



# Visual Representation and Conservation Problems in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

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## Abstract

Visual representation has been an integral part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church throughout the history of the church, namely in the form of iconography. The walls of the *Makdas* (Holy of holies) of each Orthodox Church are usually adorned with the depictions of the Trinity, the life of Christ on earth, St. Mary, winged angels and saints in traditional Ethiopian artistic styles. The church presents different themes from the Holy Bible and other apocryphal texts to figure out an 'imaginary' of believer's worship for two ways of seeing, 'to see and to be seen' or 'intra-ocular' via the 'third-eye'. However, nowadays, many of these paintings have lost their value due to poor conservation techniques, lack of expertise in their restoration and insufficient care for traditional conservation methods to preserve the church's religious and cultural heritage. Many of the church paintings and icons in the churches and in the market have lost their local traditional themes due to external elements and a very poor conservation system.

**Keywords:** Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Visual presentation, art, painting, tangible heritage conservation

## Introduction

The origin of religion or the beginning of traditional beliefs through human evolution is believed to be one of the most important factors for the development of visual art and architecture and for the domestication of plants and animals. There are arguments that early humans have had ritualistic relationship with their surrounding rocks such that they used to draw and engrave spiritual images on them, other than simply using them for shelter. It is believed that due to the strong connection between art, trance experience and myth, some rock paintings might have shamanic objectives and thus represent the works of traditional healers who depict trance-like experiences and aspects of their community rituals (Dowson & Lewis-Williams, 1994:237). It is also believed that early humans might have begun to domesticate fauna and flora to sanctify for their religion before they domesticated them for personal consumption (Hancock, 1992:162). Thus, the beginning of religion is regarded as one of the roots of the evolutions of visual art and architecture and sedentary way of life as well.

Visual representation continued with Christianity and other modern religions except Islam and has been an integral part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church throughout the history of the Church. The walls of the *Makdas* (Holy of holies) of every Ethiopian Orthodox Church are generally decorated with the representations of the Holy Trinity, scenes from the life of Christ, St. Mary, winged angels and saints in traditional Ethiopian



artistic styles (i.e. a simplified Coptic version of Byzantine Christian art) (Chojnacki, 1983).

Paintings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church present different themes from the Holy Bible and other apocryphal texts with recognizable and highly stylized wall paintings and icons, not only for use in liturgical services, but also to be kept before the eyes of devotees during their prayers. They also thus inspire prayer, meditation, and devotion. These aspects made visual representation more important in religion than in any other social life area- to figure out a believer's worship for two ways of seeing, 'to see and to be seen' or 'intra-ocular'. In other words, it is believed that during praying in front of icons, not only worshippers are looking at the pictures, but the spirit of the pictures is also looking at the worshippers at the same time( Tadesse, 2010:126-127).

Many of the church paintings are painted on the walls or painted on raw-cotton canvasses and they are attached to the walls with glue (Aalund, 1985:62). Artists depicted them on the walls or on canvasses with a white coating of gesso or plaster, with dyes, available from minerals, natural colours and pigments made from locally gathered ingredients by brushes made from animal hair (Chojnacki, 1983:175; Mellors & Parsons, 2002:15). Then, there are many smaller and portable paintings (also known as icons) kept with other sacred objects and carried outside on feast day celebrations, and the smallest or the miniatures can be kept in private houses on a small iconostasis.

The main objective of this paper is to look at the major themes of the church paintings and conservation problems that endanger them. The discussions about the conservation problems refer not only to the problems of protection and restoration of art works, but also to the challenges of conservation of the age-old tradition.

### **Major themes of Church paintings**

Compositional arrangements of thematic subjects and colour have significant presentation in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church paintings. Subjects are depicted in frontal positions, wide-eyed and with halo (a ring or circle of light around the head of a saint in a religious painting) (**Figures 1-8**). While the halo represents the torn crown of Christ, the frontal position is to make the prayers to concentrate on the prayer or to 'communicate' with the subject and they are made wide-eyed to illustrate the power of the subject over the universe. In other words, the painters make the subjects to indicate that they have the power to differentiate the righteous from the wrong and to keep the universe. While praying before such pictures, as mentioned before, Christians believe that they are not only looking at the pictures, but they are also being looked by the spirit of the subject that resides in the pictures (Mercier, 1979:40, 47; Tadesse, 2010:88, 127-129).

On the other hand, those who are said to have a connection with evil or the sinners are represented with the 'lowest profile', (**Figure 2**, centre bottom), i.e. this is to show them as powerless, and not to allow them to have equal status with the main subject, and they are generally coloured in black i.e. to symbolize the hell in to which they are believed to be sent after death for their sins, or sometimes as naked people (to show that they are spiritually naked or do not have any good work to cover their sins (Tadesse, 2010:88, 127-129).

Highly venerated, as the two-fold Virgin and mother of God, established as a dogma at the council of Ephesus in 431 CE, St. Mary is given a special privilege in the Ethiopian



Orthodox Church and among the believers (Chojnacki, 1983:171- 172). Believed to have effective power of intercession between Christ and mankind and protecting against evil, she is presented, not only in Orthodox Church paintings but also in the liturgy books (particularly the liturgy of the mass) of the church, in apocryphal texts, private praying books of the believers and other related texts. Hence there are many churches dedicated to St. Mary. Adopting her name and commemorating her feast days are also among the common manifestations of the cult of St. Mary. The Image of St. Mary therefore dominates the subject-matter of Ethiopian traditional art.

As a dogmatic tradition in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in general, each of the four sides of the walls of the *Makdas* is devoted to different biblical and ecclesiastical themes. Though many pictures feature St. Mary as the principal subject in almost all directions, the southern face of each *Makdas* is usually reserved for the major events in her life based on *Nagara-Mariam* (Life of St Mary). She is usually presented in portraits illustrating the life of Christ, in rare compositions illustrating her own and her intercession on behalf of humankind. St Mary is said to have performed many miracles. As for the miracles, painters usually focus on the incarnation, St. Mary's intercession, the family's flight to Egypt, the Virgin's apparition at *Dabra Mitmaq* (in Egypt) and her death. Unique to Ethiopian Orthodox Church paintings, is that of St. Mary's intercession on behalf of a man named Bela'e-seb. Bela'e-seb, a cannibal, believed to have eaten seventy-eight people, and who received salvation because of the Virgin's influence and mediation (Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1994).

Colours in Ethiopian Orthodox paintings have their own interpretations. Artists illustrate St. Mary wearing the same attire – a red dress, blue veil decorated with artistic decorations and yellow cape, decorated with golden embellishments, seated on a highly decorated throne, holding the divine Son on her left arm, and most of the time, flanked by the two archangels, *Michael* and *Gabriel*, on her right and left sides respectively (**Figure 1**). This picture is also known among the artists and researchers of the field by the name of the enthroned Mary and sometimes called the Madonna (Tadesse, 1972:264). The three colours, red, blue, and white are predominant in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church art. They symbolize God the Father, The Son and The Holy Ghost, respectively. In another interpretation, the red reminds us of the blood of Christ at His crucifixion and the blood of the martyrs, the white stands for the hope of life after death and blue notifies us of the union with God (Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1994; Wondmagegenhu & Motovu, 1970).



**Figure 1:** The enthroned Mary (a miniature), photographed by Baluku Stanley, May 2007.

The eastern wall mainly represents the *Tamara Mariam* and *Tamra Iyasus* (Miracles of St. Mary and Christ respectively). The Entrance to Jerusalem is usually depicted on the eastern wall, Jesus riding a donkey and several saints below it. The northern face is mainly devoted to Abraham's sacrifice, beheading of John the Baptist procession of the equestrian saints and martyrs. The equestrian saints are identified by the colour of the horse they ride - white for *St. George*, black for *St. Marqoreyos* and brown or red for *St. Theodore* (**Figure 8**).

Being considered to be the most important from liturgical point of view, the western wall is usually decorated by the combinations of major events from the above themes, specially, Crucifixion, Birth of Christ, the incarnation, death of St. Mary and the Last Judgment (**Figure 2**). The Ethiopian Orthodox Church exemplifies the incarnation and birth of Christ; placing St. Mary with the morning sun rise so that the eastern direction is given special consideration. Therefore, the clergy perform the liturgy in a section of the church called *Qenie Mahelet* (Performing Place) to the west of the *Makdas* to face to the east and meanwhile, facing the western wall of the *Makdas*.



**Figure 2.** The incarnation, death of St. Mary and the Last Judgment found on the cover of Hiruy Erimias's book in Amharic entitled, *Mezgebe Tarik (Records of History)*. Addis Ababa, Commercial Printing Enterprise (2002). Photographed by Bantalem Tadesse, May 2007.

**Figure 2**, for example, represents three major themes: the incarnation (painting's top-left surrounded by clouds), death of St. Mary (left bottom) and the Judgement Day (the coming of God for the judgment) (right). In the incarnation, St. Mary can be seen standing under the canopy of the Trinity in a red dress, purple<sup>1</sup> overgarment and with halo and her palms facing each other in front of her. The two holy men, one on her right (Christ), with bright red dress, purple gown, halo and holding a cross on his left hand, and another one (God) on her left with darker red dress, darker green over-gown, and halo, each person stretching their right hand towards the head of St. Mary, supporting a crown from either side to put on the head of St. Mary.

According to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's interpretation, the two holy men and the dove on the crown symbolize the Holy Trinity (God the Father, the Holy Ghost and God the Son). The dove was also chosen and sent by Noah to check if the water had dried up after the great flood and came back with a freshly plucked olive leaf to show that the water had receded (Genesis 8:8-11). The illustration of the Baptism of Christ is also presented with a dove coming from above to the head of Christ while he was baptizing in the River Jordan to exemplify the Holy Ghost (Mathew 3:16-17). So, the dove is one of the most respected birds in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and symbolizes peace.

The picture below the Holy Trinity, symbolizes the death of St. Mary, her body is laid on a bed. Her body, hair and neck are covered with a red-purple garment and her face is uncovered, and her eyes are closed, but still with a halo. Her body is surrounded by the apostles. While only the faces of many of the apostles are seen, one is seen standing with bright purple dress, bright green over-gown, holding a red book in his left hand and a censer on his right hand. At the front, a man known as Tawfania, is kneeling down, he is being punished by an angel with a sword for his attempt to burn the corpse of St.

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<sup>1</sup> This painting was photographed from a book; therefore, the colours might be different from the original picture.



Mary. He is presented in profile as was the usual depiction for all sinners (Ullendorff, 1960:166).

In the judgment scene, God is depicted seated high-up, magnified with a light blue garment and red over-gown. He is stretching out His arms and rests on a round yellow object which symbolizes the globe, which itself rests on top of a cross. Here, the globe symbolizes the universe, and the cross represents the True Cross on which Christ was crucified. The positioning of the globe on the cross and God on the globe represent therefore the Crucifixion of Christ to save the universe and His victory over death.

St. Mary in a red garment and purple veil, and one of the prophets with a bright dress and red over-gown, are illustrated to the right and left of God respectively, each escorted by several people behind. In front are three angels, each one holding a copy of the Bible, opened to face the front (i.e., the viewer), another one holding a spear up-right and the third one blowing a trumpet towards a crowd in front of them. Several people (just below the angel blowing the trumpet) are depicted in frontal view, all dressed in white clothing and in front of the other angel, on the left, are naked people depicted in black. The two groups are separated by a man in green, beating a drum with a drumstick.

In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, all objects including the musical instruments have their own biblical and ecclesiastical interpretations. The trumpet and the drum are used to announce both good and bad news (Genesis 4:21). Therefore, they are used to announce the Last Judgment that is good news for those who fulfil the orders of God as they will be saved in the heaven to live an eternal life. As for the bad news, that is for the sinners, as they will be sent to the everlasting hell. Those who are escorting St. Mary and the prophet represent those who have already died and are in heaven for their good works and due to the intercession of St. Mary and the prophets. Those who are depicted in black and are naked are the examples of those who have died as sinners and will be sent to hell for their sins.

According to the church's interpretation, the drum symbolizes Christ and His divine nature. The cloth that covered the main body of the drum exemplifies the bandage used by the Jews to cover Christ's face. In another version, the Church symbolizes the cloth as the pieces of bandages His corpse was shrouded with. The crossed leather-strips that fasten the two pieces of animal skin (top and bottom ends of drum) with the main body represent the Christ's cloth and the scars on His body due to His flagellation. The beating of the drum represents the sound of when Christ was beaten.

The Holy Bible is opened to be viewed by all sinners to show that even though both groups were provided with it, only those who are going to be sent to heaven used it to fulfil the orders of God while the sinners do not. In other words, some benefitted from it, and some are going to be punished for their failure to fulfil the orders of God the Father according to His Holy Bible.

### **Conservation Problems: Art works and Tradition**

The conservation and restoring of wall paintings in many churches are undergoing unavoidable degradations caused by human and natural factors. Many are damaged by bird and bat droppings and seepage of rainwater through the roofs. Others are highly affected by light (flash photography), insufficient ventilation, termites and other insect pests (Aalund, 1985:67,69,70).

This subtopic discusses, not only the problems of protection and restoration of art works, but also the challenges of conservation of the tradition in the paintings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (UNESCO. 1972). Many of the church paintings and icons in the churches and in the market lost their themes due to external and foreign elements and poor conservation system. Old paintings are painted in natural colours and pigments made from locally collected ingredients, but nowadays artists usually use factory made colours (Mellors & Parsons, 2002:15; Aalund, 1985:62).

Some imported icons in the market seem to be made for decorative purposes (i.e. popular art) rather than religious aims (Aalund, 1985:95). In these pictures St. Mary is illustrated with a blue garment and red overgarment (**Figure 3**) instead of the above symbolic representations. In some of these pictures the lips of Mary and the Son are glossed (**Figures 3 and 4**), which is totally out of line in the religious themes. Sometime unusual decorations are applied also on her clothing (**Figure 4**). Usually, Mary holds the divine Son on her left arm to present a Biblical theme to represent the version which says, “Up on thy right hand did stand the queen in gold of Ophir...” (Psalm 45:9). According to the interpretation of the church the subject of this version is Christ, and this queen represents St. Mary so that the church uses this version to position St. Mary in church paintings on the right-hand side of Christ.

However, in some pictures she holds Him on her right arm (**Figure 4**) and appears on his left hand side, violating the traditional position of the Mother-and-Child theme. In the old Ethiopian church paintings, it was common to see saints, holy men (and most of the time the painters themselves), praying, performing religious services or bowing down or prostrating to the religious figures in traditional or religious clothing (**Figure 1**). But the theme of the previous paintings is not presented in many of the newly restored paintings. Instead, the restorers or those who sponsored the restorations are represented with their families in modern and secular clothing (**Figure 5**).



**Figure 3:** St. Mary with the divine Son (miniature), photographed By Baluku Stanley, May 2007

These days there are differences as demonstrated by **figures 1, 3 and 4**. In **figure 1**, Mary is seated on a conspicuous and elaborate throne, in a red garment, blue veil and

yellowish cape, and guarded by the two angels with swords as usual. The infant Christ wears a red garment and green gown. The two holy men, Abba Ferminatos and Abba Epherem, the creators of St. Mary's praises, are standing on the right and on the left respectively, praising her, each holding a book in his left hand.

On the other hand, the painters focused mainly on St. Mary and the Son (**Figures 3 and 4**), which is reminiscent of a close-up photograph, missing the whole picture and much detail. The angels are seen partially, and the throne and the holy men cannot be seen totally. The guarding angels, usually figured with St. Mary, are mostly depicted in three ways: either holding swords, or crosses, or without weapons, flanking the Virgin with their wings. In **figure 3** one notes a very unusual depiction of the angels. The angel on St. Mary's right is holding a spear and a nail-like object whilst the one on her left is holding a cross. Mary is seen in a blue garment and a red veil or overgarment.



**Figure 4.** St. Mary with the divine Son. Monastery of Daga Estifanos, Lake Tana.  
Photographed by Bantalem Tadesse, 2003.

**Figure 4** departed from the common tradition in many ways. In addition to the missed elements such as the throne and the holy men, like in **figure 3**, Mary holds, the divine Son in her right arm. The clothing style is also different in this painting. In this icon, St. Mary wears a bright purple veil, decorated with lines and beads. Furthermore, her lips, those of the divine Son and the angels are glossed in bright red. This painting is a fifteenth-century Madonna by the Ethiopian artist, named Fire-Siyon, who lived during the reign of King Zara-Ya'akob (1434-1468 CE) (Tadesse, 1972:264). This shows the introduction of foreign elements and brings the question, "why do the clergy keep such paintings which are out of the contextual interpretation of the church?"

Even Deacon Daniel Saifa-Sellassie<sup>2</sup> did not give attention to this tradition and his answer to my question was so brief: "... a mother can carry her child in either of her

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<sup>2</sup> Deacon Daniel Saifa-Sellassie is the Director of the exhibition, entitled *Grand Exhibition of the Millennium: Ethiopia stretches Her Hands to God* and organized by the Patriarchate Office of the

sides.” While some argue that though it violates the tradition, Deacon Daniel believes that the church keeps these imported or foreign influences for their artistic value. Deacon Daniel, among others, give less consideration to the symbolic interpretations of church paintings.



**Figure 5.** St. Mary with the divine Son. Monastery of Dabra Mariam, Lake Tana.  
Photographed by Bantalem Tadesse, 2003.

In **figure 5** a photograph of six people is attached below St. Mary and the woman (in white) is the one who sponsored the reconstruction of the Church of Debra Mariam. Therefore, the painter depicted her with her family members to commemorate her good works. It is common to honour those who contribute for the construction and maintenance of churches, but magnifying individuals in secular and modern clothing styles in the religious paintings is in contrast to believers who prostrate and is totally out of line according to the religious themes. Instead of painting the donor in a prostrated position in the painting, a photograph of the sponsor is attached to it. Moreover, based on the Holy Bible and the preaching of the church, women usually wear long dresses and cover their hair; both women and men wear traditional garments whenever they go to church. However, in the photograph (attached to **figure 5**), the woman is presented in fashioned, uncovered hair and dressed in a modern and short dress. Another woman behind her is also in modern clothing and with styled and uncovered hair. The two men on her right and another man and children on her left are also in dressed in modern suits with neck ties.

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Ethiopian Orthodox Church for the celebration of the Second Millennium of Ethiopia for one year (September 2007 – September 2008). My visit to this exhibition was guided by Director, Deacon Daniel, and I used the opportunity to raise the question while he was describing church paintings in the exhibition.



**Figure 6.** St. Mary with the divine Son and two local saints, Ewostatews and Takla Haymanot (below), western wall of the *Makdas* of Dabra Sina Monastery, Gorgora, Lake Tana. Photographed by Bantalem Tadesse, 2004.



**Figure 7.** Equestrian saints and martyrs, northern wall of the *Makdas* of Dabra Sina Mariam Monastery, Gorgora, Lake Tana. Photographed by Bantalem Tadesse, 2004.

**Figures 6 and 7** are attached here to show how the poor conservation system made the description difficult. **Figure 6** is a photograph of a two panels painting- Madonna, (upper) and local saints (below). In **figure 6**, the poor conservation system made it difficult to be sure if the images on the right of St. Mary are angels or not. The left side of that image is partly covered with a white curtain so that we cannot be sure if there is the guardian angel on that side.

**Figure 7** is a six-panel painting on the northern wall of the *Makdas*- the upper three for the equestrian saints on their horse back and the lower three for their executions as martyrs. The equestrian saints are identified by the colour of the horse they ride: white for *St. George* (at the middle), black for *St. Marqoreyos* (to the right) and brown or red for *St. Theodore* (the middle). The first panel from the right in the lower panels shows

two of the martyrs standing, in the second panel, four are persons and in the third panel, one is hung upside down. These examples show poor conservation or restoration as these images have been damaged by termites and/or water.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church teaches that angels attack and punish, or win over evil, not by exerting muscular force like human beings, but by their spiritual power so that their muscles should not be presented stretched and rigid. Nonetheless, some imported icons and miniature do not meet this criterion. For example, in many pictures that show St. Michael punishing the devil, the muscles of the angel, particularly on his legs, are seen stretched and rigid, as he exerts much force like a human being would do (**Figure 8**).



**Figure 8.** The Archangel, St. Michael Punishing the Devil (A Miniature, photographed by Bantalem Tadesse, January 2008).

According to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church interpretation, the story represented by this picture is related to the intercession of the archangel, Michael, in an important event. It is connected to a Christian couple in Syria who had honoured the archangel. The husband and wife are named Asteranikos and Afomia. Asteranikos died and Afomia refused to marry any other man. The devil is said to have revealed himself to Afomia several times while disguised as a holy man and sometimes as the angel St. Michael in order to persuade her to marry someone.

Finally, the devil is said to have tried to attack her when efforts at diplomacy failed. Afomia is believed to have been spared by the archangel. The event is commemorated yearly in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, particularly in the churches dedicated to the archangel, St. Michael, with a great feast on Sene 12 (June 20) (Ethiopic Synaxarium [Amharic – Ge'ez version], 1994, V. II: 401-403).



## Conclusions

Like other museum objects, paintings are kept in churches and museums for the spiritual and social values they represent (UNESCO, 1972). Iconographic or visual art presentations like the wall paintings and icons of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church have dual purposes. One is a spiritual purpose to represent the spirit of the imaginations of individuals or societies. These paintings present messages to the mind's eye of the believers, which is inaccessible in any other ways, even with the modern electronic instruments like cameras. On the other hand, these paintings are very vital sources to study the cultural, social, and artistic development of the country. Professor Stanislaw Chojnacki, the pioneer of Ethiopian art, who produced more than fifty publications on the subject, witnesses that the discovery of many previously unknown paintings has inspired a growing interest in the field in the last fifty years (Chojnacki, 2002). The evolution of Ethiopian art has therefore strong attachments to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Chojnacki, 1983). But there is a debate among the church scholars and other artists as some argue that the evolution of Ethiopian art and architecture has been predisposed to foreign influence. A comparative assessment on the gradual changes of the characteristics helps to identify the artists, styles, external influences and to date the paintings. Nicolaidis (2014) maintains that in the Orthodox Christian tradition, icons are not regarded as artworks but are rather a visual gospel and 'windows' into the spiritual realm. They are anticipated to support believers to be more contemplative and prayerful. They essentially guide the believers into a life of contemplative prayer.

Despite this importance, however, some of the changes discussed above desecrate the sanctity of the paintings. St. Mary's position on the left of Christ (**Figure 4**) and magnifying individuals in secular and modern clothing styles in the religious paintings into which believers prostrate (**Figure 5**) are totally out of line with the dogma of the church. In general, some of the changes in composition (**Figures 4 and 5**), in colour (**Figures 3 and 4**), magnifying individuals with the religious painting (**Figure 5**) violate the dogma of the faith. So, conservation and restoration of works should be conducted by expert in order to maintain the spiritual values of the paintings. Attention should be given also to stop the degradation of the wall paintings (**Figure 6**). Historical paintings with artistic importance should be conserved and preserved in such a manner that they retain their original state; not only their material and spiritual values but as their witness of historical and dogmatic evolution. To conserve historical paintings in their intact nature the authentic original materials and traditional skills should be considered a priority.

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**Figure 8:** The Archangel, St. Mikael punishing Devil (miniature, photographed by Bantalem Tadesse, January 2008). **NB.** Except figure 4, painted by an Ethiopian artist, named Fire-Siyon, the painters of others are unknown.