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8 The Question of Authenticity: Two Ethiopian Icons

Sonia Dixon

Walter Benjamin's work remains central in discussions of authenticity nearly a century after publication. In his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he concludes that the concept of an object's authenticity requires an "original," stating, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."¹ However, for ritual-based objects, Benjamin proposes that they remain intact with their mystical or religious functions, so that religious objects — even if reproduced — are original, or authentic.² Christopher B. Steiner takes this further, exploring the definitions of reproduction. He convincingly argues that in certain instances authenticity requires redundancy and repetition.³

With this approach, the new creation is accepted as authentic.⁴

In their 1999 publication, Ruth B. Phillips and Steiner note that "both art historians and anthropologists have resoundingly rejected most commoditized objects."⁵ They conclude that scholars and collectors reject objects if they do not appear to have been created in a perceived, traditional style.⁶ The authors, focusing on Africa, see this as an attempt of "civilizing" indigenous craftsmen and artists.⁷ In many non-Western nations, the economic value of objects often depends on how "traditional" they appear to Western consumers.⁸ In this model, fewer commoditized objects are purchased for collections and museums.⁹

¹ Benjamin 1968, p. 220 deals with modern material and writes in a particular context without closely analyzing liturgical objects. For a more recent application of Benjamin's work and modernism, see Nagel 2012.

² Benjamin 1968, pp. 223–24 argues that authenticity persists in these objects since the uniqueness of the original remains due to its connection with tradition. For a more detailed discussion of Benjamin's work and devotional objects, see Bredekamp 2009, pp. 285–301; see Nichols 1989, pp. 7–11.

³ Steiner 1999, pp. 92–93 examines the printing press to explain redundancy and repetition in tourist art. He notes that woodcuts with the same imagery representing different cities are an example of redundancy. Repetition results from the process that repeats the use of what is considered redundant. Maps, for example, are repetitions. According to Steiner, redundancy and repetition are accepted as being true.

⁴ Steiner 1999, p. 93 suggests the viewer is not concerned if a map is the original or the copy. Steiner applies this method to the large-scale production of objects sold in African tourist markets.

⁵ Phillips and Steiner 1999b, p. 9. I define commoditized objects as items created with the intent of earning a financial

profit. Phillips and Steiner examine the nuances of art, commodity, and artifacts and propose that it is not always obvious if the object falls into the category of commodity.

⁶ Phillips and Steiner 1999b, p. 10 argue that objects created with elements of "Western style" are not purchased by tourists. Steiner 1999, pp. 101–02 also explores this issue and proposes that objects not appearing in this "traditional" style are labeled as inauthentic.

⁷ Phillips and Steiner 1999a, p. 10 argue that this practice removes the craftsmen and artists from modernity.

⁸ Steiner 1999, p. 95. For interviews with contemporary artists creating icons in Ethiopia, see Silverman 1999c, pp. 135–36. Silverman interviewed artists in 1993. Artist Adamu Tesfaw explains that he moved from Goğgam, a northwestern province of Ethiopia, to the capital Addis Abāba to improve his sales due to buyers who seek "traditional" Ethiopian paintings.

⁹ Steiner 1999, pp. 96–97 and 102 identifies "'elite' consumers" and "'serious' collectors" as the individuals responsible for selective collecting. Steiner proposes that these collectors do not purchase commoditized objects and/or objects outside a certain style.



Figure 8.1. Double-sided Painted Icon (cat. 29), view of side 1 with both wings open. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

The term “traditional” is of course problematic when discussing modern art.¹⁰ Workshops, artists, and practices change over time, according to the needs and desires of consumers, and while some artists continue to emulate traditional style, others deviate from perceived traditions.¹¹ I use the work of Benjamin, Phillips, and Steiner to investigate issues of authenticity by focusing on two icons purchased by David P. Harris as case studies: a double-sided painted icon (cat. 29; fig. 8.1), and a stone diptych icon (cat. 30, fig. 8.2).

The painted icon consists of three components: a central panel and two wings. The central panel is painted on both sides. The side wings are painted on

one side and feature carved wood decoration on the other; they serve as covers when closed. The bail at the upper end allows for the icon to be suspended, possibly as a pendant on the body, in a liturgical setting, or in a home.¹² The small size and portability is key to its function as a devotional object. The paintings feature an Italianate style, which is thought to have been introduced in Ethiopia in the seventeenth century when Jesuit missionaries brought prints of the Santa Maria Maggiore icon from Italy.¹³ Double-sided painted icons from Ethiopia featuring this Italianate style are displayed in museums, and published in scholarly catalogs and articles.¹⁴ Many such objects held in these museums,

¹⁰ Silverman 1999a, p. 22 argues that the term “traditional” is ambiguous and concludes that “traditions are fluid.”

¹¹ Sobania and Silverman 2009, p. 30.

¹² Mann 2005, p. 8; Mercier 1997, p. 77; Silverman 1999c, p. 138. Icons can be suspended from the neck or shoulders.

¹³ Langmuir et al 1978, p. 3; Heldman 1993, p. 75.

¹⁴ Including the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Abāba University, no. 3531 (early eighteenth century); Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997.81.1 (early eighteenth century); the Walters Art Museum, 36.17 and 36.5 (eighteenth century); Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2011.218 (late seventeenth century); Saint Louis Art Museum 12:2016 (late seventeenth century); and the Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of



Figure 8.2. Stone Diptych (cat. 30), open. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

dated to the seventeenth century or later, also demonstrate an evolution from the Italianate tradition, and the adoption of a “local” style. Some local stylistic features that can be seen on our painted icon, including the addition of red and green backgrounds, a lack of shading, large eyes, elongated fingers, and organic forms.¹⁵ They are also found in the carving on the exterior panels, with crosses and X motifs, or diagonal ovals, representing doves’ eyes.¹⁶ This local, or indigenous style, increasingly displaced the Italianate style. The iconography has, however, changed very little over time; most double-sided painted icons feature the Mother of God and saints associated with Ethiopian Orthodoxy.¹⁷ According to Orthodox icon

theology, the saints and holy figures depicted must be recognizable for the icon to function. Standard iconographic compositions and the presence of naming inscriptions are tools that aid the viewer in this recognition.

The acquisition of double-sided painted icons in museums and their publication by scholars suggest that these objects are perceived as being authentic. While many of these types of objects feature an Italianate style combined with some more local Ethiopian elements, this stylistic synthesis and evolution occurred over the course of several centuries in the early modern period, and is seen as an expression of authenticity by scholars, collectors, and curators outside of Africa.

Ontario, AGOID.107383 and AGOID.70080 (seventeenth century). The double-sided painted icons are published in scholarly catalogs; Langmuir et al 1978; Grierson 1993; Mercier 1997; Chojnacki and Gossage 2000; Fletcher 2005.

¹⁵ Silverman 1999c, p. 139 describes this as the “basic style.”

¹⁶ Mercier 1997, p. 88.

¹⁷ The saints most frequently depicted include Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus, Täklä Haymanot, and Ewoṣtatewos. For an encyclopedia of Ethiopian saints, see Haile 1991. See also the essay by Madison Gilmore-Duffey (ch. 10) for a discussion of specific Ethiopian saints.



Figure 8.3. Stone icon. $3\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2}$ in. (9.53 × 6.35 × 1.27 cm). Timothy S. Y. Lam Museum of Anthropology, 2009.02.E.10. Photo: Courtesy of the Lam Museum of Anthropology, Wake Forest University.



Figure 8.4. Stone icon. $4\frac{3}{4} \times 2\frac{9}{16} \times \frac{9}{16}$ in. (12 × 6.5 × 1.5 cm). Timothy S. Y. Lam Museum of Anthropology, 1992.09.E.2. Photo: Courtesy of the Lam Museum of Anthropology, Wake Forest University.

The stone diptych icon (cat. 30; fig. 8.2) features four carved surfaces with Christian-themed iconography commonly found on Ethiopian painted icons, executed in a more indigenous, non-European style. Like the double-sided painted icon, the stone diptych is also small and fits into one's hand.¹⁸ It does not feature a bail for suspension, but does stand upright when open — the weight of the stone adds to its stability. Taken together, the small size, material, and ability to stand open without support, suggest an object of portable, personal devotion.

The origin of stone icons has not yet been determined; these objects are thought to be a relatively new phenomenon, perhaps beginning in the twentieth century.¹⁹ A comparable object, now at the Timothy S. Y. Lam Museum of Anthropology

at Wake Forest University in North Carolina (fig. 8.3), also features an indigenous style and iconography, exhibiting none of the European influences seen on double-sided painted icons. On stone icons, such as the one purchased by Harris and that at the Lam Museum, figures are without naming inscriptions and bodies are abstracted, with an emphasis on the enlarged hands and faces. The continued production of stone icons using non-European style and iconography ensures that they retain their recognizability to the Ethiopian faithful. Single saints are most frequently depicted; popular narrative scenes include those of the Crucifixion and of the Virgin and Child. The saints depicted are both those traditionally represented on Eastern Orthodox devotional objects, and those specifically associated with Ethiopia. The exteriors of the panels show great diversity in subject matter, including images of saints, animals, and non-figural geometric designs.

¹⁸ The stone diptych measures slightly larger than the double-sided painted icon; see cats. 29, 30.

¹⁹ This timeframe is based on interviews with the artists conducted by Sobania and Silverman 2009. The Timothy S. Y.

Lam Museum of Anthropology at Wake Forest University in North Carolina and the Horniman Museum and Gardens in London date the stone icons in their collections to the twentieth century.



Figure 8.5. Stone icon. $5 \frac{1}{8} \times 3$ in. (13.01 \times 7.62 cm). Horniman Museum and Gardens, London, 1971.441. Photo: Courtesy of Michael Gervers (via DEEDS).



Figure 8.6. Stone icon. $3 \frac{5}{16} \times 2 \frac{3}{8} \times \frac{9}{16}$ in. (8.4 \times 6 \times 1.4 cm). Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Abāba University, 8364. Photo: Courtesy of Michael Gervers (via DEEDS).



Figure 8.7. Stone icon, twentieth century. $5 \frac{5}{16} \times 3 \frac{9}{16}$ in. (13.5 \times 9 cm). Private collection. Photo: Africa Gallery, Hengelo, Netherlands.



Figure 8.8. Stone icon, twentieth century. Greenstone with red cinnabar. $4 \frac{1}{2} \times 3 \frac{3}{8}$ in. (11.4 \times 8.6 cm). Private collection. Photo: Artemis Gallery, Erie, Colorado.



Figure 8.9. Processional cross (cat. 2), detail of the front. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

Are stone icons authentic? The answer might seem to be “yes,” as they are found in museums and collections; however, this collecting is limited. To my knowledge, three museums include stone icons in their online catalogs, and all are dated to the twentieth century (figs. 8.3, 8.4, 8.5, 8.6).²⁰ While stone icons are sold by a small number of western galleries, they are also available in Ethiopian markets (figs. 8.7, 8.8).²¹ This availability in Ethiopia suggests that their production is, in part, for the local faithful, and thus argues for their authenticity according to Benjamin’s definition.

Why then are stone icons seemingly not objects of desire for museums and collectors, and why have they been largely overlooked in scholarship? In interviews with Neal Sobania and Ray Silverman, artists, such as Adamu Tesfaw, make clear that they create these items without regard for the identity of the potential buyer — tourist, clergy, and/or the

²⁰ Two stone icons, 2009.02.E.10 and 1992.09.E.2, are in the Lam Museum of Anthropology. The Horniman Museum possesses one stone icon, 1971.441, and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Museum at Addis Abāba University has one, 8364.

²¹ The galleries include Artemis Gallery of Erie, Colorado, and the Africa Gallery, based in Hengelo, Netherlands. Both sell modern stone icons.



Figure 8.10. The double-sided painted icon (cat. 29), top row, center, in one of Harris’s display cases in his home, as photographed in February of 2020. Photo: Kyle Henderson.

faithful.²² When stone icons are purchased as religious objects by the faithful, the depicted holy figures are recognizable, and the objects are authentic. When they are purchased by tourists, function — and thus authenticity — is less easy to define. Some tourists can see these objects as devotional; others may see them as souvenirs.

Harris bought his stone diptych in 1976 from a dealer in Alexandria, Virginia, early in his Ethiopian collecting phase, with other Ethiopian objects.²³ Among them is a metal processional cross (cat. 2), which features the same indigenous style as that found on the stone diptych: large eyes, elongated fingers, and abstract representations of bodies (fig. 8.9).²⁴ For Harris, it can be suggested that the authenticity of the stone diptych was recognizable because of its similarities to other Ethiopian religious objects, such as the processional cross. For the double-sided painted icon, because Harris

²² Silverman 1999c, p. 145; Sobania and Silverman 2009, p. 28.

²³ According to the sales receipt, Harris purchased the stone diptych — listed as a “slate book” — with other Ethiopian objects. For more on this receipt and on Harris’s collecting overall, see the essay by Brad Hostetler (ch. 2).

²⁴ For discussion of Harris’s purchase of this cross, see the essay by Lynn Jones (ch. 6).

cataloged this object with his sub-collection of “Icons: Byzantine to Modern Era” and displayed it in his home alongside Post-Byzantine painted icons (fig. 8.10), it can be suggested that Harris perceived this object as authentic not for its Ethiopian features, but because it was recognizably an icon to him, according to his expectations of Greek Orthodox icons.²⁵ As detailed in the essay by Brad Hostetler, Harris had converted to Greek Orthodoxy. Therefore it can be argued that what both objects share in terms of their authenticity to Harris is their sacred recognizability and function.

A comparative example for this discussion of authenticity is the *Kykkotissa* icon, associated with the Holy Monastery of the Virgin of Kykkos in Cyprus. This icon remains an object of pilgrimage despite not having been seen since the sixteenth century.²⁶ Benjamin’s definition of ritual-based objects is applicable here, as copies have continued to be made since the icon’s removal from public view. These copies are perceived as the original — and thus authentic — and are displayed for public devotion and purchase. Like the stone diptych, the copies of the *Kykkotissa* icon are authentic because they are recognizable to the faithful.

What is the status of an object’s authenticity when it is made for the tourist industry? Phillips and Steiner argue that commoditized objects, such as those found in the souvenir and tourist trade, are often labeled as “the inauthentic, the fake, or the

crassly commercial.”²⁷ How might we recognize tourist objects among the Ethiopian objects in this catalog? The Lam Museum describes one of its stone icons as made for the tourist trade, noting that icons are typically wooden and painted.²⁸ This viewpoint suggests that objects made for the tourist market are defined by medium, and does not allow for change and evolution of artists’ practices, and for the realities of the economy. We cannot determine the use of tourists’ icons, whether they are of stone or painted. If we follow Benjamin’s definition, the purchase of any object by tourists would render them inauthentic, unless they are purchased by the faithful. If function defines authenticity, the stone icons are authentic to those who recognize them as religious objects.

I suggest, however, that authenticity, once affirmed, cannot be lost. The stone diptych is, at base, a religious object, an icon; whether it was, or was not, made for the tourist market would not negate its authenticity. The object can remain authentic even though a purchaser does not recognize its intended function. When sold in the tourist trade, such an icon could remain authentic because it is purchased by a member of the Orthodox faithful. If purchased as a souvenir, the icon remains authentic. In the eyes of the tourist, it may be unrecognizable and may lose its intended function, but it would not lose its authenticity.

²⁵ For a discussion of Harris’s organization of his collection, see the essay by Hostetler (ch. 2).

²⁶ Carr 1999, pp. 368–71; Kouneni 2008, p. 98.

²⁷ Phillips and Steiner 1999b, p. 4.

²⁸ Timothy S. Y. Lam Museum of Anthropology, 2009.02.E.10, <https://lammuseum.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/5F71E F03-067B-4036-9299-403882813397>

29. Double-sided Painted Icon

Tempera on gesso-covered wood (possibly olivewood), pigment, and string

Central panel: $4 \times 3 \frac{1}{8} \times \frac{5}{8}$ in.

(10.1 × 8.0 × 1.6 cm)

Side 1 wing: $2 \frac{13}{16} \times 2 \frac{5}{8} \times \frac{5}{16}$ in.

(7.1 × 6.6 × 0.5 cm)

Side 2 wing: $2 \frac{13}{16} \times 2 \frac{5}{8} \times \frac{1}{8}$ in.

(7.1 × 6.7 × 0.4 cm)

3.23 oz. (91.5 g)

INSCRIPTIONS: On the wing of side 2: *Abba Gäbrä Mānfās Qəddus*; on the main panel of side 2, inscribed on their lower robe, left: *Abba Täklä Haymanot*; and right: *Abba Ewostatewos*.

CONDITION: There is extensive wear on the painted panels. The wood frame below the Virgin and Child has a chip.

PROVENANCE: Purchased by David P. Harris from Xanadu Gallery in San Francisco on April 26, 1991. Harris bequest, The Blick-Harris Study Collection, Department of Art History, Kenyon College (2020.190).

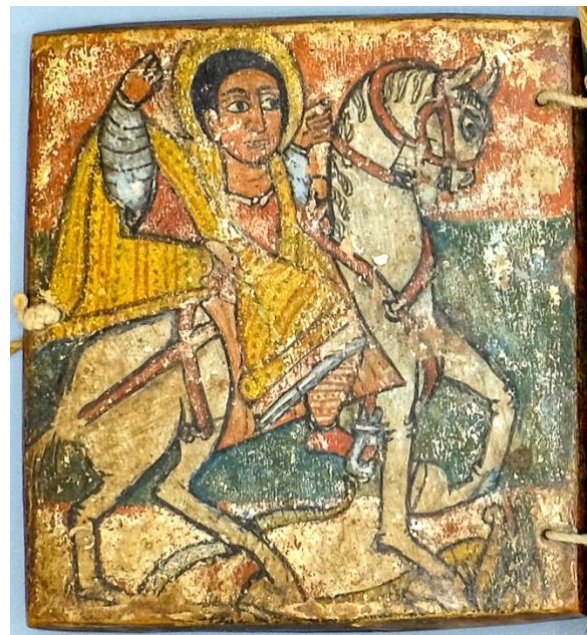
<https://digital.kenyon.edu/arhistorystudycollection/637/>

This object consists of a central panel and two wings. String attaches each wing to the central panel. The central panel is painted on both sides; the two side panels are only painted on the interior. Their exterior faces feature carved wood decoration and serve as covers to the paintings on the central panel when closed. A string attached to the outer edge of each cover allows the wings to be fastened. When opened, the wings provide stability and allow the object to stand on its own. The loop at the upper end indicates that this object could also be worn or suspended.¹ The small size suggests that it served a personal, devotional purpose.²

The exterior of the wing on side 1 is carved with a central, equal-armed cross with trefoil finials on the left, right, and upper arms, and a lozenge-shaped finial on the lower arm.³ The cross is enclosed within



Cat. 29A. Double-sided painted icon, oblique view of side 1 open. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.



Cat. 29B. Double-sided painted icon, side 1, Saint George. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

a beaded lozenge, and each corner of this panel features a framed-X motif.

The interior of this wing features a haloed figure on a white horse, set against a background created by three horizontal registers; from top to bottom they are red, green, and red (cat. 29B). The equestrian wears a blue long-sleeved tunic beneath a red short-sleeved tunic. He wears a yellow and red patterned



Cat. 29C. Double-sided painted icon, side 1, Virgin and Child with two angels. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

mantle and matching trousers. He raises his right arm and holds a lance or spear, now badly abraded. The horse tramples a limbless reptile. This iconography depicts Ethiopia's patron saint, Saint George, on horseback killing a snake.⁴ Some depictions portray a dragon with wings and legs rather than a snake. Equestrian saints are popular talismanic images in Ethiopian religious art.⁵

The painting on the central main panel, on side 1, shows four haloed figures (cat. 29C). The Virgin is in a frontal pose with both of her arms wrapped around the Christ Child; they are flanked by two angels holding spears.⁶ The Virgin wears a red gown under a blue *maphorion*. Her halo is highlighted by red rays, a feature that is distinct from the other haloes.⁷ She also grasps a ropelike object in her left hand — possibly a handkerchief, or *mappa* — and gives the blessing gesture with her right hand, extending her first two fingers.⁸ Christ gazes at his mother as he holds up his right arm and hand with the gesture of blessing while holding a red closed book in his left hand.

The pairing of the Virgin with Saint George is first associated with king Zār'a Ya'eqob (r. 1434–68). According to legend, they are said to have helped the king triumph in a battle against Sultan Aḥmad



Cat. 29D. Double-sided painted icon, side 2, Gäbrä Mānfäs Qəddus. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

Badlāy (r. 1432–45), a Somali kingdom in the Horn of Africa, in 1445.⁹ Zār'a Ya'eqob subsequently mandated an increase in the veneration of Mary through the making of icons, the establishment of festivals in her honor, and the implementation of readings from the Miracles of Mary in every church service.¹⁰ The king encouraged the faithful to wear images of the Virgin on their chest.¹¹ Icons of Mary became more prevalent after the rise of this Marian cult.¹²

On side 2, the cover features a carved checkered pattern with nine square frames alternating between two designs: an X motif and cross-hatching. The X motif is common in Ethiopian art, and is interpreted as “doves' eyes,” which are apotropaic in function.¹³

When open, the wing features a figure standing against a background with three painted registers: (from top to bottom) red, green and red (cat. 29D). The figure lifts both of his arms with his palms facing upward — the same direction as his gaze — and is flanked by two lions. His body is covered in hair and he wears an orange harness strapped across his chest and torso.¹⁴ He has long black hair, a white beard, and a halo. This is an image of the hermit saint Gäbrä Mānfäs Qəddus (fl. fifteenth century) — founder of the monasteries Däbrä Zəq^wala and

Mədrä Käbd, both southeast of Addis Abäba — identified by the Gə‘əz inscription in the upper left corner.

Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus lived as a hermit who refused to wear clothes due to his ascetism.¹⁵ According to legend, God covered his body with hair to protect him from cold weather — portrayed in the painting as black hatching.¹⁶ The orange harness that he wears may represent heavy chains for mortification, emphasizing his ascetic lifestyle.¹⁷ In the wild, Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus befriended and tamed animals and is often depicted with them.¹⁸

The central panel on side 2 features two similarly dressed haloed saints in frontal pose standing against a green background with Gə‘əz inscriptions on the lower half of their bodies. On the left stands *Abba* Täklä Haymanot (ca. 1215–1313), founder of the monastery, Däbrä ‘Asbo, later renamed Däbrä Libanos in Šäwa in central Ethiopia.¹⁹ *Abba* Ewošatewos (ca. 1273–1352), who stands on the right, founded his own monastic community in modern Eritrea (Erətra).²⁰ The two saints stare upward, holding hand crosses in their right hand, similar to the ones featured in this catalog.²¹ Both figures wear knotted white turbans with black and red stripes, yellow shawls with different patterns in red, and red tunics.²² Ewošatewos has a black beard and Täklä Haymanot has a white beard, a feature denoting him as “father of all monks.”²³

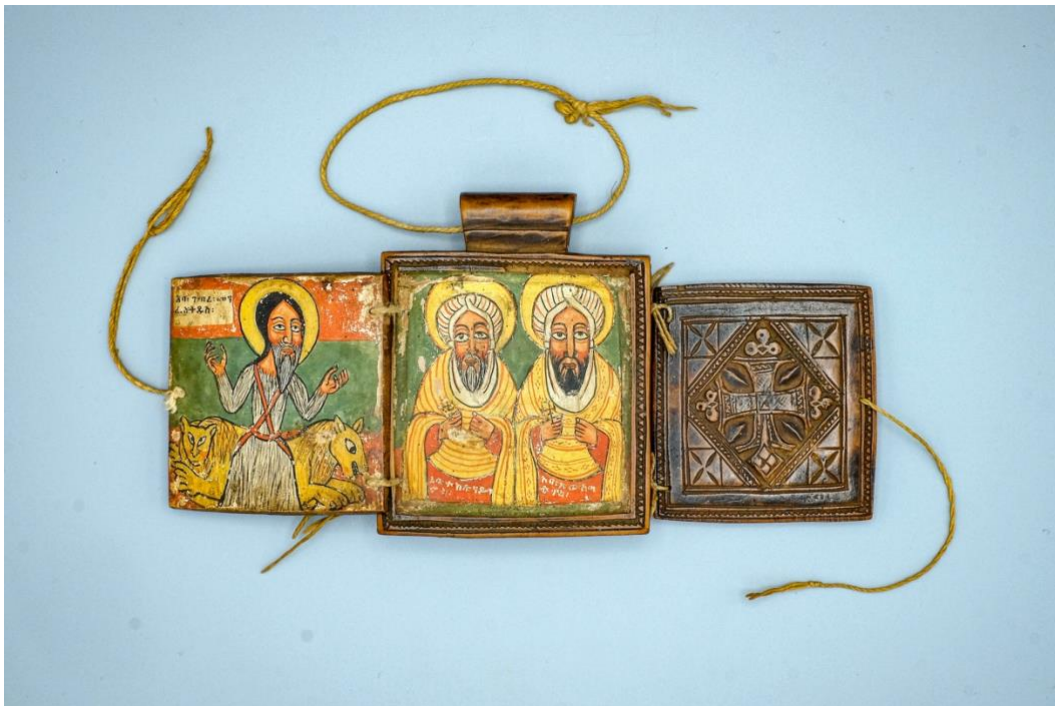
These two monastic leaders are usually depicted together.²⁴ They are both recognized as being religious and political leaders. A legend credits Täklä Haymanot with helping king Yəkunno Amlak (r. 1270–85) overthrow the Zag^we dynasty and restore the Solomonic dynasty in 1270.²⁵ Ewošatewos criticized emperor ‘Amdä Šəyon I (r. 1314–44) for his involvement with his father’s wife and encouraged a ruler from Ḥamasen, modern Eritrea, to rebel against the emperor.²⁶

1. Mercier 1997, p. 77; Silverman 1999c, p. 138. Larger icons were carried in liturgies; Mann 2005, p. 13.
2. Mann 2005, p. 13; Silverman 1999c, p. 138.
3. To avoid iconographical hierarchy, I identify sides 1 and 2, rather than front and back. The paintings on side 1 have more deterioration than those on side 2; this may indicate more use.
4. A passage in the Synaxarium or in the Book of Miracles of the Virgin describes Saint George riding a white horse; Chojnacki 1973, p. 60. Saint Theodore rides a brown or red horse and Saint Mercury rides a black horse; Langmuir et al 1978, p. 7; Silverman 1999a, p. 152. Derillo 2019 says that Saint George is the nation’s patron saint; Jenkins 2008, p. 13.
5. Grierson 1993, p. 244.
6. Scholars often state that the composition of the Mother and Child derives from a painting located in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, prints of which were brought to Ethiopia by Jesuits in the 1570s. Chojnacki 1964, p. 9; Heldman 1993, p. 96; Langmuir et al 1978, p. 3.
7. Chojnacki 1990, p. 18. He refers to the red decoration as red “tongues of flame” that begins during the First Gondär style in the seventeenth century.
8. Jenkins 2008, p. 13; Chojnacki 1990, p. 27.
9. Heldman 1993, p. 96.
10. Haile 1993, p. 51; Heldman 1993, pp. 71–73, 96; Mann 2005, p. 12; Haile 1991.
11. Grierson 1993, p. 91, p. 244.
12. Mann 2005, p. 12.
13. Mercier 1997, p. 88.
14. See Sarah Mathiesen’s essay (ch. 7).
15. Langmuir et al 1978, p. 7; Silverman 1999a, p. 154.
16. Langmuir et al 1978, p. 7; Silverman 1999a, p. 154; Haile 1991.
17. Silverman 1999, p. 154.
18. Haile 1991; Heldman 1993, p. 97; Langmuir et al 1978, p. 7.
19. Šäwa includes Ethiopia’s capital Addis Abäba. Haile 1991.
20. Zelleke 1975, p. 70; Derillo 2019, p. 110.
21. See the essay by Lynn Jones (ch. 6).
22. Depictions of the two saints with turbans and nimbi begin in the seventeenth century; Chojnacki 1990, p. 29.
23. Grierson 1993, p. 197.
24. Chojnacki 1990, p. 18; Langmuir et al 1978, p. 7.
25. Derillo 2019, p. 109; Jenkins 2008, p. 14; Haile 1991.
26. Haile 1991.

SFD



Cat. 29E. Double-sided painted icon, view of side 1 with both wings open. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.



Cat. 29F. Double-sided painted icon, view of side 2 with both wings open. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.



Cat. 30A. Stone diptych, open. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

30. Stone Diptych

Stone, leather string, and possibly cinnabar

Left panel: $3 \frac{5}{16} \times 2 \frac{11}{16} \times \frac{7}{16}$ in.

(8.4 × 6.7 × 1.1 cm)

Right panel: $3 \frac{5}{16} \times 2 \frac{9}{16} \times \frac{5}{16}$ in.

(8.4 × 6.6 × 0.7 cm)

8.52 oz. (241.5 g)

CONDITION: The leather strings that tie the two panels together are broken.

PROVENANCE: Purchased by David P. Harris from Maria Teresa O’Leary (Nuevo Mundo) in Alexandria, Virginia on February 28, 1976. Harris bequest, The Blick-Harris Study Collection, Department of Art History, Kenyon College (2020.193).

<https://digital.kenyon.edu/arhistorystudycollection/638/>

This stone diptych features four carved surfaces with Christian-themed iconography commonly found on Ethiopian painted icons (see cat. 29). Leather strings threaded through pierced holes fasten the two panels to form the diptych. A recess in the interior of the left panel accommodates a raised surface on the right panel, allowing a snug fit when closed. The reddish tint on the object may be traces of cinnabar, also found on similar objects.¹ The diptych can fit into one’s palm suggesting a personal devotional object.

The front cover (cat. 30B) features a thin, unadorned border that encloses a carved frontal depiction of an angel with spread wings, their arms crossed over the chest, and their hands framing the face. The angel wears a long-sleeved garment with



Cat. 30B. Stone diptych, exterior of left panel, angel. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

vertical stripes, and a belt around the waist. The angel's round eyes stare directly at the viewer.

The upper portion of the cover's interior surface, the left panel of the diptych (cat. 30C), features an equal-armed cross with quatrefoil finials. To the left and right of the cross are wavy stripes. Below this decoration is carved recess, measuring three-eighths of an inch deep (1 cm).

The recess contains an image of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child flanked by two bodiless angels, a standard Ethiopian Orthodox iconography. The angel on the right has a halo while the other does not. Wings, indicated by faint carved lines, emerge from behind their heads. Radiate haloes encircle the Virgin and Child. The half-length Virgin carries Christ with her left arm while gripping a cloth in her left hand. She makes a sign of blessing with her right hand, extending her index and middle fingers, as she gazes at the viewer with her large round eyes. Christ holds an object in his left hand, possibly a closed scroll, and makes the gesture of blessing with his right hand, as he looks at his mother.



Cat. 30C. Stone diptych, interior of left panel, Virgin and Child with two angels. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

According to an account from the Miracles of Mary, a servant had a vision where the Virgin took her *mappa*, or handkerchief.² Scholarship often associates the iconography portraying the Virgin with the handkerchief to a the painting of the Virgin and Child from Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, copies of which were brought by Jesuit missionaries to Ethiopia in the 1570s.³ King Zär'a Ya'eqob (r. 1434–68) amplified veneration of the Virgin and required readings of her miracles during each service; more than 600 of these miracle accounts survive.⁴

The interior of the diptych's right panel is carved with two frames (cat. 30D). The exterior frame features a *barag*, or tendril-like decoration, often found in Ethiopian manuscripts and on hand and processional crosses.⁵ The interior frame is undecorated with an equal-armed cross at the top center, matching the cross on the left panel.

Below the cross and within the frames is the raised surface that nests inside the left panel's recess. The protrusion features an image of a man in frontal view with no identifying inscription. The figure has a short beard, wears a long-sleeved garment with vertical stripes on the lower half, and is adorned with



Cat. 30D. Stone diptych, interior of right panel, angel. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.



Cat. 30E. Stone diptych, exterior of right panel, angel. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

a belt around his waist. He points upward with his two index fingers, as he gazes toward the sky.

The diptych's back cover (cat. 30E) also features a double frame, the style of which matches that of the interior carving of the right panel. Inside the frame is a frontal figure raising his arms while pointing upward with his two index fingers. He wears a body length, textured garment with sleeves that hang low, almost touching the ground. His long straight beard extends to the ground while the scalloping around his head indicates he has curly hair. While this figure is not named by an inscription, these iconographic elements identify him as Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus.⁷ This hermit saint lived in the wild and adhered to a strict ascetic life, including forgoing clothes. The textured details on the diptych represent the hair God provided Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus to protect him from cold weather.⁶ Painted depictions of the saint often include wild beasts (see cat. 29).⁸

1. See figure 8.8 in my essay (ch. 8).
2. Heldman 1993, pp. 99–100; Jenkins 2008, p. 13.
3. Langmuir et al 1978, p. 3; Heldman 1993, p. 73.
4. Haile 1993, p. 51; Heldman 1993, pp. 72, 96; Mann 2005, 12; Haile 1991; Chojnacki 1964, p. 9.
5. Zanotti-Eman 1993, p. 63.
6. Haile 1991; Zelleke 1975, p. 73.
7. For a discussion of his iconography, see Sobania et al 2018, p. 56.
8. Langmuir et al 1978, p. 7.

SFD



Cat. 30F. Stone diptych, exterior. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.



Cat. 30G. Stone diptych, interior. Photo: Birhanu T. Gessese.

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