

Restoration: On the Trail of the Artist Behind An Ethiopian Painting of the Holy Trinity

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The Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida has significant holdings of religious art from the tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), including processional and hand crosses, illustrated manuscripts and healing scrolls, icons and mural paintings. In recent months I have worked to resolve some questions surrounding one of the Ethiopian mural paintings in the museum's collection, which is so heavily damaged that it cannot presently be exhibited at the museum. Like most EOC mural paintings, it was painted on cotton cloth that was then pasted to the walls of a church. The painting measures 7 ft. 6 in. by 9 ft. 11 in. and portrays the Holy Trinity as three identical haloed, robed men with white hair and beards. These figures are surrounded by the four beasts that support the throne of God and 24 crowned and winged bust-length figures representing the elders of the Apocalypse (Ezekiel 1:10 and Revelations 4:4-7).

All elements of the design are rendered in bright, saturated colors and heavily outlined in black. In 2005, Karen French, a painting conservator at Baltimore's Walters Art Museum, conducted an initial analysis of the painting and made a preliminary proposal for treatment. In 2008, conservator Rustin Levenson, who like French has expertise in restoring mural paintings, prepared a proposal for treatment based on her examination of the painting at the Harn in the context of a workshop for graduate students in the university's Museum Studies program.

Prior to this year I had concluded that the painting dates to the mid-twentieth century and had tentatively narrowed the region of its production to the northern highlands of Ethiopia. Among those I consulted about the painting were older Ethiopian artists trained in the EOC, but until recently no helpful leads developed. A turning point came when Curator of African Art Susan Cooksey and I were working with a young Washington DC-based artist, Daniel

Berhanemeskel, on the acquisition of one of his icon paintings for the museum's collection.

Daniel comes from a distinguished lineage of church painters in Aksum in northern Ethiopia, which includes his great grandfather Aleqa Yohannes Teklu (c. 1883-1978) and his father Berhanemeskel Fisseha (b. 1947). Daniel kindly agreed to send photographs of our Trinity mural to his father in hopes that he might help us to identify the artist. When Daniel saw the photographs he remarked with surprise that the style of the mural resembles early works by his father. Indeed, when Berhanemeskel Fisseha received the photographs he confirmed that the Harn's Trinity mural is his own work from around 40 years ago. Although he does not recall the specific church for which he painted the mural, he says it was probably in or near the city of Adigrat, east of Aksum in the old Agame region, now part of Tigray. My work on the Trinity mural will now focus on interviewing the artist to learn more about its origins, technique, style and iconography, and on securing the resources for its restoration.



Rebecca Martin Nagy is director of the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida and affiliate with the Center for African Studies. Since 2001 she has been conducting research in Ethiopia, primarily on the work of contemporary artists based in Addis Ababa. Her research culminated in the exhibition "Continuity and Change: Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists," which she co-curated with Professor Achamyelch Debelo of North Carolina Central University. The exhibition, accompanied by a publication of the same name, opened at the Harn and traveled to the Diggs Gallery at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina in 2007.