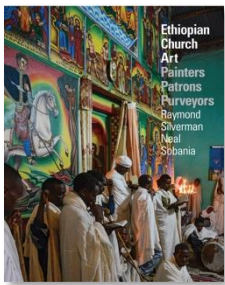


[Review] *Ethiopian Church Art: Painters, Patrons, Purveyors*, by Raymond Silverman and Neal Sobania



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Drawing on the lives, works, and religious commitments of a wide range of Ethiopian artists, the authors of this groundbreaking volume brilliantly describe the vital but little-studied art and craft of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Authors Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman, respectively professors of history and African studies, have conducted interviews and carried out in-depth research projects for over twenty-five years to produce this stunning masterpiece. The book features more than two hundred individuals—painters, gallerists, priests, woodworkers, patrons, promoters, and marketers—all participating in a complex matrix of intersectional relationships involving Ethiopian art, creativity, religious culture, faith, and commercial energy.

The presentation of this volume is in “coffee table” format, 10 x 13 inches, sumptuously illustrated with colorful photography, and amply documented with accompanying explanatory photo captions and other abundant text. Chapters follow the subtitle of the publication, with deep dives into the lives and roles of painters, patrons, and purveyors of this unique artistic expression. While the authors insist that their interest is in the people who make things rather than in the things themselves, they nonetheless devote significant attention to the trades of liturgical metalworking, parchment and manuscript production, and the “illumination” (that is, the illustration) of religious texts, most commonly featuring portraits of individuals, such as the Gospel writers, Saint Mary, Saint George, and archangels, or the depiction of biblical events from the Nativity to the Crucifixion and Ascension of Jesus.

The concluding chapters take the reader into the world of “Painting for a New Millenium” and the Ethiopian “Diaspora,” followed by a list of 150 bibliographical references for further reading, a helpful glossary of vernacular terms used throughout the text (presented in Ethiopic script with transliterations and definitions), and an exhaustive index of the people, places, objects, and events referred to in the publication.

Though this is not primarily a theological or missiological study, students of these disciplines will be intrigued by the potential implications drawn from this extensive research. Significant attention is given, for example, to the veneration of Mary as the focus of many devotional practices in Ethiopian art and culture. Though Mary has always played an important role in the Orthodox Church, her enhanced veneration in Ethiopia, including her thirty-three feast days in the ecclesiastical calendar celebrating her life and miracles, dates back to the fifteenth century. “Believers do not pray directly to Jesus,” write the authors, “as he is perceived as being spiritually too distant.”

Furthermore, as Jesus is God, it is impossible for God to mediate with God. So petitions are mediated through some other intercessor—Mary, a saint, or a priest (244).

As I read *Ethiopian Church Art*, a number of recurring questions kept surfacing in my mind. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians today comprise more than forty percent of the country's population. Protestants—mainline, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals—are newer on the scene but together account for about 20 percent. Some new members of Protestant churches come from Muslim religious backgrounds. But many of them are Ethiopian Orthodox in origin. To what extent do they bring some of the perspectives found in this study into their new church experience? How do they view creativity and the aesthetic values deeply embedded in the Orthodox tradition? Do Protestants encourage young artists within the church to paint or produce wood-based arts expressions of the biblical story for discipling believers in evangelism and peacemaking, or have these practices largely been abandoned due to their association with a previous life and religious experience? Perhaps new forms of artistry are being born within the various Protestant churches. If so, what are they, and how are they shaped by or in reaction to the predominant Orthodox artistic patterns and values present everywhere in Ethiopian culture? Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this review but might prove fruitful for discussion and research by ethnodoxologists curious about artistic expressions emerging within Ethiopian Protestant communities in the years to come.