

Copying, Imitation, and Intermediality in Illuminated Ethiopic Manuscripts from the Early Solomonic Period

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Nowadays, the Orthodox churches of Ethiopia and Eritrea use numerous “sacred vessels” (*nəwayä qəddəsət*) made of metal—such as censers, crosses, ewers, and chalices—for liturgical purposes.¹ but how old is this practice? Since Christianity reached these areas during the Aksumite period, toward the mid-fourth century,² it stands to reason that local churches started employing metal utensils and vessels in liturgical settings from late antiquity onward.³ Unfortunately, however, archaeologists have not yet been able to identify examples of

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¹ Emmanuel Fritsch, “Paraphernalia,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig and Alessandro Bausi, vol. 4 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 275–78. Henceforth, when speaking of these churches in the period before the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia, I use the term “Ethiopian Church” for the sake of convenience.

² Steven Kaplan, “Ezana’s Conversion Reconsidered,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 13, no. 2 (1982): 101–9.

³ For an attempt to reconstruct the architectural setting of the liturgy in Ethiopia prior to the rise of the Solomonic dynasty, see Emmanuel Fritsch and Michael Gervers, “Pastophoria and Altars: Interaction in Ethiopian Liturgy and Church Architecture,” *Aethiopica* 10, no. 1 (2012): 7–51. For an overview of the liturgy, calendar and readings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, see Marsie Hazen, ed., *The Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church*, trans. Marcos Daoud (Addis Ababa: Berhanenna Selam Printing Press, 1954); Ernst Hammerschmidt, *Studies in the Ethiopic Anaphoras* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1987); Emmanuel Fritsch, *The Liturgical Year of the Ethiopian Church* (Addis Ababa: Master Printing Press, 2001); idem, “Qəddase,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig and Alessandro Bausi (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 4:271–75.

paraphernalia from this early period, so remarks about it are bound to remain largely speculative.⁴ The situation is not much better for the period from the decline of the Aksumite Empire around the eighth century to the deposition of the last ruler of the Zagwe dynasty in 1270.

Our knowledge of the use of metal vessels in Christian liturgical contexts in Ethiopia improves for the period following 1270—a year marked by the advent of a new line of rulers known as the Solomonic dynasty because they presented themselves as descendants of the biblical King Solomon. Scholars generally divide the seven-centuries-long history of this dynasty into a series of shorter periods, of which the first, generally referred to as the early Solomonic period, goes from 1270 to 1527. This period saw a flowering in the production of metal objects and in the illustration of manuscripts, where such objects were often represented, under the patronage of prominent religious figures, nobles, and the Solomonic emperors themselves. With the exception of an illuminated late antique Gospel book kept at the monastery of Ḥnda Abba Gärīma (discussed below), the earliest depictions of metal objects in Ethiopic manuscripts are found in early Solomonic examples. So it is on this latter period that the present essay focuses, in an effort to start outlining a history of the Ethiopian Church’s use of metal objects and of the representation of such objects in illustrated codices.⁵

Before reviewing the available data, it is worth observing that little has been published on the various types of metal objects used by the Ethiopian Church, and that most of what has been

⁴ The function of a recently discovered Aksumite stone pendant with a cross and an inscription, discussed in Alessandro Bausi, Michael Harrower, and Ioana A. Dumitru, “The Ḡə’Əz Inscriptions from Beta Samā’Ti (Beta Samati)*,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 77, no. 1 (2020): 34–56, remains to be determined.

⁵ For a detailed overview of the history of metalworking in this period with further bibliography, see Jacopo Gnisci, “Christian Metalwork in Early Solomonic Ethiopia: Production, Function, and Symbolism,” in *Peace, Power and Prestige: Metal Arts in Africa*, ed. Susan Cooksey (Gainesville, FL: Harn Museum of Art, 2020), 254–65.

written on the topic focuses on the morphology of Ethiopian crosses as a tool for dating them.⁶ Likewise, scholars have looked at the rendering of metal objects in other media, such as manuscript illumination, principally to identify criteria for dating the various types of crosses used by Christian Ethiopians, whereas the significance of such depictions has not attracted much interest. To complicate matters further, there have been no systematic studies on the other types of metalwork used by the Ethiopian Church, on their symbolism, function, and social dimension, and on their visual and semantic relation to the Church and to the constellation of other items that would have been used during the liturgical service (e.g. textiles, manuscripts, baskets, and—at least from the fifteenth century—icons).⁷ This disinterest in the sociocultural dimension of Ethiopian art is part of a Eurocentric tendency to ignore the communicative intentions of Ethiopian artists and their patrons that is open to criticism.⁸

This essay, by contrast, culls evidence of metal objects from illustrated manuscripts and written sources to further our understanding of their symbolism and use in Ethiopian devotional

⁶ For an overview of existing research, see Eine Moore, *Ethiopian Processional Crosses* (Addis Ababa: The Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1971); Bent Juel-Jensen, “The Evolution of the Ethiopian Cross,” in *Aspects of Ethiopian Art from Ancient Axum to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Paul B. Henze (London: The Jed Press, 1993), 17–27; Mario Di Salvo, *Croci d’Etiopia: Il segno della fede; Evoluzione e forma* (Milan: Skira, 2006); Stanislaw Chojnacki, *Ethiopian Crosses: A Cultural History and Chronology* (Milan: Skira, 2006); Jon Abbink, “The Cross in Ethiopian Christianity: Ecclesial Symbolism and Religious Experience,” in *Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (London: Routledge, 2015), 122–40; Jacopo Gnisci, “Crosses from Ethiopia at the Dallas Museum of Art: An Overview,” *African Arts* 51, no. 4 (2018): 48–55. The methodological considerations about the dating of Ethiopian crosses outlined in these studies can also be applied to the study of other types of Ethiopian metal objects.

⁷ One of the few studies that examines the sociocultural dimension of Ethiopian art during the early Solomonic period is Steven Kaplan, “Seeing Is Believing: The Power of Visual Culture in the Religious World of Aṣe Zär‘a Ya‘eqob of Ethiopia (1434–1468),” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32, no. 4 (2002): 403–21.

⁸ Jacopo Gnisci, “Constructing Kingship in Early Solomonic Ethiopia: The David and Solomon Portraits in the Juel-Jensen Psalter,” *Art Bulletin* 102, no. 4 (2020): 7–36.

and liturgical contexts. In analyzing the visual data in the light of Ethiopian texts, which are mainly hagiographical in nature, it is necessary to bear in mind that these strands of evidence present different methodological challenges.⁹ Nevertheless, by adopting this approach I hope to shed some light on the artistic practices, strategies, and concerns of image-makers during the early Solomonic period and to explore the attitude of the Ethiopian clergy toward materiality and precious metals such as gold.

Another point that deserves attention is that gold appears to have been rarely used to embellish Ethiopic manuscripts. In fact, gold ink, which was probably made by mixing gold powder with an aqueous solution of gum arabic, is found only in a manuscript containing a collection of the Miracles of Mary kept in the church of Amba Gəšän Maryam produced for Emperor Dawit II (r. ca. 1382–1411).¹⁰ The procedure for making the gold ink seemed so exceptional at the time as to be accountable only through a miraculous intervention of the Virgin

⁹ This is worth stating since most studies dealing with Christian Ethiopian art do not situate their contribution in critical terms within the existing literature. For some remarks on the value of Ethiopic hagiographies as historical sources, see Steven Kaplan. “Hagiographies and the History of Medieval Ethiopia,” *History in Africa* 8 (1981): 107–23. For relevant remarks on the use of hagiographies as sources on art, with a focus on the Byzantine tradition, see Alexander Kazhdan and Henry Maguire, “Byzantine Hagiographical Texts as Sources on Art,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991): 1–22.

¹⁰ On this manuscript, see Marilyn E. Heldman, “Maryam Seyon: Mary of Zion,” in *African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, ed. Roderick Grierson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 71–100, at 91–92. Unfortunately, the ink has not been analyzed and, more generally, analyses of the pigments used to decorate early Solomonic Ethiopic manuscripts are practically nonexistent. The only exception is Jacek Tomaszewski, Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, and Grażyna Zofa Żukowska, “Ethiopian Manuscript Maywäyni 041 with Added Miniature: Codicological and Technological Analysis,” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 29 (2014): 97–117. The documentation of the techniques and materials used to decorate manuscripts in the twentieth century is likewise deficient, but see Taye Wolde Medhin, “La préparation traditionnelle des couleurs en Éthiopie,” *Abbay: Documents pour servir à l’histoire de la civilisation éthiopienne* 11 (1980–82): 219–24.

Mary.¹¹ This manuscript is also one of three known cases in which a solution of gold is used in the illuminations, the other two being a Gospel book from Kəbran Gäbrəʾel and a psalter now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.¹² In the Miracles of Mary of Gəšän Maryam, seven full-page miniatures across the manuscript mark the beginning of a new text section. Four of these miniatures feature nearly identical representations of the Virgin and Child flanked by two adoring angels, with Emperor Dawit II on a lower step (Fig. 1).¹³ Here, significantly, the gold is used exclusively for the garments and halo of the Virgin and Child, a privilege that—in line with the hierarchical worship system promoted by the Church—was not granted to the angels or to a figure as important as the emperor.¹⁴

While we know of only three manuscripts decorated with gold, the pictorial evidence provided by other illustrated Ethiopic manuscripts can be looked at from different angles, and

¹¹ The story is recorded in several copies of the Miracles of Mary and has been translated by Enrico Cerulli, *Il libro etiopico dei Miracoli di Maria e le sue fonti nelle letterature del Medio Evo latino* (Rome: Dott. Giovanni Bardi, 1943), 89–90.

¹² On the Gospel book see Jacopo Gnisci, “Towards a Comparative Framework for Research on the Long Cycle in Ethiopic Gospels: Some Preliminary Observations,” *Aethiopica* 20 (2017): 70–105, with further bibliography. On the psalter (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. éth. 105) see Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, “Le psautier illustré de Belēn Sägäd,” in *Imagines medievales: Studier i medeltida ikonografi, arkitektur, skulptur, måleri och konsthantverk*, ed. Rudolf Zeitler and Jan O. M. Karlsson (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1983), 1–46. It is probable that these manuscripts were decorated by mixing gold powder and other minerals with gum arabic, but this can only be confirmed through technical analysis. For an overview of the use of gold in the Ethiopian tradition, see Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, Alessandro Bausi, Denis Nosnitsin, and Claire Bosc-Tiessé, “Ethiopic Codicology,” in *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Alessandro Bausi et al. (Hamburg: COMSt, 2015), 154–74, at 156–57.

¹³ The only differences between each scene are the decorations on Mary’s garb and the captions, which respectively describe the emperor as someone who “loves” Our Lady Mary and whose faith is “steadfast,” “crowned by the Trinity,” and “sincere.”

¹⁴ In art, this hierarchy finds a number of expressions, as argued in Jacopo Gnisci, “The Liturgical Character of Ethiopian Gospel Illumination of the Early Solomonic Period: A Brief Note on the Iconography of the Washing of the Feet,” in *Aethiopia fortitudo ejus: Studi in onore di Monsignor Osvaldo Raineri in occasione del suo 80° compleanno*, ed. Rafał Zarzeczny (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2015), 253–75.

with different questions in mind, to illuminate neglected aspects of the historical use and symbolism of metalwork among Christian Ethiopians. Since this is the first study of its kind for the context of early Solomonic Ethiopia, it lays no claims to comprehensiveness, but aims to introduce and present information that has hitherto remained scattered or overlooked. The first section of the essay examines the question of the development of manuscript illumination in Ethiopia and its relationship to other traditions. The second reviews current knowledge about the working methods of Ethiopian illuminators. The third considers whether it is possible to detect visual traffic between different media in Ethiopian art, with a particular focus on representations of metalwork in manuscripts. The fourth looks at the significance of metal objects in Ethiopian illumination. Finally, the last section, discusses the attitude of Christian Ethiopians toward materiality and precious metals in the light of visual and textual sources. These sections raise questions that open avenues for future research, address select challenges presented by the evidence, and showcase the value of a more culturally and contextually informed approach to Ethiopian art.

Manuscript Illustration in Early Solomonic Ethiopia

The birth of a manuscript culture in Ethiopia, and the beginning of a tradition of illustration, date back to the late antique period. Their development was closely related to the introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia and to the country's close ties with Alexandria and the Mediterranean world. Two Ge'ez Gospel books kept at the monastery of ʿĪnda Abba Gārīma, which have been dated by carbon 14 to ca. 330–650 CE and ca. 530–660 CE, bear witness to the beginnings of this tradition in Ethiopia. The Gospels have coeval metal covers with embossed crosses, which are significant for the history of the presentation and display of manuscripts in

Ethiopia and in the late antique world.¹⁵ Similar metal covers are represented in the evangelist portraits found in one of the Gärima Gospels, Gärima III, where three of the evangelists hold up a copy of their work, each of which has a treasure binding.¹⁶ Each of the gem-studded covers has a cross at its center and is painted in yellow to evoke the gold used in precious bindings from late antiquity onward.¹⁷ Yellow, as discussed below, was probably also used for the same purpose in manuscripts from the early Solomonic period.

No other illustrated manuscripts from the Aksumite period survive. However, the presence of cycles of illustrations with a late antique flavor in early Solomonic Ethiopian manuscripts suggests a broader impact of early Christian imagery on the development of Ethiopian art. The so-called short cycle—which features representations of the Crucifixion, the Holy Women at the Tomb, and the Ascension—is often mentioned as evidence of the circulation of early Christian models in early Solomonic Ethiopia.¹⁸ Other subjects and iconographic details

¹⁵ It remains to be established whether the two early Gärima Gospels were produced in Ethiopia, in a different context, or by itinerant artists—if such a question can ever be satisfactorily resolved. In modern Ethiopia, manuscripts with precious covers are carried and displayed in procession during special occasions, as discussed by Anaïs Wion, “The *Golden Gospels* and *Chronicle of Aksum* at Aksum Şeyon’s Church: The Photographs Taken by Theodor v. Lüpke (1906),” in *In kaiserlichem Auftrag: Die Deutsche Aksum-Expedition 1906 unter Enno Littmann*, vol. 3, *Ethnographische, kirchenhistorische und archäologisch-historische Untersuchungen*, ed. Steffen Wenig (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2017), 117–33. It is unclear, however, how old this tradition is.

¹⁶ For an overview of the features of these two Gospel books and their covers, with further bibliography, see Judith S. McKenzie and Francis Watson, *The Garima Gospels: Early Illuminated Gospel Books from Ethiopia* (Oxford: Manar Al-Athar, 2016), esp. 43–45.

¹⁷ McKenzie and Watson, *The Garima Gospels*, 43–46, figs. 44, 58, 60–61, 93.

¹⁸ The fundamental studies are those by Marilyn E. Heldman, “An Early Gospel Frontispiece in Ethiopia,” *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 48 (1979): 107–21; Claude Lepage, “Reconstitution d’un cycle protobyzantin à partir des miniatures de deux manuscrits éthiopiens du XIV^e siècle,” *Cahiers Archéologiques: Fin de l’Antiquité et Moyen Âge* 35 (1987): 159–96; and Gianfranco Fiaccadori, “Πρόσωπις, non πρόοπις. Efeso, Gerusalemme, Aquileia (Nota a IEph 495, 1 s.),” *La Parola del Passato* 58 (2003): 182–249.

also point in this direction.¹⁹ For instance, some Ethiopic Gospel books and psalters²⁰ include Old Testament scenes that were commonly used in early Christian art and that illustrate moments of salvific history, such as Daniel between the Lions and the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace.²¹ Some of the motifs that appear in Ethiopian miniatures, such as the canopy of wings (Fig. 1), may also be indebted to early Christian models.²²

However, it is often difficult to establish precisely when and from where foreign artistic ideas may have been transmitted to Ethiopia. Due to its geopolitical position at the crossroads of trade routes between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, but surrounded by territories ruled by Muslim dynasties, the Ethiopian Empire always maintained a delicate balance between openness and closeness to foreign cultures. In its arts too there is a tension between tradition and

¹⁹ See Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, “Observations sur l'iconographie de l'Annonciation dans la peinture éthiopienne,” in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies. University of Lund, 26–29 April 1982*, ed. Sven Rubenson (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1984), 149–64; and Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier, “Un tétraévangile illustré éthiopien à cycle long du XVe siècle: Codicologie et iconographie,” *Cahiers Archéologiques: Fin de l'Antiquité et Moyen Âge* 54 (2012): 99–174.

²⁰ See, e.g., EMLL 2064, fol. 130r, described in Getatchew Haile and William F. Macomber, *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa, and for the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, Collegeville*, vol. 6, *Project Numbers 2001–2500* (Collegeville, MN: HMML, 1982), 127–28.

²¹ For these two themes in the Ethiopian tradition, see respectively Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, “The Wall-Paintings in the Church of Mädhane Aläm near Lalibäla,” *Africana Bulletin* 52 (2004): 9–29, at 17; and Stanislaw Chojnacki, “Les trois hébreux dans la fournaise: Une enquête iconographique dans la peinture éthiopienne,” *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 35 (1991): 13–40. For an overview of their appearance in early Christian art see André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 7–30; and Robin M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2000), 72–88.

²² Stanislaw Chojnacki, *Major Themes in Ethiopian Painting: Indigenous Developments, the Influence of Foreign Models, and Their Adaptation from the 13th to the 19th Century* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1983), 179–89; Jacopo Gnisci, “A Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Icon of the Virgin and Child by the Master of the Amber-Spotted Tunic,” *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 49 (2019): 183–93, at 187–88.

innovation.²³ On the one hand, the evidence suggests that early Solomonic scribes and artists continued to copy late antique texts and images.²⁴ On the other hand, they remained open to literary and artistic ideas coming from their near and distant neighbors, which they appropriated, altered, and adapted to suit their religious needs, sensitivity, and taste.²⁵

While it is evident that Illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts reflect this tension between the indigenous and the foreign, studies of their history have not always dealt successfully with those problems that emerge when one attempts to explore dynamics of interaction between visual cultures.²⁶ In large measure, this is due to a lack of pictorial evidence for the period preceding the rise to power of the Solomonic dynasty in 1270, a lack that hinders our ability to understand the early development of early Solomonic manuscript illumination and thus our comprehension of its relationship with metal objects. Such challenges are compounded by the fact that Ethiopian

²³ On the necessity to “Africanize” the achievements of the Aksumite Empire without overlooking its material and cultural exchange with other traditions, see Niall Finneran, “Ethiopian Christian Material Culture: The International Context; Aksum, the Mediterranean and the Syriac Worlds in the Fifth to Seventh Centuries,” in *Incipient Globalization? Long-Distance Contacts in the Sixth Century*, ed. Anthea Harris (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007), 75–89.

²⁴ For an excellent introduction to the cultural and material complexity of the Ethiopic manuscript tradition, see Alessandro Bausi, “Writing, Copying, Translating: Ethiopia as a Manuscript Culture,” in *Manuscript Cultures: Mapping the Field*, ed. Jörg Quenzer, Dmitry Bondarev, and Jan-Ulrich Sobisch (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 37–77; and Balicka-Witakowska et al., “Ethiopic Codicology,” with further bibliography. For an analysis of the transmission of a visual motif from late antiquity to the early Solomonic period in Ethiopic manuscripts, see Jacopo Gnisci, “An Ethiopian Miniature of the Tempietto in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Notes on Its Relatives and Symbolism,” in *Canones: The Art of Harmony; The Canon Tables of the Four Gospels*, ed. Alessandro Bausi, Bruno Reudenbach, and Hanna Wimmer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 67–98.

²⁵ See Gnisci, “Constructing Kingship in Early Solomonic Ethiopia.” On the concept of appropriation, see Robert S. Nelson, “Appropriation,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 160–73.

²⁶ For an overview of these issues, with further bibliography, see Matthew P. Canepa, “Preface: Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interaction among Ancient and Early Medieval Visual Cultures,” *Ars Orientalis* 38 (2010): 7–29.

scribes do not appear to have concerned themselves much with accuracy or realism when copying from one or more models or real-life objects, and that scholars have not been sufficiently attentive to links between images and intended meanings.

Copying, Appropriation, and Innovation

Our limited knowledge of pre-Solomonic art and the working methods of Ethiopian artists affects our capacity to locate visual traffic between metalwork and manuscript illustration in the early Solomonic period. On the one hand, there is ample evidence that Ethiopian artists—who were generally monks or members of the clergy²⁷—were in the habit of “copying” images or appropriating motifs from a variety of sources.²⁸ The transmission of texts through copying was a valued and essential activity in a Christian book culture like that of Ethiopia, so it stands to reason that the scribe-artist (the distinction is not always clear for the period in question) also attached importance to the reproduction of the images that accompanied these texts. On the other hand, the evidence also indicates that these “copying” processes seldom led to the creation of an exact replica. Indeed, far from being crystalized, the manuscript culture of early Solomonic Ethiopia appears to have been ever-changing, with both texts and images being frequently

²⁷ Gianfranco Fiaccadori, “Bisanzio e il regno di 'Aksum: Sul manoscritto Martini etiop. 5 della Biblioteca Forteguerriana di Pistoia,” *Bollettino del Museo Bodoniano di Parma* 7 (1993): 161–99; Marilyn E. Heldman, “Creating Religious Art: The Status of Artisans in Highland Christian Ethiopia,” *Aethiopica* 1 (1998): 131–47.

²⁸ Suffice it here, as evidence of copying practices, to draw attention to the similarities between the Crucifixion scenes discussed in Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, *La crucifixion sans crucifié dans l'art éthiopien: Recherches sur la survie de l'iconographie chrétienne de l'Antiquité tardive* (Warsaw: Zaś Pan, 1997), and the Tempietto miniatures discussed in Gnisci, “An Ethiopian Miniature of the Tempietto.”

amended and revised to suit the taste, religious preferences, or necessities of the society that produced and used these cultural artifacts.²⁹

This research area remains problematic and understudied, and, while it ultimately leads beyond the scope of this essay, it cannot be entirely overlooked, as it bears on the present discussion. In the Ethiopic tradition, as in other contexts, variations in content appear to have been constantly introduced for a variety of reasons that remain to be fully explored.³⁰ These variations could be induced by a variety of factors, including: 1) a desire to modify an image so that it conformed to local religious beliefs or customs; 2) an incapacity to understand a model, or details of it, which could lead to its misrepresentation or to a transformation into something understandable by its maker and viewers; 3) an inability to accurately copy a model, due to the artist's technical limits, leading, over time, to further transformations in the copying process; 4) a desire to conflate multiple scenes or models into a single one; and 5) an openness to innovation and to the appropriation of foreign motifs into the artistic repertoire.³¹

²⁹ Gnisci, "Constructing Kingship in Early Solomonic Ethiopia."

³⁰ For this reason, one should be wary of labeling the Ethiopian tradition as "conservative," as argued in Jacopo Gnisci, "Picturing the Liturgy: Notes on the Iconography of the Holy Women at the Tomb in Fourteenth- and Early Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Manuscript Illumination," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 78, no. 3 (2015): 557–95, at 587–88. For some reflections on the relationship between "models" and "copies," see Jonathan J. G. Alexander, "Facsimiles, Copies, and Variations: The Relationship to the Model in Medieval and Renaissance European Illuminated Manuscripts," *Studies in the History of Art* 20 (1989): 61–72; Mary-Lyon Dolezal, "The Elusive Quest for the 'Real Thing': The Chicago Lectionary Project Thirty Years On," *Gesta* 35, no. 2 (1996): 128–41; and John Lowden, "The Transmission of 'Visual Knowledge' in Byzantium through Illuminated Manuscripts: Approaches and Conjectures," in *Literacy, Education and Manuscript Transmission in Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. Catherine Holmes and Judith Waring (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 59–80.

³¹ For a preliminary presentation of these issues in the Ethiopian tradition, see Balicka-Witakowska, "La crucifixion sans crucifié," 6–9; Gnisci, "Towards a Comparative Framework"; and idem, "An Ethiopian Miniature of the Tempietto."

In some instances, the combination of these factors over a length of time makes it difficult to identify which are in play. Consequently, problems also emerge when assessing the visual impact of metalwork on manuscript illumination and vice versa. Some examples of Ethiopian metalwork feature abstract motifs that also appear in Ethiopic manuscripts. At the same time, many early Solomonic miniatures feature metal objects in scenes that appear to reflect, to some extent, the illuminator's ecclesiastic surroundings.³² Because of this connection, some have looked at the illuminations to help provide a chronology of the morphological development of Ethiopian crosses. Since Ethiopian crosses are often distinct in shape from other traditions, it should be possible, so the reasoning goes, to date them by looking at the appearance of certain cross types in illustrated Ethiopic manuscripts, which can be dated by means of paleographic, textual, and stylistic criteria.³³ As tempting as this kind of approach may at first seem, closer scrutiny shows that it generates more questions than answers.

The Morphology of Metal Objects in Ethiopic Manuscripts

Attempts at establishing a genealogy of motifs in different media in early Solomonic art generally stumble on the impossibility of reconstructing a development sequence due to the loss of most early material. Moreover, the features of most of the cross types depicted in illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts (e.g. cross pattée, Greek cross, cross crosslet, or cross quadrate) are too

³² See the remarks in Alessandro Bausi, "Su alcuni manoscritti presso comunità monastiche dell'Eritrea," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 38 (1994): 13–69, at 59–62; and Jacopo Gnisci and Rafał Zarzeczny, "They Came with Their Troops Following a Star from the East: A Codicological and Iconographic Study of an Illuminated Ethiopic Gospel Book," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 83, no. 1 (2017): 127–89, at 138–48.

³³ As put into practice in Chojnacki, "Ethiopian Crosses."

generic to be useful in a study of their morphology.³⁴ The cross pattée staff held by the abbot of the monastery of Ḥayq Ḥstifanos, Iyäsus Mo'a (1214–93), at the beginning of a Gospel book he commissioned, for example, does not present particularly distinctive features (Fig. 2). Likewise, the crosses crosslet held by the saints Gäräma and Şəḥma in a miniature from a mid-fifteenth-century prayer book are painted in too generic a manner to be of much use to a study of cross morphology (Fig. 3).

Even when painted metal objects present more distinctive details, they are generally still of limited value for establishing chronologies or intermedial relationships. Let us consider, as an example, two miniatures from a late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century copy of the *Gädlä Säma 'tat*, a collection of acts of martyrs and saints, from the monastery of Däbrä Libanos in Eritrea.³⁵ Here, Bishop Phileas (fol. 3r) and Zechariah (fol. 3v) are shown holding cross-staffs with tendril-shaped lower arms (Figs. 4–5). Elaborate lower arms such as these were a recurring feature of Ethiopian crosses before and during the early Solomonic period, but they are by no means unique to the Ethiopian tradition.³⁶ Moreover, even if, hypothetically, we wished to argue that the artist appropriated these elements from a cross or from an image in another illustrated manuscript, we would still face difficulties in establishing the medium and date of the model. It

³⁴ Most of the cross forms that appear in early Solomonic manuscripts are attested already in Aksumite coins, as noted in Juel-Jensen, “The Evolution of the Ethiopian Cross.”

³⁵ On this manuscript, see Alessandro Bausi, “Su alcuni manoscritti presso comunità monastiche dell’Eritrea: Parte terza,” *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 41 (1997): 13–56, at 23–32. Considering the style of the miniatures, a late fourteenth- to mid-fifteenth-century date might be more likely for this manuscript than the fifteenth- to early sixteenth-century date proposed by Bausi.

³⁶ See, e.g., Gabriel Millet, “Les iconoclastes et la croix, à propos d’une inscription de Cappadoce,” *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 34, no. 1 (1910): 96–109, figs. 1, 3–5; Leslie Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 152–57; and Vrej Nersessian, *Treasures from the Ark: 1700 Years of Armenian Christian Art* (London: British Library, 2001), 111–12, cat. no. 14.

is true that similarly shaped arms can be seen below a number of Ethiopian crosses, but, for all we know, the *Gädlä Säma 'tat* artist may have simply added the lower arms as a flourish, perhaps inspired by the similar motifs appearing in near-coeval headpieces and bands of interlace (*ḥaräg*) in Ethiopic manuscripts.³⁷ The half palmettes that sprout from the base of the cross at the center of the headpiece in the *Gəṣän Maryam* manuscript (Fig. 1), for example, have a shape that closely recalls the lower arms of the crosses in the *Gädlä Säma 'tat* from Däbrä Libanos (Figs. 4–5).

The above remarks can be extended to other types of metal objects depicted in early Solomonic manuscripts. For instance, the chalice-shaped censer held by Zechariah in the *Gädlä Säma 'tat* of Däbrä Libanos has few distinctive features other than its cross-topped handle (Fig. 5). Similar handles can be seen in many modern censers, which are often also chalice-shaped, but since the published examples all date from the eighteenth century onward, it is hard to say what the relationship with coeval metalwork might have been. Zechariah's censer also lacks a lid,³⁸ but should this be taken this as an indication that the *Gädlä Säma 'tat* illuminator did not replicate a real-world object or that he simply did not pay much attention to such details?

The more one looks at the visual evidence from this angle, the more it becomes clear that definite answers to such questions are elusive.

A collection of psalms and antiphons preserved in a fourteenth-century manuscript now in the BnF is decorated with a portrait of Moses holding a prayer staff with a rounded knob (Fig.

³⁷ Compare the arms with, for instance, the headpieces reproduced in Csilla Fabo Perczel, “Ethiopian Illuminated Ornament,” in *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art: Held at the Warburg Institute of the University of London, October 21 and 22, 1986* (London: The Pindar Press, 1989), 59–62, figs. 105–7.

³⁸ I am grateful to the editors for drawing my attention to this point.

6).³⁹ This object, which appears in other early Solomonic manuscripts, brings to mind the metal knob that, to this day, is sometimes found at the top of the wooden staffs used by members of the Ethiopian clergy. However, since similar staffs appear in other traditions from late antiquity onward,⁴⁰ how are we to determine whether the artists responsible for introducing such details were replicating their surroundings or appropriating motifs from earlier works of art? Moreover, given the lack of pre-thirteenth-century examples of Ethiopic illumination, how can we establish a chronology for such a development?

My point can be further illustrated by looking at a manuscript that contains the Life (*gädl*) of Ḥstifanos and the Life of Abäkäräzun and is embellished with several illuminations depicting local and foreign saints.⁴¹ In the portraits of Paul, Pachomius, and Macarius (fols. 2r–3r) the holy men are depicted holding a tau-shaped crosier (Fig. 7). One could argue that these crosiers, like other items depicted in this manuscript, such as the flywhisk held by Abäkäräzun (fol. 113v), replicate objects that were used by the Ethiopian clergy at the time of the painting.⁴² However, here as elsewhere, the level of simplification makes it difficult to be more precise about the morphological relationships between metal objects and their depiction in illuminated manuscripts, and the loss of evidence makes it impossible to present any kind of sequential

³⁹ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. éth. 10, fol. 113v. On this miniature, see Jacques Mercier, ed., *L'arche éthiopienne: Art chrétien d'Éthiopie* (Paris: Paris Musées, 2000), 46–47.

⁴⁰ For instance, see the examples in Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa: Studies in Iconography and Patronage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), fig. 135; and Cynthia Hahn, “What Do Reliquaries Do for Relics?” *Numen* 57, no. 3 (2010): 284–316, fig. 1.

⁴¹ New York, New York Public Library, Spencer Collection, Ethiopic MS 7, ca. 1480–1530; on this manuscript, see Marilyn E. Heldman, “The Early Solomonic Period: 1270–1527,” in *African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, ed. Roderick Grierson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 141–92, at 190.

⁴² For an early example of an Ethiopian tau-shaped crosier or prayer staff, see Jacques Mercier and Claude Lepage, *Lalibela, Wonder of Ethiopia: The Monolithic Churches and Their Treasures*, trans. Jennifer White-Thévenot and Jane Degeorges (London: Paul Holberton, 2012), fig. 5.80.

development of the appearance of these motifs in Ethiopian art or of the use of such objects in the Ethiopian tradition.

Exceptions to these observations exist but are few in number. One such case can be observed by examining a group of Ethiopian crosses of the so-called Lalibäla type (Fig. 8).⁴³ These crosses are topped by a zigzag garland that also appears above the arches of the canon tables in several early Solomonic Ethiopic Gospels (Fig. 9). The zigzag garland pattern was, in all likelihood, transmitted to Ethiopia during late antiquity through an Ethiopic Gospel book that featured an illustrated copy of the Eusebian Apparatus.⁴⁴ Subsequently, as convincingly argued by Jacques Mercier and Claude Lepage, Ethiopian craftsmen transferred this pattern into metalwork.⁴⁵ Therefore, in this particular instance, we can say with relative confidence that a pattern was transferred from manuscript to metalwork. Although again, due to the loss of earlier evidence, it is difficult to recognize when this transferal took place.

There may be a few other cases where it is possible to assert that the themes or patterns used in the decoration of metal vessels were taken, as it were, from illuminated manuscripts. For instance, it is likely, but not certain, that the interlace motifs that appear in Ethiopian crosses and

⁴³ For several examples of such crosses see Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela, Wonder of Ethiopia*, 130–41. These crosses have been tentatively dated by the authors between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. However, the dating is problematic since it is evident that they continued to be produced even after this period, as illustrated by the fifteenth-century example discussed in Heldman, “Early Solomonic Period,” 187, cat. 86.

⁴⁴ The pattern does, however, appear in other media in late antique art; see for example the sixth-century diptych with Christ and Mary in Berlin, Bode Museum, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, 564/565. For an overview of the history and decoration of the Eusebian Apparatus, see Matthew R. Crawford, *The Eusebian Canon Tables: Ordering Textual Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴⁵ Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela, Wonder of Ethiopia*, 130–41; Jacopo Gnisci, “The Dead Christ on the Cross in Ethiopian Art: Notes on the Iconography of the Crucifixion in Twelfth- to Fifteenth-Century Ethiopia,” *Studies in Iconography* 35 (2014): 187–288, at 197.

wall paintings were borrowed from manuscript illumination.⁴⁶ However, the intermedial spread of forms and motifs was a phenomenon that must have occurred at different periods in the context of Ethiopia.⁴⁷ Therefore, partly due to the loss of evidence and partly to the entangled processes that lay behind the creation of imagery during the early Solomonic period, it is seldom possible to offer a systematized account of the role that metal objects played in the development of manuscript illumination or that miniatures played in the creation or decoration of metalwork.

The Significance of Metal Objects in Ethiopic Manuscripts

A more fruitful approach may be to investigate the significance attached by Ethiopian illuminators to the metal objects they portrayed during the early Solomonic period. In this respect, an obvious but overlooked point is that questions about mimesis and variation in Ethiopian art may be of interest to someone working within our scholarly tradition, but it unclear whether such categories existed during the early Solomonic period or if they had any effect on the parameters within which Ethiopian illuminators operated. Originality certainly does not appear to have been a quality actively sought by Ethiopian artists, who, driven by religious belief, concerned themselves more with the intelligibility and iconic character of their work. The linear style of their paintings, the preference for a two-dimensional and non-naturalistic mode of representation emphasizing the hierarchical relationships between figures, and the recurring use

⁴⁶ As argued in Gnisci, “An Ethiopian Miniature of the Tempietto,” 85–88. From the fifteenth century, Ethiopian crosses were also engraved with iconic scenes that may have been borrowed from painted panels and manuscripts, as suggested in Marilyn E. Heldman, *The Marian Icons of the Painter Frē Šeyon: A Study in Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Art, Patronage, and Spirituality* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994), 49–50.

⁴⁷ For some excellent examples see Mercier and Lepage, *Lalibela, Wonder of Ethiopia*, 82–167.

of captions to label a scene and the elements within it, are all indicators of a demand for visual clarity and a disregard for the mundane.

Illustrated objects, regardless of their material, had an essential function in the communicative strategies employed in illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts. Herein, iconic portraits are almost indissolubly linked with objects that ensure, at a basic level, an immediate readability of visual content: holy men and ecclesiastics hold a cross, book, or other ritual object (Figs. 2–6),⁴⁸ while rulers and warrior saints brandish, or have nearby, a weapon.⁴⁹ While the portraits of holy men could hardly be described as mimetic, they do replicate aspects of the context to which they belonged, since members of the Ethiopian clergy generally bore the same marks of distinction (that is, they carried the objects and wore the vestments) that are reproduced in early Solomonic illuminations.⁵⁰ This dynamic relationship between the visual arts and reality ultimately stems from a desire, frequently attested in the written record, to unite two worlds into a whole: the biblical past with the ecclesiastical present, and the heavenly with the earthly. In mirroring aspects of contemporary reality in their work—that is to say, by anachronistically endowing saints and Old Testament prophets with items of liturgical paraphernalia—the

⁴⁸ The cases in which a particular type of metal object is associated systematically to a specific person, thus functioning as an attribute, are few: St. Stephen typically holds a eucharistic chalice (Fig. 4), while Zechariah generally holds a censer (Fig. 5).

⁴⁹ For some examples, see Witold Witakowski and Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, “Solomon in Ethiopian Tradition,” in *The Figure of Solomon in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition: King, Sage and Architect*, ed. Joseph Verheyden (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 219–40; and Gnisci and Zarzeczny, “They Came with Their Troops,” 138–48.

⁵⁰ On vestments, see Jacopo Gnisci, “Ecclesiastic Dress in Medieval Ethiopia: Preliminary Remarks on the Visual Evidence,” in *The Hidden Life of Textiles in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean: Contexts and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Islamic, Latinate and Eastern Christian Worlds*, ed. Nikolaos Vryzidis (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 231–56. For evidence that gold vestments were considered a mark of prestige in Ethiopia, see Aaron Michael Butts, “Embellished with Gold: The Ethiopic Reception of Syriac Biblical Exegesis,” *Oriens Christianus* 97 (2013–14): 137–59, at 158.

Ethiopian illuminators clearly fashioned a connection between themselves and this community of saints, thus exploiting the mechanisms of visual cognition to assert their own identity. Similar strategies, as Steven Kaplan and Antonella Brita have argued, were used to promote sainthood through ritual performances and hagiographic narratives.⁵¹

Ritual objects in illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts, however, should not be understood just as elements that signal the ecclesiastical or monastic identity of those who hold them. In early Solomonic Ethiopia liturgical performances, texts, and architectural and artistic forms were embedded with interconnected layers of meaning. These interconnections were consciously reinforced by spreading forms and motifs across the various objects which were used in ritual activities that stimulated the intellect as well as all the senses. Participation in the liturgy, enhanced by this visual and conceptual background, would have encouraged a sense of belonging to the Church and its community. Moreover, the frequent enactment of religious processions outside of the church compound, combined with the custom of associating days and features of the landscape with episodes of biblical history, allowed Christianity, in its cultural and material manifestations, to penetrate into the very fabric of human existence in early Solomonic Ethiopia.

In a context where everything was charged with religious significance, metal objects and their representations could take on new symbolic meanings determined by their function and the settings in which they were used.⁵² This environment made it possible for an object to embody

⁵¹ Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1984); Antonella Brita, “Agiografia e liturgia nella tradizione della Chiesa etiopica,” in *Popoli religioni e Chiese lungo il corso del Nilo: Dal Faraone cristiano al Leone di Giuda*, ed. Luciano Vaccaro (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 515–39.

⁵² I use “symbolic” here with the acceptance given to the term by semioticians: see Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (1991): 174–208, with further bibliography.

the spiritual qualities of a saint or for a holy figure to be compared with an object, as illustrated by a prayer to *Abunä Bärtälomewos* where he is likened to a “vase of joy” and a “cup of sanctity.”⁵³ The virtue of a holy man could even be emphasized by means of a comparison with the material properties of precious metals. Gold, in particular, was often employed as a metaphor for a saint’s purity in Ethiopic hagiographies.⁵⁴ For example, the fourteenth-century saint *Filmona* is said to be pure as gold and purer than silver because of his abstinence.⁵⁵

All these considerations suggest that copying from other illustrated manuscripts or artworks was only one among several factors that led to the creation and reproduction of portraits showing holy men holding metal objects. In fact, by incorporating elements inspired by their material culture in their representations of prophets and saints, Ethiopian illuminators effectively created a visual bridge between the content of the manuscripts they decorated and the reality they inhabited, thus exploiting the edifying and legitimizing power of images. This impression is confirmed by a study of narrative scenes in illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts, in which the appearance of metal objects is not limited to scenes where the narrative justifies their presence. Thus, while it is not surprising to find a water basin and aquamanile in a miniature of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (Fig. 10), the presence of cross-bearing Apostles in miniatures of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem (Fig. 11) calls for an explanation.⁵⁶ In the latter case, the presence

⁵³ Getatchew Haile, ed. and trans., *Voices from Däbrä Zämäddo. Acts of Abba Bärtälomewos and Abba Yohannäs; 45 Miracles of Mary* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013), 150–51.

⁵⁴ Carlo Conti Rossini, “Note di agiografia etiopica (‘Abiya Egzi’, ‘Arkalēdes e Gabra-Iyasus),” *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 17 (1938): 409–52, at 413.

⁵⁵ Maurice Allotte de La Fuÿe, trans., *Actes de Filmona* (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1958), 13.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of this motif of the washing of the feet in Ethiopian manuscript illumination, see Gnisci, “Washing of the Feet.” For the entry into Jerusalem, see Marilyn E. Heldman, “Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem in Ethiopia,” in *Proceedings of the First United States Conference on Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University, 2–5 May 1973*, ed. Harold G. Marcus and John

of paraphernalia is wholly inconsistent with the biblical narrative. What matters here is not whether the metal objects in manuscripts are morphologically similar to the real-life objects they portray, but that their presence would have evoked the customs and activities of the religious communities in which both objects and manuscripts were used, thus strengthening in these communities the belief that they belonged to God's elect people.

Heavenly Gold

Another question worth considering is the attitude of Ethiopian illuminators toward materiality and precious metals. Crosses, together with codices, were among the most frequently depicted objects in illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts from the early Solomonic period. Most preserved crosses from this period are made of metal, but more perishable materials such as wood were also used and valued for their symbolic properties.⁵⁷ Were early Solomonic illuminators interested in emphasizing the materiality of the objects they represented? And, if so, can we uncover the values they attributed to the material properties of these objects?

While rules for the use of color were apparently never codified in early Solomonic Ethiopia, it seems significant that the crosses and most other types of liturgical paraphernalia represented in Ethiopic manuscripts were generally painted in yellow (e.g. Figs. 4–5).⁵⁸ As

Hinnant (East Lansing: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1975), 43–60; and Gnisci, “Washing of the Feet,” 258–61.

⁵⁷ On the symbolism of wood in Ethiopian literature, see Getatchew Haile, “Praises of the Cross, *Waddase Mäsqäl*, by Abba Giyorgis of Gasəčča,” *Aethiopica* 14 (2011): 47–120, at 53 and 85.

⁵⁸ Balicka-Witakowska et al., “Ethiopic Codicology,” 157–58. Systematic research on the use of colors in Ethiopian art has yet to be undertaken, and I am not suggesting that color was devoid of aesthetic or semantic properties in the context of early Solomonic Ethiopia; see, e.g., Balicka-Witakowska, “Iconographie de l'Annonciation,” 150. One point that emerges from a preliminary study of Ethiopic literary sources is that emphasis is placed on the contrast between light and darkness rather than on the hues of color. In this respect, it may be possible to find points of

mentioned above, yellow paint was in all likelihood already employed to represent gold in one of the Gärima Gospels, where it was used for the halos of the evangelists and the treasure bindings of the books they hold. In early Solomonic manuscripts, yellow is systematically used for the golden jeweled cross of Golgotha in representations of the Crucifixion in which the body of Jesus is notably absent.⁵⁹ This suggests that early Solomonic artists used yellow paint to represent gold.⁶⁰

The rare cases where dark grey or black, rather than yellow, were used to represent metal objects only serve to reinforce this conclusion. I submit that such cases show that Ethiopian illuminators occasionally used dark grey and black as a means to represent iron. One such case can be seen in the Gospels of Iyäsus Mo'a (fol. 5v), in which the only figure who holds an item of paraphernalia that is not painted in yellow is the actual donor: Iyäsus Mo'a (Fig. 2).⁶¹ This feature of his portrait is all the more striking if we consider that his hagiography emphasizes his donation of eight crosses of gold and silver to his monastery, Ḥayq Ḥṣṭifanos,⁶² and that late thirteenth-century notes in his Gospel book record the donations of precious gold objects to that

contact with other traditions; see, e.g., Liz James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁵⁹ Balicka-Witakowska, *La crucifixion sans crucifié*; Gnisci, "The Dead Christ."

⁶⁰ As noted by Jules Leroy, "La peinture chrétienne d'Éthiopie antérieure à l'influence occidentale," in *Christentum am Nil: Internationale Arbeitstagung zur Ausstellung "Koptische Kunst," Essen, Villa Hügel, 23.–25. Juli 1963*, ed. Klaus Wessel (Recklinghausen: Verlag Aurel Bongers, 1964), 60–78, at 69; and Balicka-Witakowska, *La crucifixion sans crucifié*, 27, n. 37. For parallel uses of yellow paint (such as orpiment) to stand in for gold, see the essays by Lynley Herbert and Bea Leal in this volume.

⁶¹ On this manuscript, see Balicka-Witakowska, *La crucifixion sans crucifié*, 123–24; and Gnisci, "Washing of the Feet." On the portrait, see Claire Bosc-Tiessé, "Sainteté et intervention royale au monastère Saint-Étienne de Ḥayq au tournant du XIII^e et du XIV^e siècle: L'image de Iyasus Mo'a dans son Évangile," *Oriens Christianus* 94 (2010): 199–227.

⁶² Stanislas Kur, trans., *Actes de Iyasus Mo'a, abbé du Convent de St-Etienne de Ḥayq* (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1965), 32; while written after the saint's death, this work may draw on earlier records or oral traditions.

same institution (fol. 339).⁶³ The black cross-staff distinguishes Iyäsus Mo'a as the only contemporary figure depicted in the Gospel book, as does his lack of a halo. Although the earliest surviving crosses of the type held by the saint are made of iron, the illuminator's decision to use black should not be taken as an indication of interest in visual accuracy. Rather, it should be read as an act of humility on the part of the depicted donor, comparable to the aforementioned decision to not use gold to adorn the garments of Emperor Dawit II in the Miracles of Mary of Gəšän Maryam (Fig. 1).⁶⁴

The presence of an iron cross in the portrait of Iyäsus Mo'a is quite exceptional, and, on the whole, the objects in early Solomonic manuscripts, like the halos of those who hold them, are painted in yellow. From this, we may surmise that the artists responsible for making these images approved of the use of gold vessels and of precious materials in ecclesiastical contexts. The written sources confirm this impression. While some religious groups appear to have criticized the use of gold for liturgical paraphernalia,⁶⁵ it is safe to say that most Christian Ethiopians did not object to the use of precious metals: church inventories often highlight the donation of objects made with precious metals,⁶⁶ as do other kinds of texts that circulated during the early Solomonic period.⁶⁷ However, if on the whole the Ethiopian Church approved of the

⁶³ Bosc-Tiessé, "L'image de Iyasus Mo'a," 202–3.

⁶⁴ For another painted simulation of iron see the discussion of Nebuchadnezzar's colossus in the introductory essay by Joseph Salvatore Ackley and Shannon L. Wearing in this volume.

⁶⁵ For instance, see the discussion on whether altar tablets should be made of gold and silver or wood, in Getatchew Haile, trans., *The Gə'əz Acts of Abba Ḥṣṭifanos of G'əndag'ənde* (Louvain: Peeters, 2006), 53–54.

⁶⁶ For several examples, see Bausi, "Alcuni manoscritti," 30, 36, 38–39, and 53.

⁶⁷ Kur, *Actes de Iyasus Mo'a*, 32. On the use of gold for images, for instance, see Getatchew Haile, "Documents on the History of Aṣé Dawit (1382–1413)," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 16 (1983): 25–35, at 28 and 31.

use of vessels made with precious metals like gold, it condemned the coveting of such precious metals, and, more generally, maintained ambiguous attitudes toward materiality.⁶⁸

A passage from the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century Life of Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus, in which the saint celebrates the Divine Liturgy, captures much of the Ethiopian Church's attitude toward gold and, more generally, earthly objects. As the saint prepared for the celebration, the church in which he stood disappeared, so that "everything built by earthly hand was set aside, all the pillars and stone from the floor to the roof, and all the structure; its beams were transformed, and its chandeliers and all the vessels of the church were transformed; and, moreover, all the curtains disappeared; and, furthermore, traces of the earthly church did not exist [any longer]. There was a light and the darkness was set aside, and a new tabernacle of light was planted."⁶⁹ At this point, all the equipment for Mass began miraculously descending from heaven, including "a gold paten, a chalice, a cross-shaped gold spoon, and the coverings, and the veils" as well as the "priestly vestments" and a "gold basket."⁷⁰ This episode is followed by the pitching of "tents woven like gold pomegranates colored with purple threads" and whose color, we are told, "*did not look like earthly gold*, but was unknown to the eye."⁷¹

The passage speaks to a desire to disassociate objects from the manufacturing processes that led to their creation. The earthly vessels of the church in which Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus was celebrating the Mass, irrespective of their material, had to be replaced with heavenly objects of gold because they were man-made. Gold was not so much to be valued for its material worth but for its symbolic properties and reflective capacity. In this respect, it is possible to draw a further

⁶⁸ Gnisci, "Metalwork in Early Solomonic Ethiopia."

⁶⁹ Personal translation from Paolo Marrassini, "*Vita*," "*Omelia*," "*Miracoli*" *del Santo Gabra Manfas Qeddus* (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 66.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

parallel between the Ethiopian Church's conception of precious-metal objects and the human body. In Christian Ethiopia holy men were venerated because they had cleansed themselves from the pollution of the earthly flesh and made themselves like angels on earth.⁷² In a similar way, metal vessels were not valued for their manufacture, but because they were sanctified and united with the heavenly sphere through the eucharistic celebration.

Conclusions

Scholarship has devoted little attention to the symbolic dimension of the various types of metal objects used by the Ethiopian Church. The focus has hitherto been on the morphology of Ethiopian crosses, with the aim of providing a chronology of their development. To this end, authors have often turned to the evidence offered by illuminated manuscripts—which can generally be dated with greater confidence than metalwork—to help provide a more reliable framework for understanding the evolution of the formal features of crosses. Yet, as this study has shown, this line of research actually provides little insight into the development of crosses, or other metal objects for that matter, in early Solomonic Ethiopia. Indeed, even in the few instances where it is possible to detect traffic between manuscript illumination and metalworking, as with the zigzag garland patterns which decorate crosses of the Lalibäla type (Figs. 8–9), we are seldom able to determine when the spread of forms across different media took place.

⁷² See Steven Kaplan, “The Ethiopian Holy Man as Outsider and Angel.” *Religion* 15, no. 3 (1985): 235–49. The exact relationship between the contemporary practices and past beliefs of members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church remains to be investigated, but it is worth noting that there could be partial overlaps between past and present concerns about purity: see, e.g., Tom Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast: Prohibition and Mediation in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 7–12.

In contrast, by studying the significance attributed by Ethiopian illuminators to depictions of crosses and other metal objects it is possible to learn more about their working practices and communicative concerns. The visual evidence suggests that copying from earlier models, or from different media, was just one among several factors affecting the production of visual culture in early Solomonic Ethiopia. When depicting metalwork, Ethiopian illuminators appear to have been inspired not so much by formal likeness, but by a desire to create images that echoed the religious customs and aspirations of the society to which they belonged. The idealized mirroring of aspects of reality in art led to the production of images that would have resonated vividly with their makers and viewers. Thus, the anachronistic placement of objects associated with clerical status in depictions of holy men, and of paraphernalia in Old and New Testament scenes, enhanced the intelligibility of these illustrations and legitimized the actions and ritual performances of the Ethiopian clergy by constructing a precedent rooted in the biblical and apostolic tradition.

Gold, as discussed above, is attested in only three illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts from the early Solomonic period. However, Ethiopian artists employed yellow to represent gold, a practice that was already established in late antiquity, given the evidence afforded by Gärima III. While, on the whole, the Ethiopian Church appears to have approved of the use of precious metals in liturgical contexts, it nevertheless maintained an ambiguous attitude toward materiality: objects made with precious metals such as gold were not so much valued for their material worth or craftsmanship, but because of their symbolic meaning, reflective properties and liturgical function.

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