thesis studies the *Habesha* and follows the terminology provided by both Taddesse Tammerat and Donald Levine. Despite its inclusion of multiple ethnic groups, the *Habesha* is unified by the legacy of the Aksumite kingdom, mainstream imperial Ethiopian cultural norms and adherence to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Ethiopian Orthodox Sacred Painting Then and Now

The sacred paintings that exist today are part of a centuries old tradition whose origin is enigmatic, but whose history is dynamic. This section provides a brief overview of the history of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings in order to provide a general perspective on this artistic tradition. With evidence of its practice going back to the thirteenth century, the Ethiopian Orthodox painting tradition is the product of indigenous visual tradition, creative innovation and foreign introductions. Even imagery that exhibits signs of being significantly influenced by foreign models cannot completely be written off as mere indigenous facsimiles of introduced prototypes. The tradition of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred painting is a by-product of the religious culture in which it was made. Paintings, blessed by an Ethiopian Orthodox priest, have been integrated into *Habesha* culture on their own terms as a society with a strong sense of self-determination.

One concept that is voiced by artists and clerics is the ideal represented by the *tintawi* or old style of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings (see figure 9). This concept of the *tintawi* ideal exists in the imagination of many patrons, painters and priest when analyzing the paintings that are produced today or compared to the mass-produced posters depicting saints that enjoy brisk sales in market stalls. The *tintawi* style most often referred to dates back to

the end of the seventeenth century. It spread quickly across the Ethiopian highlands during the eighteenth century.⁸⁴ Within western academic circles, this style has been given the label of the *Second Gondarine* period or style. According to the art historian Stanislaw Chojnacki, this style would become the "...most durable style in Ethiopian painting."⁸⁵

While previous styles of Ethiopian Orthodox painting were linear and lacked any suggestion of *chiaroscuro*, this style appears softer with shading that defined the rounded forms of the faces and the numerous folds in the garments of the figures. Despite the extensive use of shading in the depiction of figures in Second Gondarine period paintings, they maintain a stylized otherworldly monumentality that bears a closer resemblance to the iconic appearance of the artistic traditions associated with other branches of Orthodox Christianity. In the minds of many *Habesha* individuals, this lack of naturalistic detail enhances rather than detracts from the visual experience. This particular manner of portraying religious themes is often described as *spiritual beauty*,⁸⁶ in contrast to naturalism,⁸⁷ that feeds the mystical mind in the viewer. This sense of spiritual beauty is further enhanced by the use of pattern and ornamentation in the fabrics in the painting. In this example, the radiant halos reveal the mystical quality of these paintings seen on the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. It is unusual that Saint George does not have a halo in this painting. Devoid of landscape, the painting is a visual representation of gravity and a definite light source, the content of this painting seems not to exist within the earthly realm, but instead floats in a divine sphere of existence. The vivid colors and exaggerated features, such as fingers and eyes, further contribute to the mystical and surreal nature of the painting. Images, such as this one are typical of the Ethiopian Orthodox sacred painting in the minds of patrons, painters, priest and even art

⁸⁴ Chojnacki, Stanislaw. "The Iconography of Saint George in Ethiopia, part II." in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, VOL. XI, No. 1, January 1973, edited by Stanislaw Chojnacki and Richard Pankhurst. Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1973, 82.

⁸⁵ Chojnacki: 1973, 82.

⁸⁶ In conversation with priests, the term that they use is *manfasawi* or 'something that is spiritual in nature'.

⁸⁷ In the context of discussions about the visual qualities of religious imagery naturalism is described as *segawi* or 'fleshy'.

historians. While many artists create images that do not strictly imitate this particular style, they have remained influential in Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings still produced today.



Manuscript painting of Saint George and the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child accompanied by Patron from the 18th century. Collection of Sam Fogg. Photograph by Sam Fogg (fig. 9)

According to Chojnacki, while the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries marked a “zenith” in the tradition of Ethiopian Orthodox painting,⁸⁸ the following centuries would see increased western influence made apparent by increased naturalism in the prevailing style.⁸⁹ Chojnacki further stated that the styles of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries are “degenerate” versions of the legacy of the Second Gondarine period style.⁹⁰ While this may be the view of some academics this conclusion may be a little

⁸⁸ Chojnacki, Stanislaw. *Ethiopian Icons, Catalogue of the Collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa University. Milan: Skira Editore, 2000, 40.

⁸⁹ Chojnacki, Stanislaw. “Short Introduction to Ethiopian Traditional Painting.” in *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, VOL. II, No. 2, July 1964, edited by Stanislaw Chojnacki, Nigel Hudson and Richard Pankhurst. Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie I University, Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1964, 11.

⁹⁰ Chojnacki, Stanislaw: 1964, 11.

unkind and does not take into consideration that the changes that have taken place are the product of a combination of the tastes of indigenous patrons, the creative inclination of indigenous painters and the critique of indigenous priests.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw both the continuation of the Second Gondarine style and a transformation in the prevailing visual tradition. With the greater influx of European expatriate artists and art, some versions of the Second Gondarine style became increasingly influenced by the Italian and Spanish Baroque religious imagery or modeled itself on Greek and Russian Orthodox images. With the founding of Addis Ababa as the new capital in the end of the nineteenth century, the cosmopolitan cultural environment became a melting pot of global artistic movements and indigenous tradition. Artists such as Alle Felleghie Selam and Afewerk Tekle, who were taught to paint in the west, moved away from the Second Gondarine style and incorporated Baroque style combined with the influence of twentieth century modern art. The diversity and dynamism found in the Ethiopian Orthodox paintings produced during the twentieth century have challenged both patrons and priests alike. The dawn of the twenty first century has proven to be no less challenging, but at the same time both the stylistic continuity of the legacy of the Second Gondarine style is maintained by a significant number of artists in Addis Ababa who also contribute their own interpretation of the stylistic status quo of the past two centuries.

Through knowledge and oversight of the city's priests who watch over the products of the creative endeavors of these artists currently working in Addis Ababa that innovation is carefully balanced with theological integrity. Their involvement in the patronage process serves as a countermeasure to this artistic tradition's slide into the state of being mere exotic curiosities for foreign visitors.

Present Day Addis Ababa as a Center of Artistic Activity and Patronage

Since its founding, Addis Ababa has been cosmopolitan and subject to enormous progress in modernization compared to the rest of the country. At the same time, this tectonic degree of transformation has been tempered by the continuity of traditional Ethiopian culture and particularly the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In this unique environment the centuries old tradition of commissioning and creating of Ethiopian Orthodox religious paintings for use by either churches or individuals survives. Since Addis Ababa has been Ethiopia's centre of governance, diplomatic relations and business for more than one hundred years, this city has been fertile ground for art patronage.

Compared to other cities and settlements in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa has had a broader variety and greater number of patrons. Because of this larger pool of potential commissions, artists from other cities and settlements have moved to Addis Ababa seeking a greater level of prosperity through commissions from the great number of churches, foreigners and nobles. This point was highlighted in Raymond Silverman's research that involved the interviewing of *Kes Adamu Tesfaw*. When asked why he moved to Addis Ababa, *Kes Adamu* said:

I came here to strengthen this profession, to promote my work. There is a better supply of materials, the demand for the product is high and you can also become well known here.⁹¹

This quote from *Kes Adamu Tesfaw* explains the motivation of artists from the other provinces to go to Addis Ababa. In the minds of many of these painters, this city represents a place of opportunity where both the building of skills and the pursuit of prosperity would take place. This was particularly true in regards to the growing tourist market in Addis Ababa that was full of people seeking paintings with religious and secular themes. Although Henry Salt is attributed for having been one of the earliest Europeans to purchase

⁹¹ Silverman: 1999 [quoting *Kes Adamu Tesfaw*], 135-6.

Ethiopian paintings in 1809,⁹² the twentieth century that witnessed the greatest amount of growth in the purchasing of Ethiopian paintings by foreigners.⁹³ During the early years of the tourist trade in Addis Ababa, according to Silverman, European traders including Balambaras Giyorgis from Greece and Djougashvilli from Georgia led to the early development of the production and marketing of 'traditional' Ethiopian art for foreigners.⁹⁴ Both the workshop of Djougashvilli and the *Ethiopian Tourist Trading Corporation*,⁹⁵ in addition to countless artists would serve to feed the growing appetite of the tourist market that grew exponentially during the reign of the Emperor Haile Selassie.⁹⁶ The twentieth century also witnessed the founding of the first art schools, such as the School of Fine Art and Design founded by Ale Felleghie Selam in 1958, which continues to serve as a center of art instruction for both budding novices and experienced painters.

After the installation of the communist regime, there ceased to be either imperial or noble patronage. During the time of the *Derg*,⁹⁷ crisis faced the hierarchy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Some high-ranking members of the clergy were "retired", executed or forced into exile. The exception to this was puppet church leaders who were installed by the new revolutionary government.⁹⁸ This does not necessarily mean though that the communist government fully undermined the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Church continued under a government appointed patriarch and people continued to attend the liturgy⁹⁹. Despite the endurance of the Church during this time, it was a difficult period for painters of religious art. This was not as much due to oppression from the government, but mostly due to the disappearance of the

⁹² Silverman: 1999, 171.

⁹³ Chernetsov, Sevir. "Ethiopian Traditional Painting." in *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective*, edited by K. Fukui, E. Kurimoto and M. Shigeta. Kyoto: Shokado Book Sellers, 1997, 7.

⁹⁴ Silverman: 1999, 172.

⁹⁵ Silverman: 1999, 173.

⁹⁶ Silverman: 1999, 172.

⁹⁷ This was the commonly used name for the communist government of Ethiopia that was in power from 1974 to 1991.

⁹⁸ Eide: 2000, 33 & 166-7.

⁹⁹ Eide: 2000, 168.

relatively lucrative tourist trade that supplemented the incomes of the painters who also created paintings for religious purposes.¹⁰⁰

Since the fall of the Derg in 1991, tourists have slowly been returning to Ethiopia and once again have begun to purchase the art of the traditional painters of Addis Ababa. Although, after the fall of the communist government, there was a growing demand for devotional images, this renewed need for images of saints was being partially satisfied by an influx of factory-made posters, icons and cards¹⁰¹ used in place of commissioned, hand-painted images made by a traditional Ethiopian painter. This trend of using factory-made images for religious purposes is not new. These mass-produced Western images started to enter Ethiopia in the 16th century¹⁰² and continue to serve some of the religious needs of Ethiopians today.¹⁰³ Despite this influx of mass-produced images, there continues to be a demand for hand-painted images for use in the churches and homes of the faithful.

¹⁰⁰ Eide: 2000, 162.

¹⁰¹ These cards are about the same size as a playing card and typically are an easily portable device for personal devotion. Another type of factory-made card that made a comeback was the Christmas card (Assefa Gebre, interview.).

¹⁰² Eide: 2000, 141.

¹⁰³ Eide: 2000, 177.

Chapter 3: The Living Tradition

Like other Oriental Churches, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is heavily steeped in traditions that date back centuries. To the outsider it has a certain air of timelessness, which some might see as a relic of antiquity. For the faithful, this religious institution is a source of continuity and security that has remained relevant in a world of constant change and anxiety, typified by the urban landscape of Addis Ababa. The venerable traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church can be found in its scripture and religious rituals. Tradition is also present in the art that decorates the interiors of the churches that play such a central role in the spiritual life of the faithful. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, like other Orthodox Churches, while some superficial changes may emerge over time, the theological underpinnings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church faith remain the same. This stable foundation, which this theological continuity is built upon, is its written and unwritten aspects of ecclesiastical tradition.¹⁰⁴

The term ecclesiastical tradition represents the summation of all sources of theological dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith. While in the larger sphere of Christian theology, scholars refer simply to the term 'tradition', but I prefer to use 'ecclesiastical tradition' in order to clearly differentiate between religious and secular tradition. *Ecclesiastical tradition* or otherwise simply *Tradition* is made up of two aspects which include the written and the unwritten sources.

Not only non-Orthodox but many Orthodox writers have adopted this way of speaking [about Tradition], treating Scripture and Tradition as two different things, two distinct sources of the Christian faith. But in reality there is only one source, since Scripture exists *within* Tradition. To separate and contrast the two is to impoverish the idea of both alike.¹⁰⁵

Through time, clerics have maintained the ecclesiastical tradition within their spheres of influence. The priests have not maintained religious practice in a stagnant fashion to the point it ceases to be relevant to the needs and

¹⁰⁴ In Amharic, the term that is used is *bahil*, which means tradition or custom.

¹⁰⁵ Ware: 1993, 197.

challenges of the present day. The expression of ecclesiastical tradition is in a state of constant flux in order for the Church to maintain its continuing contemporary relevance to form a *living tradition* of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Instead of becoming an anachronism, fortified with written and unwritten fonts of ecclesiastical tradition, clerics practice a type of “creative fidelity”¹⁰⁶ in order to maintain a constant state of contemporary relevance in a genuinely orthodox fashion. Like the texts and liturgy, which are the legacy of this religious tradition, the formal qualities and content of these paintings is based on the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The manner in which saints and religious narratives are depicted is not arbitrary. As is the case with all other aspects of the liturgical life of the Church, these images are an integral part of an overarching system of ecclesiastical dogma and practice that cultivates the religious life of the faithful and provides a coherent picture of divine order.

Despite the seemingly unchanging appearance of these paintings over time, their appearance is in a state of continuous flux. This perpetual transformation in the appearance of sacred imagery may seem out of character for a sect of Christianity whose identity revolves around the preservation of tradition. Some paintings that are being produced, such as the works of a painter who went by the nickname of Debella, display a vibrant animated quality (see figure 10). On formal grounds, it seemed as though Debella broke away from convention. Ecclesiastical tradition however is not purely about the style of the painting. Living tradition relates to the liturgical role of the painting rather than simply the paintings superficial qualities. While people appreciate them as beautiful things, the primary function of these images is to cultivate one’s relationship with the divine.

¹⁰⁶ Ware: 1993, 198.



Kiddus Uriyel by Debella, photograph by author (fig. 10)

Notwithstanding the perceptively unconventional appearance of his paintings, Debella states that his works are appreciated by patrons and receive the blessing of priests¹⁰⁷. Debella's paintings are seen as acceptable because of their adherence to theological doctrine.¹⁰⁸ It must be kept in mind that the blessing of the priest and not the image itself makes a *bona fide* sacred painting. The authority to determine the integrity of a religious painting is not in the hands of either the painter or the patron, but the care-takers of the Church.

This chapter will discuss the theological underpinnings that determine the appearance and content of Ethiopian Orthodox painting used in the liturgical life of the Church. Indeed the style of a painting may look as though it is traditional, nevertheless is lacking intrinsic theological integrity in other ways.

¹⁰⁷ Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with author, April 2003

¹⁰⁸ Both the function of these paintings and the judgment process will be discussed later in this thesis.

According to the beliefs held by priests, a painting's adherence to the content of the body of religious literature and other legitimate sources of tradition determines its theological integrity, not superficial attributes, such as style.¹⁰⁹ The role that tradition plays in imagery is primarily concerned with the message conveyed by the image as well as an image's ability to direct the perception of the viewer towards a spiritual frame of mind.¹¹⁰

Another important element in a sacred painting is recognition.¹¹¹ For example, a person, who wishes to use an image of the Virgin Mary in the process of prayer and other acts of devotion, requires an image that unequivocally depicts the Virgin Mary that cannot be confused with anyone else. An image of the Virgin Mary that does not possess the conventional qualities of that type of image is considered useless by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It does not serve as an icon of that saint. Because the image is not connected to the living tradition, the perceived presence of that saint through the image is inhibited.¹¹²

True tradition is always *living* tradition. It changes while always remaining the same. It changes because it faces different situations, not because the essential content is modified.¹¹³

The living tradition is a culmination of all authorized sources of belief. Rather than being static, it is both contemporary and grounded in continuity based on *literature* and *tradition* or the written and unwritten vehicles of liturgical catechesis. Like the Church itself, these two tributaries feed into the larger

¹⁰⁹ *Memher Abba Tekesta Berhan* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003; *Memher Abba Aēmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Abuna Garima* (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Aleka Abba Haregweyan* (monk and administrator), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Gebez Nahu Sana* (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne* (teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹¹⁰ *Assefa Gebre* (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002; *Deacon Haile Masked*, (deacon, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, August 2000; *Deacon Dereje Debella* (deacon, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, August 2000.

¹¹¹ Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹¹² Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹¹³ Meyendorff: 1978, 8.

stream of living tradition that has undergone development and changes over time in order to adapt to present circumstances. Both of these sources of the living tradition form the basis for the practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and have a noticeable effect on the imagery created, approved and used in the liturgical life of this faith. This section will look at literature and tradition, which have a substantial effect on the production and appearance of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings.

Literary Sources of the Living Tradition

The history of textual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is as old as the sect itself. What exists today is largely the product of the immense theological and intellectual activity that occurred between the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. *Habesha* theologians translated Christian texts from languages, such as Coptic, Syriac and Greek into Ge'ez, the *lingua franca* of the ancient kingdom of Aksum and the tongue of the intellectual elite of the Church. These scholars also began consolidating scripture into the format that roughly exists today.¹¹⁴

The entire body of the textual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is vast and deals with different aspects of the faith including personal devotion and monasticism in addition to the numerous hagiographies and the core body of scripture made up by the Old Testament and New Testament portions of the Bible. Indeed, not all of the textual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is relevant for the creation and judgment of sacred paintings, thus it would be impractical and imprudent to describe them all in this thesis.¹¹⁵ The types of texts that are relevant to sacred imagery are scripture, such as the Gospels, and hagiographies. According to my own experience conducting research on the production of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings, I found that it was hagiographical texts that were referred to

¹¹⁴ Haile: 1993, 48-49.

¹¹⁵ Major figures that have dealt extensively with the Habesha textual tradition are Getachew Haile and E. A. Wallis Budge. See bibliography for titles.

the most, but not exclusively, when speaking about how visual narratives are composed in Ethiopian Orthodox paintings commissioned recently in Addis Ababa.

Ethiopian Orthodox scripture includes canonical and deuterocanonical books. The first set of books make up the *mäs'haḥ kīddus* or the Ethiopic Bible. The Ethiopic Old Testament includes the *Septuagint* and Hebrew Apocrypha. Present research has determined that these texts were derived from Greek prototypes. The actual prototype from which this body of scripture was translated is still a mystery.¹¹⁶ These two types of texts are the portions of the Old Testament that are most commonly used in the creation and judgment of sacred paintings. Examples of narratives from these texts, which are commonly found in the form of sacred paintings, are *The Three Holy Children* and the *Ancient of Days* (see figure 11), both from the *Book of Daniel*. The former narrative is described further in the deuterocanonical and apocryphal text by the same names. While pseudepigrapha, such as the *Book of Enoch*, are also a part of the Ethiopic Old Testament, they are rarely, if at all, directly related to the appearance of contemporary religious imagery.



Ancient of Days by William Blake, 1794 (fig. 11)¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Haile: 1993, 47.

¹¹⁷ Ibiblio, Online, <http://ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/blake/ancient.jpg>. (June 2, 2011)

The Ethiopic New Testament is derived from Greek prototype texts. Like the texts included in the Ethiopic Old Testament, the precise texts that it was translated from are not currently known.¹¹⁸ Examples of narratives for Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings, which are derived from the New Testament, include the *Flight to Egypt* and different portions of the *Passion*. While it is not common to see entire portions of the Book of Revelations depicted in sacred paintings, some elements like the *Twenty-four Elders* are found flanking images of the *Holy Trinity*¹¹⁹ and was included in the decoration of the interior of a church by Mengistu Cherenet, which was commissioned by Anonymous Patron 'A'.¹²⁰ These examples represent only a portion of the larger body of religious imagery based on New Testament sources.

The other category of textual tradition used for Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings is hagiography. These texts are used in the creation and judgement of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings in addition to the veneration of saints. This category can be broken down into two types, the *Sinkessar* and the *Gadlat*. Compared to the relatively venerable canonical texts, these hagiographical sources only reached some semblance of their current form some time between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries in Ethiopia.¹²¹ The *Sinkessar* is a series of books, compiled in sets of two or four, which are further divided up into the thirteen months of the Ethiopic calendar.¹²² The *Sinkessar* currently in use by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, is derived from an Arabic edition that was developed around the sixth century and was introduced into Ethiopia in the twelfth century.¹²³ During this intellectual and theological golden age of the early Solomonic Period beginning in the thirteenth century

¹¹⁸ Haile: 1993, 48.

¹¹⁹ Book of Revelation 4, 4

¹²⁰ Anonymous Patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹²¹ Haile: 1993, 48-9.

¹²² It is based on the thirteen month Julian calendar rather than the twelve-month Gregorian calendar.

¹²³ Budge: 1930, 64.

that it was translated into Ge'ez and entered into regular use in the ecclesiastical life of Ethiopians.¹²⁴

The texts include stories of each of the saints that are commemorated throughout the year. For more important and popular saints such as *Kiddus Mikayel* or the archangel Michael, a saint is commemorated on several occasions. Saint Michael is commemorated on the twelfth day of each month and on each of these days of commemoration, there is a different story about the acts of Saint Michael. On each of the days there are stories about each of the saints that are to be commemorated on that day recited during the course of the liturgy. The way that the *Sinkessar* is used in the liturgical life of the Church is the reading of the stories to the congregation of the life and acts of the saint or saints to whom the day is dedicated. It is during the reading of the passages from the *Sinkessar* that the congregation is given an opportunity to learn about the plethora of different saints who are venerated by the *Habesha*.¹²⁵

Despite the frequent use of the *Sinkessar* in the church, it is not often part of an ordinary individual's personal library. This is the case even for painters and patrons of religious art. This is because firstly the *Sinkessar* is so large and expensive; painters are discouraged from buying it for themselves. Many *Sinkessar* are hand-made volumes that were painstakingly written by hand by a trained calligrapher. While this results in beautiful manuscripts, it also makes this text inaccessible to the majority of people. Fortunately for painters, the need to refer to this text is rare. This is because the information can often be obtained from other hagiographical texts that are much smaller in size and mass-produced. The only time a painter would need to consult the *Sinkessar* is when they had to fulfill a commission involving an obscure saint. In such cases, the painter would consult a priest rather than the text. This type of use of priests as sources of theological information for painters is but one

¹²⁴ Haile: 1993, 48-9.

¹²⁵ Kes Haile Mikayel (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

example of the important role that priests play in the creation of religious imagery as well as the maintenance of its theological integrity.

Another variety of hagiographical texts are the *Gadlat*.¹²⁶ The *Gadlat* are a series of books that provide both descriptions of the lives and attributes of saints.¹²⁷ Unlike the *Sinkessar*, these hagiographies are about individual saints as opposed to being a large compendium of the lives of the saints. These hagiographies are available in many different formats and price ranges including ones that contain information on more than one saint. Manuscript copies exist, most are mass-produced and abridged, which makes them affordable to painters, priests and patrons. Not only are *Gadlat* available in the original Ge'ez, they are also available in modern Ethiopian languages, such as Amharic and Tigrinya, which further contributes to their accessibility to the laity who are not schooled in the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Examples of titles of *Gadlat* that are commonly used are the *Gadla Giyorgis*¹²⁸ and *Gadla Abuna Tekla Haymanot*.¹²⁹ Another group of *Gadlat* that are still in use are the *Te'amire Mariyam* and the *Te'amire Yesus*. The word *Te'amire* means 'miracles' that describe the history, acts and miracles of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ respectively. Although they are mentioned in the Gospels, these texts provide a more in-depth history, not found in the New Testament.

In addition to the hagiographic texts, there are devotional texts that take the form of religious poetry dedicated to the saints. One of these types of devotional texts is the *Dersanat*, which are devotional prayers dedicated to angels. These texts have names like *Dersana Mikayel* and *Dersana Gabriel* dedicated to the archangels Michael and Gabriel respectively. Although these texts are used in the act of personal devotion to the various angels, embedded in their content is information about the acts of the angels and the

¹²⁶ The *-at* is in reference to the plural form of the word. For example, *Gadlat* is plural for *Gadl*.

¹²⁷ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹²⁸ This can be translated as 'The Acts of Saint George'.

¹²⁹ This can be translated as 'The Acts of Saint Tekla Haymanot'.

mercy they have shown humanity. Like the *Gadlat*, the *Dersanat* are available in inexpensive and vernacular formats, which make these texts not only accessible to the ecclesiastical intellectual elite, but also the laity.

Other types of devotional scripture that helps people understand more about the saints are the *Malkat*. These are devotional poems take the form of descriptions of the different physical parts of the saints from head to toe. The parts of a saint's body become referential signifiers of religious narratives and concepts for which a saint represents. When looking at an image of a saint, it is easy to focus on different portions of a saint's anatomy and relate them to portions of the *Malkat*. Unlike the hagiographies mentioned above, the *Malkat* provides not only some narrative account of the acts of the saints, but also include descriptions of the appearance of the different saints. The *Malkat* is relevant in regards to both the creation and judgment of sacred paintings. If a painter was told to paint an image of the Virgin Mary, they could read the *Malka Mariyam*. From this, the painter would receive both spiritual inspiration and crucial information about the saint they are about to render. Priests also use passages from the *Malkat* as a source to critically judge the appropriateness of the image that is presented before them.

A prayer often utilized by painters is the *Wuddasse Mariyam* that, like the hagiographies and the *Malkat* relating to the Virgin Mary, serves as sources of inspiration that facilitate the creative process, but does not provide the hagiographical information that the previously mentioned literary sources offer. These texts can include only one saint in a volume or compilations of a number of different saints. The painter Debella uses a book that includes the *Gadla Mariyam* and the *Dersana Mikayel* in one volume. Also included in this compilation are prayers to those respective saints that facilitate the process of devotion to them.¹³⁰ For Debella, books like this help aid in his perceptual connection to various saints while concurrently building his familiarity with their attributes and acts. The texts contribute to the ongoing education that

¹³⁰ "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

enables the painter to build both a relationship with the saints as well as develop his knowledge about their respective hagiographical narratives.

The above-mentioned texts are the most commonly used in relation to the creation and the judgment of contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox paintings. Just as the life of Jesus Christ is recorded in more than one Gospel, it is common for information about a particular saint to be found in different texts. For example, if a painter was commissioned to paint an image of the Virgin Mary, he could refer to the Gospels, *Te'amire Mariyam*, *Malka Mariyam* and the *Wuddasse Mariyam*. These combined texts provide a body of literary sources of information on a particular saint and provide a firm grounding for the defense of the image that a painter makes when it is presented before the priest. Although the different elements of the overall textual tradition can be combined as such, some painters may only refer to one text. When this is done, the text is usually either a *Gadl* or a *Dersan*.

Unwritten Sources of the Living Tradition

According to my findings in Addis Ababa, not all living tradition is handed down through scripture. The teacher of divinity, *Memher* Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne, who resided at the time of this study in the compound of the church *Kiddus Giyorgis* in the *Piazza* section of Addis Ababa, provided me with some important insights on what constitutes the living tradition as it is understood by both painters of Ethiopian Orthodox images and the priests who judge their theological integrity. He warned me about my tendency to focus on the texts when talking about sources that influence the appearance of religious imagery. He told me that while the body of religious literature was indeed important, they were not the only basis of knowledge regarding the depiction of saints. *Memher* Fisseha then began flipping through his Bible that he always kept next to him. Finding what he wanted, he grinned and then proceeded to inform me that the scriptures themselves tell us to also heed traditions passed down to us through the ages by other means aside from the body of religious literature of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The

old teacher pointed at a passage in the bible that verified his point¹³¹ and stated Saint Paul had views on how ecclesiastical doctrine is to be passed down from generation to generation in II Thessalonians 2,15. The Bible states that the faithful must learn about the traditions of the Church both from texts and from *afe tarik*¹³² or oral tradition, which in most branches of theology is simply described as *Tradition* typically written with a capital 'T'.¹³³

Although textual sources of information can be derived from the religious literature of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the oral *Tradition* of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in direct relation to imagery, serves a part of the visual guidelines adhered to by painters of religious imagery as well as by the Ethiopian Orthodox priesthood. Knowledge about these guidelines is part of a painter's education that he derives from a master painter. Priests, on the other hand, do not normally receive the same formal schooling in the unwritten aspects of religious imagery as the painters as part of their education. While the education of a painter of religious imagery in unwritten aspects of the painting tradition is appropriately centered upon visual depictions of religious figures and narratives, the education of a priest is one that deals more generally with all facets of doctrine and religious observance. Religious imagery is considered only a portion of the larger liturgical whole. What unwritten source of information about religious imagery consists of is exposure to visual precedent to be found in the monasteries within which they received their tutelage.

Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne used two images of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child as examples of the relationship between unwritten aspects of Tradition and religious imagery. While there are texts that describe the acts of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, notably the *Te'amire Mariyam* and the *Te'amire Yesus*, certain features about the painting are not found in

¹³¹ II Thessalonians 2,15

¹³² The literal translation of the Amharic term, *afe tarik* is 'mouth history', but is understood to mean either oral history or oral tradition.

¹³³ *Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne* (teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

texts. One example is identifying which arm the Virgin Mary uses to hold the Christ Child. *Memher* Fisseha stated that for him, oral tradition states that all things sacred should be held in the right hand, which explains his preference for images of the Virgin and Child where Saint Mary holds Jesus in her right arm. Indeed, in Ethiopian Orthodox images of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child at the time that this research was conducted it was not unheard of to see the Christ held in the right arm of the Virgin Mary, although the Christ Child being held in the left arm of the Virgin Mary was far more common. The prevailing practice is said to be based on the *Saint Mary Maggiore* prototype attributed Saint Luke (see figure 12), showing the Christ Child being held in the Virgin Mary's left arm.¹³⁴ Portuguese Jesuits, who first arrived Ethiopia in 1520,¹³⁵ introduced this version of the *Virgin Mary and Christ Child* in the 1570's,¹³⁶ which remained as a vital influence both directly and indirectly on future depictions of the *Virgin Mary and Christ Child* long after Emperor Fasiladas expelled the Jesuits from Ethiopia in 1632.¹³⁷

The Tradition that *Memher* Fisseha received from unwritten sources and interpreted shaped his preference for a painting depicting the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child in her right arm that for him best represented his understanding about Church dogma. It should be noted though that in *Memher* Fisseha's cell, he had several different images of the Virgin Mary where she is shown holding the Christ Child both in the right and the left arm.¹³⁸ While this is the case, there are examples of the visual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church whose origins are known. One example of this is an aspect of the visual tradition that is derived from visual prototypes.

A prototype referred to by priests and other churchmen are images of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child attributed to the hand of Saint Luke. These

¹³⁴ Heldman: 1994, 153.

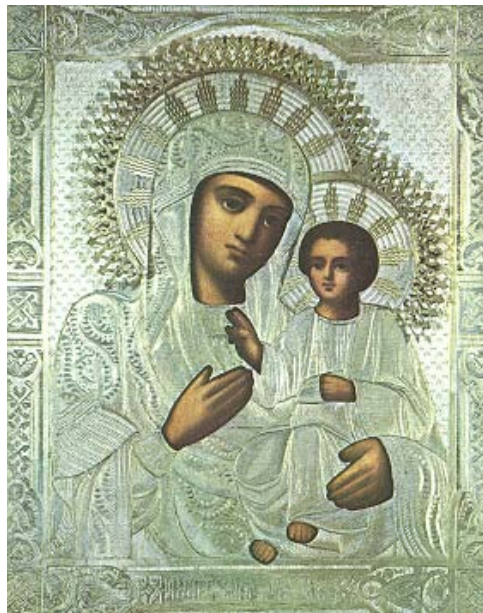
¹³⁵ Tamrat: 1993, 25.

¹³⁶ Heldman: 1993, 75.

¹³⁷ Tamrat: 1993, 25.

¹³⁸ *Memher* Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne (teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with author, April 2003.

religious narratives are derived from images of divine provenance and are seen by priests as a correct manner to depict these saints.¹³⁹ Because of this, the painted prototype by Saint Luke acquires the same legitimacy in the minds of the clergy as an image based on the written word found in the Gospels. Even if images of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child owe more to the introduction of reproductions of images of the *Santa Maria Maggiore* prototype introduced by the Portuguese Jesuits in the 16th century than ones directly attributed to Saint Luke, it is the belief in a divine provenance of visual precedence that serves as the authoritative prototype for future religious paintings.



Hodegetria (fig. 12)¹⁴⁰

While the above-mentioned example has a visual precedence, a significant number of images do not. The origins of this aspect of visual tradition can be obscure, but no less crucial in the production and judgment of sacred paintings. The reason why *Habesha* painters paint Saint George on a white horse is hard to fathom and cannot be substantiated with scripture. This artistic convention could be the result of authorization by a priest at some point in history, which would encourage a tradition of copying this image.

¹³⁹ *Abba Mīhret Wallew* (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Abba Tekesta Berhan* (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁴⁰ University of Dayton, *Online*, <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/icon3.html>. (June 2, 2011)

The fact that the visual tradition of depicting Saint George mounted on a white horse can be found in other types of Christian, painting particularly that of the Byzantine tradition, could be a contributing factor. According to Stanislaw Chojnacki, no known examples of *Habesha* examples of sacred images of Saint George predate the fifteenth century.¹⁴¹ Early examples of this type of image that date from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century share some of the crucial visual attributes of Byzantine counterparts and could therefore be safely linked with the visual precedent established by the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Mediterranean. Byzantine attributes could be found in such features as the style of the crupper as well as the manner in which the tail was shown tied in a plaited knot.¹⁴²

Even though facets of the visual tradition seem to be present in most sacred images of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, it is by no means monolithic. Within the larger scope of the visual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, there are also regional variations. In images of Saint George and the Dragon, some versions include a black devil emerging from inside the dragon. This feature associated with a visual type from the Gojjam Province and is not commonplace, though still present in some images produced in Addis Ababa.¹⁴³ It should be noted that regional variations of the visual tradition, particularly in such a cosmopolitan city as Addis Ababa, do not exist within a vacuum. The visual tradition of this city is affected by influences outside of the city and even outside of Ethiopia, such as the already mentioned influences from Gojjam and the larger world of the Orthodox Christian communion outside of Ethiopia.

As will be seen later in this thesis, not all aspects of the visual tradition are considered to be of equal importance. Narrative aspects of an image that

¹⁴¹ Chojnacki: 1973, 57.

¹⁴² Chojnacki: 1973, 73.

¹⁴³ Silverman: 1999, 153; Chojnacki: 1973, 54.

deal directly with religious doctrine are considered to be more important than the formal qualities of a painting.¹⁴⁴ Even though stylistic conservatism in Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings exists, the style used by painters of religious imagery is perpetually in a state of transformation. Changes have been evident in the development of sacred painting in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church over the last 1500 years. The most significant stylistic modifications took place during the fifteenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Patrons, painters and priests have used terms to describe distinct styles such as tradition and ancient. Some artists and priests do not like paintings that are too naturalistic, abstract or expressionistic in style.¹⁴⁵ By these more conservative parties, these images seem to deviate from established conventions and detract from the essential meaning that is supposed to be conveyed through the painting.¹⁴⁶ These preferences are not simply personal opinion, but have more to do with the significance of one style over another. The most common issue that arises is that an overly naturalistic painting suggests to the viewer the painting's inappropriate emphasis on the worldly rather than the appropriately mystical message of Christian dogma.

Raymond Silverman believes that the most recent stylistic developments of the visual tradition of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred painting in Addis Ababa are part of a continuum of style that traces its roots from the beginnings of Christian paintings in Ethiopia.¹⁴⁷ As much as the visual tradition of sacred paintings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has a tendency towards conservatism, stylistic flux is an integral part of the continuum. Silverman

¹⁴⁴ *Abuna Garima* (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Aleka Abba Haregweyan* (monk and administrator, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁴⁵ In Amharic, it might be phrased as *tintawi mended*, which literally means the 'ancient path' or 'the old way of doing things', but is understood as meaning 'being in the ancient style'.

¹⁴⁶ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Abba* Aëmro Birru (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Haile Mikayel* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Tekesta Yibeyin (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁴⁷ Silverman: 1999, 149.

asserts correctly that the current stylistic trend is not as much a distinct style, but as much a product of cultural continuity as it is of artistic innovation.

A controlling factor that either serves to maintain the stylistic status quo or fosters flux in the prevailing style is the level of toleration for change held by both patrons and clergy of Addis Ababa. Another contributing factor in what constitutes a correct image is the ability for it to inspire a mystical mindset. None of the textual traditions state that an image of a saint should not be rendered in a way that is too realistic or as the priests and painters say *segawi*.¹⁴⁸ This Amharic word literally means ‘meat-like’, but is more accurately translated as something that has a ‘fleshy’ and seemingly corporeal in appearance.

The generally preferred style for a sacred painting is what is described as *menfasawi*, which literally means ‘spirit-like’, but is better described as meaning as a way of describing an image that is spiritual in appearance. This style is visually defined by a type of stylization that bears a striking similarity to Byzantine icons with its reduction of naturalistic detail, linear clarity and monumental compositional arrangement. The *menfasawi*¹⁴⁹ style is generally preferred because it is considered to be more likely to inspire a spiritual frame of mind in viewers. While the preference of many of the priests for the *menfasawi* style is not based on texts, it is part of the prevailing visual precedent that is part of their indoctrination and can potentially be an issue that could result in either the acceptance or rejection.

Naturalism and influence from post-Renaissance European styles increased during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Two factors contributed to this change. The works of an elite group of Ethiopian painters educated in Europe instigated change as well as art instruction that occurred at the School of

¹⁴⁸ *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁴⁹ *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Fisseha Tegegne* (teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Fine Art and Design in Addis Ababa that trained students how to paint in a naturalistic manner. Although a great amount of stylistic diversity among contemporary painters in Addis Ababa, the style most generally acceptable for sacred art has remained fairly conservative and still reflects the monumental *menfasawi* style as the gold standard. Artists have both broken away to some degree from and challenged the prevailing visual tradition, yet they have arguably achieved some level of acceptability. Their knowledge of the living tradition maintains the approval of the priests and patrons, which enables them to successfully stretch the boundaries of convention.

Four artists who broadened the parameters of acceptability in religious painting include Afewerk Tekle, who has been inspired by modernism¹⁵⁰ and Alle Felleghes Selam,¹⁵¹ who is influenced by European Renaissance painters. These painters received a significant amount of their artistic inspiration from their educational experiences in Europe and America respectively.¹⁵² Two artists who are products of an extensive religious education and received apprenticeships at monasteries, and desired to expand the stylistic possibilities of older *Habesha* styles are Tadesse Wolde Aragay and Ketsella Markos.

The manner that Tadesse Wolde Aragay depicts his figures emphasizes their large eyes and monumental forms that are highlighted by bold outline as well as fields of color and pattern (see figure 13).¹⁵³ Certain elements of the Second Gondarine Style can be seen in his paintings, but he reinterprets this venerable style with an emphasis on pattern, color and geometric form. Despite these changes that Tadesse Wolde Aragay had made, the current metropolitan, *Abuna Paulos*, admires his paintings and priests deem

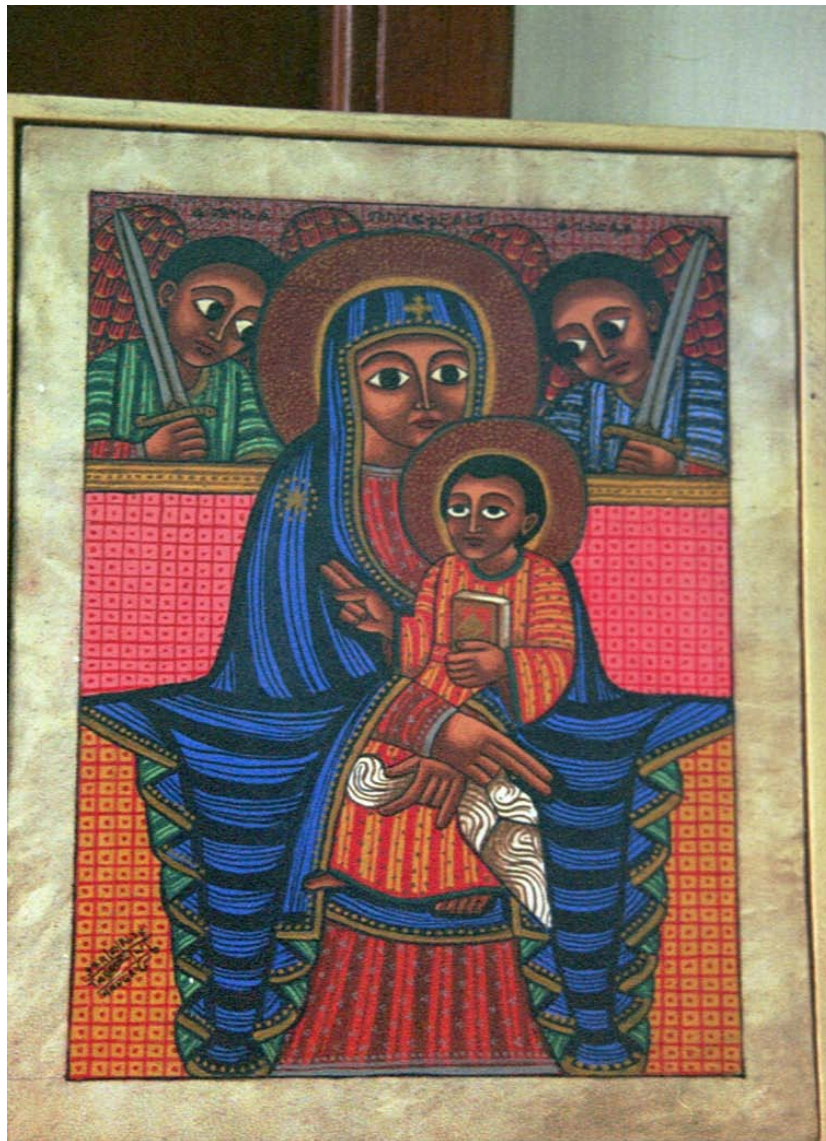
¹⁵⁰ While the art of Afewerk Tekle significantly deviates from the prevailing visual tradition, he does seek the advice of priests so that his works in the end would be deemed acceptable for religious purposes both on grounds of textual canon and on stylistic grounds.

¹⁵¹ Ale Felleghes Selam made the now famous *Holy Trinity* and *Last Judgment* paintings at Trinity Cathedral and they have received great acclaim. There have been people who have found his paintings to be too *segawi*. Disapproval of his style had resulted in much of his work in the cathedral *Addis Mikayel* being painted over and replaced by the work of the painter Mengistu Cherenet.

¹⁵² Alle Felleghes Selam (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁵³ See fig. 11

Taddesse Wolde Aregay's style acceptable for religious purposes.¹⁵⁴ The painter Ketsella Markos superimposes the monumental *menfasawi* style of his figures over a naturalistic background, which contributes to the sharp visual intensity of the saints featured in the narrative in contrast to the softer organic appearance of the landscape into which they are incorporated (see figure 14).



The *Virgin Mary and Christ Child* by Taddesse Wolde Aregay, photograph by author (fig. 13)

¹⁵⁴ Taddesse Wolde Aregay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.



Flight to Egypt by Ketsella Markos, photograph by A. Robert Johnson (fig. 14)

The four above mentioned artists have successfully challenged the prevailing visual tradition, but they represent an exception to the rule. An understanding of the visual tradition and contemporary conventions of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings can make the difference between a successful artist and one who has pleased neither his patrons nor the priests. The usual way that painters learn about how to create an acceptable style of religious painting is through exposure to accepted paintings and also through their apprenticeship under a master from whom they learn the how to correctly paint images of saints and religious narratives.

Not only does the apprentice learn to paint from the master, the apprentice can also serve as the master's assistant for large commissions. A common outcome of the apprenticeship system is that the student often adopts the style of the teacher.¹⁵⁵ It is typical for an apprentice to learn the skills of

¹⁵⁵ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

painting and to closely mimic the style of their master. Replication of the master's style is a particularly valuable skill for a large mural in a church that is painted both by the master and his apprentice. During his apprenticeship, Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew helped his father paint religious images as part of his education. While Solomon Belachew would draw the outlines of the figures and the background of the painting Gebra Kristos would complete the pictures by adding color pigments. When looking at religious paintings by Solomon Belachew and also of his son, Gebra Kristos, it is difficult to tell who painted which painting due to the astonishing similarity in their styles.¹⁵⁶ Through this manner of a master educating his apprentice, the continuity of a particular interpretation of the visual tradition is passed on. Gebra Kristos did not have to develop his own manner of making religious paintings that are likely to pass the scrutiny of clerics. He could derive the conventions of the visual tradition from the tried and true images painted by his father and incorporate them into his own work.

The artist Tadesse Yemane Berhan was an apprentice to the painter Mengistu Cherenet. Mengistu received commissions to paint the interior of churches and both artists were involved in these projects.¹⁵⁷ It is customary for the master painter to paint major religious figures in the church, such as the *Holy Trinity*, and for the apprentice to paint lesser holy personages.¹⁵⁸ As a result of his apprenticeship, Tadesse Yemane Berhan has nearly an identical painting style as Mengistu Cherenet and it is difficult to tell the difference between the works of these two artists.¹⁵⁹ By learning from his master who had already established himself and whose style has reached a certain level of acceptability among both patrons and priests, it is likely that the apprentice will enjoy similar success with his own paintings.

¹⁵⁶ Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter) in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁵⁷ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁵⁸ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁵⁹ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

In contrast to the painters of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred imagery, it is rare for either patrons or churchmen to receive a formal education about the visual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.¹⁶⁰ What understanding these two parties have about visual tradition is most commonly derived from exposure to sacred paintings within churches.¹⁶¹ Knowledge about the finer details of how a religious image is to be painted is the domain of the painter.

This desire to maintain this level of acceptability and therefore marketability of his paintings compels the painter to maintain established stylistic visual tradition of his master. This practice lent itself to the stylistic conservatism that is a common feature in Ethiopian Orthodox sacred art. Some painters, such as Tadesse Wolde Aragay, despite his very traditional Church education and apprenticeship developed a unique style. It is his knowledge of the age-old Ethiopian Orthodox painting tradition as a whole, in addition to theological doctrine, that enabled him to produce very unique and sometimes challenging images that manage to conform to the living tradition of the Church.

This desire to creatively contribute and even transform the prevailing visual tradition is the norm and has a historical precedent. The painter Fere Seyon who worked during the fifteenth century in the imperial court of the Zara Yaqob is a good example. His compositionally dynamic figures were a departure from the more static manner of depicting holy and divine entities that had previously dominated Ethiopian Orthodox sacred painting. The artistic ingenuity, with the fluid and organic use of line, of Fere Seyon flew in the face of the conventional manner full of linear rigidity and geometric formality that can even be seen in current examples of religious imagery used in the numerous churches and monasteries in Addis Ababa.

¹⁶⁰ *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁶¹ *Kes Haile Mikayel* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Another artist, who personally served as a painter for an Ethiopian emperor, was Alle Felleghes Selam. Made possible by funding that he received from the state because of his outstanding talent in portraiture, he received a significant amount of his artistic training at the Art Institute of Chicago from 1949 to 1954. When Alle returned to Ethiopia, he served as a court painter for the emperor, Haile Selassie and received prestigious commissions such as the interior of Trinity Cathedral in Addis Ababa in 1962.¹⁶² Alle Felleghes Selam was highly influenced by Western art and particularly liked Italian painting of the Renaissance and the Baroque periods.¹⁶³ Alle's painting style reflected this type of stylistic preference. Consequently, the paintings that he did in Trinity Cathedral look as though they would not appear out of place in a church in Italy. Despite the radically different appearance of these images from those painted according to precedent, they were determined to be sufficiently consistent with the living tradition to remain in the cathedral.

While Alle's older works reflect a tendency towards the Western artistic tradition, some of the religious works that he does currently seem to be a stylistic departure from the baroque-like works he did in the past. The new images that he makes are stylistically closer to the Second Gondarine Period style and therefore appear more conservative. His new works lack the naturalism of his previous famous works, such as his depiction of the *Last Judgment* at Trinity Cathedral and possess an otherworldly monumentality that suggests a more mystical visual interpretation of the religious subject matter in his paintings.

When I interviewed him at his home in 2003, Alle was in the process of painting an image of the *Virgin Mary* that would be placed on top of an altar in a church in Nazret. While still showing the signs of being done by a master painter, its execution was stylistically carried out in an uncharacteristically conservative manner that would probably be more acceptable to clerics who were not comfortable about paintings that are too naturalistic and overly

¹⁶² Alle Felleghes Selam (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁶³ Alle Felleghes Selam (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

influenced by Western old master painters.¹⁶⁴ It is worth noting that Alle was not losing his ability to create naturalistic paintings, instead adjusted his style in order to appeal to his current client.¹⁶⁵ He was working on a portrait derived from a photograph. The painting exhibited the artist's masterful use of chiaroscuro in the modeling of features of the person was depicted in the painting.

Although the formal qualities of these paintings, which are currently being produced in Addis Ababa, may display a plethora of styles, these images remain strictly bound to the textual and unwritten traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in order to ensure their theological integrity and thus their acceptability to both the patron and the priests who would bless them. This does not mean that the living tradition is always a constraining tether that completely stifles creativity on the part of the artist. There are certain limits to the kinds of changes that take place in regard to the visual tradition. A painting of the Virgin Mary that looks sexually suggestive¹⁶⁶ or an image of Jesus Christ wearing black garments¹⁶⁷ would be seen as inconsistent with the visual tradition, or even offensive, and therefore would be rejected by priests. The kinds of changes in the visual tradition that can successfully occur are those that can be adequately defended with the Ethiopian Orthodox body of religious literature, visual precedent and other aspects of the living tradition.

Education in the Living Tradition

Since its infancy, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has provided the *Habesha*, and those who were incorporated into their cultural and political sphere, with educational institutions that provided both theological and general instruction. These Church-sponsored educational opportunities ranged from the parish-

¹⁶⁴ Unfortunately, I was not allowed to take a picture of this example of his most recent works. The reason he gave me was that it was not finished and that he only would allow completed paintings to be photographed.

¹⁶⁵ Alle Felleghie Selam became seventy years old during the period that the research for this thesis was taking place.

¹⁶⁶ Kes Taye Tessema (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁶⁷ "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

run *Sämbät Timhirt(ïbet)*, or Sunday schools that taught basic literacy and religious principles, to great *gadamoch* or monasteries, such as Debra Damo in Tigré or Debra Libanos in Showa, where ecclesiastical and government elites pursued their advanced studies. One way of viewing the traditional *Habesha* educational system is to associate parish schools with elementary schools and the monasteries with secondary schools and universities. The Church was the sole provider of education until reforms were set into motion in the twentieth century primarily under the emperors Menelik II and Haile Selassie. These reforms involved the founding of government schools and universities that competed with the traditional Church-run educational institutions. Despite the growing importance of these government-run educational institutions, the traditional Ethiopian Orthodox centers of learning still play a, if slightly reduced, role in the education of Ethiopians.¹⁶⁸

Religious educational institutions offer a theology-centered curriculum that is not replicated in the curriculum of the government schools. Increasingly, since the establishment of state schools, students either leave the traditional religious education system at an early age or forgo traditional education altogether.¹⁶⁹ The education that could be acquired at these religious educational institutions range from ones that provide very elementary tutelage about the ecclesiastical tradition, such as *Dawit*, *Wuddasse Mariyam* and *Malka Mariyam*¹⁷⁰ to those that cultivate and disseminate the most advanced varieties of theological knowledge, such as biblical interpretation.¹⁷¹ Fluency in Ge'ez, some religious songs and catechism occurs at a local level at the parish church. More advanced learning takes place at the many monasteries that still dot the landscape of the Ethiopian highlands where the professors, who are predominantly monks, of the various disciplines in the living tradition can be found.

¹⁶⁸ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Aragawi Kahsay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁶⁹ Jara Haile Mariam (head of the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Sport), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Kalewold: 1970, vii.

¹⁷⁰ Kalewold: 1970, 3-5.

¹⁷¹ Kalewold: 1970, 29.

Unless a person is intending to be a cleric, it is not common for the general *Habesha* population to have had a monastic education unless they are an *aleka*,¹⁷² *memher*¹⁷³ or a *dabtara*¹⁷⁴ who make up the Church's intellectually elite laity. It should be noted that painters of sacred images are among this group. While artists who create sacred images may not have the same status as a priest in *Habesha* society, they represent a part of the respected *Habesha* intellectual elite because of their knowledge of hagiographies and the visual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Like their priestly counterparts, painters also go to monasteries in a search for knowledge of the living tradition of the Church. Some painters attach themselves to a teacher in order to study about the liturgical life of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as well as to study about how to create the religious imagery so central to the liturgical life of the Church. The instructors at these monasteries teach painters about the living tradition as it is passed on in the form of scripture, oral tradition and images. Ideally, the painters who received their education at the monasteries are taught the correct manner to paint religious images as well as fully understand the theological concepts behind them. As a result, some painters are educationally on almost the same footing as priests in matters of theological doctrine, but also with a formal education in visual tradition and artistic techniques.

Through personal interviews, this chapter illustrates the different ways that the people received their knowledge of the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. With an understanding about the nature of people's knowledge and how they acquired it, greater insight can be gained regarding how patrons, painters and priests function while engaged in the patronage process. The circumstances by which people acquire knowledge about the living tradition are the family, parish church and cathedral school, monasteries, independent study and independent master painter.

¹⁷² Church administrator

¹⁷³ Church teacher

¹⁷⁴ Church cantor and scholar who sometimes also serves as a healer

The Family

All of the individuals, who were interviewed in this study, whether they were patrons, painters or churchmen, came from religious families. In this environment, either through instruction by family members or by shared experience that individuals learn about the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Within the family, children would learn about Church liturgical calendar of fasts, feasts and celebrations. Furthermore children would learn biblical stories, the lives of the saints and other sacred literature. Of the two patrons who were interviewed for this study,¹⁷⁵ who insisted on being anonymous,¹⁷⁶ credit their parents with fostering their piety and encouraging them to attend church. These two people also credit their family with teaching them about the lives of the saints and fostering their relationship with the holy figures.¹⁷⁷

A significant number of painters also credit their families with their knowledge about ecclesiastical traditions, especially those who came from families whose members included painters or priests. The painter, conservator and art consultant Tadesse Wolde Aragay, originally from Aksum, spoke of a family made up primarily of soldiers on his father's side and clerics on his mother's side. The maternal side of his family was one that was dominated by priests and *dabtara*, who are lay scholars of the Church.¹⁷⁸ Tadesse Wolde Aragay chose to enter the priesthood.¹⁷⁹ This domestic environment instilled knowledge about the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and encouraged him to go down an educational path that is typically undertaken by priests.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁵ In this study, they will be known as Anonymous Patron 'A' and Anonymous Patron 'B'.

¹⁷⁶ The anonymity of these two patrons was the condition that allowed me access to the information that they provided during the resulting interviews. Out of respect for them, I strictly maintain their anonymity throughout this work.

¹⁷⁷ Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003; Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁷⁸ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁷⁹ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁸⁰ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

The painter and conservator Ketsella Markos, originally from Gondar, also came from a family whose lives centered on the Church. Because his father was a priest, Ketsella Markos undoubtedly received the benefit of his knowledge of the Church. Ketsella's father, in addition to his religious duties as a cleric, also worked as a calligrapher and an illuminator of manuscripts.¹⁸¹ Ketsella Markos stated that not only did he learn the technical skills of a painter from his father, but he also received an extensive hagiographical knowledge both from textual sources and sacred images produced by painters he knew personally. Like many artists, he saw many images in the wide variety of churches he visited throughout his life.¹⁸² For Taddesse Wolde Aragay and Ketsella Markos the education that their family provided was a precursor to the extensive amount of learning they received at their monastic schools and under a master painter.

For the painters Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew and Getachew Berhanu, their fathers were one of their most important sources of knowledge about the ecclesiastical traditions of the Church. Unlike the two previously mentioned artists, neither Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew nor Getachew Berhanu acquired religious knowledge or the technical skill of a painter at a monastery. While neither of their fathers were clerics, they both painted sacred images and had the benefit of a thorough knowledge of both the textual and visual traditions of the Church. Through them, Gebra Kristos and Getachew gained their hagiographical knowledge and were also taught how to paint images of saints.

Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew not only developed his skills as a painter by practicing on his own, he would also assisted his father, the famous Addis Ababa painter Solomon Belachew, paint commissioned sacred images. One painting of *Saint George and the Dragon* prominently displayed in the church *Kiddus Giyorgis* in *Piazza* in Addis Ababa represents the creative process involving father and son (see similar example in figure 15). According to

¹⁸¹ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, March 2003.

¹⁸² Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, March 2003.

Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew, his father drew the image in outline, while he filled in the color.



Silet painting of Saint George and the Dragon being held by the artist Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew. Oil paint on canvas, Photograph by author (fig. 15)

By helping his father, Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew was able to practice his painting technique. Assisting his father's work also reinforced his knowledge on the way to portray saints in a manner generally deemed acceptable to priests.¹⁸³ As a result, Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew is able to paint a significant number of saints correctly from memory paint in a style that is similar to that of his father. In this manner, Gebra Kristos inherited both the skills of his father and a proven approach to the visual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church upon which he could develop his own successful style.

As it was for Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew, the fact that Getachew Berhanu's father was a painter of sacred images had an enormous impact on

¹⁸³ Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion wit the author, April 2003.

the latter's life and became a determining factor in his choice to become a painter. When describing his father, Getachew Berhanu recalls a man who was incredibly pious, an adept painter and someone who possessed extensive knowledge about religion. Although Getachew Berhanu confesses that he never became fluent in Ge'ez like his father, he did learn about the histories of the saints and the appropriate manner to paint them so that they would win the acceptance of the priests who judge them.¹⁸⁴

Taddesse Yemane Berhan is another example of an artist whose father played a significant role in his hagiographical knowledge that contributed to him eventually becoming a painter for the patriarch himself.¹⁸⁵ While Taddesse Yemane Berhan stated that he gained his abilities as an artist elsewhere, he did learn about the lives of the saints as well as scripture and other sacred texts, such as the *Malka Mariyam*, from his father. Taddesse Yemane Berhan, despite his parochial education, never learned Ge'ez. He stated that his father, who was fluent in Ge'ez, translated texts for Taddesse Yemane Berhan and taught him about the miracles and other acts of the saints. Currently, Taddesse Yemane Berhan relies on translations of hagiographical texts for a better understanding about the histories of the saints he portrays in his works.

Alle Felleghes Selam is an artist who did not have the benefit of a paternal education as his father died when he was young. Alle Felleghes Selam went into the care of his grandfather, *Aleka Hiruw* who was both an administrator at his church and a painter of sacred images. It was *Aleka Hiruw* who educated Alle Felleghes Selam in religious studies, including Ge'ez, scripture, tradition and sacred images. In addition to the normal circumstances of being a youth, Alle Felleghes Selam's childhood with his grandfather, was filled with the scripture and sacred texts, music and imagery of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. His background in the visual traditions of the Church was not only based on *Aleka Hiruw*'s own work, but was influenced by the sacred

¹⁸⁴ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁸⁵ Taddesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

paintings that filled the various church buildings around his home town of Fiché. His grandfather's profound influence encouraged Alle Fellegehe Selam to turn away from becoming a machinist and enabled him to become one of Ethiopia's most famous painters.¹⁸⁶

It was not only painters whose knowledge about the living tradition was attributed to their family background. Both patron 'A' and patron 'B', whose names I am not allowed to divulge for reasons of privacy, came from religious families who encouraged them to learn as much as possible about the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Parents contributed to the religious development of patron 'A' who was told stories about the acts of the various saints and their intercessory powers.¹⁸⁷ Patron 'B' also credited parental instruction as a contributing factor in this person's knowledge about the saints and fervent devotion to the Ethiopian Orthodox faith.¹⁸⁸

While the patrons and the painters who were interviewed for this study were very forthcoming about the impact of their families and their childhoods, priests tended to focus on their formal educations at churches and monasteries rather than the more informal influences that existed within the social dynamics of their families. It is unrealistic to think that their families were not contributing factors in both the underpinning of their religious knowledge as well as a source of encouragement to pursue their advanced religious studies at a monastery. The limited amount of knowledge I have about the role that the family environment played in the development of theological knowledge of these priests probably had more to do with the way I directed the interview, which focused on their advanced religious studies that led to their ordination. One priest who did talk about his family was *Kes Tadesse Shumiye*. He mentioned that his father was a *Kes Gebez*¹⁸⁹ and that he grew up in a domestic setting that pivoted around the spiritual and

¹⁸⁶ Alle Fellegehe Selam (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁸⁷ Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁸⁸ Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁸⁹ Title of a priest, which roughly means 'Master of Priests' or high priest and is an ecclesiastical rank higher than that of an ordinary priest or *Kes*

intellectual aspects of the Church, which contributed heavily to himself becoming a priest.¹⁹⁰

Although formalized religious education at the parish churches, cathedrals and monasteries play an important role in religious education, we cannot overlook the crucial importance of the family in the religious education of individuals, particularly that of children. Of the interviewees mentioned above, all of them came from devout families with members of the family directly involved in church affairs, whether they were clerics, painters of sacred images or members of the laity who were well-educated in the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. It is not surprising that they continue to be heavily involved in church affairs, whether either as priests, patrons or painters. In this way, the family continues to serve as an educational environment for the next generation of painters, patrons and priests by forming the bedrock of their future religious education.

Parish Church and Cathedral Based Religious Education

As they were in the past, churches serve as a centre of indoctrination in the Ethiopian Orthodox faith. They serve as places where people may receive formal instruction in religious dogma and the significant aspect of their faith in their life as a Christian. In addition to being centers of liturgy, religious devotion and reflection, churches also are centers of learning. Churches offer full-time primary and secondary education for children as well as other types of religious education for all age groups.¹⁹¹

Traditional parochial schools, such as the one attached to Trinity Cathedral in Addis Ababa, are still venues for formal instruction in religious studies as well as other subjects. The students who graduate from parochial schools would have received knowledge about religious dogma. If a patron who commissioned a sacred painting had the benefit of going to a school such as the one at Trinity Cathedral, they would acquire hagiographical knowledge

¹⁹⁰ Kes Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁹¹ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

and perhaps have a better than average knowledge about how this saint should be portrayed in a painting. For a priest or a painter, a traditional Church-run education provides a solid foundation in scripture and visual tradition. By going to a Church-run school, these pupils take part in the educational continuum of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with formal instruction in scripture and other aspects of the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The painter Aragawi Kahsay received a parochial education at the parish church school in the village Kälkélé in Tigré at *Kiddist Mariyam Betakristiyan Kälkélé*.¹⁹² He said his education at the school began with literacy, which he refers to as the “*ha hu*”, or the Ethiopic version of the ‘ABCs’. During this time Aragawi developed his mastery of both Tigrinya and Ge’ez. The following stages in his parochial education at *Kiddist Mariyam Betakristiyan Kälkélé* involved a predominantly secular curriculum in the daytime.¹⁹³ Religious subject matter was taught in the evening. That part of the curriculum included various hagiographies, such as *Dawit*, *Wuddasse Mariyam*, *Malkat*, and a variety of other texts and devotional prayers to the saints. In addition to other sources of hagiographical knowledge, such as the *gadlat*, he built the foundation of his hagiographical knowledge base here, which would prove pivotal in the creation of correct depictions of saints and religious narratives. This is particularly the case with the *Gadlat* and *Malkat*, which are texts that describe the acts and appearance of saints.¹⁹⁴ Aragawi continued his religious education beyond this point but his studies at *Kiddist Mariyam Betakristiyan Kälkélé* provided the foundation for the advanced knowledge he acquired at *Abba Hadera* monastery.¹⁹⁵

Although some members of the *Habesha* community receive a significant amount of their education from Ethiopian Orthodox parochial schools, more of the population attends classes in religious education that Getachew

¹⁹² Translates to the ‘Saint Mary’s Church, Kälkélé

¹⁹³ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁹⁴ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁹⁵ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Berhanu refers to as *Sämbät Timhört(ïbet)* or “Sunday School”.¹⁹⁶ These schools play an important function in the process of providing the adherents with the religious education that they need in order to have a better understanding about the Ethiopian Orthodox faith.

Even though these classes do not provide the same level of education as the parochial or monastic schools they are a valid source of information concerning the living tradition of the Church. One of the many subjects commonly taught at the *Sämbät Timhört(ïbet)*, are the acts of the saints and the significance of martyrs and angels on their lives. An important aspect of the cult of saints that is communicated in these classes is the power of intercession that the saints have. People are taught how to foster a relationship with one or more saints as well as facilitate the possibility of saints acting on their behalf through prayers and votive offerings. During a typical class, an instructor presents excerpts from a hagiographical text such as *Gadlat*, and discusses them with the class. Sometimes the instructor uses images, whether they are paintings or factory-made posters, as a visual aid to help the students get a better understanding about either specific saints or religious narratives such as the *Flight into Egypt* or the various examples of the miracles performed either by the Virgin Mary or by Jesus Christ.¹⁹⁷

While not everyone enjoys of the benefits of attending the *Sämbät Timhört(ïbet)*, the religious education acquired there allows ordinary members of the laity to gain a basic understanding about the scriptural and visual traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.¹⁹⁸ People who have received their education outside of the church are not the only ones who have benefited from attending *Sämbät Timhört(ïbet)*. People who are a product of a traditional parochial education also attend these classes in order to refresh and edify their knowledge as well as hear a new perspective on a particular

¹⁹⁶ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁹⁷ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

¹⁹⁸ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Anonymous patron ‘A’, in discussion with the author, April 2003.

saint. For them these sessions are part of the life-long process of learning about the living tradition and its significance in their lives.

Examples of those who benefited from *Sämbät Timhirt(ïbet)* were the two anonymous patrons interviewed for this study. In addition to the religious education they received at home from their families, they also attended church-run educational programs. Patron 'B' received a formal education at a parochial school at the local parish church. The education that this patron received included literacy in Amharic and Ge'ez, numeracy and other secular subject matter. Patron 'B' received religious education, with an emphasis on study about the cult of saints.¹⁹⁹ Patron 'A', while receiving a primary and secondary education at a state school, attended *Sämbät Timhirt(ïbet)* at the local churches both in Addis Ababa and at the family's rainy season retreat²⁰⁰ outside of the city.²⁰¹ Like patron 'B', patron 'A' recalls learning about history of the saints and how they should appear in sacred imagery through their local church.²⁰²

While the majority of the priests, who were interviewed for this study, were educated in monasteries, there were exceptions. Instead of pursuing his education within a monastic setting, which is more common for advanced theological study, *Abba Miret Wallew* stated that he was educated by going from church to church and picking up aspects of the theological background required for a priest. In addition to fluency in Ge'ez, *Abba Miret Wallew* was taught various *Malkat* and elementary aspects of theology. Afterwards he pursued a formal education in *Zima* or religious music. He also studied *Keddasse* or liturgy, which is more advanced and required of a cleric. In addition to learning religious music, he studied *Kene* or religious poetry noted for its profound, hidden religious meaning.²⁰³ Knowledge of *Zima*, *Kene*, *Gadlat* and *Malkat* provided a rich, nuanced understanding of the theological

¹⁹⁹ Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁰⁰ Location of this retreat is not specified in order to protect the identity of the interviewee.

²⁰¹ Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁰² Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁰³ *Abba Mihret Wallew* (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

concepts presented in religious imagery. An education about literature, such as the above mentioned genres, signifies a high level of education in the ecclesiastical tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and therefore represents a competency in determining the theological integrity of imagery.

Monasteries

Within the context of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, monasteries should not be viewed as isolated places full of introverted monks. Since the fifth century, the monasteries of Ethiopia have been important centers of learning. They should more accurately be viewed as Ethiopia's indigenous version of the university. Like the universities of Europe and the Middle East, these monasteries were places where the intellectual elite received their advanced education and also served as centers of intellectual activity. Monasteries are often the destination for aspiring scholars who wish to study, *Aqwaqwa*,²⁰⁴ *Keddasse*, *Kene* and advanced scriptural studies.²⁰⁵

Monasteries are also noted as centers for the production of manuscripts and religious paintings, which makes them the epicenters of creating the means of perpetuating, cultivating and disseminating the living tradition. The most famous monasteries, such as Debra Libanos in Shoa, teem with scholars, monks, priests, calligraphers and painters studying under masters in their respective disciplines. Clerics and painters who represent the embodiment of the living tradition and are instructed in the appropriate manner that this living tradition is communicated to the rest of the faithful.

Although monasteries are best known for being centers of theological learning, they also provide other types of learning. The hieromonk²⁰⁶ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan, in addition to his studies in divinity, learned about ecclesiastical administration, accounting, history, geography and

²⁰⁴ Liturgical dance

²⁰⁵ Kalewold: 1970, 1.

²⁰⁶ A monastic who also has the authority to carry out the functions of a priest

handicrafts.²⁰⁷ This particular monastic master specialized in the teaching of scripture to students at *Kiddist Mariyam* Monastery in Addis Ababa at the time of the interview. Before being posted in Addis Ababa, the teachers at a variety of monasteries taught him about scripture and commentary on these texts.²⁰⁸ This kind of learning environment allows priests to build their extensive knowledge about the Holy Bible and other associated texts. Some, but not all, clerics have also received formal instruction in hagiographic texts further fortifying their extensive knowledge about the saints and how they should be depicted in religious imagery, which I found surprising considering the priest's role in the maintenance of theological integrity of images of saints.²⁰⁹

I often found that priests did not feel as though they were very knowledgeable about sacred images, particularly in relation to painters. Their intellectual strengths were the mastery of scripture, confidence in their interpretation of these texts and a strong background in the hagiographies of the saints. While these clerics often had a formal education in texts and oral tradition, unlike painters they did not necessarily receive formal instruction about images. This lack of a formal education in religious imagery does not mean that priests are completely devoid of knowledge about sacred paintings. Their knowledge about the interpretation of scripture and oral tradition provide them with the faculties to also interpret a visual representation of the living tradition. Additionally, the monasteries where these priests studied were often full of sacred imagery. This provided a future cleric with models of the conventions of images of saints.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

²⁰⁸ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

²⁰⁹ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003; *Abba* Gebra Sellassie (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes* Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), April 2003.

²¹⁰ *Kes* Haile Mikayel (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Painters such as Aragawi Kahsay, Tadesse Wolde Aragay and Ketsella Markos were educated in monasteries.²¹¹ Within these monasteries, in addition to learning about religious songs and poetry, Tadesse Wolde Aragay and Ketsella Markos also served their apprenticeships under the tutelage of master painters.²¹² Under these circumstances these painters developed their technical skills and were taught how to depict saints and religious narratives in a manner that conforms to the prevailing interpretation of the visual aspect of the living tradition. Aragawi stated that the environment of the monastery was also inspirational. At the *Abba Hadera* Monastery in Tigré, this deacon/artist recalls the multitude of sacred paintings, which to him were both beautiful and inspiring. The images that he saw at this monastery motivated him to become a painter in the first place.

Painters such as Debella did not receive the same monastic education as the other three painters. Instead of an education with a theological emphasis similar to that of a prospective priest, he received instruction, which stressed the applied arts, under a painting master at the Aksum Tseyon Monastery in Tigré.²¹³ Like Tadesse Wolde Aragay and Ketsella Markos, Debella learned not just how to paint, but how to paint in a fashion that would be most likely to be deemed acceptable for clerics. All apprentice painters at monasteries received crucial elements of the living tradition. They learned about both visual conventions as well as how to translate scripture and oral tradition into a visual format. Because these master painters dispense their knowledge and experience at these monasteries perpetuation of aesthetic and narrative continuity was fostered. This monastic education serves as a foundation for their pupils to either retain the style of their master or these skills are utilized in the development of new ways of expressing the living tradition in paint.

²¹¹Aragawi Kahsay, (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

²¹²Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

²¹³“Debella” (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Independent Study

Families, churches and monasteries have been traditional sources of secular and religious education for patrons, painters and clerics, but another path has also been utilized. The clerics who were interviewed in this study stated that their teachers taught them texts, such as the Holy Bible and the *Malkat* and the *Sinkessar*. Hagiographies on the other hand, such as the *Gadlat* and the *Dersanat*, were often learned through independent study.²¹⁴ All clerics are expected to be fluent in Ge'ez and are therefore expected to read hagiographic texts themselves in this liturgical language while the fluency of painters varied greatly and not all of these artists are able to read texts in the original Ge'ez language. Painters with a limited or non-existent fluency in Ge'ez have to rely upon modern language translations of these locally published texts.

While the majority of the people interviewed in this study, supplemented their education with independent study, it was the painter Assefa Gebre who used independent study as the primary source of his education. When I first entered his room at his family compound, I did not just find the usual accessories associated with a working painter, I saw partially finished paintings, canvas, paint and turpentine. Interestingly, religious texts filled the room. Rather than learning from his family and/or receiving a formal education under a master, he pursued his studies on his own.²¹⁵ When speaking with Assefa Gebre, it is obvious that he is intelligent, motivated and very well read person who is very strong in his Ethiopian Orthodox faith. He appears to be someone who, through sheer will, developed his own understanding about the living tradition as well as the technique and style of a painter of sacred images strictly through independent study without the guidance of a monastic education or master painter. In addition to his unique insights into religious visual narratives, his manner of portraying saints and religious narratives has also resulted in difficulties with both patrons and

²¹⁴ *Abba Aêmro Birru* (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Abba Miret Wallew* (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Teye Tessama* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²¹⁵ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

priests in addition to the success that he has achieved as a painter of sacred images.

What would cause problems are small details, such as the color of a saint's lips²¹⁶ or the saint's use of a symbolic device,²¹⁷ which was seen as inappropriate by a priest.²¹⁸ Had Assefa Gebre studied under a master painter, he would probably have been more self-consciously aware of these details in the conventions relating to the visual tradition. If ignored, these details could prove troublesome both to the painter and the patron. Although Assefa's paintings are often seen as conventional and he does learn from his mistakes, the formal education provided by a master painter would have helped Assefa Gebre avoid these complications in the patronage process resulting from holes in his knowledge about the visual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Independent Master Painters

This category relates solely to the painters of sacred images. A master painter, who was a family relation, trained the majority of painters who were interviewed for this study. Painters, such as Gebre Kristos Solomon Belachew and Getachew Berhanu, inherited the Ethiopian Orthodox artistic tradition from their fathers. Other painters, such as Tadesse Yemane Berhan, who is now a painter of high standing and a favorite of patriarch *Abuna Paulos*, did not come from an artistic family nor did he study at a monastery under a master painter. Tadesse Yemane Berhan trained under the famous Mengistu Cherenet who also paints for the patriarch and does other prestigious commissions such as *Addisu Mikayel* in the *Awtobus Terra* portion of Addis Ababa. It should be noted that Tadesse was the product of both a parochial education and advanced study at the School of Fine Art and

²¹⁶ This is in reference to a particular case when Assefa Gebre painted the lips of the Virgin Mary in a colour red that was far too bright to the point it seemed to the priest to be vulgar compared to the convention of painting the lips of Saint Mary in a reddish-brown colour, which is seen as more appropriate by clerics. This is described in detail later in this thesis.

²¹⁷ This particular case involved the archangels wearing their crowns in the presence of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child, which met the disapproval of a priest who stated that this was inappropriate due to scriptural evidence. This too will be described later in this thesis.

²¹⁸ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Design at Addis Ababa University. Consequently, before entering into his apprenticeship under Mengistu he already had a background in the living tradition of the Church and learned the technical skills of a painter at a state-run art school in addition to studying under the master painter, Mengistu Cherenet.²¹⁹

Tadesse Yemane Berhan painter did not have an opportunity to receive a type of artistic education in the correct rendering of the living tradition in paint. He may have been taught about the acts and histories of the saints while at his parochial school and he may have been shown how to understand an image of a saint. Like many other people though, he was not explicitly taught about the visual tradition and its application when painting sacred images. At art school, he may have been taught how to paint in a skilled fashion and was able to hone his technique. On the other hand, he was not taught how the living tradition was incorporated into and embodied in the paintings he has created. The curriculum of the School of Fine Art and Design emphasizes European and American techniques and styles and very rarely provided instruction in the painting of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings, therefore providing a very different type of arts education acquired at a monastery.

²¹⁹ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Chapter 4: The Tripartite Model

This chapter introduces the tripartite model of the dynamics of the patronage process. These participants include the patron and painter as well as the priest who has both direct and indirect influence on the patronage process. The reason for the pivotal importance of priests in relation to sacred imagery is the dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that states that in order for a painting to possess sacred power, it must be blessed by a member of the priesthood. Theologically, the blessing transforms an ordinary painting into a portal leading to the divine. It is important to note that not just any painting with Christian content is worthy enough to receive the blessing of a priest. The painting must conform to the prevailing interpretation of textual and non-textual sources, which make up the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Only when the cleric finds that a painting conforms to tradition is it deemed suitable enough to receive his blessing and be utilized in the liturgy of the Church. It is this scenario that highlights the role that the dynamic of pastoral power is evident in the actions of the clergy as they oversee the integrity of the picture of the divine envisioned by their parishioners. Once again, the importance theological integrity of imagery is crucial toward understanding the role that clergy play in the maintenance of the artistic tradition connected with the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian faith.

It seems ironic that priests occupy the position of judging the correctness of religious imagery because they work without explicit guidelines or formal training. In this role, priests become the protector of the visual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The ecclesiastical authorities understand that sacred images represent one of the visual faces of Church dogma, which are instrumental in the mystagogic catechesis of the Ethiopian Orthodox communion. When a priest says an image does not possess power, he asserts that the image is not a portal onto the divine cannot be used to call upon the intercession of a saint and does not contribute to the salvation of the user.²²⁰

²²⁰ *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Most small commissions, such as a small devotional painting, only involve one person as the patron.²²¹ In contrast, if a large church or cathedral is to be decorated with a plethora of wall paintings, the patron in such commission can take the form of a committee of members of the congregation led by a chairman.²²² All three parties are involved in the social dynamics of every case when a sacred painting is being commissioned for use in a Church. The only exception to this pattern of art patronage is when an art consultant, such as Tadesse Wolde Aragay, is involved in the patronage process placing a fourth party into the social dynamic of the patronage process. He represents the only case of an art advisor's involvement in the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings in Addis Ababa and most likely the only one in Ethiopia at the time I conducted my research from 2001 to 2003. Since Tadesse Wolde Aragay, as an art advisor in the commissioning of Ethiopian Orthodox art, is an exception to more common parties found in the tripartite model, this fourth party will not be covered in any depth in this body of work. Instead, emphasis will be placed on the most typical dynamic relating to the commissioning of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings.

Function of this Chapter

In order to better understand the dynamics of the patronage process, it is important to develop a better understanding about the different general types of participants most commonly involved in the patronage process. The process of formulating the tripartite model as a means to illustrate social dynamics in a particular cultural group at a given place at a given time is inherently problematic. The changeable nature of human behavior sometimes challenges the validity of efforts toward building and conveying a concrete understanding of the patronage process. The foundation on which the validity of this model stands is the official doctrine of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that asserts the importance of priestly oversight of all aspects of mystagogic catechesis, including the liturgical use of imagery.

²²¹ Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²²² Tadesse Yamane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

The validity of the tripartite model comes from the analysis of the patronage process from the perspective of the liturgical function of images. The findings of this research elucidate issues relating to official dogma and its application of this dogma as it is gathered from observation and interviews. To put it simply, the objective of this study is the analysis of practiced ecclesiastical norms rather than focusing on individual practices. This analytical strategy serves the function of developing a better understanding not only of the patronage process itself. It also serves as a tool to foster a fuller comprehension of the tradition of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings.

The process of formulating this model as a means of illustrating a particular type of social interaction that occurs in modern Addis Ababa was not initially obvious. The distinctions between the existing literature on Ethiopian “traditional” painting and in particular what I have been referring to as *sacred or religious paintings* is not clearly defined. While Mercier’s book *Art that Heals* states that it is necessary for a cleric to bless religious paintings, his emphasis was on the ritual purity of these works rather than their liturgical function and oversight of the content of these paintings. Mercier, however, was writing about asceticism and the healing properties of paintings in an ethnographic manner that is similarly applied to the traditional religious practices of western sub-Saharan Africa rather than in the ecclesiological manner in which this study was carried out. This marks a divide among art historians conducting studies in Ethiopian art. Some researchers follow a paradigm of an Africanist and therefore use an anthropological and ethnographical mindset and methodologies that are used in other regions of Africa. The ecclesiological and liturgical mindset focuses on Christian practice within this culture in the same manner as a researcher would study any other Christian culture. Although this study does make use of the analytical theory and methodologies of ethnography, it does so with an emphasis on the role of liturgical practice and observance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The marriage between these two paradigms in this study

bridges the gap between Africanist and ecclesiological approaches to the Ethiopian Orthodox artistic tradition.

While Silverman has done groundbreaking work on the study of living artists who create traditional Ethiopian paintings, some crucial issues are missing in his work. Unlike Mercier, Silverman does not include the importance of the priest's blessing of paintings in the creation of sacred imagery. This is not surprising for two reasons. Firstly, not all of the art covered in his book, *Ethiopia, Traditions of Creativity*, is religious in nature. Another reason for a lack of emphasis on the liturgical side of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its art is due to his background in traditional western sub-Saharan African. At the time that the book was published, Silverman was relatively new to the field of Ethiopian art and therefore maintained the outlook of a traditional Africanist. His approach to painters is historical and biographical with an emphasis on the formal and narrative qualities of their images rather than approaching them from an ecclesiological standpoint. In his writings about the painter Kes Adamu Tesfaw, Silverman calls for greater research to discover why the visual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church currently manifests itself the way it does.²²³

Marilyn Heldman's work, *The Marian Icons of the Painter Fré Seyon*,²²⁴ is the only text that directly confronts the subject of the patronage of sacred paintings.²²⁵ In her analysis of the paintings of Fere Tseyon and the 15th century court of Zara Yaqob, she briefly looks at the issue of the patronage of sacred paintings from this period. While she does look at the parties who were involved in the production of these paintings notably royalty and the nobility of the Ethiopian Empire, she does not describe the patronage

²²³ Silverman: 1999, 148.

²²⁴ Heldman's use of the spelling of the Amharic word for fruit, at the time of this book was Fré is incorrect considering how this word is pronounced in Amharic, which according to David Appleyard's transliteration is Fīre. Her contributions to the museum catalogue, *African Zion*, she adopts the more phonetically correct transliteration, 'Fere', which is the transliteration that I use in this thesis for the benefit of the reader who may have not be familiar with the Appleyard system of transliteration.

²²⁵ This is in contrast to sacred works that are used within the context of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

process itself in her writing.²²⁶ While this information would be helpful in the understanding about art patronage during the rule of Emperor Zara Yaqob, the lack of written records on the patronage process during the 15th century prevents full comprehension. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church did not normally keep records about artistic commissions. Instead, a significant amount of information about the patronage of sacred painting came from foreign visitors to Ethiopia, such as Francisco Alvarez, who collected information about the Ethiopian imperial court in the 16th century.²²⁷

Scholars who are conducting research on contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox sacred painting have the advantage of becoming acquainted with the living resources from which researchers derive their information. In addition to being influenced by these scholars who have dealt with issues, such as patronage, contemporary painters and the theological foundations regarding the nature and use of sacred paintings, it was my discussions with patrons, painters and priests in Addis Ababa that contributed the most significantly to this study. These living sources have both shaped my general knowledge about sacred paintings and have provided the evidence that validates my tripartite model of social dynamics during the patronage process. The information that they provided me contributed to the ability to describe the activity that occurs within this activity as well as understand how this type of interaction affects the artwork that is at the hub of this social activity.

As a result of the state of the existing literature on both contemporary painters of sacred painting and the patronage of these paintings, the tripartite pattern of art patronage was not obvious and the information was not available before data was gathered through interviews I conducted in Addis Ababa. The tripartite model is the product of my own realization both of the importance of the priest and an understanding about how the priesthood

²²⁶ Heldman: 1994, 86.

²²⁷ Heldman: 1994, 86.

affects both the dynamics of the patronage process itself and the art that is created through these commissions.

Parties Involved of the Tripartite Model

The *tripartite* model represents the most common pattern of interactive dynamics that occurs during the patronage process involving sacred paintings. It shows the types of participants involved in this pattern of social interaction and describes what kind of knowledge they possess as well as their function in this process. This chapter provides background information that is necessary for a fuller understanding of the following chapter, which illustrates both the typical course of the patronage process in present day Addis Ababa and the social interaction that takes place in both the creation and ecclesiastical oversight of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings.

The Patron

Patrons, who are either individuals or groups, serve two functions. They initiate the commission of a painting and provide funding for the work. Other types of activity within the patronage process are heavily dependent on the particular circumstances of the commission and the natures of the patrons themselves. It must be noted that the only type of patron considered in this study are those who commission *sacred paintings* used in a liturgical context of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This study excludes the practice of Catholic priests commissioning Ethiopian paintings for religious use within a Latin Rite ecclesiastical context because it theologically falls outside of the the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and is not subject to the oversight of the clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.²²⁸ Although these paintings are technically used as sacred paintings in much the same way they are used in the Ethiopic Rite, they are sacred paintings created for the theological environment of the Catholic Church as opposed to that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The paintings that are commissioned by Catholic priests would be judged on the basis of the idiosyncrasies of Catholic doctrine and worldview in contrast to the doctrinal and liturgical practices of the indigenous Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Most importantly the commissioned painting

²²⁸ Tekesta Yibeyin (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

would be used for Catholic worship and therefore would not be a true Ethiopian Orthodox sacred painting.

Of the three parties discussed in this chapter, the patron is the most demographically diverse category. There are nearly as many types of patrons of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings as there are types of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians with the exclusion of only the poorest adherents to the faith. They can be shop owners, clerics, business people or even the patriarch. Because a great variety of sacred paintings are used in the practice of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith, there are paintings that are made to suit a variety of needs and even budgets. While a patron may be able to partake in a large commission that involves the painting of the entire interior of a cathedral, a commission of a sacred painting can also include a small and inexpensive painting used in the practice of *sīlet*. This means that a great variety of people of varying socio-economic status can potentially be the patrons of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings.

Due to the wide variety of people who can be patrons, they all possess different degrees of knowledge about theology and particularly how it relates to the appearance and use of sacred paintings. One patron may possess an elementary knowledge about religious texts because of their limited religious education. Others would have an extensive knowledge about dogma and even know how saints should be graphically portrayed. The latter group usually consists of those who have benefited from religious education at home, parochial education, formal instruction at *Sāmbāt Tīmhirt(ībet)* or even at a monastic centre of learning. In some cases the patron is a member of the clergy.

The involvement of a priest playing the role of a patron has the potential to create a different dynamic in the relationship between the painter and the patron than what would take place when a lay patron is involved. In the instance that there is a cleric commissioning a painting, the painter is faced

with social interaction with someone with high social status in *Habesha* society combined with theological knowledge and therefore would show a greater level of deference to the patron to the point of being open to suggestions on how the painting should appear. Patrons who do not benefit from an education in ecclesiastical tradition tend to rely entirely on the expertise of the painter and play an acquiescent role in the patronage process, in contrast to someone of the Ethiopian Orthodox intellectual elite, such as a priest, who would likely play a more active role.

Although the dynamic of the patronage process might be affected by the participation of a patron who is also a cleric, the motivation for a priest to commission a sacred painting is the same as it is for the lay patron. Both lay and the ecclesiastical patron commission sacred paintings to cultivate their relationship with the saints. Regardless of which type of patron commissions a painting, they all have to be deemed as acceptable and blessed by a priest. It is interesting that paintings commissioned by a cleric are not to be judged and blessed by the same cleric who commissioned the painting in the first place. A third party cleric must be involved in order to ensure the theological integrity of a painting.²²⁹

Despite the possible differences that could exist between the different varieties of patron, they share two characteristics. Their role in the patronage process is to instigate and finance the commission. All patrons place themselves in the position of finding a painter who can adequately execute the commission. Of course the patron must discuss with the painter what kind of painting they need before they fulfill their commitment and provide the money necessary to pay for the work. All other types of involvement of the patron in the patronage process are varied and erratic and highly dependent on individual patrons and unique circumstances.

²²⁹ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

Patrons, Power and Patronage

The examples of commissions that I investigated involved lay and ecclesiastical patrons. Although both types of patrons serve the two main functions of a patron mentioned previously, some marked differences in the dynamics of the patronage process between these two types of patrons exists. According to my findings a major source of status and power over the resulting appearance of religious imagery within the patronage process is derived from an individual's perceived knowledge about ecclesiastical tradition.

Generally, painters and clerics believe that patrons are the least knowledgeable of the three participants in the patronage process, unless they happen to be priests. The average lay patron usually has a basic grasp of the major points of Church dogma as well as elementary knowledge about the lives and attributes of the saints. Still this group consists of people who either have an elementary level of formal education in ecclesiastical tradition or have acquired knowledge in an informal manner through family or independent study.²³⁰ The patron tends to be highly dependent on the expertise of the painter and the priest, during the patronage process in order to have a fully *bona fide* sacred painting that receives the blessing of a priest.

Aside from their instigation and financing the lay patron usually plays a passive role during much of the patronage process. The patron will usually tell the painter what they want portrayed, the size of the painting and the type of backing used. Most other details are left to the skill and knowledge of the painter. It is uncommon for a lay patron to tell a painter in detail how they want the image to be rendered.²³¹ Occasionally, a patron will state that they want an image of the Virgin Mary that will include a specific amount of gold decoration on her garments or out of familiarity would point out what kind of

²³⁰ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²³¹ Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002; "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

painting they want by using an already existing example found in a church.²³² In this dynamic the average lay patron shows deference to the painter and the priest because of their exalted knowledge about what constitutes theological integrity regarding sacred imagery and Church doctrine respectively.

The lay patron perceives that painters and clerics are dedicated to ecclesiastical life and have been educated in the ways of the Church.²³³ Consequently, patrons consider painters and the priests as 'experts'. Despite their role as the instigator of commissions, they comply with the decisions of the painter and the judgment of the cleric. In this dynamic, it is the painter and the cleric who place greater importance on the correctness of the image, which supercedes the personal desires of the patron. In the case of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings, the customer is *not* always right and they realize that it is in their best interest to rely on the knowledge and skill of the painter and the judgment of the priest.²³⁴

Although lay patrons generally play a passive role during the creative process regarding the iconography of the composition, they may exercise control over the style of the image. Rather than forcing a painter to paint in a manner that the patron would prefer, the patron instead chooses a painter who paints in a manner that they have a preference for. A patron's knowledge about the work of a particular painter can be determined either through viewing existing works at a church or by perusing through a painter's photograph album of the works that he has previously made.²³⁵

²³² Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003; Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²³³ Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²³⁴ Alle Felleghie Selam (painter), in discussion with the painter, October 2002.

²³⁵ "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002; Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

This dynamic of power changes when the patron is a member of the clergy. A clerical patron has received an extensive instruction in the ecclesiastical tradition through rigorous monastic education and is knowledgeable about the subject matter of sacred paintings. When this pattern of patronage occurs, the balance of influence, over the appearance of the painting, shifts towards the patron. In some instances the patron is a member of the priesthood and dictates how the sacred image should be painted on the basis of their interpretation of ecclesiastical tradition.²³⁶ In this case due to the hierarchal nature of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as well as the general supposition, that priests possess superior knowledge of theological matters, the painter will adopt a compliant comportment in the presence of the cleric. While painters generally have a great respect for clerics, likewise, priests tend to view painters of sacred images as a group knowledgeable in ecclesiastical tradition.²³⁷ While the cleric would show respect for the skills of the painter during the course of the patronage process, the painter will view the patron as a source of information and inspiration, particularly concerning the sacred literary tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.²³⁸

Due to the considerable knowledge a cleric has about ecclesiastical tradition, he is particularly critical about the artist he chooses to paint a religious image. This artist would have to possess an extraordinary amount of theological knowledge in order to win the approval of a cleric. The key to a successful relationship between the painter and the priest is the cleric's absolute confidence that the painter will create a religious painting that possesses unquestionable theological integrity. With this faith in the ability of the painter, the priestly patron will usually not micromanage the creative process and leave the painter to get on with his work.²³⁹ This empowers the painter to do

²³⁶ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²³⁷ *Abuna* Garima (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Taye* Tessama (priest), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²³⁸ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

²³⁹ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

what he perceives as appropriate based on the input provided by the patron, his theological knowledge and technical skill of the chosen painter.

Because of the accumulated theological knowledge possessed by a priest, along with his opinions about the interpretation of doctrine, conflicts may arise between the cleric/patron and the painter. Instead of a heated exchange, a façade of gentility is maintained on the part of the painter due to the priest's prestigious position in *Habesha* society. Likewise, a priest, despite his own high-ranking status in the community, tends to respect painters of sacred painting because of their knowledge of the visual representation of the ecclesiastical tradition.

Patrons and Publicity for Artists

While the primary function of the patron is to commission works of art, the patron's secondary function as a source of publicity for the artist greatly benefits the painter. Word-of-mouth is a potent way of building a painter's reputation in the general community and fosters name recognition.²⁴⁰ Verbal publicity, as beneficial as it can be to an artist, is only effective if the artist maintains a good relationship with the patron throughout the patronage process, produces a painting that meets the approval of both the patron and the priest and provides what is seen by the patron as good value for the money. If the painter though becomes known for being recalcitrant or acquires a reputation for creating paintings that do not possess theological integrity, word-of-mouth can likewise end a painter's career.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003; Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003; Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

²⁴¹ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

The Painter

The Amharic word that is used is *sa'li* or “one who paints”. Linguistically there is no differentiation between the painter of sacred images and those who paint other types of images. It is important to note that secular painting, as it is known in modern Europe or the Americas, was a foreign concept in Ethiopia until recently. Before the twentieth century, a painter who did portraits of members of the nobility was also an artist who created sacred paintings and received the training of a person who painted images of saints for use in religious practice.²⁴² In Amharic, there is no single word that means ‘one who paints sacred images’. While all painters are expected to know how to paint, the painters of sacred images, known in English as *Church painters*, *iconographers*, *icon painters*, have to know how to create a picture that meets the approval of the priests who bless the image.²⁴³

The Precarious Position of the Painter

In the overall dynamics of the tripartite pattern of patronage, a painter can find himself in a precarious position. His good reputation relies on his ability to meet the standards of both the patron and the priest. The painter must provide the patron with a painting that pleases them aesthetically and is imbued with sufficient theological integrity to receive the blessing of a priest. If a painter is able to meet or exceed the expectations of his patrons he builds or maintains his good reputation.

The other party involved in the patronage process that the painter has to impress, is the clergy. If a painter creates a painting that does not meet the approval of the cleric, the painting is rejected and the patronage process is not complete. The painter knows that aside from a need to adhere to the prevailing interpretation of ecclesiastical tradition, there are clear criteria that

²⁴² Silverman: 1999, 136.

²⁴³ Unfortunately there is no exact term used to describe a painter of sacred images. They usually only refer to themselves as *s'ali* that can be translated as ‘one who paints’. Otherwise these artists can be described as *yikiddus s'il s'ali* or ‘one who paints holy paintings’. An English term that gets used frequently both by Ethiopian painters as well as Western art historians is “traditional painter”. Although this term is generally understood to mean religious images, its meaning has expanded over time to mean also secular images done in the traditional Ethiopian style.

separate an acceptable painting from one that is unacceptable. These guidelines are integral parts of the painter's education under an established master artist.

A casual observer would certainly notice that the paintings of saints and religious narratives are compositionally and stylistically similar in all the Ethiopian Orthodox Churches in Addis Ababa. The prevailing tendency of commissioned paintings is that they are conservative in their depiction of religious themes. The creative environment found among the community of painters of sacred art is radically different from that of the *avant garde* artists for whom innovation and critique of the established order represents the paradigmatic norm. For the painters of sacred art, individual creativity plays a secondary role to theological integrity and how acceptable it is to priests.

Even a connoisseur of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings may confuse the works of some of the most prolific painters in Addis Ababa such as Mengistu Cherenet, Taddesse Yemane Berhan and Aragawi Kahsay (see figure 16). The style in which these three artists paint is similar. The similarity in style is not limited to large-scale works. Artists, such as Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew and Aragawi Kahsay paint miniature religious images in a similar style (see figure 17) even though they studied under two different masters. Seen as a whole, the existence of a predominant style is evident.



Silet painting of the Virgin Mary with Christ Child accompanied by angels being held by the artist Aragawi Kahsay (left) and his half brother Seghed Kahsay (right). Oil paint on canvas. Photograph by author (fig. 16)



Diptych style that is used for personal devotion and protection depicting Saint George and the Dragon (left panel) and the Virgin Mary with Christ Child (right panel) accompanied by angels in the miniature style painter by Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew. Tempera paint on panel, Photograph by A. Robert Johnson (fig. 17)

These paintings attempt to balance mystic linearity and the artist's subtle use of shading. The style used in the rendering of the saints often reveals the artist's élan at emphasizing pattern over naturalism in details such as the folds of a saint's garment or the scales of a dragon. In essence, the painter wants to show a high level of craftsmanship in his painting, but not to make paintings that would be considered more profane than mystical by both patrons and priests.

At the same time, patrons and priests are not always entirely adverse to the naturalistic style that has been a widespread element in Ethiopian Orthodox painting since the eighteenth century. The style, known as the Second Gondarine Style, along with its variations has become the gold standard of 'traditional' Ethiopian Orthodox art.²⁴⁴ This style is marked by rigid linearity, combined with a graceful manner of composition, yields monumental formality. Despite the use of shading, the figures retain the flat appearance that they possessed in preceding Ethiopian styles, such as the First Gondarine Style of the seventeenth century that did not make the use of any kind of chiaroscuro.

The visual result is a composition that conveys visual sumptuousness without seeming overtly worldly. These paintings convey a certain aloofness that communicates to the viewer that the beings depicted in the painting are not in the same category as ordinary people. The formality of this style reinforces a figure's sanctity and the separation from the earthy is also reinforced, in the same manner that there is a stylistic difference in ancient Egyptian portraiture of the Old Kingdom between depictions of royalty and commoners. This characteristic has come to be understood as possessing 'spiritual beauty'

²⁴⁴ Although shading in the rendering of saints did enter widespread practice during the 18th century in the form of what is now termed the 2nd Gondarine Style, this is not the first time it was used. In the court of Zara Yaqob in the 15th century, a Venetian contemporary of the painter Feré Tseyon, Nicolò Brancalion used shading on the figures rendered in his paintings. This can be seen on the icon IESMus4191.

that conveys a sense of the mystical and is separate from the mundane and the profane.

The work that a painter produces can be attributed to two other factors. The first is a strong influence from their mentors, which is evident in the style of Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew and Tadesse Yemane Berhan. The second point is that the input of priests also plays a role in the appearance of these paintings. Although the possibility of rejection by a priest looms over the heads of all but the most confident of painters, the utilizing a relatively conservative style, such as that used by Mengistu Cherenet, Tadesse Yemane Berhan and Aragawi Kahsay further contributes to the chance that the image would meet the approval of a priest. Artists, such as Tadesse Wolde Aragay can make changes in the overall style of the painting, but simultaneously maintain the theological integrity that would appeal to a priest.

When the painter Ketsella Markos addressed the question about what features in a painting priests view as 'traditional' and acceptable, he responded with the following characteristics. Motifs included such features as large eyes, bright colors and a prolific use of the color blue. Most of all the painting must have a holy grace and spiritual beauty, which is far more important than naturalism.²⁴⁵ It is this last characteristic that seems the most subjective, but is considered a concrete concept by patrons, painters and priests that value a sense of monumentality in religious art. According to the painter Assefa Gebre, the style of a painting is of secondary importance to the image's theological integrity.²⁴⁶ Instead of making a dramatic deviation from the accepted painting style used by his father, Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew continues using it so that his works are more likely to meet their approval again in the future. In short, Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew has become a known quantity in the artistic community like his father and

²⁴⁵ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, March 2003.

²⁴⁶ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

grandfather. With this established reputation, he has become a respected 'brand name' among artists that would inspire confidence in future patrons.

The same can be said about Taddesse Yemane Berhan. He is a painter whose style is similar, if not seemingly identical to that of his mentor and employer, Mengistu Cherenet, court painter of the patriarch and one of the most famous and admired painters in Addis Ababa. It is understandable why Taddesse Yemane Berhan would want to paint in a nearly identical and successful style as that of Mengistu Cherenet. While this may not be the sole reason why Taddesse Yemane Berhan also has his works commissioned by the patriarch, the adherence to a particular style, which has already been proven to be appealing to the patriarch and his immediate circle, could be a contributing factor.

It is revealing that *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai*, a notable priest at the important church, *Kiddus Uriyel* in *Kazanjes*, listed Mengistu Cherenet and Aragawi Kahsay among his favorite painters. This connection was particularly illuminating because, as I mentioned before, the style of these two painters is similar and they have experienced a great amount of commercial success as the creators of sacred paintings.²⁴⁷ While the styles used in the creation of sacred paintings is fairly diverse, the style used by these two painters tends to be the most popular and are seen as being acceptable to both patrons and priests. This practice has created a pre-eminent style in Addis Ababa.

The existence and widespread use of a prevailing style is not new in the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The styles that are commonly known as the Moon Faced Style of the fifteenth century, First Gondarine Style of the seventeenth century and Second Gondarine Style of the eighteenth century were all associated with imperial patronage. Variations of these courtly styles could be seen in the highlands of Ethiopia beyond the sphere of the imperial court and its patronage practices. One can see that inside of churches, illuminated manuscripts and devotional images each of

²⁴⁷ *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai* (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

these styles were widely used and became what was the standard manner in which saints were depicted. As a result of this, expected sacred paintings to conform to those styles.

Two artists, Afewerk Tekle and Alle Felleghie Selam, challenged the prevailing appearance of sacred paintings. They made use of foreign influences, such as, expressionist and baroque styles during the 1950's and 1960's. Even though their approach deviates significantly from older indigenous styles, they have met success with the help of patrons as well as clerics who were willing to see saints portrayed in a new manner. While both of these painters received the patronage of Emperor Haile Selassie and have gained exalted status as the creators of sacred images, the respective styles for which they became famous have not become integrated into the prevailing style presently used in the majority of Ethiopian Orthodox churches in Addis Ababa. According to *Abuna* Garima, whatever style is used and however a saint or group of saints is portrayed in a painting, an image that is suitable to receive the blessing of a cleric is one that is in accordance with the "dogma" of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This flexibility regarding the formal qualities of these paintings highlights the importance of theological integrity over style.²⁴⁸ Still, the sensibilities of both patrons and priests must be appealed to by the artist as well as the current trends in prevailing acceptable styles.

Uniqueness of the Painter of Sacred Images

Painters of sacred images are not only expected to be able to paint an image that looks correct according to the prevailing standards of the time, they are expected to be knowledgeable in ecclesiastical tradition and it is this body of knowledge that separates these painters of religious images from all others.²⁴⁹ A painter of secular art such as pastoral scenes or portraits is expected to create paintings that are pleasing to the patron. If the patron is

²⁴⁸ *Abuna* Garima (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁴⁹ *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan (monk and administrator, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

happy with the work, the patronage process has reached a successful conclusion without the need for further oversight as to the quality of the work. All that is crucial is knowledge of generally acceptable styles and adeptness in their painting technique.

The painter of sacred images, in contrast to the other type of painters described above, is required to possess knowledge and ability that goes beyond what is required to create an aesthetically pleasing painting. The painter, Ketsella Markos listed the three most important qualities that a painter of sacred images should possess to differentiate him from all other types of artists. Firstly, they must have an adequate knowledge of ecclesiastical tradition. Secondly, the paintings that the artist produces must exude spiritual beauty. Lastly that painter must be able produce work in a medium and manner that will survive the environments and the religious practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.²⁵⁰

The painter Ketsella Markos elaborated on the contrast between the painter of sacred images and all other types of painters. Ketsella said that an old classmate of his who attended the School of Fine Art and Design in Addis Ababa received a commission to paint the interior of a church. While this classmate was an expert painter whose abilities were without question, he had received neither a formal education nor did he conduct independent study about aspects of sacred painting that would ensure its theological integrity. The painter simply copied the visual appearance of sacred paintings that he had seen before.²⁵¹ Despite his abilities as a painter the clerics who oversaw the project were not happy with the result and did not give this artist's paintings their blessing. Consequently, the painter was politely dismissed and the work that he did do inside of the church was painted over. The clerics soon contacted Ketsella and he did the work that the previous painter was supposed to have done, but this time the clerics were happy with

²⁵⁰ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, March 2003.

²⁵¹ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, March 2003.

the resulting work and gave it their blessing. Ketsella attributed the difference to the clerics' reaction to his work compared to the work done by the other painter to the three factors that set the painter of sacred images in a class apart of all other types of painters.²⁵²

Rendering of Spiritual Beauty

Another factor that Ketsella related was the ability for this kind of painter to render images of saints in a ways that fosters feelings of holiness in pictorial form. It is not enough for a painter to create an accurate depiction of a saint with the appropriate devices, gestures and features alone. Although theological knowledge is important in the creation of quality sacred paintings, they are also expected to have a mystical mindset and truly believe in what they render in paint. A successful painting of a saint is one that emphasizes the mystical qualities of these holy beings stylistically and helps cultivate a vivid image of the heavenly realm in viewers' as well as reinforce their comprehension about the lives of the saints. In short, this power to inspire others toward the pious is seen as rooted in the piety of the painter.²⁵³

The hieromonk or monk, who serves as a priest, Memher Abba Tekesta Berhan elaborated upon this concept when he stated that the painters of sacred images are supposed to be instruments of the Holy Spirit. The divine moves the mind and hands of the painter and the resulting image reveals a mystical appearance, conveys the work of the Holy Spirit as it manifested itself through the perception and the body of the painter.²⁵⁴ This importance of the sanctity of painters of religious images could explain the perceived importance of asceticism, which in the past was a common practice that the painter creating the image observed. Jacques Mercier delved into the relationship between the creative process and asceticism and connected the

²⁵² Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, March 2003.

²⁵³ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, March 2003.

²⁵⁴ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

ascetic and ritual purity of the painter with the resulting ritual purity of the painting.²⁵⁵ During my research I developed an understanding that the actual ‘ritual purity’ of the image was of little to no importance. Evidence in this body of research, derived from interviews, supports this conclusion. My findings though do not undermine the importance of ascetic practices in relation to the creative process. Abstaining from worldly temptations and withdrawing from the profane seemed to enable artists, such as Assefa Gebre and Aragai Kahay, in the creation of paintings that possess an almost undescrivable quality of mystical beauty that goes beyond mundane attractiveness.

Memher Abba Tekesta Berhan emphasized the effects of asceticism, or lack thereof, on the appearance of the painting. He stated that in the past, the painters of sacred images practiced asceticism and believes that the combination of fasting, prayer and abstinence from sexual activity placed the painter in a spiritual state. While in this spiritual state the painter would create paintings that reflected a spiritual reality as opposed to an earthly one. The hieromonk lamented that few of these painters practiced asceticism and instead created paintings in a profane state of being at the present time. As a result, the artwork that they produce reflects this profane state. He attributes the fleshy appearance of the paintings that are lacking in spiritual beauty that he sees today in Addis Ababa.²⁵⁶ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan summed up his theory with the saying

Spiritual food results in spiritual paintings and earthly food
results in earthly paintings.²⁵⁷

The “spiritual food” that the *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan speaks of is asceticism that feeds the mystical consciousness of the painter. This mystical

²⁵⁵ Mercier: 1997, 73-4.

²⁵⁶ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

²⁵⁷ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

consciousness of the painter produces images that have the necessary spiritual beauty that contributes both to the consciousness of the viewer as well as the divine power of the image.²⁵⁸ The painters Assefa Gebre, Aragawi Kahsay and Debella practice asceticism and believe in the direct correlation between asceticism and the spiritual appearance of the paintings that they produce.²⁵⁹

When Aragawi Kahsay is not producing religious paintings in his workshop, he sleeps at night in his bedroom with his wife. He maintains his secular lifestyle, which is centered on the family. By contrast, when he is working on paintings for liturgical use, Aragawi spends the night in the workshop in a sleeping bag alone.²⁶⁰ When producing religious works, he separates himself from the ordinary routines of domestic life and exists in a place that is physically separated from routine domesticity. Instead he dwells within a space surrounded by his work as a creator of religious images. This practice contributes to a clear separation in the popular imagination among people of Addis Ababa between the production of paintings that are destined for the tourist market and those that will be used for religious purposes.

This traditional view about the relationship between the asceticism and the creative process, is strong in Addis Ababa, some painters do not subscribe to the idea that asceticism is required in order to produce paintings that possess spiritual beauty. Neither Ketsella Markos nor Taddesse Wolde Aragay practice asceticism while producing paintings that will be used in liturgical functions, nor do they see it as an essential aspect of the creative process while creating liturgical art. They view this practice as something that was observed during their fathers' generation, but is not necessary in order for their art work to receive a priest's blessing today. They believe that the

²⁵⁸ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

²⁵⁹ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002; Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003; "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

²⁶⁰ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

spiritual beauty in their paintings can be achieved without the aid of fasting, prayer and sexual abstinence.²⁶¹ Alle Felleghe Selam is another notable painter of religious images who does not see a need for asceticism even while decorating the interior of a church. In the early 1960's, Alle Felleghe Selam received a commission initiated by *Abuna* Meleke Sedek, which involved painting the *Last Judgment* in the dome of the recently completed Cathedral dedicated to the Holy Trinity, which was the result of the initiative of Emperor Haile Selassie. Alle Felleghe Selam did not adhere to ascetic practices and according to his recollection; this did not seem to bother the *Abuna*.²⁶² Although refraining from ascetic practices while painting sacred images may seem like a practice of a new generation of painters, it does not present an accurate picture of what presently occurs in Addis Ababa. The fascinating twist to this picture is that artists who do claim to practice asceticism, such as Assefa Gebre, Debella and Aragawi Kahsay represent a younger generation, in their thirties and forties in contrast to the other artists interviewed for this study, who did not strictly follow ascetic practices while creating religious art.

Despite the fact that no conclusive trends can be determined from the information gathered, what can be determined is that although asceticism is often viewed as unnecessary in the creation of a religious painting, this practice is not entirely disappearing. Indeed, asceticism seems to have found a place in the practices of a new generation of painters who still see it as something that is still important even though it is not compulsory. Emphasis is not only placed on what is refrained from, such as animal products, alcohol and sexual activity, what is also important to the painter is what is done to prepare them for the creative process. Debella reads from small books of prayer before he begins work while Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew lights a

²⁶¹ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002; Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁶² Alle Felleghe Selam (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

candle as a way on entering into a mindset appropriate for the painting of images of saints.²⁶³

Overall, little uniformity is evident in how these painters prepare for the creative process, or whether they do anything at all to ready themselves to paint. The end result is a painting that possesses spiritual beauty. How it is achieved is less important.²⁶⁴ While examples of paintings in churches are naturalistic and are described as *segawi*, such as the *Last Judgment* in Trinity Cathedral in Addis Ababa, by Alle Felleghes Selam, they are generally not seen as possessing spiritual beauty and therefore do not possess power according to the living tradition of the Church despite the exquisite craftsmanship put forth while creating it.²⁶⁵

Medium of Sacred Paintings

The last differentiation between painters of sacred images and secular artists that Ketsella Markos discussed was their ability to make paintings physically suited for religious use. In his example, one of the problems that emerged due to the Church's use of an ordinary painter is that he did not know how to paint on church walls. Due to his lack of experience, he applied the paint directly to the walls. As a result the painting would not have lasted very long due to problems associated with the mechanical stresses placed on the paintings and the leaching of potentially damaging moisture through the walls.

Having painted a number of churches in the past, in addition to his extensive knowledge about art conservation, Ketsella knew that painting directly on the walls was not suitable for these circumstances. His way of decorating the interior of the church was to first paint the required images on canvas. The

²⁶³ "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002; Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

²⁶⁴ *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁶⁵ *Kes Taddesse Shumiye* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Abba Tekesta Berhan* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

painted canvases were then adhered to the walls of the church. Ketsella stated that this method is easier to execute because the painter is able to paint in the comfort of his own studio. He stated that because of his experience as a painter of churches he was privy to this manner of decorating the interior of a church that would be more durable and less likely to bleed or develop cracks over time.²⁶⁶

Knowledge about producing paintings appropriate for use in a liturgical context extends beyond the painting of churches. A painter who is commissioned to paint a religious image must know how to paint on wood and know how to organize the visual narrative in two or three sections, which is required of someone whose patron wants to have a diptych or triptych made. Both Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew and Aragawi Kahsay have had extensive experience in the painting of polyptychs of various sizes on wood. Not only are they able to create a compositionally beautiful narrative on two or three separate panels, they developed a specific painting style in the process.

Painting styles used for larger works highlight the ability of these artists to render shading and other intricate details, artists use a simpler gestural style that works better on smaller icons. For smaller works, they use a simpler gestural style, in which the technique employs small, but bold paint strokes. Despite their simplicity, they convey dynamism and the ever-important spiritual beauty required of a sacred painting. Additionally, a painter who has worked exclusively on large canvases, which are common in Modernist²⁶⁷ painting, may not be able to prepare the surface of the wood correctly or be able to paint in the miniaturist style that is needed for painting smaller wood panels.

Other qualities separate the painters of sacred images from other types of painters, but these three characteristic qualities are the most prominent. The

²⁶⁶ Ketsella Markos (paint), in discussion with the author, March 2003.

²⁶⁷ The concept of Modernism, as it is understood in this work is best described by the New York, Modernist art critic, Clement Greenberg in his 1939 article, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*.

focus of many painters working within the Modernist and Post-Modernist paradigms are issues of artistic critique, and individuality. The painter of sacred images is grounded in the traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. While these painters may also produce paintings whose subject matter falls outside of the ecclesiastical sphere, they are familiar with the mysticism of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. These painters of religious works are in their own way like preachers, but instead of using words they convey their messages through images. As a result, viewers are able to cultivate and maintain their relationship with the divine among other aspects of the liturgical life of the Church. These painters, in addition to priests, are well aware of the magnitude of the art they create and the appropriate manner in which to render the holy.

The Priest

Within the dynamic of the tripartite pattern of art patronage, priests perform two functions. They are the 'gatekeepers' of ecclesiastical tradition that ensures that an image's theological integrity is maintained and used for religious rituals. The priests are also advisors to both the patron and the painter. These two functions help ensure both the integrity of ecclesiastical tradition as it appears in sacred images in addition to facilitating the patronage process.

Types of Clerics Involved in the Patronage Process

According to Mercier, the types of priests who bless images can be "any abbot, monk or priest known to be pure".²⁶⁸ They are in charge of maintaining theological integrity of the religious imagery used in the church building and compound. Clerics are also responsible for *sīlet* or votive offerings to their church. No matter if the cleric is a member of the married secular priesthood or is an ordained monk or hieromonk, what they all have in common is that they form the priesthood of their respective parishes. They are responsible

²⁶⁸ Mercier: 1997, 74.

for leading the liturgy and administering the Eucharist and priests are accountable for the religious education of the congregation and maintaining the theological integrity of religious practice, including the use of imagery. For the purposes of this study, priesthood includes abbots, bishops, secular priests or hieromonks because they all have pastoral responsibility for the theological integrity of their respective spheres of influence. Naturally, priests received extensive education in theology and once their study is complete they are charged with the responsibility of spreading knowledge about ecclesiastical tradition among the faithful as well as maintaining its integrity, including the production and use of religious imagery. The education that priests receive is based on the type of cleric they are as well as their aptitude and ambition.

The Ethiopian Orthodox priesthood is hierarchical and the Amharic language has a term for each type. The *kes* is the priest of the local parish, while the *kes gebez* has a higher rank with substantial religious and administrative responsibilities. They are allowed to marry before they are ordained. If their wives die or they divorce, these priests cannot remarry, and they are expected to remain chaste for the remainder of their lives. While the lay priests can garner a great deal of respect from their parishioners and even members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy they are not admitted into the highest echelons of the Church. Lay priests are not allowed to become bishops, which is a position exclusively reserved for monks.

The latter category of the serving priesthood includes hieromonks who have bound themselves to poverty and chastity in addition to the maintenance of theological integrity in their respective parishes. They usually live within either monasteries or church compounds. These clerics possess the title of *abba*, which is shared with monks who do not have the same responsibilities as the hieromonk. This title can be accompanied by other titles depending on their additional responsibilities. Some monks serve as administrators and are referred to as '*aleka abba*'. Others serve as teachers and hold the title of '*memher abba*'. Unlike their lay counterparts, monks may rise up to the status of bishops and are referred to simply as *Abuna*. The bishops also serve the

same function as priests in all ways, including involvement in the patronage of religious images for their cathedrals or other churches. Bishops are addressed in a variety of ways. Most are addressed as 'Your Eminence' or 'Your Grace'. The patriarch, who is equivalent to the pope of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, is addressed as 'His Holiness' and is the only bishop who is to be addressed in this manner. All clerics, whether lay or monastic can be respectfully addressed in Amharic as *abbatachin*, which can be translated as 'our father'.²⁶⁹

All priests serve two functions in the patronage of sacred paintings. Their first obligatory function is to bless images after he has determined that they possess theological integrity. The second function of the priest is to educate, inform and advise the patron in both ecclesiastical traditions as well as provide detailed information about the actual patronage process. Despite the theological background of many painters of sacred images, their knowledge about Ethiopian Orthodox doctrine is usually less extensive than that of a priest. Indeed, a painter may approach a priest with a question about a particular theological concept and be able to use that information to create a suitable painting that passes the scrutiny of a cleric. Without help of these clerics, many patrons would find commissioning a religious painting almost insurmountable. Most importantly, the painting would be deemed powerless according to Church dogma and the ecclesiastical authorities without the approval, and consequently the blessing, of a priest.²⁷⁰

The Priest as Gatekeeper of the Living Tradition

In order to better understand religious paintings, it is helpful to view the painters of sacred images as preachers. The only difference between painters and preachers is that the preacher uses the spoken word to convey his message. The painter uses images as a way of making manifest the living tradition and the divine realm. It would not be acceptable if a preacher says

²⁶⁹ Abuna Garima (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁷⁰ Abuna Garima (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

things in a sermon that are contrary to the dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The ecclesiastical authorities would be theologically irresponsible if they condoned the promotion of blasphemy and heresy from the hallowed space of the church building before the parishioners. It is the responsibility of these ecclesiastical authorities that the message of the sacred paintings, made in the name of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, does not contradict its dogma. Although many of these priests are open to beneficial changes in how saints and religious narratives are represented, these clerics serve as defenders against compromising aesthetic and narrative elements that would detract from or even pervert the living tradition of the Ethiopian Church.

Despite the authority priests are endowed with regarding the judgment of the suitability of paintings, they do not ordinarily receive formal education in religious art, as do painters.²⁷¹ It would be natural to think that priests would be ill equipped to judge whether a painting is correct or not. According to *Abuna* Garima, all priests ideally know how a sacred image should look and are able to discern between those that are correct and incorrect examples.²⁷² Even though judgment of paintings is a duty of the priests within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, *Abuna* Garima understands that priests do not always carry out this responsibility. Their problems lie in variations in religious education, individual aptitude in theology or personal bias. *Abuna* Garima stated that as part of their training to be priests, they are taught how to determine if a painting conforms to ecclesiastical tradition.

This finding may seem like a discrepancy, but the perception of what constitutes a formal education about art as well as the tools needed to determine the correctness of the depictions of saints should be considered. Although, the majority of the priests who were interviewed in this study did not receive a formal education in art, formal education about painting was

²⁷¹ *Memher Abba* Aëmro Birru (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Abba* Gebra Sellassie (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Abba* Mihret Wallew (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Gebez* Nahu Sanai (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁷² *Abuna* Garima (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

understood by these clerics as one in the actual creation of these paintings including the finer points of technique, composition and style. *Abuna* Garima dispelled this misunderstanding by stating that the knowledge needed by these priests, in order to judge the theological integrity of religious paintings is a background in the dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as they are derived from the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.²⁷³

While most priests describe themselves as lacking a formal background in art, all of the clerics who were interviewed in this study claimed to have a substantial background in the written and un-written aspects of the theology of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Priests use their understanding of the living tradition as the yardstick that the correctness of paintings that is heavily influenced by their background in the religious literature of the Church. This though does not mean that these priests are completely ignorant about non-textual elements of the living tradition, such as the appearance of images. As is the case with other practitioners of Ethiopian Orthodoxy, sacred imagery fills their lives and is crucial both in their perceptions and their personal relationship with the saints. These images are important aspects of their lives and are often the focus of their contemplation of the sacred and the divine.

On this subject, I had an enlightening experience during an interview with a teacher of theology. *Memher* Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne lives in a cell in the compound of the church *Kiddus Giyorgis* in the *Piazza* portion of Addis Ababa. He was not an artist nor did he see himself as an expert on the topic sacred art. Despite this claim, the walls of his cell were covered with religious imagery comprised of handmade works as well as factory-made images. Some of these images appeared to be made in styles associated with the Eastern Churches while others were distinctly baroque in style. This teacher was not compelled by any external authority to display these images on the interior of his living quarters. He displayed these images in his cell, because he wanted them to be in his personal space. These images highlight the

²⁷³ *Abuna* Garima (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

personal importance of the visual elements of the living tradition in addition to the diversity of styles that are utilized by the faithful of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Even though *Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne*'s educational duties focus on the study of religious texts, imagery is also a crucial element of his faith. Indeed, religious imagery can be found in many places in a church compound and not necessarily always within the church itself. It is not uncommon to see images of saints in administrative offices whether they take the form of small pictures that are the size of playing cards to poster-sized images with images typically derived from Byzantine or baroque sources. For priests, religious imagery is present in their personal space as well as in the areas in which they conduct their religious duties. Images are an integral part of their lives and the sacred images they see in the monasteries where they trained or the churches where they teach and carry out the liturgy.²⁷⁴ These priests generally cannot identify a style as being associated with particular art historical categories, such as the *Second Gondarine* style or the *Masters of the Moustache*. Due to the fact that the vast majority of priests have not received any formal instruction in the history of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings, they were not taught the language and manner of categorization used in academia.

Instead, these clerics have had their own language to describe sacred paintings. Rather than breaking down styles into the vast array of categories, as is done in academic circles, the appearance of paintings is usually described in a diametric fashion. Words that are used in these diametric descriptions are old versus new; spiritual versus naturalistic or traditional versus untraditional. These first two categories are more like a sliding scale or spectrum of variations that exist not only in the two extremes, but also a plethora of combinations of the opposing diametric qualities. The last

²⁷⁴ *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai* (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Tadesse Shumiye* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Taye Tessama* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Haile Mikayel* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

diametric model is generally seen as an either/or description. A painting is seen as either sufficiently possessing theological integrity or not. While there is no central authority that provides the language to describe religious paintings, the terminology used by the priests is very similar from one cleric to another.

For example, when priests asked me about my research, I would respond with the usual statement that I was doing research on contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox paintings in Addis Ababa. This statement often resulted in quizzical expressions and the clerics telling me that I should go to the far reaches of Gojjam or to Lake Tana to see old paintings. Although these priests do not claim that they are experts on art, they are generally fiercely proud of the Church's artistic heritage. The Amharic adjective used to describe these older examples of art is *tintawi*. This word conjures nostalgia for historical ideas and objects from an idealized past.

It could be said that something *tintawi* is a phenomenon that predates living memory. In contrast to the term *addisawi*, or new, describes a phenomenon that vividly exists within living memory. This concept relates to artistic style because the perception that in *tintawi* time, meaning more that roughly a century ago, paintings possessed more spiritual beauty and that the painters of these images are perceived as being more mystical than those today. The paintings that would be seen in a *tintawi* church in Lake Tana are understood as being more spiritual and as having a greater connection with the centuries-old legacy of the Church in its medieval imperial glory. *Tintawi* paintings are seen as not suffering as much from the effects of an influx of foreign artists and images that occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁷⁵ This period of tremendous foreign influence on the visual tradition of religious imagery witnessed a new trend emerging that appeared to the *Habesha* as a more worldly appearance. While the more naturalistic appearance in sacred paintings reached a zenith in the nineteenth and

²⁷⁵ Chernetsov: 1997, 4.

twentieth centuries, the trend began in paintings made in the eighteenth century with the Second Gondarine style.²⁷⁶

According to Chojnacki, during the twentieth century there was a “...complete stylistic and other breakthrough in Ethiopian painting which then identifies itself with the art of the Western world as the result of the innovating trends of the period.”²⁷⁷ These innovative trends were products of increased foreign artistic influences coupled with both the desire of artists to derive from these Western styles and the introduction of a formal education in Western artistic styles fostered by such institutions and the School of Fine Art and Design in Addis Ababa. As a result, artists began to incorporate Western painting techniques and styles into the pre-existing visual tradition of the *tintawi* style resulting in what is referred to as the ‘mixed’ style. When a priest analyzes a painting, he may describe it as being more *tintawi*. Likewise, when a painting is described as being in the ‘mixed’ style, it is seen as an image that is been heavily influenced by Western artistic styles whether it is Renaissance, Baroque or Modernist in nature.

Though some may subscribe to the linguistic dichotomy of *tintawi* versus *addisawi*, the hieromonk *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* has provided another type of diametric language used to differentiate between styles. His diametric language consists, as mentioned before, of the aesthetic dichotomy involving a *segawi* meaning fleshy and naturalistic or a *menfasawi*, which means that something possesses a spiritual quality.²⁷⁸ This type of thinking, as already discussed, centers on disdain for naturalism that detracts from the spiritual nature of the painting. The perception about the importance of a painting is based on the dichotomy between paintings that possess mystical powers

²⁷⁶ Silverman: 1999, 143.

²⁷⁷ Chojnacki: 1983, 32.

²⁷⁸ *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

after they are blessed and those that will always be incapable of being a point of contact between the faithful and the divine.²⁷⁹

This perception about the appearance of paintings based on the *segawi* and *menfasawi* dichotomy, while potent in the minds of many priests, should not be seen as a hard and fast rule. It would be overly simplistic to view paintings that are more naturalistic as being ones that will always be seen as inappropriate and powerless. Indeed, the hieromonk *Abba* Gebra Selassie is personally fond of sacred images that resemble the more naturalistic style associated with Italian Baroque paintings.²⁸⁰ Another hieromonk named, *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan *Kes Gebez* Nahu Sanai is not concerned about the exact style in which a painting is made. He has expressed tolerance for a variety of styles as long as the images were in concordance with religious texts.²⁸¹ The key feature in the appearance in a painting, which is deemed highly desirable if not crucial, is spiritual beauty regardless of style. This aspect of a painting's appearance contributes to a spiritual state of mind. This quality is a better criterion for determining if a painting can be imbued with mystical power.²⁸²

According to the priests who were interviewed for this study, a sacred painting must be the embodiment of what is 'traditional'.²⁸³ The Amharic word for *tradition* is *bahēl*. To describe something as being traditional, the word that is used is *yābahēl*. Although it is easy to associate the *yābahēl* label simply with the appearance of the painting, it would be an oversimplification

²⁷⁹ *Kes* Taddesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Abba* Aēmro Birru (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁸⁰ *Abba* Gebra Sellassie (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁸¹ *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan (monk and administrator, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Gebez* Nahu Sanai (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁸² *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

²⁸³ *Kes* Haile Mikayel (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan (monk and administrator, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Abba* Mihret Wallew (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Gebez* Nahu Sanai (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes* Taddesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes* Taye Tessama (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church) in discussion with the author, April 2003.

of the ideas behind the concept of tradition, as priests have understood them. While appearance does play a role in determining whether a religious painting is *yābahēl*, other factors determine whether a cleric would agree such as its adherence to textual sources and visual precedent. Aside from a painting possessing the essential ingredient of spiritual beauty, style usually plays a secondary role in the process of determining whether a painting is *yābahēl* or not to adherence to textual sources and visual precedent.

The *Habesha* artistic contribution to the appearance of paintings play a role in what makes a painting *yābahēl* to a certain extent, but other types have more importance. The hieromonk *Abba Miret Wallew* explained this with examples. His view was that images of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child are based not just on the precedent set by *Habesha* painters in the past, but also the legend that St. Luke made a portrait from life of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child.²⁸⁴ All of the authorized sacred paintings of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child, perceived as *yābahēl*, are considered to be copies of the original painting. *Habesha* painters currently produce derivations of these original images, with varying degrees of success.²⁸⁵ According to *Memher Abba Tekesta Berhan*, the most important prototype painters can derive their images from is not an Ethiopian precedent, but universal Orthodox Christian sources, such as St. Luke, who represents a crucial element in the unwritten and visual sources of ecclesiastical tradition.²⁸⁶

These statements made by *Abba Miret Wallew* and *Memher Abba Tekesta Berhan* were preceded by a discussion I had with the painter *Assefa Gebre*. Interested in the importance and nature of style in the context of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred painting, I asked the artist how he felt about the proliferation of religious images that have a closer resemblance to Mediterranean styles²⁸⁷ rather than Ethiopian images made earlier in history. He stated that

²⁸⁴ Refer to the image of the image of the Madonna and Child from the church Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.

²⁸⁵ *Abba Mihret Wallew* (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁸⁶ *Memher Abba Tekesta Berhan* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁸⁷ This includes Greek, Syrian, Armenian and Coptic styles.

it is not an accident that these new images are meeting with general approval. He asked me to whom is traditionally attributed the first depiction of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. My answer was that the original painting, according to legend, was painted by St. Luke. Assefa agreed with my answer, but he followed it with a second question. He asked me in what style was this painting rendered in. I told him that it had a Byzantine appearance. Assefa agreed.²⁸⁸

He followed this question and answer session, by saying that these images by St. Luke are a direct source of tradition, upon which contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox images should be based. Assefa's opinion was that the reason why old Ethiopian depictions of the saints look the way they do is because the individuals who painted them did not possess the skill to execute the 'Greek' or 'Byzantine' style. He considered the paintings that set the precedent in the Ethiopian stylistic tradition as corruptions of the original models in the Mediterranean Christian world. Assefa concluded, by saying that the new paintings that are currently being produced are not a deformation of the Ethiopian tradition, but a return to the precedent set by the evangelists themselves.²⁸⁹ This kind of statement elucidates a certain perception about the relationship between the appearances of the painting and how *yābahēl* it is. Assefa's opinions express a greater loyalty to a 'Christian' tradition over an essentialized 'Ethiopian' tradition. To him loyalty to the Christian faith takes precedent over ethnic, cultural or national identity.

For the monk, *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan, the critical feature of a painting is not the style employed to render individual saints or religious narratives. In fact, for this monk style is not terribly important. What is of utmost importance beyond all other criteria is that the image must comply with ecclesiastical tradition, which includes both written and unwritten sources. In addition to adherence to textual tradition, a sacred painting must conform to other

²⁸⁸ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

²⁸⁹ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

standards passed down through *afe tarik* or oral tradition as well as the visual precedent of the sacred images that were painted in the past.

One specific example that *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan provided was the coloring of the saints. He said that they should be the color of a *faranji*, a foreigner with a light complexion. He said that if he were to judge a painting with saints that looked like the darker non-*Habesha* Africans of the south and west, he would reject the painting outright.²⁹⁰ The source of this practice does not come from religious texts, but from the unwritten tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The painter, Ketsella Markos also explained this practice. He stated that African-American people would ask him about this practice during the tour of the exhibition *African Zion* across the United States.²⁹¹ People were surprised by an African nation whose artists painted religious images of figures without African physical features. Ketsella's response to these inquiries was that the saints were painted to look like the *faranji* because many of the saints were "Israelites" or were from other portions of the Mediterranean world. In short, these saints were *faranji* so therefore they should look like the *faranji*.²⁹²

Conformity to ecclesiastical tradition is not centered on ethnic, cultural or national identity. Instead, it is centered on what is seen as part of the larger context of a global Christian tradition that has primacy over more localized identities. One must not say, however, that Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings are never used as symbols of ethnic, cultural or national identity because they are definitely a source of pride for the *Habesha* people and Ethiopia as a whole. According to the clerics, the primary function of these paintings relates to Christian mysticism and heritage. Other functions of these painting are seen as secondary and do not have a direct bearing on the judgment of the image by priests.

²⁹⁰ *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan (monk and administrator, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁹¹ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁹² Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Of particular concern for priests is that sacred images convey a graphic representation of the traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The clerics have had an extensive education in religious literature and have also been brought up on the unwritten traditions of the Church. While they may not have the same ability to articulately describe a sacred painting, the clerics are aware of a painting's consistency with *bahēl* even though it may embody a new approach toward a particular religious subject matter. This balancing act between innovation and theological integrity facilitates the introduction of fresh and new ways of visually communicating Church dogma.

This graphic reinterpretation, like the continuing reassessment of scriptural texts as well as how this content is communicated is also part of the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Most priests are aware of these changes in how ecclesiastical tradition is depicted and how people visualize the sacred. Sometimes priests even champion these innovations. Despite the fact that many of these clerics may appear very conservative, the ideals that many priests possess are often progressive and open to constructive alterations of the living tradition as long as the integrity of ecclesiastical tradition is maintained.

Priests as Educators and Advisors

In addition to the compulsory duty of serving as gatekeepers who maintain the theological integrity of messages conveyed by religious imagery, priests serve other functions during the patronage process. Clerics can also be advisors for patrons.²⁹³ The priest Kes Taye Tessama stated that he preferred that potential patrons consult with him first so they could be informed not only about the process, but also to confirm the religious significance of what they are about to undertake.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Kes Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Kes Taye Tessama (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁹⁴ Kes Taye Tessama (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

For example, a potential patron would be guided by the cleric who would explain the act of *silet*, or votive offering, as well as what it means in the religious life of the individual and their relationship with the saints. When the cleric is sure that the potential art patron understands the significance of what they are about to undertake, the priest would often tell the person how to go about the process of commissioning a work of art. Even if a potential patron is well versed in the importance of commissioning images for one's spiritual life, he or she may not know any reputable artists to partner with for the commission. Even though most clerics may not have formal education in art, many priests are familiar with local painters of sacred images and will make recommendations to the patron. Priests even provide names and contact information of painters they consider knowledgeable and able to create paintings that would meet the approval of a priest.²⁹⁵ These learned men would often interject their opinions about why they like a particular artist over others. Consequently, priests become a source of advertising for painters. To be the favorite painter of these priests can be an enormous benefit to the commercial success of an artist.²⁹⁶

Often the prospective patron knows little about art patronage, but their desire to conduct correctly will ensure that they please the saint in question. For the patron, the process can cause anxiety. The educational and advisory role of authority figures of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church can also take place on a one-to-one basis. Not only can a prospective patron learn more about the powers of the saints, they can also learn about the patronage process itself from the priest.²⁹⁷ The roles of the priest as an educator and as an advisor is to reassure the prospective patron and help them in the process of building their relationship with a particular saint in order to facilitate saintly intercession in the life of the patron. This type of counseling both reassures

²⁹⁵ Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003; Kes Taye Tessama (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁹⁶ While many painters are recommended this way, the artist who is most often on the lips of the learned men of the Church in Addis Ababa is Mengistu Cherenet. Other artists who are often recommended by the learned men of the Church are Aragawi Kahsay and Afewerk Tekle.

²⁹⁷ Not all priests have an in-depth knowledge of the patronage of sacred art. In this case the father of the Church will try to be as helpful as possible, by providing what knowledge they do have and then referring the prospective patron to someone they know would provide more information.

the prospective patron and reaffirms the doctrines of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.²⁹⁸ Other information that priests provide is how to initiate the patronage process. The clerics describe the process from beginning to end and advise the prospective patron about what to look for in a painter. They can provide the potential patron with an idea of how much it would cost to commission a work of art.²⁹⁹ One way for an artist to become known is to be recommended by a priest, which is not an easy process. If an artist's body of work impresses a member of the clergy, the artist would have an effective source of positive publicity.³⁰⁰ Potential patrons generally follow the cleric's advice concerning the selection of an artist.³⁰¹ The only problem for the artist in this process is to become known by a cleric and impress this priest enough to recommend him to a parishioner.

One tactic for an artist to become noticed by a priest involves a direct approach. This involves the painter making an appointment with a cleric and presenting examples of their paintings with the hope that the priest would be impressed, and recommending the artist to someone who is looking for someone to create a painting for them.³⁰² Another strategy involves the artist displaying their work just outside or within the precinct of the church in order to draw attention from members of the congregation. What a painter may also do is directly approach a priest in order to establish his reputation with this leader of the church community who could in turn recommend this painter to aspiring patrons.³⁰³ No matter what means an artist uses in order to become a well-known figure among the priests in Addis Ababa, fostering a good reputation is a tremendous benefit to an aspiring painter's career. While these above-mentioned strategies are the most proactive ways an artist can make themselves known to members of the priesthood, often these clerics

²⁹⁸ Kes Taddesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Kes Taye Tessama (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

²⁹⁹ Kes Taddesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Abba Gebra Sellassie (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Kes Taye Tessama (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁰⁰ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

³⁰¹ Kes Taye Tessama (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁰² Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

³⁰³ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

discovered artists by going to a church and being impressed by a particular icon or wall painting that they see. If sufficiently impressed by this religious image, the priest would inquire as to who painted it and the means by which he could contact the artist directly.³⁰⁴

Tadesse Yemane Berhan, Tadesse Wolde Aragay and Alle Felleghie Selam are examples of artists who benefited from being discovered by a priest. For Tadesse Yemane Berhan, his career began to rise greatly when a member of the patriarch's inner circle saw examples of his work in a church dedicated to Saint Gabriel in Addis Ababa and notified the patriarch himself about the capabilities of this young and ambitious artist. Accordingly, the painter was introduced to the patriarch who soon hired him to carry out the commission.³⁰⁵ Tadesse Wolde Aragay's close relationship with the patriarch began when Tadesse's work caught *Abuna Paulos*' eye at an exhibition held at the Hilton Hotel in Addis Ababa.³⁰⁶ The emperor Haile Selassie noticed Alle Felleghie Selam, when he was a young man. Not only did this discovery result in him getting a scholarship to study art in the United States, it also built his reputation as a painter of churches.

Knowledge, Judgment and Personal Discretion

By virtue of their station, priests embody the cumulative traditions and theological knowledge of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.³⁰⁷ Consequently, these churchmen are considered the repositories of knowledge concerning the sacred literary tradition. There are instances when this is not the case, but only in exceptional circumstances. Sometimes patrons happen to be extremely learned people of the church and perhaps are themselves priests.

³⁰⁴ Tadesse Yemane Berhan, (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁰⁵ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁰⁶ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁰⁷ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Abuna Garima* (archbishop, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Aleka Abba Haregweyan* (monk and administrator, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

In the case of a priest commissioning a painting, it is standard practice for another priest to both judge and bless the painting.

As a result of this practice, there is almost always a separate priest whose duty it is to judge and bless the painting. This is also the case if a priest is the painter. The priest/painter would only create the painting while another priest would have to judge and bless the image. An example of this is if a commission involved a priest/patron and a priest/painter, the proper procedure is to have another priest judge and bless the painting despite the presence of two other priests. They studied at monasteries and churches, received formal education in the scriptures and doctrines of the Church and have undertaken independent study of other ecclesiastical topics. In addition to knowing various hagiographies, priests generally have an extensive knowledge about the liturgy,³⁰⁸ religious eulogies³⁰⁹ and various types of religious music.³¹⁰

While they tend to be knowledgeable about the scriptural traditions, very few priests have had any formal education in art and the Ethiopian Orthodox visual tradition.³¹¹ The only characteristic that priests know about the stylistic aspects of sacred art is what they notice around them in the church and what they have as personal possessions. Even the prestigious Trinity Seminary in *Arat Kilo* in Addis Ababa offers no classes on the subject of religious imagery in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Ketsella Markos stated that for a brief period he taught the seminary students about Ethiopian Orthodox paintings. According to him, no opportunities for students of divinity to receive a formal education about sacred paintings have been available.³¹² Of the ten priests who were interviewed, only one took a workshop in religious imagery of

³⁰⁸ In Amharic this is known as the *keddasse*.

³⁰⁹ This includes such texts as the *Wuddasse Mariyam* and the *Malka Mariyam*.

³¹⁰ This is called *zima* and includes such musical categories as *tsome dougwa* and *dougwa*.

³¹¹ *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Haile Mikayel* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Abba Gebrä Sellassie* (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Abba Miret Wallew* (monk, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³¹² Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

Oriental Christianity and another conducts independent study on the subject.³¹³ The latter priest, *Kes Taddesse Shumiye*, reads on the topic and during the interview referred to the copious notes he had taken while conducting his independent research. Aside from these two exceptions, when a priest judges an image, they are largely viewing it from the perspective of a visual interpretation of textual tradition.

The lack of standardization in the judgment of paintings can lead to conflicts among priests as well as difficulty for both the patrons and painters. Alternatively, the potential for inconsistency can also open opportunities for artists to reinterpret and even deviate from the prevailing visual tradition. While priests are invariably very strict about an image's adherence to the textual traditions, the opinions of priests, in regards to the formal aspects of a painting, can vary greatly. The priest, *Kes Haile Mikayel*, stated that in order for him to consider a painting acceptable, it must conform strictly to the textual traditions and that he also strongly relies on stylistic precedent³¹⁴ when judging the appearance of the painting. If it deviates too much, the painting would be rejected.³¹⁵ Another priest, *Aleka Abba Haregweyan*, when asked how he would judge a painting stylistically stated that style was of no importance. It was only the images correct visual interpretation of textual tradition that mattered.³¹⁶

Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai made one very revealing statement in the interview. I asked him to compare two paintings depicting the archangel St. Uriel. One painting was visually grounded in the legacy of the *Second Gondarine* style. The other painting was modern stylistically and technically modern because of the way the artist applied the paint to the canvas, with its thick impasto in

³¹³ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Taddesse Shumiye* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³¹⁴ This 'stylistic precedent' is made up of the paintings that this priest has seen in churches previous to the judgment of a painting.

³¹⁵ *Kes Haile Mikayel* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³¹⁶ *Aleka Abba Haregweyan* (monk and administrator, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

the same manner as Vincent van Gogh in contrast to the smooth surface found on traditional Ethiopian paintings. Despite the fact that images were visually very dissimilar, *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai* used the word “traditional” to describe both of these paintings.³¹⁷ I was initially surprised by his response, but I understood nonetheless. For him the tradition lay in the visual depiction of text. If the image conformed to the texts, it was then traditional. The priest pointed at another painting that also was supposed to depict St. Uriel. Although the painting stylistically roughly followed the prevailing visual tradition influenced by the *Second Gondarine Style*, he stated that it was not traditional and correct because it deviated from tradition. The figure in the painting instead bore a closer resemblance to Jesus Christ rather than an angel and therefore was not a correct portrayal of St. Uriel.³¹⁸

While *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai* was open-minded about style, other priests are more discerning. For example, *Kes Tadesse Shumiye*, a priest at the recently rebuilt church, *Medhané Elem, Bolé*, not far from Bolé Airport in Addis Ababa, said that in the old church that stood previously, was a painting of the Virgin Mary that troubled him greatly. Although the image conformed to textual traditions, he found it stylistically repulsive. He described this painting as being too “*segawi*”³¹⁹ and wanted the painting to be obliterated. He chose not to pursue the obliteration of this painting because the structure was going to be demolished anyway and the rebuilt church would be painted with images that would conform to his requirements.³²⁰ This experience highlighted the variety of opinion among priests concerning style. One quality that they all preferred in a painting was that it had to be *menfasawi*³²¹ and inspire spiritual thoughts in those that look upon the image.

³¹⁷ *Kes gebez Nahu Sanai* (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³¹⁸ *Kes gebez Nahu Sanai* (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³¹⁹ Fleshy and naturalistic

³²⁰ *Kes Tadesse Shumiye* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³²¹ Spiritual

The interview with *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai* that took place in the treasure room of the church *Kiddus Uriyel* in the *Kazanjes* portion of Addis Ababa was very revealing. Many of the objects in this room were given to this church in fulfillment of *sīlet*. These paintings were also among these objects used in the fulfillment of *sīlet*. In order for them to be accepted by the Church and be placed in the treasure room, these *sīlet* paintings were judged and then blessed. Oddly, one of the paintings in the room did not conform to the textual traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It was accepted because a painting is not only judged as to how well it conforms to textual traditions and visual tradition, but what function it will serve after it is given to a priest. A painting given in good faith that will be hidden away in a treasure room is unlikely to expose the congregation to this error as an image painted on the interior of a church.³²² In the end no hard and fast rules exist regarding the judgment process and the exact criteria that all paintings given to a church must meet. What can also be derived from this example is the reasoning process that takes place in the minds of priests who take the whole picture of the circumstances surrounding the patronage and submission of a painting into consideration.

Memher Abba Tekesta Berhan elucidated why this differentiation exists. He stated that religious imagery could be divided into two categories. The first category of sacred paintings is for perpetuity. Paintings that fall into this category are paintings used in churches and manuscript illumination. These types of sacred paintings are usually strictly judged. The second category of paintings is one that meets the current needs of the faithful. This includes paintings used for the fulfillment of *sīlet* and minor types of religious art, such as playing card sized factory produced pictures of saints.

Some these playing card sized images of saints are blessed and are then *sacred images*, but many are not and can be used in the process of visualisation of a saint while conducting prayers. While a person can attempt

³²² *Kes gebez* Nahu Sanai (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

to plead for divine intervention while using a *religious image* that is not a *sacred image*, according to the official doctrines of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, it is of no use. The beliefs of the users of these images do not always strictly conform to official Church doctrine and members of the faithful can believe that it is not important for the image to have been blessed by a priest³²³.

These images are usually not judged so harshly. *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan said that as long as these images were not either grossly incorrect or offensive, the priest usually accepts them “naively”.³²⁴ The same is true for religious images that are factory produced, which can be described as being transient and disposable. They are not viewed as art for future generations, but are inexpensive, but useful alternatives for the present time.

While this differentiation between different types of religious imagery is pragmatic and serves the needs of many Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, it does lead to confusion for many as to how the Ethiopian Orthodox Church wants the saints to be portrayed. According to the patriarch’s art advisor, Tadesse Wolde Aragay, the outer clothes of the Virgin Mary are supposed to be blue according to the canons of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. A significant number of people, including priests are not sure whether the Virgin Mary’s outer cloths are blue or red because while the traditional Ethiopian images depict Her in blue outer clothes, many of the factory produced images of the Virgin Mary that are based on Greek Orthodox images depict Her in red outer clothes.

Although the judgment of a priest about the suitability of a painting is generally not contested, some artists feel compelled to defend their work. The painters present the textual traditions upon which they based their creative decisions and use quotes from those texts in order to defend their

³²³ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³²⁴ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

case. On rare occasions a priest would decide that the painter's evidence is sufficient, retract his initial conclusion, and then bless the painting.³²⁵ Most of the time, priests hold fast to their decision and refuse to bless the painting.

While a priest may not know every single detail that a sacred image should include, such as the different gold adornments on the Virgin Mary's garments, they have concrete opinions about how a painting should look. While some priests are open to styles that deviate from the prevailing visual tradition, they generally prefer paintings that are stylistically close to the *Second Gondarine* style. Priests also often prefer paintings that are spiritual in appearance or *menfasawi* in nature. Although there have been paintings done in a Baroque style that have been deemed acceptable such as Alle Felleghe Selam's depiction of the Last Judgment at Trinity Cathedral, most priests prefer images that are less *segawi* or naturalistic.³²⁶ Despite the fact that stylistic issues play some role in the judgment process of the priest, the most important quality to the priest is the image's conformity to textual tradition and that the image can be defended primarily by textual evidence.³²⁷

³²⁵ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³²⁶ Kes Taddesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³²⁷ Aleka Abba Haregweyan (monk and administrator) in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Chapter 5: The Patronage Process According to the Tripartite Pattern

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with a picture of how the patronage process is actually carried out in Addis Ababa. Currently, a limited number of academic sources touch upon the subject of the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox religious imagery. That being said, none provided a complete account of what occurs during the patronage process from beginning to end. The content of this chapter is based on actual events that occur during a typical commissioning of a painting. Understanding the entire patronage process provides a complete picture of this art historical phenomenon through the use of indigenous input that contributes to the integrity of this study.

The frequent involvement of priests in various portions of the process is fundamental in the creation of religious paintings. Although they invariably serve as judges of an image's theological integrity, priests also provide information, insight and reassurance for patrons and painters before and throughout the course of the production process. Their direct and indirect involvement ensures the success of the commission. The central role of the priest in the patronage process is pivotal in this thesis due to the critical magnitude of theological integrity in the works commissioned in the circumstances covered in this study.

The Shape of the Patronage Process

While analyzing the information in my field notes on art patronage, something became apparent. Despite the fact that different cases varied to a certain degree, they shared an overall shape. My gathered data revealed discernable stages in the course of the patronage process that were part of the overall flow of this social dynamic. As a result of my inquiry, I have determined that a total of six stages characterize the patronage process from beginning to end.

These six stages include 1) shaping the motive of the commission, 2) the consultation, 3) the commencement of the commission, 4) the creative process, 5) the completion of the painting and 6) the judgment. These six

stages can be found in the majority of cases except when a cleric may not find the commissioned painting acceptable and therefore would not give it his blessing. If this happens, an additional seventh stage in the patronage process would have to be added involving the painter reconciling this failure with the patron.

Shaping the Motive for the Commission

Although this portion of the patronage process occurs before any contact between the patron and painter takes place, it is a crucial point in the process. It is at this time when potential patrons are intending to further their relationship with the holy. A patron's desire to commission a religious painting involves twofold reasoning. A person may wish for a miracle to occur to them in the future as a gesture of gratitude for divine intervention on the patron's behalf.³²⁸ While there may be mystical reasons for commissioning new paintings for churches, the need to commission a religious painting may be accompanied by other motives, such as a desire to beautify a place for which a patron has a strong personal connection. Some patrons do not attach their motivation to a specific reason. Instead, they describe their motivation for commissioning a religious painting as a God-driven calling.³²⁹

Paintings are offered to churches as a form of begging, an act of faith, a commemorative devotion. They take a place in the liturgy, serving as a support to prayer and as a kind of blackboard teaching the message of the Gospels. If they prove to be miraculous, nothing is impossible for them.³³⁰

What differentiates sacred and secular paintings made purely for visual enjoyment is that sacred paintings serve as tools to facilitate people's relationship with the holy and contribute to their protection and salvation. In addition to being a bi-product of the living tradition, sacred images are an integral part of liturgical life and a means for its perpetuation. Sacred

³²⁸ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003; *Kes Taddesse* Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³²⁹ Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³³⁰ Mercier: 1997, 79.

paintings do this in three ways. They are visualizations of the divine, serve as a channel between people and the denizens of heaven and are used as votive offerings.

Visualization of the Divine

Some of the earliest surviving examples of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings illustrated holy texts as well as adorn the interiors of church buildings. It would be easy to view these images simply as texts for the illiterate, but that would be an oversimplification of their significance. These paintings are not the hand-servants of scripture, but equals in the liturgical life of the Church. As equal companions, they embody a holistic summation of the living tradition, which incorporates scripture, oral tradition and the interpretation of both of these sources by the collective mind of the Church represented by the priest. It should be remembered again that what makes these paintings sacred is his blessing. As already discussed, the priest will only bless an image if it is consistent with the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. A sacred painting is therefore an authorized vehicle of understanding the living tradition that is ideally free from deviation from ecclesiastical dogma.

In the *Sämbät Timhirt(ibet)* and other types of religious education that occurs in the various parish churches and cathedrals in Addis Ababa, people of all ages learn about elementary aspects of ecclesiastical tradition.³³¹ Among other aspects of the observance of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith, those who attend these classes are given opportunities to learn about the acts of the saints. Images of saints are used as an illustration for the story being told about the saint and concepts associated with the religious narrative. For example, the teacher can explain the contents of the *Dersana Mikayel* and show an image of Saint Michael vanquishing Satan to reinforce it. The

³³¹ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

teacher could also use this image to emphasize the power of the armies of God and their ability to triumph over evil.³³²

These images are also used to teach about characteristics of saints that cannot be found in any text, but are commonly transmitted through images as part of the visual tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.³³³ When learning from a teacher about the acts of Saint Tekla Haymanot, students may hear about his ascetic acts. Additionally, in a sacred image, they see the saint undergo great feats of endurance in a state of perfect serenity. The *Gadla Tekla Haymanot* (see figure 18), or the life and acts of Saint Tekla Haymanot, it is mentioned that this saint stood for such a long time that one of his legs withered. In the image, students can see the leg that fell from the saint's body and even see a depiction of this leg sprouting wings and flying to heaven before the saint does.

Some of the oldest surviving examples of the sacred paintings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are illuminated manuscripts. For many, they appear simplistic in their style, but they represent the beginning of the long heritage of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings. The tradition of illuminating manuscripts continues to this day in Addis Ababa. Painters, such as Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew, can be seen with a book that contains hand written script and blank pages. On these pages, the artist paints in the illustrations for these manuscripts.

³³² The archangel, Saint Michael is seen as the commander of the divine armies of God on whose strength are legions of angels

³³³ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne (teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with author, April 2003.



Twentieth century icon of Kīddus Tekla Haymanot (fig. 18)³³⁴

³³⁴ Betsy Porter, Online, http://www.betsyporter.com/images/E_St_Takla_Haymanot_JT.JPG. (June 2, 2011)

In addition to the use of sacred images as visual aids for *Sämbät Timhört(ïbet)* and as illustrations for religious texts, they also serve as liturgical decoration for the interiors of churches. These sacred paintings in ecclesiastical structures are also part of the process of visualizing the holy. Just like religious scripture, sacred paintings also illustrate the liturgy. The liturgy is a holistic means of catechesis that involves all of the senses, including the eyes, in this mystagogic process. The sung and spoken words are important elements as well. In this context, sacred images serve two main functions. They adjust the perception of the viewer toward a mystical mindset as well as enveloping this person's psyche within a space serving as a sanctified didactic resource that communicates the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The interiors of Ethiopian Orthodox churches are designed to be the setting for the profound and mystical event of the Eucharist. It is a sacred space set apart from the outside world by its use and its appearance. Ideally, all aspects of a church's interior are designed to assist in the process of directing the psyche to a liturgical frame of mind. The often dazzling array of the images of saints and religious narratives combine to unfold the grand drama of the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the liturgy. An example of this holistic liturgical experience is the preparatory process conducted before the faithful enter the space within the church. It includes asceticism and prayer combined with the removal of one's shoes. The separation from the outside world and the sacred space of the church building is made definite in the mind of the participant heightened by the throngs of people outside of the church precinct who see themselves as unworthy of entering into such a holy place. The effect is otherworldly and further amplified by numerous images of saints and angels. Collective prayer, hymns and the swirling smoke of burning incense further enhance this religious event amidst the staring eyes of the heavenly assembly rendered on the walls of the house of worship.

In such an environment, not only can worshippers hear in the liturgy about the significance of the Virgin Mary.³³⁵ They can see the life of the Virgin Mary and the miraculous events associated with Her. During the liturgy, the congregation does not only hear about the Holy Trinity, but they see within the church the official manner of envisioning this divine concept, which involve three identical patriarchal figures in a row. Through words, the congregation during the liturgy will hear of the three parts of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God. By way of the sacred painting, the congregation sees the threefold nature of the Holy Trinity as well as its unity through uniformity.

The kinds of paintings within the church, and their location in this space, are not left to the discretion of individuals. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church more precisely, its representative in the parish, the priest, regulates the placement of images. These rules ensure a coherent, correct and consistent portrayal of the living tradition. When going from one church building to another, a person can see some consistency in the arrangement of these images. The consistency of imagery contributes to a consistency in the message conveyed by these images.

Even in a church that cannot afford to cover its interior with images, certain images must be present. For example a depiction of the Holy Trinity must hang over the western entrance into *kiddist*³³⁶ of the church. Another example of essential images that are required to be present in a church includes the Virgin Mary and Christ Child on the altar.³³⁷

Portal into the Divine

The previous section of this chapter described the use of sacred paintings essentially as illustrations for the written and unwritten traditions of the

³³⁵ Mercer: 1970, 321.

³³⁶ This is the Amharic word for the Holy of Holies of the church where the altar is, which is separated from the rest of the church with a screen where only the priests and deacons involved in the carrying out of the liturgy are allowed.

³³⁷ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002; Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

Church; this section deals with an aspect of sacred painting that is more mystical. One elucidating statement made by Stanislaw Chojnacki about the panel paintings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church can shed some light on this point.

They may properly be termed icons, in the sense that they are believed to be permeated with the spiritual presence of the saints and in particular of the Virgin Mary. Prayers made to an icon are believed to be offered directly to a specific saint or to the Virgin Mary. The icon can thereby elicit either a blessing on the righteous or punishment to wrong-doers.³³⁸

This belief that saints can act through sacred paintings sheds light not only on their didactic role, but also reveals why the confessed behave in a certain manner when interacting with these sacred paintings. This can involve acts of respect such as bowing and the giving of votive offerings to the image.

Trust in her with all your hearts without doubting because she is your salvation. Prostrate yourselves before her icon. As for him who does not prostrate himself before her, may he be obliterated from his standing, and may the memory of his name go into oblivion. May all the angels in heaven say, 'Amen'.³³⁹

Sacred images are used as portals leading to the holy and divine. One source of textual evidence that these images are traditionally seen as portals into the divine is in the *Sinkessar*. On the tenth day of the Ethiopian month of *Maskaram*, concerning the acts of the Virgin Mary, an entry describes a sacred painting of the Virgin Mary protecting a man from thieves and at a later time sweat and oil came out of the same painting. In the *Gadla Marha Krestos*, it is written that the Virgin Mary spoke to him through a sacred painting.³⁴⁰

This passage from the *Sinkessar* emphasizes that the sacred image is a means for the power of the saint to interact with the earthly sphere. This

³³⁸ Chojnacki: 2000, 20.

³³⁹ Haile: 1992, 4.

³⁴⁰ Kur: 1972, 38.

particular story involves a full sized icon through which the Virgin Mary protected the holder. Other types of icons, such as those worn around the neck, serve the same function. The only difference is that they are smaller, roughly the size of a man's hand when closed. In addition to the outside of this small variety of icon being decorated with carvings, the top of the icon allows for the user to affix a cord to the icon and therefore wear it around the neck of the person as a protective amulet.

Another way to determine whether sacred paintings serve as portals into the divine is to look at the human behavior associated with these images. Once again, the writings of Jacques Mercier provide a clue. Professor Goha-Tsebah, whom Mercier quoted, stated that the blessing of the cleric resulted in a change in the painted image. He stated that while the apparent form of the painting, which can be determined through the human senses, does not change as a result of the cleric's blessing, a more intrinsic transformation takes place. Goha-Tsebah mentions that it is the nature of the painting that changes when it is blessed.³⁴¹

According to Marcel Griaule, quoting a cleric and painter from Gondar, an empowered sacred painting "...speaks and it also cures."³⁴² With this perceived change in the nature of a painting, a change in the expectations of people who interact with it becomes evident. Mercier states that images that have been blessed and are perceived to be sacred are veiled.³⁴³ In Addis Ababa, I frequently visited churches and found this to be a common practice. If someone prays before the image, they can lift the veil and cover the image with this veil when he or she has finished using it. Due to the enormous size of wall paintings found in many churches, large curtains are used to cover these paintings. When the liturgy is taking place, the curtains are moved aside so that the paintings of the various saints are visible. After the liturgy is finished, the wall paintings are once again covered with the large curtains out

³⁴¹ Mercier: 1997, 74.

³⁴² Mercier [quoting interview conducted by Marcel Griaule on 12 November 1994]: 1997, 72.

³⁴³ Mercier: 1997, 74.

of respect for the saints they depict. This kind of behavior highlights the extraordinary reverence held for these paintings.

The painter and conservator Ketsella Markos described another ethnographic example of the perceived nature of sacred paintings. He explained that many women, when praying to the Virgin Mary, would dab the image with perfume as an offering.³⁴⁴ These women, through the application of perfume on the sacred painting, are in essence placing the scent on the Virgin Mary herself. The use of these images as portals into the divine is not limited to offerings. It is common for people to pray individually before them. Sometimes people recite prayers from their memory, while others may use a book of prayers and recite from its pages as part of a dialogue with the holy.³⁴⁵ Giving offerings to sacred images is not unique to the act of personal devotion while using an icon. The same can be seen during the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgy. During the liturgy in what is referred to as the “Little Entrance” after the preparation of the devices of the Eucharist and the vesting of the priest, incense is burned.³⁴⁶ At this point in the liturgy, the incense smoke is spread over the altar and throughout the interior of the church. Interestingly, the icons that are inside the church are also censed. According to Mercer’s translation of the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgy, the priest says

I will offer unto thee incense with rams; all thy garments smell of myrrh aloes and cassia; let my prayer be set forth in thy sight as incense. Yet again we offer unto thee this incense.³⁴⁷

and

Accept of me my prayer, that the incense in thy presence, gift of the Father, present of the Son, communion of the Holy Ghost, even now may ascend to thee; and praise to our Lady Mary, mother of God, lover of the prophets and true apostles and martyrs and fathers of old, be with me and all of you.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁴ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

³⁴⁵ “Debella” (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

³⁴⁶ Mercer: 1997, 230.

³⁴⁷ Mercer: 1997, 321.

³⁴⁸ Mercer: 1997, 321.

As was the case with the icons that were anointed with perfume these images that are used in the liturgy are anointed with incense as an offering. As can be seen in the content of the prayers stated by the priest, the incense is "...an acceptable offering"³⁴⁹ to God, the Virgin Mary and the saints. This offering of incense is received by the denizens of heaven through the sacred paintings in the church.

Another example regarding the nature of sacred paintings relates to the use of small icons worn around a person's neck. The majority of these images are diptychs that can be closed so that the depictions of the saints inside are hidden and protected. According to Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew, this kind of image is used as a type of talisman. He stated that although this image can provide protection for the wearer, it also must be treated with respect.³⁵⁰

The artist provided an example. If the wearer of this icon wishes to have sexual intercourse, he or she must take off the neck icon and place it a distance away from where the act will take place. A common thing to do is to put the neck icon in another room. After the wearer is finished with the act, he or she must not wear the icon for several days afterwards and may only wear the icon after they thoroughly wash themselves.³⁵¹ This procedure is evidence of the respect held for these types of images and most of all respect shown to the saint whose presence through the image protects the wearer from danger as was described in the Sinkessar.

Votive Use of Sacred Paintings

Images can also be used as offerings to God and the saints. The reasons why people commission a painting or paintings that would be used as an

³⁴⁹ Mercer: 1997, 324.

³⁵⁰ Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁵¹ Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

offering vary greatly, but the purpose for these offerings is to earn the favor of God and the saints. This is closely tied to the strong belief among many adherents to the Ethiopian Orthodox faith that by establishing a covenant with a saint, these divine entities would act on behalf of the devotee. This process is called *sīlet* in Ethiopia. In *sīlet* many different things can be offered in order to fulfill a covenant with a saint, involving objects such as liturgical vestments, carpets or candles. If a person is particularly poor, they can offer their services as a manual laborer to a church dedicated to the appropriate saint. Despite these other options regarding the type of *sīlet* the faithful could offer the Church, the offering of sacred paintings is still common.

Patrons, who wish to call for intercession from a particular saint, can go to any church and pray to the saint and ask this saint for assistance. This covenant could involve the devotee telling the saint what the problem is. If this request is seen as fulfilled the devotee would commission a painting in honor of that saint. This painting would be a depiction of the relevant saint who is thought to have granted the miracle. This painting would then be presented to a church that is dedicated to the miracle-working saint and offered to the priest as a fulfillment of the covenant. For example, if a person prayed to the Virgin Mary for a miracle and the miracle was perceived to have occurred, the devotee could give a painting of the Virgin Mary to a church dedicated to that saint, such as *Debra Tsion Kiddist Mariyam* in Addis Ababa.

There have been great examples of *sīlet* that take the form of entire churches. Addis Ababa has few churches that were commissioned by Emperor Menelik II during the late 19th and early 20th century. One includes the church dedicated to Saint George in *Piazza*, which was built in thanks for the saint's intervention on behalf of the Ethiopians during the battle of Adwa in 1896. For most adherents of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, funding the creation of a new church would be unrealistic. Instead, the most common type of *sīlet* painting would consist of an oil on canvas image that is often no larger than six feet in height and three feet in width.

When the painting is given to the saint's namesake church, it is presented to a cleric. The priest decides if the image is an appropriate offering. If it is accepted by the cleric, he will give his blessing to the image and the person who gave the image to the church, and whose name is written in the church's register of donors. The image usually is then deposited into the treasure room of the church and used according to the discretion of the priest. If a person wishes to take part in *sīlet*, but is uncertain of what to do or even what painter they could hire, they go to a priest who will guide them through the process. Priests even recommend painters to the donor.³⁵² These *sīlet* paintings are both presented framed or detached from their stretcher and rolled for convenience.³⁵³ Despite the popularity of the oil on canvas paintings, other options are available. One option is Taddesse Wolde Aragay's paintings on animal skin. They are much smaller than the typical size of the oil on canvas paintings, but are seen as acceptable by clerics in the fulfillment of *sīlet*.³⁵⁴ No matter what kind of *sīlet* offering is involved, from the beginning to the end of the patronage process, priests are willing to help the patron in the commissioning of new sacred works while emphasizing the importance of forming and fulfilling covenants with the communion of saints.³⁵⁵ The priest would also know what kinds of new paintings are needed in the church or which ones need replacing due to age or damage. If the patron decides to follow through with the commissioning of a painting, they hear the priest's recommendation for a painter, or the patron is allowed to choose another one.³⁵⁶

When discussing the replacement of old and damaged paintings in churches, it has to be understood that sacred paintings have to be in suitable condition to fulfill their religious function. A sacred painting is not seen as adequate when the image of a saint is obscured from damage. Despite the fact that

³⁵² Kes Tayé Tessama (priest), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Kes Taddesse Shumiye (priest), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁵³ Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁵⁴ Taddesse Wolde Aragay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁵⁵ Kes Tayé Tessama (priest), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁵⁶ Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

government agencies of Ethiopia would like to preserve these old paintings, the usual path taken by parishes is that the decrepit paintings are replaced with new ones.³⁵⁷ To an outsider, this may sound like a culture that is disrespectful to its own artistic heritage. It should be understood though that despite the pride that the *Habesha* have for their artistic heritage, the concept of art preservation remains alien to many. These sacred paintings are seen as being functional objects, which serve in the process of coping with problems faced in this world and hope for salvation in the next. If the content of the painting is obscured, its functionality is compromised. In the mind of many priests, this diminished functionality necessitates the creation of a new painting.³⁵⁸ Unfortunately for those who wish to see the preservation of these older paintings, such as conservators Ketsella Markos and Taddesse Wolde Aragay, this practice of replacing old paintings with new ones continues throughout most of the country. It is an ongoing struggle in Ethiopia, which involves finding a middle ground that both protects the nation's artistic heritage and meets the religious needs of the parishes. One thing that can be said though is that this desire to replace older images with new ones contributes to the continuing survival of this age-old artistic tradition even in the face of the modernization of Ethiopian urban centers, such as Addis Ababa.

The Consultation

For experienced and/or confident patrons, they require little assistance in order to begin the patronage process. Other patrons, particularly those who have never commissioned a sacred painting or are intimidated by the affair, can consult others before they begin the commission. This consultation can work in two major ways. Firstly, it reassures an individual that the act of art patronage is as beneficial as religious devotion. A consultation can also help to locate a painter whose work has withstood the judgment of a priest.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷ Taddesse Wolde Aragay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁵⁸ Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁵⁹ Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003; Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

While the reasons for commissioning a sacred painting tend to be personal, external reinforcement can either come from friends or clerics.³⁶⁰ Friends can play an important role as a source of encouragement. In the case of anonymous patron 'B', the patron's friend not only reinforced this individual's resolve to commission a sacred painting, but also suggested the artist through which the commission could be completed.³⁶¹

In this particular case, the patron's friend told this person that a particular church was in need of an altarpiece. The altarpiece had to be a representation of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child on canvas mounted on a gold colored frame. Anonymous patron 'B' considered this need to be a serendipitous opportunity to contribute to the church and therefore earn the divine grace of God.³⁶² Even though friends and acquaintances can be helpful sources of information, their knowledge can be limited. Someone who wants to commission a large-scale project may find that information received from a friend insufficient, lacking crucial insights, such as how to raise the substantial sums of money required for a large-scale painting.

As helpful as friends can be, priests feel it is their duty to encourage people to cultivate their relationship with the holy through a variety of means including the commissioning of sacred paintings.³⁶³ When a cleric counsels a potential patron, the importance of the intercessional powers of the saints is strongly emphasized. Indeed, priests, such as *Kes Taye Tessama*, recommends to people who are intent on commissioning a sacred painting to consult him first before they begin the patronage process.³⁶⁴ Many clerics in Addis Ababa are aware of the painters of sacred images who work in the area and know what kind of work they do. Through a combination of personal

³⁶⁰ Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Taye Tessama* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁶¹ Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁶² Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁶³ *Kes Tadesse Shumiye* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Taye Tessama* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁶⁴ *Kes Taye Tessama* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

experience as well as word-of-mouth from the clerics and laity, clergymen are generally savvy about which painters are preferable over others and which one is most appropriate for a particular type of commission. Additionally, the priest would explain how commissioning sacred paintings further assists the patron in his or her process of obtaining divine grace and salvation.³⁶⁵ Not only does a patron's consultation with others help fortify their resolve to follow through with the patronage process it is also an opportunity for the potential patron to learn about the process. Commissioning a work of art can result in some anxiety despite the patron's pious motives. One important bit of inside knowledge that potential patrons could learn from a priest is that not all paintings are judged equally. Paintings that are located in the interior of a church are judged more stringently than a *sīlet* painting that will be stored in a treasure room and perhaps never used for either devotional or liturgical purposes, but serving only as a votive offering.³⁶⁶

With all that priests can provide a potential patron, they are a tremendous resource for contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox art in the city of Addis Ababa. In addition to general information about artists and their work, clerics will sometimes offer positive and negative opinions about painters. Even though this type of information may either seem to be a particular priest's subjective opinions, they remain valuable because they tend to represent views that are widely held among priests who would make significant impacts on outcomes of the patronage process.³⁶⁷

Patronage comes in the form of committees. They can also benefit from consulting with informed laity and priests. Committees whose members become patrons usually only form when a large commission is undertaken,

³⁶⁵ *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁶⁶ *Memher Abba Tekesta Berhan* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁶⁷ *Memher Fisseha Tseyon Tegegne* (teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Taye Tessema* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Kes Tadesse Shumiye* (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru*, interview; *Assefa Gebre* (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

such as the painting of the interior of a church. A case where this occurred was at the cathedral, *Addisu Mikayel* near *Awtobus Terra* in *Markato*, where a large portion of the interior was being painted with images of saints.³⁶⁸ Any commission that involves filling a church with liturgical images can be a sizable project that would require both the resources and the approval of a large body of notables representing the parish, diocese and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as a whole. Making this already substantial project even more of a feat is that this particular church building itself is one of the largest in Ethiopia.³⁶⁹ Not only large cathedrals form committees when commissioning sacred paintings. Any parish church can form a committee when it wants to carry out a large scale commission so that financial resources can be pulled together. Committees also ensure that the resulting decision made by the patron will be met with consensual approval, which would prevent future conflicts. While a committee's consultation with experts may prevent future problems concerning commissioned paintings, this does not completely guarantee that complications would not arise in the future regarding arguments over theological integrity and stylistic appropriateness.

In the case of *Addisu Mikayel*, the famous painter Alle Felleghes Selam painted its interior. Unfortunately, as mentioned before, the painting that resulted was met with contempt by both clerics and members of the congregation. Regardless of the ability and exalted reputation of the painter, influential clerics and members of the laity felt that the work was overly *segawi* or naturalistic and lacking in spiritual, mystical or otherworldly appearance. Because of this, the painting was seen as deficient in theological integrity. This dissent eventually led to the obliteration of most of Alle Felleghes Selam's work in this church. Alle Felleghes Selam's paintings were then replaced by the paintings of Mengistu Cherenet.

³⁶⁸ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁶⁹ While the research was being conducted for this thesis, another church, *Medhané Elem*, *Bolé* was being constructed, which is widely considered to be an even larger church that reflects both the size of the population and the relative wealth in that parish.

While the process of consultation did take place, it was not conducted in a fashion that adequately included the parties whose opinions and influence were equally strong in the diocese about how the paintings should look. Indeed it is not always possible to anticipate the source of dissent about the appearance of a painting by the committee, even after consultation, whether it is from a cleric currently posted to the church or even one that will be posted in the future. There is a chance that a future priest may find paintings in his church, which are drastically inconsistent with his own perception of how religious paintings should appear.³⁷⁰ This kind of potential conflict could also result in the obliteration of paintings and the commissioning of new ones.

Their selection of a painter can either be the result of the choice of one specific artist that the committee collectively agreed upon or alternatively the committee can hold a juried competition.³⁷¹ In the former, the committee would likely choose a painter who was already well known and that a priest might recommend. With a juried competition, the committee makes a call for artists to submit work for the committee to critique. As much as the committee is a body of authority figures who raise money and make decisions, they are also a group that would be involved in the consultation of 'experts' such as clerics, a previous patron or a renowned art advisor with a strong background in both the Ethiopian Orthodox visual tradition and the patronage process.

The former manner of selecting a painter requires the artist to already have an established reputation so that either members of the laity or clergy could recommend the artist. Generally speaking, the juried competition provides an opportunity for relatively unknown painters to have their work seen by the committee. In response to the invitation to enter into the competition, painters from around Addis Ababa and beyond submit a small painting of a saint as a masterpiece. This sample painting would often depict a particular saint or

³⁷⁰ Kes Taddesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁷¹ Taddesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

religious narrative determined by the committee.³⁷² This masterpiece would win the famous artist yet another commission or even open doors for the lesser known painters to a successful career as a painter of sacred images in churches.³⁷³

As a whole, consultation, as discussed, is a process that informs patrons how to carry out a commission and helps to select a painter who would create an image with sufficient theological integrity to pass the critique of a priest. While friends and acquaintances can help at this stage, it is members of the priesthood who are most able to help potential patrons. Even though few priests admit to being knowledgeable about art *per se*, sacred images are as much a part of their lives as are sacred texts. From their constant exposure and use of these images, the clerics develop a sense of what in a painting is consistent with ecclesiastical tradition. They also develop and express their opinions about what style best captures the almost indefinable, but still crucial quality of being *menfasawi* and therefore in possession spiritual beauty. Their extensive exposure to religious art further reinforces their integral role in the patronage of sacred paintings as a whole. In addition to being one who judges the correctness of the painting and give the image his blessing, according to the findings of this study, the cleric serves as a source of information. This further establishes clerics as a nexus in the patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings.

The Commencement of the Commission

At this point the individual patron or a church committee contacts the painter and formally begins the patronage process. A telephone call arranges a meeting between the patron and the painter. The meeting accomplishes several things. From the outset, patrons express their needs to the painter. This discussion can include which saint the patron wants to see painted as well as what size the patron wants the painting to be. Moreover the patron

³⁷² Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁷³ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

can state what media they desire, such as wooden panel, canvas or parchment. The contractual agreement between the patron and painter is strictly verbal and does not involve a written document signed by both parties. Instead of signing a written contract, a handshake is all that is needed to make the agreement binding.

Regarding commissions relating to churches a number unwritten facets of ecclesiastical tradition pertain to the depiction of saints in all paintings. Furthermore, special rules dictate what painting can go where in the interior of the building. The majority of patrons, except for perhaps a learned clergyman, will not exactly know this information. All good painters of sacred art do possess this kind of knowledge. For example, the artist would know that in the northern portion of the church in *kene mahelet*,³⁷⁴ where the adult and married men reside, images of martyrs and angels adorn the walls. On the southern side of the *kene mahelet*, where the women are, depictions of the life and miracles of the Virgin Mary appear. In this case the location of religious paintings within the interior of the church is dictated by the painter in accordance with tradition.³⁷⁵ In the case of commissions involving the painting of the interiors of churches, artists will commonly go to the church, study the space that needs to be painted and determine the subject and size of the paintings.³⁷⁶

In most cases the painter determines how the religious narrative will be rendered, although occasionally the patron determines what will be painted. A commission where the patron dictates the nature of the painting usually occurs when the patron is a priest because the cleric's theological knowledge surpasses that of the painter. While a priest would dictate how the religious narrative would be depicted, they do not interfere with a painter's style. By choosing an artist who paints in a particular way the patron determines the

³⁷⁴ This portion of the church is a part of the interior of the building that is furthest away from the altar.

³⁷⁵ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002; Ketsella Markos (painter) in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁷⁶ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

style, sometimes in consultation with a priest. This pre-emptive manner of determining the style is used rather than the patron attempting to change a painter's existing style.³⁷⁷

During this preliminary portion of the patronage process it is common for the painter to compose a sketch so that the patron can develop an idea of how the painting will look when it is finished. Like the patron, the painter wants the commission to go as smoothly as possible and will do anything in his powers to prevent a disagreement from occurring. As a means of avoiding conflicts while the sacred image is actually being painted, the painter commonly attempts to convey his ideas regarding the appearance of the completed painting. With these preliminary sketches and descriptions, patrons would know whether what the painter's work sufficiently appeals to the tastes of a particular patron. Though there is this opportunity for patrons to voice their opinions about how their commissioned painting should look, painters, such as Getachew Berhanu and Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew, rarely receive comments from patrons about changes to their original idea. In most cases, as Alle Felleghe Selam found during his extensive experience as a painter of sacred images, patrons tended to show deference to the knowledge, experience and opinion of the painter.³⁷⁸

Another way that painters help the patron visualize what the commissioned painting would look like when it is completed is to show photographs of past work. Painters are not the only participants who use photographs in the earliest stages of the patronage process. Patrons will sometimes use photographs to help them express what they want an artist to paint.³⁷⁹ Patrons typically know significantly less about paintings than painters and find it difficult to verbally express what they want in a painting. Although some painters would incorporate these preferred qualities seen in the photographs

³⁷⁷ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

³⁷⁸ Alle Felleghe Selam (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

³⁷⁹ "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

in their own painting, some go even farther by making a reproduction of a painting in a photograph presented by the patron.³⁸⁰

As accommodating as a painter tries to be, he would not act on requests made by the patron seen as detrimental to its theological integrity. An example of a painter refusing to grant a patron's request to paint a painting consistent with ecclesiastical tradition involved the painter who goes by the nickname of 'Debella'. A patron entered Debella's shop and requested a painting of Jesus Christ. There was nothing unusual about this request. Indeed many people do request paintings of Jesus Christ to be made for either private devotion or for *sīlet*. The request was different because the patron wanted the robes of Christ to be black, like those of a monk. Debella refused this request without hesitation. According to this painter, Christ is only to be portrayed with white robes and deviations from this tradition would be construed as irreverent disrespect in addition to resulting in a painting that would not receive the blessing of a priest.³⁸¹

I asked Debella if there were subjects that he would not paint out of principle even if he were to earn money from the commission. His response was that he would never paint a picture of an unvanquished devil even if he were offered money to do so.³⁸² He feels that a painter must not cross certain boundaries. The reason for this would not only be for the sake of his success as a painter of sacred images, but also to maintain the good will of God.³⁸³

³⁸⁰ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; I have personally witnessed Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew in both 2002 and 2003 copying paintings from photographs or from examples of works by other artists that he has in his shop. Gebra Kristos, while having his own style is also an adept copyist who can mimic the works of Gojjam artists or even other artists who work in Addis Ababa. Although he prefers to be left to his work while he is actually painting the image, he is willing to meet the demands of a patron during the instigation of the commission.

³⁸¹ "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

³⁸² In examples of sacred paintings, such as those of the Archangel Michael, there are depictions of devils, but these are seen as acceptable. In these types of religious narratives, the devil is shown as being beaten by an unquestionably victorious saint. What are seen as unacceptable are depictions of the devil as a figure of reverence or as victorious over the forces of God.

³⁸³ "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

Another example of a painter refusing to conform to the requests of a patron involved the famous painter Alle Felleghes Selam and Empress Menen, wife of Emperor Haile Selassie I at the church of *Kiddus Raguel* in the *Markato* portion of Addis Ababa. The empress commissioned a depiction of the *Crucifixion* at the church and she hired Alle Felleghes Selam, who was one of the court painters of the imperial family. As is the case in most commissions, at the beginning of the patronage process, they discussed what kind of painting would be created and how it would appear when completed. Despite the fact that Alle Felleghes Selam was more than willing to follow through with the commission, the empress made a request that he refused to fulfill. The empress wanted to include a portrait of her prostrate at the foot of the cross in a gesture of humility and devotion. Alle Felleghes Selam told her that such a request was not appropriate for this particular image and that a depiction of her would not fit in the overall composition of the painting. One would think that someone with the clout of an empress would damn the painter's insolence and make him do what she told him to do. This expected outcome though did not occur. She had great respect for the knowledge, skill and insight of painters of sacred images. She was particularly in awe of Alle Felleghes Selam and therefore followed his advice regarding the omission of her image in the painting without question.³⁸⁴

This incident may seem like a strange reversal in the social order when one of the most powerful members of a royal family would conform to the request of a common artisan. It should be understood that painters of sacred images, during the time of Empress Menen, were, and often still are, seen as craftsmen who are beyond the category of ordinary painter. This vocation that was for so long practiced by clerics has maintained its prestige even when more painters today are members of the laity. The lay counterparts are considered to be part of the intellectual elite who possess a substantial amount of theological knowledge. Painters of sacred images are often the product of intense instruction on ecclesiastical tradition that is sometimes

³⁸⁴ Alle Felleghes Selam (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

equal to that of a priest.³⁸⁵ The legacy of painting sacred images bestows upon its lay practitioners a status close to that of a learned member of the priesthood rather than someone who is merely an artisan like a carpenter, bricklayer or plumber.

Determining the appearance of the sacred painting is an important aspect of the commission, other matters have to be dealt with during this point in the patronage process. The parties have to negotiate the cost of the work that is to be done and how the artists will be paid. The patron and artist either negotiate a price, or the artist might have established a flat rate based on size, such as 2000 Ethiopian Birr/99.961 GBP for every square meter.³⁸⁶ When the price is presented to the patron, he or she decides whether it is acceptable.

Most painters insist that they charge a reasonable price. These painters also have different pricing levels for clerics and lay patrons. They charge clerics a lower rate for their services. For example, while Tadesse Yemane Berhan charges his lay patrons 2000 Ethiopian Birr per square meter, he charges monks and priests only 1000 Ethiopian Birr (49.99 GBP) per square meter.³⁸⁷ This is also a point when the manner in which the artist is paid. The two parties also determine the method of payment, which is usually not done in one lump sum. Instead, the patron remits payments in two or three installments.³⁸⁸

The first installment is intended to cover the costs of the materials and the following payment is applied to the cost of the labor.³⁸⁹ This payment to cover the initial costs of materials is important because the painter does not always

³⁸⁵ This is particularly the case with painters such as Tadesse Wolde Aragay, Ketsella Markos and Aragawi Kahsay.

³⁸⁶ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁸⁷ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁸⁸ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

³⁸⁹ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Tekesta Yibeyin (painter) in discussion with the author, November 2002; Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

have the money for the materials for the commission. This practice of the patron covering the initial expenses of the painter before work on the painting begins serves as 'earnest money' and ensures that if the patron is either not able or not willing to make the other payment, the painter is not left having to pay for the materials out of pocket. If however, the patron does not pay in full, the painter can recover his costs by selling the painting to someone else.

When it is determined what kind of painting will be commissioned, how much it will cost and the manner in which the installments would be paid, a final agreement is made to all the terms of the exchange. This agreement is done verbally and does not involve a written contract. Nevertheless, all of the details worked out in the negotiations remain binding.³⁹⁰ Consequences for violations of the contract are not outlined in written legal documents, but follow an unwritten understanding. If patrons do not hold to their portion of the agreement, the artist gains full ownership of the painting. Conversely, if complications should result from an action on the part of the painter, such as the painting being rejected by a priest, the patron would be compensated.

Most commonly the patron pays for the work that they commission because they do not want to lose the money that they paid during the initial installment. The painter is also likely to compensate the patron because he would not want to have a reputation for violating agreements. Failure in any part of the agreement could prove fatal for a painter's reputation and even his career. Actions relating to the binding agreement between painter and patron are most commonly handled by the patron and the painter, without involving additional parties to resolve a breach of the verbal agreement. This tacit understanding encourages both parties to honor their part of the agreement and at the same time avoids open conflict which is seen as uncivil in *Habesha* society.

³⁹⁰ Getachew Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

Materials

As part of preparation the painter amasses the materials he needs to make the painting. In the past, painters used to make their own pigments. Presently in Addis Ababa, some artists know how to make natural pigments, but they do not use them when creating a commissioned painting anymore. Since the nineteenth century and in growing frequency through the twentieth century, painters of sacred images used imported, factory-made pigments. The international nature of Addis Ababa through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century has contributed to the increased availability of imported art supplies.

The types of paints used for sacred images are imported oils, tempera and acrylics. The two former types of factory-made paints are easy to acquire in Addis Ababa and other large cities in Ethiopia. Most painters like to use oil paint because of the vividness of the color as well as the long period of time required for this type of paint to dry. Because of the later characteristic, the painter is better able to make corrections when it is necessary. Other painters, such as Aragawi Kahsay, prefer the colors that are produced by tempera and therefore often use this medium for their commissions rather than oil based paints.³⁹¹

Some painters, such as Tadesse Wolde Aragay, use acrylic paints for painting images of saints.³⁹² Despite the fact that acrylic paints offer bright colors and have the advantage of being able to dry quickly, most painters of sacred images do not use them. The primary reason why acrylic has not won the same level of popularity as oil paints and tempera is that it is still relatively hard to find in Addis Ababa. What little amount that is available is beyond the budget of the vast majority of painters. Until this type of factory-made paint becomes more widely available in addition to being sold at a

³⁹¹ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

³⁹² Tadesse Wolde Aragay, (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

more reasonable price that is competitive with other types of paint, sacred images made with acrylic paints will continue to be relatively rare.

These imported, factory-made paints provide the painters of sacred images with a ready-made source of vivid color that is easy to use and most of all saves the painter time. The painter does not have to spend large amounts of effort collecting the materials they need and then go through the laborious process of preparing these materials so that they could finally be utilized in the painting process.

Most painters will use only one type of paint for the images that they create, while others use different types of paint depending on the size of the painting.³⁹³ For example, Tadesse Wolde Aragay paints smaller images using either acrylics or tempera. He likes the flat finish that acrylic paints produce in contrast to the almost sculptural *impasto* surface quality that is a consequence of using oils. Although the rippled effect produced through the use of oil paints can be a problem on a larger work, tempera as well as acrylic paints provide rich color and a smooth finish when applied to a surface. Alternately, he paints his larger works using oil because the sculptural qualities of oil paint would not negatively impact the image.³⁹⁴ Sometimes Tadesse Wolde Aragay even uses different types of paints for different parts of the painting and therefore would exploit their special qualities. His practice of using “mixed media” is the result of years of experimentation.³⁹⁵

The artist has to acquire a support for his painting. Because of the shortage of artist’s canvas in Ethiopia, painters tend to use industrial canvas and prime it with either imported, factory-made gesso or a hand-made substance called

³⁹³ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁹⁴ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

³⁹⁵ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

muké. *Muké* is a sticky mixture made out of *tef* or wheat flour and water that creates a smooth and off-white surface on which painters can apply their pigments.³⁹⁶ This treated surface is also good for the painter to sketch out the overall painting and perhaps make necessary changes in the pencil drawing until he feels that the arrangement of the figures, their gestures, their general attributes and indeed the overall composition of the painting is suitably correct. Paintings on canvas tend to be the most popularly requested type of work commissioned by patrons. Canvas paintings can take the form of smaller devotional paintings and larger examples adhered to the inside walls of churches. Paintings on canvas used for *sīlet* offerings in both smaller and larger sizes. For their size, this type of painting is relatively affordable in addition to having the advantage of being relatively easy to transport and store.

The use of adhered canvas paintings has become more popular than applying paint directly to the walls of a church for two major reasons. A painting with a canvas backing is more stable and durable than a painting that is directly applied to a wall. Paintings that are painted directly on the surface of a wall are more susceptible to damage from moisture seeping from the walls as well as the sometimes-unstable nature of the wall surfaces themselves. Alternatively, paintings on canvas are less likely to suffer from these problems because of the fabric backing. The second reason for church painter's preference for using canvas rather than painting directly on the walls is that they are able to work within their own studio rather than having to go to a parish church on a regular basis. Painting wall paintings on canvas is especially advantageous when the church is some distance away from the painter's home and workshop. A painter working in his own studio is additionally preferable because having to work in front of the scrutinizing eyes of the clerics of the parish can be an unnerving experience for some.

³⁹⁶ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

Before the painter begins to paint on the surface of the canvas, he stretches on a frame and applies *gesso* or *muké*. When these means of priming the canvas are dry, the painter then goes through the process of rendering a rough sketch of the painting and then applies the paint they wish to use. When the painting is completed, it is removed from the stretching frame and then is either mounted in a decorative frame, adhered to the wall of a church or is simply rolled up and given to the patron. When in the treasure room of the church *Kiddus Uriyel*, I saw several canvas paintings that were mounted in decorative wooden frames, ready to be used for liturgical or devotional purposes. While adhered canvas has become very popular in the decoration of the interiors of churches, there are examples, such as the interior of *Addisu Mikayel* in Addis Ababa where the walls are prepared with plaster and then the paint is applied directly on the dry plaster.

Despite the wide popularity of religious images on canvas, paintings on wood panel are not obsolete. Paintings on panel can be found in churches, in homes and even around a person's neck as an amulet. The wood typically used for this purpose is from a local variety of tree called *wanza*. A specialist carves and prepares it, as is the case for artists such as Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew. Sometimes the artist, such as Aragawi Kahsay with the help of his half-brother, Seghed, prepares the wood support at his own workshop.³⁹⁷ As is the case with painting images on canvas, the surface of the wood is treated so that it would be the establishment of a white and smooth surface upon which paints are applied with either *muké* or *gesso*.

Preservatives for the wood can take a variety of forms. They include a variety of plant-based oils or waste, petroleum-based oils derived from car maintenance centers where oil-changes are done. Factory-made varnish is also used to preserve the wood, particularly portions of the image that will be subjected to wear, such as the outside of the wings of a triptych that protect

³⁹⁷ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003; Gebre Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

the painting inside when they are closed. There is no standardization in the type of preservatives that are used or whether any preservatives are used at all. The type of preservative that is used depends on the appearance that the artist wishes to achieve as well as what is available and cost-effective.

The ancient art of manuscript illumination also continues and parchment remains the material of choice for both the handwritten text and painted illustrations. While the painter Gebre Kristos Solomon Belachew will only paint the illustrations of religious texts, some painters know the fine art of Ge'ez calligraphy as well as manuscript illumination. The animal skins that artists currently use for manuscripts are often prepared by specialists and are then bought by the painter and/or calligrapher.³⁹⁸ One of the most common types of skins used for parchment is that of a goat, preferred because of its flexibility, durability and white color that are seen as desirable qualities. Rather than being chemically tanned, the goat's skin is prepared through a combination of soaking, scraping and drying. The fur and fat of the animal is removed with metal scrapers while the surface is further refined with abrasive stones that are laboriously rubbed on both sides of the skin until it is left the desired smooth, supple and white qualities. Cow's skin is also used in some manuscripts and can be identified by its telltale tan color. It is prepared in the same manner as the goat's skin and is typically used in manuscript pages larger than an A4 sheet.

While conducting fieldwork in Addis Ababa, I found a scriptorium where I saw two calligraphers continuing the tradition of copying scripture. These men had an old text that needed to be copied equipped with a supply of sheets of fresh white goat's skin parchment. In addition to the parchment, despite the availability of fountain and cartridge pens, these scribes still use cut reed pens that resemble those used centuries earlier. The black ink used for the manuscripts is either factory-made ink or hand-made inks made from soot

³⁹⁸ Gebre Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

and fat. Red ink, on the other hand, is always factory-made and is used to highlight words relating to God or the saints.

Calligraphers fill these parchment pages with writing, but will leave some pages blank. The manuscript would then be sent to a painter who would add the required illustrations. Examples of these illustrations would include a depiction of an evangelist that precedes the sacred text or depictions of the miracles performed by Saint Mary in *Te'amire Mariyam*. As was the case for the other types of paintings, the creative process would begin with preliminary sketches, which would be used as a guide as to how the paint would be composed. As opposed to the other types of supports, such as canvas and wood, *muké* or *gesso* is not used. Instead, paint is applied directly to the surface of the parchment.

Recall

After the painter has amassed the materials he needs, what follows in the creative process is the need for the painter to recall their knowledge of the saint he is to portray. The painter draws upon his knowledge of ecclesiastical tradition, deriving inspiration from a combination of the literature and artistic precedent of the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. If this image conjures images of a painter always absorbed in scholarly reflection every time he is to commission a painting, this is not the case. For the majority of commissions, painters create images of well-known saints, making preliminary research unnecessary. Instead, the painter would create the image from memory based on repetitive practice.

The painter Aragawi Kahsay stated that most of the time he does not have to do any preliminary research when painting saints. During his traditional parochial education, which culminated in him becoming a deacon, he had to memorize the *dersanat* and *gadlat* of the various saints so referring back to

the texts is largely unnecessary.³⁹⁹ Periodically though, he seeks inspiration from paintings found in local churches. Aragawi Kahsay observes how artists who preceded him were able to compose religious narratives in a visual manner that exudes the spiritual beauty clerics and patrons look for in religious imagery. Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew, like Aragawi Kahsay, stated that often commissions of religious paintings demand the depiction of only a few of the most popular saints.⁴⁰⁰ Having to paint many of the same saints repeatedly leads to a great familiarity with the stories of certain saints as well as knowledge about the manner in which they should be depicted.

As previously mentioned, it is not uncommon for painters, as people who are devout Christians and learned in ecclesiastical tradition, to have a collection of religious literature. While the *Sinkessar* is a comprehensive source of information about many of the saints, this text is so large and expensive that it is extremely rare for a painter to actually own one. The stories of the saints usually come from other texts, usually *Dersanat*, *Gadlat*, *Malkat* and the Holy Bible as well as perhaps an abridged selection of miracles from the *Te'amire Mariyam* and *Te'amire Yesus*. The number and types of books that a painter has can vary depending on the artist. Although painters such as Debella tend to use abbreviated and translated version of these texts, other painters such as Ketsella Markos, Aragawi Kahsay, Taddesse Wolde Aragay and Assefa Gebre tend to use more complete versions of religious texts in the original Ge'ez rather than their abridged, vernacular counterparts. Despite the fact that these artists will periodically go back to these texts for their own religious edification, the only time a painter would conduct intensive research for a particular commission is if it involves a little known saint.

In addition to religious literature, priests also serve as informative resources for painters. The painter Getachew Berhanu stated that he would speak to a

³⁹⁹ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

⁴⁰⁰ Gebre Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002; Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

priest on occasions in order to learn more about the lives of the saints.⁴⁰¹ The priest he chose to consult with was not affiliated with his own parish church. Getachew Berhanu felt comfortable with this cleric with whom he could have frank discussions about religious issues and from whom he could build his knowledge about ecclesiastical tradition. Through these discussions, Getachew Berhanu learned what priests required in a sacred painting and therefore would be more likely to create a painting that would receive the blessing of a priest.⁴⁰²

Getachew Berhanu is not the only painter who consults priests when he needs to build up his knowledge about ecclesiastical tradition and how it is currently interpreted by clerics in Addis Ababa. Even painters such as Ketsella Markos and Aragawi Kahsay, who are exceptionally learned in the ecclesiastical tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, consult priests.⁴⁰³ For all three of these artists the primary reason for consulting clerics is to learn about more obscure saints, such as when Tadesse Yemane Berhan had to do a painting of Saint Bartholomew for a Catholic priest, who is a saint little known by most Ethiopian Orthodox Christians.⁴⁰⁴

Despite his extensive traditional religious education and his long experience as a painter of sacred images, if Aragawi Kahsay has some doubts about a painting he is working on, he has a priest critique his work. While painter and priest do not always collaborate in the creation of a sacred painting, it is important to understand that there is a dialogue between these two parties contributing to the theological integrity of religious imagery. The painters of sacred images generally have a high regard for clerics as a whole, particularly in respect to their extensive knowledge about ecclesiastical tradition. Painters generally see priests as fonts of religious knowledge and

⁴⁰¹ Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

⁴⁰² Getachew Berhanu (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

⁴⁰³ Ketsella Markos (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003; Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

⁴⁰⁴ Tadesse Yemane Berhan (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

the product of intense study and religious discipline. Even if a conflict does arise, painters still view clerics as being in an exalted position and would not consider acts or gestures that could be seen as insubordinate or disrespectful. Despite the difficulties that could emerge during a conflict between a painter and a cleric on an individual level, the established hierarchy is maintained and smoothed over with at least a façade of civility by both parties.

Just as painters generally hold clerics in high regard, the reverse is also true. An example of this is when I asked *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* what painter he would recommend for someone to commission a painting by, he responded by recommending Mengistu Cherenet. When asked why he recommended that particular painter, the monk said that he felt that he was incredibly knowledgeable about ecclesiastical tradition in addition to his ability to paint images that possess spiritual beauty.⁴⁰⁵ The master of priests, *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai* stated that in addition to personally knowing quite a few painters, he generally had a significant amount of respect for the amount of knowledge painters have in regards to the lives of the saints and religious narratives.⁴⁰⁶

The painters that *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai* recommended were Mengistu Cherenet and Aragawi Kahsay. The priest felt that these particular painters were extremely knowledgeable and depicted the saints in a manner that he found quite agreeable. When asked if he preferred one over the other, the priest said that he liked both of these painters equally.⁴⁰⁷ As an aside, *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai*'s opinion is not surprising since both of these painters are the product of an intense education in ecclesiastical tradition and are literate in Ge'ez. Also notable about these two painters is that their painting styles are nearly identical and would be hard to differentiate without close scrutiny.

⁴⁰⁵ *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴⁰⁶ *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai* (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴⁰⁷ *Kes Gebez Nahu Sanai* (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

Indeed in my own opinion, another painter who possesses a nearly indistinguishable style is the painter Taddesse Yemane Berhan whose manner of rendering the image of saints has won the respect of many clerics and eventually high level commission for His Holiness the patriarch himself. The similarity in the style of this third painter with the previous two is not surprising since he was an apprentice of Mengistu Cherenet and therefore possesses a strikingly similar style to his mentor.

In addition to priestly respect for the abilities of painters of sacred images, the lay public also has an enormous amount of reverence for these artists. The interaction between the painter Alle Felleghie Selam and Empress Menen mentioned previously is a clear example of a patron's, respect for Alle Felleghie Selam and his station as a learned painter of sacred images. The empress had sufficient faith in Alle Felleghie Selam's ability to paint the *Crucifixion of Christ* at the church of Saint Raguel, Markato in a sufficiently correct and beautiful manner that she trusted him completely and left him to his own devices for the remainder of the project.⁴⁰⁸

The same situation occurred in the interaction between anonymous patron 'A' and Mengistu Cherenet. While patron 'A' was learned in the traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church for a layperson, this patron viewed Mengistu as a person with significantly more theological knowledge and one who had tremendous expertise in the portrayal of saints. When anonymous patron 'A' asked for a depiction of the *Holy Trinity* to be painted in a church, which consists of three identical elderly men in a line and facing the viewer, Mengistu suggested that there should be additional heavenly entities painted on either side of the depiction of the *Holy Trinity*. This consisted of twenty four elders with incense burners, a visual reference to Revelation 4.4 in the Bible. Even though this additional content was something that anonymous patron 'A' did not initially have in mind when envisioning the commissioned work, this patron respected painters in general and particularly Mengistu

⁴⁰⁸ Alle Felleghie Selam (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

Cherenet so therefore readily accepted the suggestion.⁴⁰⁹ The patron believed that if the painter suggested that something additional to make the work correct, beautiful, educate the viewer on the doctrines of the Church and serve as an adequate portal to the divine, then the patron was receptive to the painter's input. The patron also had enough faith in the abilities of the painter to work without supervision, because of the perception that the painter, more than almost anyone else would know best how to create a correct and awe inspiring sacred painting that would receive the blessing of a cleric.⁴¹⁰

Even though Alle Felleghes Selam's imperial patron did not interact with him during the creative process while painting the *Crucifixion*, while painting the *Holy Trinity* and the *Last Judgment* at Holy Trinity Cathedral in Addis Ababa, Alle Felleghes Selam did sometimes receive suggestions from a bishop named *Abuna Sedek*. These suggestions never involved style, because this bishop was already pleased with the style that Alle Felleghes Selam used in his paintings. The bishop would intervene when he wanted to tell Alle Felleghes Selam how to better render a religious narrative so it would be consistent with ecclesiastical tradition and effectively convey church doctrine to the congregants.⁴¹¹ The interaction between the patron, painter and priest embodies the role of a hierarchy of knowledge. The lay patron shows deference to the painter because the artist is more learned in ecclesiastical tradition and would know how to portray saints and religious narratives. Although painters may not show obsequiousness to lay patrons, they would dutifully hear out suggestions made by priests.

Traditionally the last stage of the preparation process involves the artists preparing themselves to paint the image through ritualistic behavior. This procedure involves a regimen of prayer, fasting and sexual abstinence during

⁴⁰⁹ Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴¹⁰ Anonymous patron 'A', in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴¹¹ Alle Felleghes Selam, in discussion with the author, April 2003.

the period of time that the painting was being created.⁴¹² According to Mercier's research, asceticism was a process that served as a means of purification. The purification of the painter means that what he creates is in turn pure and sacred. According to Professor Goha-Tsebah, who was interviewed during Mercier's study, "The works of the pure and of the impure are not the same, but the blessing equalizes them".⁴¹³ According to the hieromonk, *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan, asceticism has less to do with issues relating to purity of the painting itself, but a means for a painter to be a suitable channel for the Holy Spirit. As a result, the painting he creates is the product of the Holy Spirit rather than simply the profane consciousness of worldlings.⁴¹⁴

In a less mystical manner of describing the benefits of asceticism, it is simply a process of the painter mentally separating themselves from worldly concerns of their everyday existence. The practice of abstinence separates painters partially from their roles as fathers, husbands and lovers. The mind ideally turns away from carnal thoughts and redirects itself toward the divine. Through fasting, discipline is exercised over the body and satisfaction of corporal desires takes on secondary importance to spiritual consciousness. The painter reciting prayers from the *Dawit*,⁴¹⁵ *Malkat*⁴¹⁶ or *Wuddasse Mariyam*⁴¹⁷, focus his perception toward the mystical world of saints, divine beauty and perhaps even a sense of mystical ecstasy. The result would ideally be that the paintings he creates would reflect this mystical consciousness.

⁴¹² Mercier: 1997, 73.

⁴¹³ Mercier [interviewing Prof. Goha-Tsebah]: 1994, 74.

⁴¹⁴ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

⁴¹⁵ Psalms

⁴¹⁶ These are a series of poetic prayers, which devotionally describe the appearance of saints.

⁴¹⁷ This consists of devotional prayers to the Virgin Mary, which is popularly attributed to the eminent Ethiopian mystic *Abba Ephrem*.

Contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox religious paintings exhibit a characteristic style which makes them similar in certain ways; yet one must consider that *Habesha* painters of these images do not live in a cultural or intellectual vacuum. Even after their initial apprenticeship, study abroad or training by other means, many painters of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred images incorporate styles from other visual traditions when creating religious paintings. Painters such as Alle Felleghe Selam, Tadesse Wolde Aragay and Assefa Gebre make it known during interviews that European artists influence the sacred paintings that they produce. The painter, Afewerk Tekle, also produces works that show signs of the influence of European modernism, but this should not be seen as the corruption of the indigenous *Habesha* manner of depicting religious themes. The primary importance to these painters is that the content is presented in a manner that clearly and effectively communicates the dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Colleagues in the larger Ethiopianist community have raised concerns over the effect of globalization on the appearance of Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings. Indeed, during the initial research of this study, my perception of authentic Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings was challenged by the similarity of the styles being used by *Habesha* painters with paintings and icons from other sects of Christendom such as the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches. To some scholars and priests, such as Kes Haile Mikayel, these new international styles are corruptions of the indigenous style.⁴¹⁸ What has to be understood is that during the creative process painters, like the majority of their clerical counterparts, are more concerned about the religious message conveyed by the image rather than ethnic or nationalist concerns regarding style.

Some Ethiopian Orthodox paintings bear striking similarities to Byzantine prototypes. Even Kes Haile Mikayel stated as an example that *Habesha* depictions of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child are based on prototypes

⁴¹⁸ Kes Haile Mikayel (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

attributed to the evangelist Saint Luke.⁴¹⁹ It should be noted that all paintings attributed to Saint Luke render the Virgin Mary and Christ Child, and were executed in a manner that is Byzantine in appearance. Hence, a *Habesha* painting of the Virgin and Child that resembles those made in the Byzantine style see themselves as conforming rather than deviating from ecclesiastical tradition. The painter, Debella, even uses reproductions of Byzantine icons as models in his work.

Once, the painter Assefa Gebre was asked by a patron to paint an image of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child for him. As usual, the artist explained to the patron how the painting would look when completed and they also agreed upon a price. The patron left happy at the prospect of the painting that would be made for him and Assefa Gebre went about his work on this commission. Once Assefa Gebre finally finished the painting, he presented it to the patron and expected his client to be happy with the work. Indeed the patron was happy about most of the painting, but was greatly distressed by one aspect of Assefa Gebre's creation. The patron felt that the lips of the Virgin Mary were too red and therefore made the image look scandalously profane. Assefa Gebre stated that he did not intend to be irreverent. This painter said to the patron that the lips of the Virgin Mary were painted in such a way because of a description gleaned from textual tradition. The text from which Assefa Gebre was referring to was the *Malka Mariyam*. In its praises to Saint Mary, the text describes her lips as being "like a rose". The color that Assefa Gebre chose for her lips was intended to give them a rose-like hue. The patron understood the significance of the painting's compliance with the textual traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but he also could not control his unease about the color the Assefa Gebre used to paint the Virgin Mary's lips.⁴²⁰

Despite the fact that Assefa Gebre felt that he was correct in the matter, his opinion based on textual evidence supplied by the *Malka Mariyam*, he also

⁴¹⁹ Kes Haile Mikayel (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴²⁰ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

did not want to lose the commission. The artist eventually took the painting back to his workshop and repainted the lips in a shade of pink rather than the more intensely red pigment that he used before. Afterwards, the artist presented the image before the patron once again. The patron was pleased with the result and gladly paid Assefa Gebre for the work that he did. As a result, Assefa Gebre was able to paint an image that both complied with the textual, the visual traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and was also able to please the sensibilities of the patron.⁴²¹

This patron's opinions about the color of the Virgin Mary's lips were based on the prevailing popular views on the visual tradition. The patron's criticism about the hue of red that Assefa Gebre used for rendering the lips of the Virgin Mary is not unique to that particular patron. The general opinion, perpetuated by painters and priests, is that the lips of the Virgin Mary must not be painted in such a way that makes them look too red. They prefer that the lips of the Virgin Mary appear as a 'natural color'.⁴²²

Normally the use of such a word as 'natural' to describe the appropriate color of a saint's lips would be inadequate, because the idea of naturally colored lips does not describe a specific hue or shade. Assefa Gebre clarified the concept by pointing to his own lips displaying to some degree what this natural color approximately was.⁴²³ The color described as 'natural' is brown mixed with pinkish red. This explanation clarified a statement made by the painter, Debella, when I inquired about the appropriate color for the Virgin Mary's lips, which preceded this discussion I had with Assefa Gebre, stated that the Virgin Mary's lips should be "brown" in order for it to be acceptable to both the patron and the priest. I was confused by this statement because in his paintings, the lips of the Virgin Mary did not look brown in a normal sense,

⁴²¹ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

⁴²² "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

⁴²³ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

but a variety of colors including different hues and shades of pink. Debella probably meant that the brown lips resemble the lips of a *Habesha* person.⁴²⁴

This explanation might seem like a tangent on the issue of visual tradition, but this information brings up an important point. In his attempt to create a painting possessing theological integrity, Assefa Gebre adhered to the textual tradition. He may have overlooked the importance of the prevailing visual tradition. As important as the textual aspect of the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition is, visual precedent is equally significant. The result of this particular incident shed light on an oversight on the part of the painter during the creative process followed by an uncommon expression of disfavor on the part of the patron.

Other cases, similar to this one involve a patron who is difficult to please. Even though disagreements do occur periodically, it is more the exception rather than the rule. Generally, patrons have faith in the painter substantiated by the opinions of friends and priests. A patron does not necessarily express his or her faith in an artist when a painting is completed, but when the patron selects the painter to carry out the commission in the first place. If disapproval in the resulting work does emerge during this final point in the patronage process, it is usually because of a detail in the painting rather than the work as a whole.

The culminating point of the commission takes place when the painting is presented before a priest in order to receive his blessing. The blessing, involves the use of a small hand cross and prayers. Theologically speaking, the Holy Spirit enters into the painting, sanctifying it.⁴²⁵ The blessing enables the image to become a portal into the heavenly sphere and a means of summoning the intercession of a saint.⁴²⁶ While a painting that receives the blessing of the cleric is empowered, a painting that is rejected by the priest is

⁴²⁴ "Debella" (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

⁴²⁵ Gebra Kristos Solomon Belachew (painter), in discussion with the author, October 2002.

⁴²⁶ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

deemed powerless and theologically useless. Paintings that are deemed authentic and consistent with tradition in accordance with the dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are separated from those that may be beautiful works of art, but do not constitute sacredness in the eyes of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Earlier in the patronage process, the priest adopted the role of advisor and counselor. At its conclusion, the priest becomes a judge who determines whether a painting is suitable for its intended religious function.⁴²⁷ Despite the importance of this duty performed by clerics, they did not receive formal instruction to perform this specific duty. As mentioned before, the evaluation of paintings is simply part of a larger dynamic of pastoral power implemented in order to maintain the theological integrity of religious observance, therefore the spiritual wellbeing, of the parish.

Fortified with religious education involving the memorization of scripture and the instruction of various teachers, priests are the bearers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's rich and extensive ecclesiastical tradition. Additionally, with constant exposure to sacred imagery in the monasteries where they studied, as well as the churches, where they carry out their liturgical duties, they possess a significant amount of knowledge about sacred imagery. Along with their pastoral, educational and liturgical duties, the priests are also the living embodiment of the Church itself. When patrons present their commissioned painting to priests, they are presenting them to the embodiment of the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church itself.

In light of Michel Foucault's concept of *pastoral power*, this ritual provides another opportunity for priests to fulfill their function as shepherds who maintain the spiritual well-being of their flock. During the ritual of the critique and blessing of religious paintings, priests serve a *police-ing* role within the institution of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. At this point of the patronage

⁴²⁷ Religious images are often judged according to varying strictness depending on how they will be used. This is described later in this section.

process the priest monitors and regulates the theological integrity of imagery used for liturgical functions.

Although painters do not always accompany patrons when they present the completed commissioned painting to the priest, this is an option that the patron can choose during the patronage process. When the painter accompanies the patron, he generally serves two functions. The painter, who is present during the judgment process, reassures an inexperienced patron. The magnitude of this ritual can be intimidating to a patron. It is also beneficial for the painter to be present when the painting represents an unconventional visual interpretation of religious subject matter that would need to be explained. In this case, if the priest has any questions regarding the correctness of the painting, the painter would be able to defend his interpretation of the living tradition personally.

If challenged by a priest, the painter could either quote scriptural sources or explain the visual precedent from which he derived his inspiration.⁴²⁸ For experienced and established painters of sacred images, the judgment process is a routine affair experienced with little anxiety.⁴²⁹ For relatively inexperienced painters or those who produce works that deviate from prevailing conventions, this event can be more challenging. Sometimes the event calls for the painter to ardently defend the theological integrity of his work. This scenario would conclude successfully if the painter is knowledgeable enough about both visual precedent and religious literature to serve as an adequate advocate on behalf the work that he has created before the judgment of the priest.

Although the theological integrity of a commissioned painting is left to the judgment of the individual priest, three basic criteria, which have been mentioned previously in this study, often serve as the grounds for their

⁴²⁸ Anonymous patron 'B', in discussion with the author, April 2003; Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴²⁹ Aragawi Kahsay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

verdict. These criteria are comprised of (a) a consistency with written tradition, (b) a consistency with unwritten tradition⁴³⁰ and (c) spiritual beauty. As possessors of pastoral power, particularly in the role of the policing body who maintain the theological integrity of all aspects of liturgical life including religious paintings, priests generally use these three criteria in order to separate images suitable for use in religious rituals from those lacking in theological integrity.

Because the process of blessing a painting is compulsory in the completion of all *bona fide* sacred images, it is logical to assume that the judgment process becomes either routine or invariably straightforward for priests. The truth is that some images presented before them are more challenging than others. For example, a conventional depiction of Saint George and the Dragon that possesses such compulsory features as a heroic soldier on a white horse, a dragon or serpent and a lady in a tree, would be fairly easy to judge. Even though the iconography does not come from scriptural sources, it is an established visual convention accepted as the current standard manner in which to depict the saint. If an image depicts the saint riding a black horse or he is seen slaying anything else but a dragon, it would be seen as contrary to the traditional manner of depicting this saint. With such deviations in the visual tradition, such a painting would be rejected by the priest.

An example of a situation where a judgment was ambiguous involved the hieromonk *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru*, who was based at the cathedral *Addisu Mikayel* in the *Awtobus Terra* portion of *Markato*. He was asked to identify the correct color of the *maphorion*⁴³¹ of the Virgin Mary. The monk initially said that he was not entirely sure. *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* declared that the scriptures did not provide a conclusive description of the color of the Virgin Mary's vestments. He could have relied on visual precedent, but that would have revealed that the *maphorion* had been

⁴³⁰ This includes *afe tarik* or oral tradition and visual precedent in the manner a certain subject is graphically portrayed.

⁴³¹ Outer robe-like garment.

depicted in red as well as blue. He consulted another monk and concluded that the Virgin Mary's *maphorion* is supposed to be painted in the color blue.⁴³² If a painter were asked this same question, he would instantly state that the Virgin Mary's *maphorion* is supposed to be blue in color without hesitation and would even describe the gold decorative elements that should adorn this garment.

While it is perhaps easy to criticize priests who have not received the same kind of formal education about imagery as painters, some factors must be considered. For priests, it seems that the aesthetic qualities of the painting are not as important as the ease of identification of a saint and the ability of the image to communicate ecclesiastical dogma. Returning to the *maphorion*, in recent years the tradition has developed that calls for blue. On the other hand, older Ethiopian sacred images render it red. To confuse the issue further, she wears a red *maphorion* in Byzantine-style factory-made images in Addis Ababa.⁴³³ Therefore, there are two ways of depicting the Virgin Mary that is reinforced by visual precedent. Yet, painters insist on only one suitable way to correctly depict the Virgin Mary. It should be remembered though that while the painters of these images carry the artistic legacy of Ethiopian Orthodox imagery, ultimately it is the priests who have the authority to judge whether these images possess sufficient theological integrity to receive their blessing.

Despite this potential for vastly different evaluations of paintings worthy of the priest's blessing, a remarkable consistency in how priests judge paintings exists. The uniformity of the criteria by which they measure the theological integrity of paintings is the reason. Of the utmost concern for priests regarding sacred paintings is that they represent dogmatic continuity and the holy and divine nature of saints and therefore possess theological integrity.

⁴³² *Memher Abba Aëmro Birru* (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴³³ Examples of these are two panel painting in the collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, which include IESMus4460 and IESMus4325.

Through training, the painters of sacred images are taught the prevailing conventional manner for depicting saints. Most painters deviate little from these conventions in order to ensure that their images receive the blessing of priests. There are a few artists who attempt to stretch the boundaries of acceptability, but enjoy only periodic success. Analysis of the former conventional group does not help this study reveal much about the inner workings of the judgment process as does the more complicated scenario of the judgment of less conventional imagery. When painters take risks they make the internal workings of the judgment process apparent. An example of this kind of risk-taking is one image by Assefa Gebre, which depicts the Virgin Mary and Christ Child with a ladder that rests upon the Virgin Mary's shoulder, and has the potential to challenge a priest because of its unconventional nature. This painting was the result of combining different aspects of the written and unwritten facets of the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to create an image that conveys a unified theological message.

Judgment of this painting required the priest to delve into the theological associations of different scriptural references involving the Saint Luke prototype of the Virgin Mary and Child, Jacob's Ladder in Genesis 28.12, the *Kidana Mehrat*⁴³⁴ and the concept of a divine connection between earth and heaven as well as Jesus Christ's role as God incarnate and the Virgin Mary's role as the Mediatrix.⁴³⁵ The priest, to whom he presented this image, was impressed by the unity of the message communicated by the different theological symbolic references found in it. He has also convinced about its theological integrity in relation to the dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church due to its adherence to the living tradition.

My first opportunity to gain an insight into the critical manner in which the judgment process took place occurred when I conducted the interview with *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan at Trinity Cathedral, in his office. The chance

⁴³⁴ The theological dogma of the *Covenant of Mercy* is the belief in the Virgin Mary as the ultimate intercessor between people and Christ's judgment of all mankind.

⁴³⁵ Assafa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002.

presented itself when I noticed on the wall behind him that there a reproduction of Alle Felleghes Selam's depiction of the Holy Trinity hung. The original painting, on which this reproduction is based, is painted on an eastern wall of the cathedral. I asked this monk if he were judging the image on the wall, what his verdict would be. *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan explained that much of the appearance of the painting, which was obviously influenced by the Baroque style, did not bother him. This monk said that he was not too concerned with what kind of style was employed in a painting. He accepted great variety of styles as long as the painting did not deviate from the textual and visual tradition. While *Aleka Abba* Haregweyan was satisfied with much of the painting, he said that he would not have given this painting his blessing. When I inquired why, he responded by saying that in a correct depiction of the Holy Trinity, all of the figures in the painting must be identical. All three must have the same appearance and must be using the same gestures. This monk noted that while two of the figures had one hand up in a gesture of blessing, the third had the opposite hand up in the same gesture. This discrepancy, he stated, made the image incorrect and therefore he would not give it his blessing because it did not visually emphasize the unity of the three aspects of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

This discussion exposed a couple of important concepts regarding the manner in which priests judge the correctness of images. Firstly, it revealed the importance of the adherence to the visual precedent while communicating aspects of ecclesiastical doctrine. Secondly, this discussion displayed the potentially impermanent nature of decision of a priest. After it was completed, Alle Felleghes Selam's depiction of the Holy Trinity had to have received the blessing of a cleric. It can be deduced that the cleric, who was responsible for the blessing of this image, had to have found this depiction of the Holy Trinity consistent enough with the ecclesiastical tradition for it to receive his blessing, or he might have felt that blessing, this image despite this apparent error, was the most prudent thing to do at the time for reasons known only by the priest and his superiors.

The only additional factor that might have shaped that cleric's opinion about the image could have been Alle Felleghie Selam's reputation as a court painter of the erstwhile emperor, Haile Selassie. Whatever the back-story was regarding this painting, it had its allies in the past and now it has its detractors. Although all religious images should ideally be judged according to their theological integrity, reputation has in the past apparently influenced the judgment process. A famous painter of exalted standing, such as Alle Felleghie Selam, is less likely to be questioned by patrons and be the brunt of priestly criticism. The esteem that clerics have for a revered artist gives the artist freedom in the way that they depict religious subject matter. Painters of great acclaim such as Tadesse Wolde Aragay, Alle Felleghie Selam and Afewerk Tekle are able to break away from some of the traditional conventions of visual precedent and still have their works blessed by priests because of the faith that clerics place in them and their images combined with their connections either with the imperial court or the patriarch.

While established painters are less harshly judged, less famous painters, such as Assefa Gebre may face tougher challenges when their works are being scrutinized when presented to a priest. An example of this is when he was asked to paint an altarpiece of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child accompanied by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. This painting was going to be a centre of focus of the liturgy after being installed on the altar of the church. After making an agreement with the patron regarding the size, appearance and price of the painting, Assefa began work on it. As usual, Assefa sought inspiration for the appearance of the painting from the textual traditions, as well as visual precedents. He also wanted to create an image that exuded the dignity and the glory of the Theotokos and the Logos.

Assefa Gebre described the two texts that influenced him, which were the *dersanat* or 'acts' of the archangels Michael and Gabriel. According to the traditions of the Church, these archangels must flank the central figures of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child. Because of the holy beings included in this

painting, not only did Assefa Gebre have to inquire about the correct manner of depicting the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, he also had to develop and draw upon his understanding about the portrayal of the two archangels. Assefa Gebre interpreted the writings within the *dersanat* that these escorting angels should have crowns, and therefore depicted the archangels Michael and Gabriel in the painting wearing crowns.

The patron was pleased after seeing the completed painting. They agreed that they would both be present for the presentation of this painting to the priest who would judge and bless the image. Both Assefa and the patron were confident that this beautiful painting was going to win the acceptance of the cleric and receive his blessing. When the painting was brought before the cleric, however, he perused the surface of the painting and refused to bless the image. Assefa Gebre was surprised at this verdict and asked the priest on what grounds was he deeming the painting unacceptable. The cleric responded by stating that the crowns on the heads of the escorting archangels were the error that compromised the theological integrity of the image. The priest added that the image was otherwise good and consistent with the traditions of the Church.

Assefa Gebre was surprised by this statement and with his usual politeness and contrition in the presence of the clergy he told the priest about the textual sources that convinced him to portray the archangels with crowns on their heads. The cleric responded to Assefa Gebre by stating that crowns were the problem. The priest agreed with Assefa Gebre that Saint Michael and Saint Gabriel do possess crowns. The cleric thought the painting depicted the archangels with their crowns on their heads. The priest cited the Book of Revelation, that it is written that the angels and divine attendants and escorts do not wear their crowns in the presence of God. The probable source of this reference can be found in the Book of Revelation 4.9-10.

Whenever the living creatures [Zoa] give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives forever and ever, the twenty four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives forever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."⁴³⁶

In the cleric's estimation, the Christ Child represented God in this religious image in the guise of the *Logos*. Even though this excerpt from the Book of Revelation does not mention angels, the priest included them among those heavenly beings who remove their crowns because of their presence in the painting and their proximity to Christ. The priest stated that Assefa Gebre had to correct the painting by removing the crowns from the archangel's heads. Assefa Gebre listened to the cleric and painted over the crowns and instead depicted them holding the crowns in their hands. After these corrections were made, Assefa Gebre once again presented the image before the priest and this time it was deemed acceptable and the painting received the clergyman's blessing.

This incident was a good example of the dialogue that takes place between the painter and the priest during the judgment process. It showed the role of interpretation in the process of creating a painting as well as the priest's scrutiny of these paintings. Even though at one level Assefa Gebre was correct about his inclusion of the crowns, he also did not anticipate other branches of the scriptural tradition that could counter his visual interpretation of the scriptural tradition. What would have guided for him as to what kind of imagery would be more likely to meet the acceptance of a priest would have been visual precedent regarding this particular image.

⁴³⁶ N.Y.I.B.S.: 1979, 305-6

The prevailing trend in Addis Ababa, when portraying the escorting archangels, Michael and Gabriel, is to depict them without any crowns, either on their head or in their hands. Even though the hagiographical information on these saints states that they do possess crowns, depictions of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child, the absence of these angelic crowns does not necessarily result in the rejection of these paintings by a priest. Assefa Gebre departed from the standard practice of not including angelic crowns. Although he added to the pictorial richness of the image, Assefa Gebre exposed himself to the complexities that could arise when going beyond the conventional norms. This mishap highlights the importance of complete understanding on the part of an artist. When they break away from the comfortable realm of widely acceptable conventions, they truly test their own interpretation of a religious narrative against ecclesiastical tradition as a whole by consulting a priest because an aspect of textual tradition or visual precedent stemming from a relatively obscure source that may be lacking in the finished painting. The priest told Assefa Gebre what was wrong and why. The painter was also given an opportunity to correct the image. In this way, not only is the process of judging a painting a way of ensuring that images remain in accordance with Church doctrine, it also presents an opportunity for a painter to learn and become aware of possible perceived errors in their interpretation of religious visual narratives. Even though this is a difficult way of learning, it is a way for a painter to take chances, be corrected and then in the future be able to produce a painting that goes beyond convention; but is also critically determined to be correct.

Aside from paintings being grounded in written and unwritten sources of Church doctrine, there are less tangible qualities of a painting that separates a merely good painting from a great one in the opinions of clerics are expressed in ways that are ambiguous at best. Clerics used words such as *konjo*⁴³⁷ and *menfasawi*⁴³⁸ to describe a painting that they especially like. While these elements are not as tangible as hagiographical content or visual

⁴³⁷ Beautiful in Amharic

⁴³⁸ Spiritual in Amharic

precedent, they are still essential parts of the visual tradition incorporated into a painting, which does not usually escape the notice of priests.⁴³⁹

The priests have an understanding that images do more than accurately depict either a narrative or a particular theological concept. Ideally, sacred paintings should also evoke a sense of awe in the viewer. The painting should reach the viewer on two levels. In one way, a person should be struck by the image's sublime glory that instills a sense of unearthly power. At the same time the images should also communicate to the viewer on a more cerebral level, conveying to them the dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church facilitating iconic catechesis. A painting that would be blessed should operate in these two ways in order to fulfill its function as a means towards salvation.

While the priests that I spoke with during this study were not always able to elaborate on what makes a painting beautiful and spiritual, they contrasted what they liked with what they did not. Typically, a priest would like a painting that possesses a high degree of craftsmanship. They do not like paintings that are overly naturalistic. This is particularly the case when it comes to rendering divine entities, such as angels. Clerics tend to like paintings that have an otherworldly character that emphasizes the divine nature of the content. Overly naturalistic images that do not have an otherworldly beauty can be viewed with disdain, seen as not possessing spiritual power.⁴⁴⁰

What is helpful in understanding this less tangible quality in paintings is to remember what *Memher Abba* Aëmro Birru, discussed regarding the diametric opposition of *segawi*⁴⁴¹ and *menfasawi*⁴⁴² qualities in the appearance of images. The stylistic preferences of the priests who judge images can be gauged along the spectrum that exists between and including

⁴³⁹ Assefa Gebre (painter), in discussion with the author, November 2002; *Memher Abba* Aëmro Birru (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴⁴⁰ Kes Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴⁴¹ Meat-like or fleshy in Amharic

⁴⁴² Possessing a spiritual quality in Amharic

these two stylistic extremes. From the standpoint of stylistic consensus a wide range of tolerance exists, but leans toward the *menfasawi* portion of the spectrum.

Examples of paintings rejected on the grounds of insufficient spiritual beauty was at the cathedral *Addisu Mikayel* where an entire set of wall paintings by Alle Felleghes Selam were whitewashed over because they were deemed too naturalistic even though they conformed to textual traditions.⁴⁴³ Because of their lack of spiritual beauty, these paintings were inappropriate for liturgical use and therefore destroyed. Another example was provided by Kes Tadesse Shumiye, who recalled a painting in his church at the time, which was *Medhané Elem, Bolé* that distressed him greatly. The priest stated that while the image was correct according to the textual and visual traditions, it was still repulsive to him. He described the painting, in his opinion, as *segawí*, therefore worldly in appearance and not representative of the divine power and dignity of the sacred subject matter.⁴⁴⁴ Kes Tadesse Shumiye therefore considered this image to be powerless. His feelings about the painting led him to call for the destruction and replacement of the painting. Coincidentally, as the old church was going to be demolished and replaced, the priest felt that it would be best use of time, money and effort to obliterate and replace the offending image.⁴⁴⁵ It is clear from the priest's candor that if this image was newly painted, he probably would have rejected the image outright.

The conformity of a painting to the requirements of the Church is important, yet some paintings are judged according to different levels of scrutiny. Paintings that are used for liturgical purposes have to meet the strictest standards while those used for personal devotion and *sí/et* are judged according to less strict criteria. This differentiation is between images for posterity, such as those used for liturgical purposes, and those for the

⁴⁴³ Tadesse Wolde Aragay (deacon and painter, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴⁴⁴ Since I did not see this actual painting before it was destroyed, I cannot tell you why this priest took this position.

⁴⁴⁵ Kes Tadesse Shumiye (priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

moment, such as paintings for personal use or as a votive offering. An example of a painting judged less harshly was at the church *Kiddus Uriyel*. A *sīlet* painting that depicts Jesus Christ receiving the chalice from the Archangel Ariel instead of Ezra, but it was deemed acceptable enough and the covenant was fulfilled despite this obvious error.⁴⁴⁶ The monk *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan stated that while priests are expected to be strict, the priest accepts minor types of sacred painting, such as those for *sīlet* or private devotion.⁴⁴⁷

The ritual of blessing images exists as a means of regulating an important aspect of religious practice in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Just like any other aspect of the liturgy that priests oversee the heads of their respective religious communities, their roles utilize their acquired religious knowledge and interpretive abilities to determine if images possess theological integrity by being consistent with his understanding of the living tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

⁴⁴⁶ *Kes Gebez* Nahu Sanai (high priest, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, April 2003.

⁴⁴⁷ *Memher Abba* Tekesta Berhan (monk and teacher, Ethiopian Orthodox Church), in discussion with the author, May 2003.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The academic significance of this thesis can be seen in its step-by-step account of the patronage process involving Ethiopian Orthodox sacred paintings created for liturgical purposes from beginning to end. This study paid special attention to essential issues, such as defining what constitutes 'traditional' and 'authentic' examples of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings from an indigenous perspective informed by the painters who make these images, the patrons who commission them and crucially, the priests who determine whether these images possess theological integrity or not. Because of the objectives and the findings of this study, in regards to the maintenance of the theological integrity of religious imagery within the patronage process, it is unique within the larger scope of scholarship on Ethiopian Orthodox art.

As crucial as these findings are toward understanding Ethiopian Orthodox paintings in its own right, this study is also a valuable resource for future inquiry into art patronage. It is true that the more contemplative, and indeed more comfortable pursuits involving the analysis of specific works of art and the academic literature, are without a doubt crucial to the progress of academia's knowledge about Ethiopian Orthodox art. What also has to be acknowledged is that so much more can be done in the realm of Ethiopian Orthodox art historical research through interview-based inquiries, as is standard practice in the rest of Africa. Because of this, ethnological methodologies, combined with a constructivist qualitative epistemological theory, should continue to be utilized in the study of Ethiopian Orthodox Art in Addis Ababa and elsewhere.

Through the application of interview-based constructivist inquiry, I was able to go beyond the current state of academic knowledge about what maintains the theological integrity, and therefore the artistic/cultural integrity, of this artistic tradition. Although the likes of Foucault and Saint John Chrysostom opened my eyes to the concepts of 'oversight' and 'theological integrity', it was the painters, patrons and priests, most of all, who provided me with a more complete picture of the internal regulation that takes place in the commissioning of Ethiopian Orthodox religious art. The findings of this study

will be valuable for future research into contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox paintings.

As the reader has seen, this body of work provides a picture of the patronage process from beginning to end. It stands to reason that in order to truly understand a particular artistic tradition, it is crucial to have an understanding of the production process behind these works of art. Although it is important to possess a technical knowledge of how these paintings are made as well as an ability to discern between styles, a formal approach provides us with a limited understanding about these paintings. Through knowledge of the dynamic within which these paintings are produced we are able to understand more about why they appear a certain way, why they are used in a particular manner and what makes these examples of this venerable artistic tradition authentic in the eyes of the institution that uses them.

In the course of this study of the patronage process, I was better able to understand why patrons commissioned these paintings. Through the artists, I learned more about the creation process and the importance of in-depth knowledge about religious dogma and the visual canons, in addition to their technical skill as painters. The priests were pivotal in emphasizing the function of these paintings in the liturgical life of the Church. For these clerics, the most important features of these paintings are their ability to educate members of the congregation about Ethiopian Orthodox dogma. They also serve as an inspiring portal into the divine and are instrumental in establishing a personal relationship between the faithful and saints. While I was aware of the religious context in which these images functioned, the priests helped me go beyond my own preconceived notions about what constitutes an authentic or traditional Ethiopian Orthodox painting and helped me progress closer to their perspective.

An example of this was when I came across priests who told me to go out into the countryside to see what they thought were examples of 'real' Ethiopian Orthodox art. These priests saw the religious art, being produced in Addis Ababa, as being corrupted through modernization rather than

representing an original manner of perpetuating the age-old traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Other clerics in Addis Ababa helped me understand that an authentic painting tradition can undergo constant innovation while continuing to remain true to its function as a means for the perpetuation of the ecclesiastical tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

An acquired understanding about the role of the priesthood as guardians of this artistic tradition made me comprehend its durability. Priests serve as the internal policing mechanism of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that maintains the theological integrity of these paintings and prevents this artistic tradition from falling into a state of whimsical creative license. An occidental academic cannot determine the authenticity of these paintings from a genuinely Ethiopian Orthodox perspective. The only type of person, within the context of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, who has the authority to label an image as an authentic Ethiopian Orthodox painting or otherwise are the inheritors and the embodiment of ecclesiastical tradition, the priests.

A complicating factor within this system exists. Since this decision is often based on the discretion of an individual priest, the possibility of a difference of opinion could develop among priests as to whether an image sufficiently adheres to Ethiopian Orthodox dogma. Individual discretion also allows for some slight variation in artistic tradition from place to place. Distinct deviation from dogma is rare and is subject to correction, such as its destruction and replacement with an image, seen by a presiding priest as being consistent with his understanding of ecclesiastical tradition.

This knowledge of the whole of the patronage process, from beginning to end, combined with an understanding about the internal mechanism used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, will hopefully serve as a springboard for future research into Ethiopian Orthodox art, in addition to being a source of information on the subject in its own right. Through this dissection of the patronage process the inner workings of the use, creation and authentication of this artistic tradition can be better understood.

Amharic Glossary

- ❖ Abba: monk
- ❖ Addisawi: new
- ❖ Abuna: bishop, metropolitan or patriarch
- ❖ Afe tarik: oral history, things passed down orally
- ❖ Aleka: church administrator
- ❖ Bahël: tradition
- ❖ Beta Israel: 'House of Israel', Ethiopian Jewry
- ❖ Birr: silver, Ethiopian national currency
- ❖ Dabtara: unordained priests who provide musical accompaniment for the liturgy
- ❖ Derg: nickname for the communist regime under Mengistu Haile Mariyam, known internally as the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia that lasted from 1974 to 1987. Later renamed The Peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Mengistu Haile Mariyam's rule did not officially end until 1991.
- ❖ Dersan: description of the acts of angels
- ❖ Faranji: foreigner, Europeans, Caucasians
- ❖ Gadam: monastery
- ❖ Gadl: description of the acts of saints
- ❖ Ge'ez: ancient and liturgical language of the Habesha (for Habesha, see definition below)
- ❖ Habesha: over-arching ethnic group comprised of three ethnic groups, which include the Tigreans, Agaw and Amharans. They are distinctive because of their use of Nilo-Semitic languages, adherence to the Ethiopian Orthodox faith and historically the dominant peoples of the one-time Ethiopian Empire.
- ❖ Hayl: power
- ❖ Keddasse: liturgy
- ❖ Kene or Qene: religious poetry
- ❖ Kene mahelet: place in a church where the dabtara perform liturgical music
- ❖ Kes: priest
- ❖ Kes gebez: master of priests

- ❖ Kidana Mehrat: a covenant involving the connection between heaven and earth, which includes the Incarnation of Jesus Christ
- ❖ Kïddïst: holy of holies of an Ethiopian Orthodox Church where the altar resides
- ❖ Kïddus: holy or saint
- ❖ Medhané Elem: “Medicine of the World”, refers to Jesus Christ
- ❖ Mäs’haf kïddus: “The Holy Bible”
- ❖ Memher: instructor in religious doctrine
- ❖ Menfasawi: spirit-like, spiritual
- ❖ Muké: gesso-like substance used on canvas and wooden supports for paintings
- ❖ Sämbät Tïmhïrt(ïbet): Sunday school
- ❖ Sa’li: painter
- ❖ S’il: image or painting
- ❖ Segawi: meat-like, fleshy, worldly
- ❖ Sïlet: votive offering
- ❖ Sinkessar: text that explains the liturgical year including saint’s days
- ❖ Te’amire Mariyam: life and acts of the Virgin Mary
- ❖ Te’amire Yesus: life and acts of Jesus Christ
- ❖ Tintawi: old
- ❖ Wuddasse Mariyam: poem dedicated to the Virgin Mary
- ❖ Yäbahël: traditional
- ❖ Zima: religious song

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