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## Introduction

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# 1 Introduction

*Brad Hostetler and Lynn Jones*

In July of 2020, the Department of Art History at Kenyon College received and accessioned over 450 objects into its study collection. These objects were part of a bequest from David P. Harris (1925–2019), a 1946 graduate of Kenyon, and emeritus faculty in the Department of Linguistics at Georgetown University. Of these 450 objects, thirty-six are Ethiopian; they are the subject of this volume.

## Organization

The volume is organized in two parts. The first focuses on the Harris bequest, the ethics of accepting such a collection, and the use of such objects for teaching and student research. The second part focuses on Harris’s Ethiopian objects, beginning with a historical overview of Ethiopian Christianity, followed by essays and catalog entries.

We begin with an essay by Brad Hostetler, Assistant Professor of Art History at Kenyon College, with Kenyon undergraduate Ani Parnagian (’23), on Harris’s collection and his collecting habits viewed through the lens of the supporting documentation that accompanied the bequest. This is followed by an essay by Elizabeth Marlowe, the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Chair in Liberal Arts Studies, an Associate Professor of Art & Art History, and the Director of the Museum Studies Program at Colgate University. Brad first “met” Liz in July of 2020 when he announced the news of the Harris bequest on Twitter. She responded, questioning the provenance of the pieces and Kenyon’s reasoning for accepting them. Wanting to

learn more about the legal and ethical dimensions of such poorly provenanced collections, Brad invited her to serve as a consultant, and then to contribute an essay examining these issues. The third essay, by Erika Loic, Assistant Professor of Global Medieval Art at Florida State University, demonstrates the importance of such collections for the work of students and scholars, and the limitations of photographs and other digital surrogates.

The second part of the volume begins with an essay by Neal Sobania, Emeritus Professor of History at Pacific Lutheran University, who provides an introduction to Ethiopian Christianity and its relationship to other Orthodox traditions. This is followed by a series of essays and catalog entries on the thirty-six Ethiopian objects by Lynn Jones, Associate Professor of Eastern Medieval Art at Florida State University, and four FSU doctoral students: Sarah Mathiesen, Sonia Dixon, Caitlin Mims and Madison Gilmore-Duffey. Lynn focuses on eleven hand and processional crosses. She asks two questions: what makes an Ethiopian cross recognizable as such when it is purchased outside of Ethiopia, and what can these objects tell us about Harris as a collector? Sarah examines the seventeen pectoral objects through the lens of their relationship with the body.<sup>1</sup> Sonia investigates issues of authenticity, using the pendant icon and stone diptych as case studies. Caitlin contextualizes the *sensul* fragments within the larger tradition of cutting manuscripts into individual leaves for sale. Her catalog also includes the two amuletic scrolls. The final essay and catalog, by Madison, analyzes the parchment icon of *Abba Samu’el* of Waldabba and

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<sup>1</sup> We begin the catalog with the hand, processional, and pectoral crosses because these objects were grouped together as a distinct sub-collection in Harris’s own catalog.

considers the ways in which particular aspects of his *vitae* are represented and emphasized in art.

### **The Harris Bequest**

A gift such as this has its pros and cons. These artifacts provide material for teaching, and for students and scholars to conduct original research, but what are the ethics of keeping such objects? While Harris left purchase records for the majority of his collection, only a small percentage of these records say anything about the provenance of the objects prior to their acquisition by the sellers. Most of the pieces lack the documentation needed to show when they were exported from their countries of origin — a critical requirement for determining an object's licit or illicit status as defined by the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import and Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property held on November 17, 1970. This bequest therefore raises questions regarding the ways in which these objects changed ownership, from the makers to the private collectors and dealers who sold them to Harris.

Why did the College and the Department of Art History accept Harris's collection when most of the objects lack the provenance necessary to meet the UNESCO Convention standards? Leaving no heirs, Harris bequeathed his estate to Kenyon; upon his death in 2019, the objects immediately became the property of the College. The decision then facing the Department of Art History was not whether to accept the items, but how to best care for them now that they were in Kenyon's possession. If they declined them, the College would have liquidated all assets at auction. Members of the Department felt that this was not the best course of action, as this could subject the objects to conditions that would jeopardize their preservation and limit their accessibility. The Department of Art History instead chose to incorporate as many objects as possible into their existing study collection, where they could be properly cared for, and available for teaching and for research by students, faculty, and the wider scholarly community. If, through this

research, it is determined that any objects in Harris's collection were acquired illegally at any point in their history, Kenyon College is prepared to return these artifacts to their rightful owners.

Prior to the Harris bequest, the study collection in the Department of Art History primarily consisted of a long-term loan from the estate of Boris A. Blick (1922–2005), emeritus faculty in the Department of History at the University of Akron. The Harris bequest was a significant addition to the study collection, and so the faculty decided in the winter of 2020 to designate it as the Blick-Harris Study Collection (BHSC). Brad worked with Kenyon students to improve the BHSC's cataloging, care, and organization, and to make it readily accessible to the public. Katherine Crawford ('22) assisted with storage and protection. Maia Cornish-Keefe ('23) photographed objects and posted these files to the collection website. Ani organized the vast amounts of documentation that came with the Harris bequest. The bequest has allowed the Department to consider, with student involvement, the best practices in caring for the objects following professional standards in storage, preservation, and research.

### **Collaboration**

The partnership with Florida State University demonstrates the ways in which the BHSC can be used beyond Kenyon. In the summer of 2020, Brad discussed Harris's Ethiopian artifacts with Lynn, who was preparing her Fall graduate seminar, *East of Byzantium*. In the past, students in this seminar examined the traditions of Armenian, Georgian, Syriac, and Coptic art. Lynn realized that a partnership with Kenyon offered opportunities for students to extend their research to include Ethiopia.

Sarah Blick, Editor of *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art & Architecture* and Professor of Art History at Kenyon, suggested that we co-edit a special volume on this Ethiopian material for the journal. We were able to bring on board Birhanu T. Gessese (Kenyon '21) as copy editor. We then began

reaching out to potential collaborators, including Ethiopia-based scholars, but quickly ran into difficulties created by the pandemic, which upended (and increased) everyone's workloads. We considered delaying the project and publication until we could recruit more collaborators and access more resources — but this project relies most heavily on student research at Kenyon and FSU. We were mindful of students' pandemic-delayed research opportunities and missed degree benchmarks. The study of these objects was an extraordinary opportunity for them at a time when everything was on hold. Research allowed them to expand their knowledge of Eastern Christian art, gave them experience in academic publishing, and added significant value to their CVs.

We identified thirty-six Ethiopian objects that could serve as the basis for FSU graduate student research. The MA and PhD students enrolled in Lynn's course — Sonia, Madison, Caitlin and Colin Kraft — were joined by doctoral candidate Sarah Mathiesen. They began the semester studying the rich artistic traditions of Ethiopian Orthodox art, and then worked on the material in the BHSC. In September of 2020, Lynn and Brad drove the thirty-six Ethiopian objects from Ohio to Florida, allowing the students one week in which to study them in person. Erika joined in, assisting as the students tackled this new challenge. It was an extraordinary week for us all, and we began to plot out the shape of this volume.

It is important to underscore that FSU students and faculty were not part of the discussions regarding Kenyon's acquisition of Harris's bequest, nor were they investigating provenance. Research on these issues was undertaken by Brad and his students at Kenyon. At FSU, students focused on historical examination of the objects, researching Ethiopian cultural heritage and the persistence of artistic forms, media, and techniques. Funding provided by FSU's Museum and Cultural Heritage Studies Program allowed them to consult with

specialists (via Zoom), including Felege-Selam Yirga, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, Associate Curator of the Byzantine Collection at the Dumbarton Oaks Museum. This has truly been a collaborative project; one in which scholars, students, librarians, and museum professionals worked together during a world-wide pandemic.

We have only scratched the surface, and hope that the works presented here will prompt future research and publication opportunities. We also hope that this volume will serve as impetus and a template for other such collaborations. We encourage readers to consult the online catalog to the BHSC, where they will find additional photographs of each object and scans of Harris's personal catalog, notes, and purchase receipts.<sup>2</sup>

Ethiopia has a long artistic tradition in which forms, motifs, iconographies, and techniques have persisted for centuries. For this reason, and following the lead of other handbooks on Ethiopian art, we, as Editors, decided to avoid any estimation of dates for the objects in the catalog.<sup>3</sup>

In order to maintain consistency in the spelling of terminology and of historical names and places associated with Ethiopia, we have adopted the conventions and transliteration system that is used by the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia* (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003–14).

Brad, Lynn, and Birhanu wish to express their gratitude to all those who generously contributed their time and knowledge to this project — in conversations conducted via email, Zoom, and phone — during a world-wide pandemic. We, and the authors of the essays in this volume, offer particular thanks to Sarah Blick, without whom this project, and this issue, would not exist. Her ideas and enthusiasm were essential to the success of the volume. Raymond Silverman, Professor in the History of Art at the University of Michigan, was a key point of contact at the start of this project. He

<sup>2</sup> <https://digital.kenyon.edu/arhistorystudycollection/>

<sup>3</sup> In avoiding any speculation on dates, we follow Hecht et al 1990, p. 18.

offered his own expertise, and connected us with a number of specialists. We thank Laura De Becker, the Helmut and Candis Stern Associate Curator for African Art at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, and Kristen Windmuller-Luna, Curator of African Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, for providing advice on issues of collecting and exhibiting African art.

FSU students received valuable assistance from Stormy Harrell, Collections Manager at the Museum of Anthropology at Wake Forest University, and Michael Gervers, Professor in the Department of Historical and Cultural Studies at the University of Toronto Scarborough. We are grateful to Leah Sherman, Visual and Performing Arts Librarian at FSU, whose ability to provide us with much-needed resources during the pandemic bordered on the miraculous. Particular thanks go to Felege-Selam Yirga who graciously fielded numerous and varied questions from us.

We would like to thank the friends, colleagues, and acquaintances of Harris who shared their memories: George Bozzini, Connie Human, Alexandra Martin-Zakheim, John and Camille

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As Editors, Brad and Lynn offer particular gratitude to their Assistant Editor, Birhanu. He began as copy editor, and quickly became much more. His meticulous work — new photography of all objects, collaboration on formatting and design, assistance in reading Gəʼəz and Amarəñña (Amharic) inscriptions — were crucial to the success of this project. We hired a student, and gained a valued contributor.

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