Exhibition Preview

Christian Chromolithographs in Ethiopia

Briana B. Simmons

All photos are by the author.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) has produced iconographic religious painting since the sixth century CE, but with the onset of mechanical reproduction and faster printing technologies, worshippers now have access to new types of religious images.1 Today, foreign and locally produced chromolithographic images (or color prints) depicting Christian religious figures are readily available in Ethiopia and have become one of the most popular and prevalent art forms in the country. This is due in part to their high volume but also to their variety, malleability, and relatively low price, which places them into a category of decorative and ritually important objects that most Orthodox Ethiopians desire. Images such as Figure 1, of the Virgin and Child, generally depict Biblical figures that are copied from historical Western paintings or drawings.

This research note outlines how Ethiopian Orthodox Christians use these religious images and briefly addresses their effect on the construction of an Orthodox identity.2 I will also discuss how church-trained painters have responded to these images and what the influx of chromolithographs has meant for their business.

These reproduced images are part of a continual process of adaptation and change in the religious practices of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Rather than dismissing them as kitsch or artistic degeneration, this study examines how they are used as aesthetic objects and the value they hold for the Christian faithful.

For this note, “chromolithograph” refers to any color print displayed in Ethiopia that is mechanically produced in Ethiopia or abroad. This comprehensive definition includes a number of printing technologies, ranging from traditional chromolithography to more modern photo offset printing processes. The prints can be purchased for one or two birr, which is approximately 10 to 20 US cents, and they are sold on sidewalks, especially outside Ethiopian Orthodox churches. Vendors often set up open-air stalls to exhibit the images, sometimes using upturned umbrellas to easily display numerous prints. It is common for peddlers to traverse local neighborhoods on foot carrying large stacks of images for sale. The prints range in size from small, 3” x 4” cards to large posters that are several feet across.3

Several scholars have examined the use of religious and secular chromolithographs in other countries (Jain 2007, Cosentino 2005, Pinney 1997, 2004, Rush 1999), but only one general overview of chromolithograph use in Ethiopia exists (Silverman, in

1 Chromolithograph of the Virgin and Child. 96.5cm x 68.6cm (38” x 27”). Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, August 2007.

2 Female parishioners in front of St. Mary of Zion Church altar, which contains hand-painted images as well as chromolithographs. Aksum, Ethiopia, June 2007.
EOC tradition, only trained male priests can create icons, making women greater engagement with religious images. Within the churches, icons are displayed only hand-painted images, they are rarely incorporated into home-based worship because of their high cost. In contrast, chromolithographs are accessible and inexpensive forms of art for all members of the faith. Many women choose to create individual altars in their homes that pair chromolithographs with cultural objects and personally significant photographs. For example, orthodox practitioner Koori Mandefro has an altar in her home that consists of chromolithographs, candles, long stems of grass, and an injera basket (Fig. 3). Injera is a staple of the Ethiopian diet made from teff, an indigenous grain. It is a woman’s responsibility to weave the baskets that store the injera for her household. Koori explains that

injera baskets are typical Ethiopian culture because in our mothers’ time, they would travel long distances and carry the food for the family in the baskets. Laying out fresh grass is also [a tradition] from our mothers—it welcomes you into the home.

The coupling of chromolithographs with “typical” representations of Ethiopian identity such as injera baskets and grass offerings creates a personal expression of how Koori, like other Ethiopian women, chooses to define herself and her faith. Many other women have home altars with similar components and they use these altars to showcase their identities as mothers, wives, keepers of the household, and devout Orthodox Christians. The construction of home altars seems to be something that women engage in far more than men, perhaps because the household is typically the domain of women, who are responsible for the numerous housekeeping and childrearing duties. Personal altars often provide a feeling of comfort and protection for many women who are within the home for most of the day. They are also a convenient means of private worship when it is not possible to go to church. Young Ethiopian girls watch their mothers create and use home altars and they in turn also make use of chromolithographs to imitate their elders.

Bennet Fisseha, a thirteen-year-old girl living in Addis Ababa, has constructed her own altar using a piece of rectangular cardboard, glue, and a large poster sheet that contains sixteen 3" x 2" religious chromolithographs (Fig. 4). They contain many of the currently popular imported images such as those of the Virgin Mary and Christ child and saints like St. Michael and St. George. Bennet remarks that, “Since my mother made her own altar I wanted to make one too,” illustrating that the chromolithographs are becoming a part of everyday life and also components of family tradition and cultural heritage. The chromolithographs that compose the altar of Terri Deneke, Bennet’s mother, were collected over several years and occupy a prominent place in a household niche (Fig. 5). Terri’s images will likely be passed on to Bennet much like a family heirloom is passed down through the generations. As she explains,

Two of the images that are framed and covered with glass are wedding gifts from my sister when I got married fifteen years ago. Some of the other older ones were my mother’s—she prayed here too. The pictures tell us about the life of Jesus Christ. I prefer the older images to the newer ones because they have a history in my family. I put grass in front of the pictures because it smells good and I try to make God happy. These types of pictures [chromolithographs] are for the people while the traditional paintings are for the church.

press). This research is indebted to Silverman’s pioneering study. By identifying patterns of chromolithograph use and their meaning within the Ethiopian Orthodox population and by investigating the opinions of church-trained painters with regards to the increasing ubiquitousness of chromolithographs in homes and places of worship, it is hoped that this paper will demonstrate the central role chromolithographs now play in Ethiopian Orthodox practice.

My research findings suggest that Ethiopian Orthodox Christian practitioners have adopted religious chromolithographs into their worship because they fit easily into a system of pre-established cultural aesthetics. Indigenous painting styles consist of geometric forms and bright, contrasting colors, where figures are often defined by strong black outlines and the eyes are the most prominent part of the face. The paintings function as icons and have therefore been displayed prominently on church altars so that people can pray to them. Although Ethiopian Orthodox churches traditionally displayed only hand-painted images, they now put chromolithographs on altars alongside hand-painted works. Parishioners at the St. Mary of Zion church in Aksum pray before a wide variety of images that include both hand-painted and chromolithograph depictions of religious subjects (Fig. 2). Chromolithographs are also used individually to offer personal protection and to provide various avenues for creative expression on personal altars. These religious images are often adorned and used with Ethiopian cultural objects such as woven baskets to assert a distinctly Ethiopian aesthetic and religious identity. Likewise, the images can also be turned into public displays of faith through placement on car dashboards and in shop windows or other publicly visible spaces.

The chromolithograph has also allowed Ethiopian Orthodox women greater engagement with religious images. Within the EOC tradition, only trained male priests can create icons, manuscripts, and wall paintings, which are relatively expensive to purchase. Although women often view and pray before painted images in church, they are rarely incorporated into home-based worship because of their high cost. In contrast, chromolithographs are accessible and inexpensive forms of art for all members of the faith. Many women choose to create individual altars in their homes that pair chromolithographs with cultural objects and personally significant photographs. For example, orthodox practitioner Koori Mandefro has an altar in her home that consists of chromolithographs, candles, long stems of grass, and an injera basket (Fig. 3). Injera is a staple of the Ethiopian diet made from teff, an indigenous grain. It is a woman’s responsibility to weave the baskets that store the injera for her household. Koori explains that
With the passage of time, chromolithographs have gained familial value that adds to their initial spiritual worth, ultimately rendering them core ritual components of contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox practice.

Ethiopian Orthodox practitioners also use chromolithographs as a visual marker to indicate public affiliation with the faith. Although official EOC leaders have said that these images are not acceptable for use in worship, priests at local levels seem to be resigned to recognizing them as part of the modern religious landscape. Archbishop Tewodros, a high-ranking papal official under the jurisdiction of the current EOC patriarch Abune Paulos, agreed to discuss the chromolithographs with me. He explained that the church does not sanction the images because they do not present

[a] correct depiction of the saints. A correct depiction can be found in the traditional religious paintings where the figures have skin and facial features that are darker in color and the figures are posed and adorned according to principles set forth in the Orthodox Bible.8

Even though the chromolithographs are not officially suitable, they are still accepted into the space of the church. Archbishop Tewodros elaborated,

Priests cannot reject the chromolithographs that are offered to the church because they represent alms that are being given to God. It is not our place to judge a gift that is being given to Jesus Christ. We try to discourage these types of images as gifts but a priest will never refuse one.9

Illustrative of the point that a gifted chromolithograph will not be refused, the official papal library that is adjacent to the Archbishop’s office displays a decorated chromolithograph. The large, framed chromolithograph of the Virgin and Child was a gift from a devoted female parishioner who also donated money for the construction of the library (Figs. 6–7). The print occupies a prominent space on the wall and the bright colors and sequin embellishment contrast starkly with the beige and brown tones of the shelves of biblical books and manuscripts nearby.

Chromolithographs are becoming an integral part of the faith despite the resistance of church leadership. Local priests realize the value of publicly displaying the chromolithographs as a visual challenge to the growing influence of Protestant faiths within the country. In the mid-1990s, evangelical churches began to undergo a revival and attract youth in increasing numbers with bibles translated into local languages and religious music involving contemporary instruments such as the guitar (Donham 1999:182). In fact, in 2006 the US Department of State noted that “Christian Evangelical and Pentecostal groups continue to be the fastest growing faiths in Ethiopia” (2006:Sec. 1). In Ethiopia, the most popular chromolithographs depicting Jesus Christ are actually based on the portraits of Warner Sallman, which were originally produced in an American Protestant context (Silverman, in press). Protestants in Ethiopia often reject the copious amount of visual imagery presented in the Ethiopian Orthodox faith and shun most imagery involving religious figures. In order to differentiate itself, the Ethiopian Orthodox population has claimed the images and made use of them even though they were originally produced for a different audience. Koori Mandefro’s home altar, for example, contains several chromolithographs based on Sallman’s portraits of Jesus (Fig. 3).

EOC PAINTERS RESPOND TO THE CHROMOLITHOGRAPHS

The appearance and increased use of the chromolithographs in Ethiopia has negatively affected artists who paint religious figures in the traditional EOC styles and forms. Surprisingly, although Ethiopian Orthodox artists admitted that they are losing business due to the growing popularity of the prints, those interviewed did not express animosity toward this trend because they feel, are still representations of the divine. Most Ethiopians who purchase chromolithographs would never be able to afford hand painted images, so artists are not losing their business. However, when a wealthy individual or a group of people want to pool their funds to purchase a work of art for the church, they are more likely to choose a chromolithograph over a painting because of the lower cost and greater availability. A priest at the Bait Meskal church in Lalibela explained that?

Nowadays, when an individual or a few people want to give alms to the church, they are more likely to bring in one of these pictures [chromolithographs] rather than a painted picture. As you can see, in this church, there are more posters than hand-painted images. They have all been donated. I would encourage people to donate paintings rather than these pictures [chromolithographs] because they are more traditional but since these newer pictures also show God, the Virgin Mary and the saints, then they are equally acceptable for the church.10

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The widespread view that chromolithographs have equal value to hand-painted religious images has affected the livelihood of painters who continue to paint in the traditional style. Aleqa Berhane has a wife and five children to support and although concerned about his ability to sell paintings, he does not diminish the importance of the chromolithographs. He explains,

It is difficult for me when people no longer want to purchase large paintings for the church. I have to support my family. But I believe in the power of all images whether they are painted or made by a machine. I had a dream where an image spoke to me and then I painted it. I met someone from another town who came to see my work and when he saw this certain painting, he said that he had to buy it because he had had a dream about it too. The images can communicate with us.

Even though the growth in chromolithograph consumption has been detrimental to his painting business, Aleqa Berhane expresses his reverence for the chromolithographs because of their subject matter and he recognizes the power of the religious image whether it is made by machine or by hand. In fact, Aleqa Berhane and his wife Tsehai have several chromolithographic images hanging on the walls of their living room. A chromolithograph showing Jesus Christ with the sacred heart on his chest and the words, “The Prince of Peace” printed in English on a scroll underneath the figure, is hung in one corner of the room next to a Tigray basket (Fig. 8). When asked why they would put these machine-produced images on their own walls when the images’ presence in Ethiopia was hurting his business, Aleqa Berhane replied,

The power of God can choose any kind of picture He wants to reveal Himself. These images do have a very good style - it is different and I like it. According to the Holy Scriptures people can see Mary and Jesus Christ in different ways. These images do look different from the ones I paint. But I am an artist, I can see the difference and it does not offend me.

Aleqa Berhane humbly asserts that it is not up to humanity to make decisions about constitutes good and bad religious pictures; images of Jesus and the saints are all equally powerful. He understands why most people prefer the purchase the chromolithographs and he is attempting to diversify his business by selling other types of paintings and focusing on the tourist market in order to cope with the loss of income from his religious art works. He is currently trying to sell more paintings to tourists and he produces paintings to commerorate local marriages. In addition, he and his wife also run a small neighborhood suq, or shop, attached to their home.

Tourists looking for “authentic” Ethiopian souvenirs often buy painted wood icons, crosses, and other objects associated with the EOC or with rural life, e.g. decorated gourd containers, wooden headrests, small cloth-covered drums. Some foreigners might view the prevalence of the chromolithographs in Ethiopian churches and homes as an encroachment upon the rich historical painting traditions of the country. Since chromolithographs have reduced local demand for religious paintings, the preferences of western tourists have become more pivotal since they have become the major consumers of hand-painted images (see Biasio, this issue). Qes Adamu Tesfaw, a priest-painter in Addis Ababa, explains,

Thirty years ago, they [the chromolithographs] were rare. They have had a great impact on the market. Now, Ethiopians don’t respect our work—they just want to buy something and hang it on the wall. Only foreigners and those who are educated value our work. But that doesn’t mean that these pictures [chromolithographs] are less valuable. The main thing is belief. We church painters have our own style. A few years ago I tried to mix techniques of my church style with the other [chromolithograph] style but that is not acceptable for foreigners. The foreigners say, “Don’t mix” and they tell us to keep our own style. So I paint in the style that I learned as a priest.

Qes Adamu’s comment illustrates the difference between an Orthodox Ethiopian and Western sense of aesthetics. His foreign clients want to see figures with “Ethiopian” features because for them, the value rests on an “authentic” Ethiopian look. Hence one of his most recent depictions is of the Virgin and Christ child and all figures are painted with brown skin, black-rimmed eyes, and a lack of formal perspective (Fig. 9). In contrast to foreigners, Orthodox Ethiopians value the subjects depicted within the paintings and the ideas portrayed by the image. So the actual style of the depiction of Mary or Jesus Christ is less important than their ability to be recognized. Ultimately, for Ethiopian Orthodox practitioners, a chromolithograph can have just as much spiritual value as a hand-painted image. In contrast, hand-painted images are becoming valuable merchandise in the tourist trade and Silverman identifies a change in the value of religious objects due to the encounter between global and local spiritual beliefs and economic worth (in press). In other words, “traditional” religious objects such as wood icons are being commoditized because of Western notions of authenticity and conversely, commodity objects such as chromolithograph prints are considered by Orthodox Christians to be an important part of their religious practice.

In order to remain competitive with mass produced art forms, Qes Adamu is sympathetic to the visual demands of foreigners.
and Western artistic conventions. For example, he provides a signature on his paintings, whereas before the twentieth century, as Elisabeth Biasio also notes (this issue), Ethiopian painters rarely signed their names on their works (Silverman 1999:143). Also, his motivations for producing religious artwork have changed. Although a devout Ethiopian Orthodox Christian who states that his religion informs many aspects of his work, Qes Adamu has reacted to his foreign clients’ desires for alternative subject matter beyond Christian imagery. So, he produces paintings depicting scenes of daily life, people practicing Islam, and historical events, such as Emperor Haile Selassie I’s diplomatic visit to Jamaica in 1966. Just like Aleqa Berhane, Qes Adamu refuses to make a value judgment of chromolithographs:

Since these images [chromolithographs] have a religious value, I cannot criticize them because no matter what the form, people believe in the character of the picture. Some images might be more attractive but that does not mean that the others were bad. These images look like photographs of Mary but my technique is different. Let me ask you … if you saw two men and one had dark skin and one had light skin, could you tell me, which one was better just by looking at them?

His clever and perceptive question reinforces my earlier argument that the appearance of religious figures is secondary to the spiritual meaning they symbolize to Ethiopian Orthodox practitioners. Much as Qes Adamu argues that skin color has no bearing on a person’s worth, the appearance and material content of these religious images should have no bearing on one’s faith and love for God.

Although Qes Adamu has chosen to maintain his own style, it is common for other artists to make copies of chromolithographs, which are then displayed in churches. A painted copy of a chromolithograph of St. Urael was given to the Bait Meskal church in Lalibela and is displayed alongside several other religious paintings and posters (Fig. 10). This painting is based on a printed copy that also circulates in Ethiopia (Fig. 11). The final work retains elements of its chromolithograph base in the poses of the figures and their features. However, the painter added references to Ethiopian culture through the tricolor border of red, yellow, and green (the colors of the Ethiopian flag) and Amharic writing across the bottom.

What does this mean when a chromolithograph is turned from a mass-produced image back into a painting? I believe that this practice serves to reinforce the chromolithograph’s increasing value within the Ethiopian Orthodox religious community. I would argue that the fact that people reproduce and/or paint...
(counterclockwise from top left)


(opposite)

over these images is, in part, an attempt to bring them closer to the historic tradition of painting within the EOC. It is also emblematic of a desire to bring new iconography into the space of the church without disrupting the established aesthetics for traditional religious art.

It is important to note, however, that traditional religious paintings have also changed in style from previous generations, as Biasio observes in her contribution to this issue. In order to study the changes in Ethiopian religious art, Silverman calls for a greater understanding of Ethiopian society and culture (1999:150). At this point in time, Orthodox Ethiopians have found great value in foreign-produced chromolithographs and they have successfully negotiated the coexistence of chromolithographs and hand-painted religious imagery. Each type of artwork fulfills a purpose in Ethiopian Orthodox society: the chromolithographs provide religious iconography that can be accessed by everyone and easily modified to suit a variety of purposes while traditional paintings continue highly valued historical conventions. Both art forms should be considered important and central aspects of contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox practice. A more comprehensive study of chromolithograph production, particularly including secular and non-Christian imagery, will help to further our understanding of how mass produced technologies are affecting local art use and production within Ethiopia.

Briana B. Simmons holds an MA in African Art History from California State University, Northridge. She is currently a PhD student at the University of California, Santa Barbara. bsimmons@umail.ucsb.edu

Notes

1 Art historian Jacques Mercier used radiocarbon dating to discern the approximate date for the oldest painted manuscripts in Ethiopia, The Abba Garima Gospels. Although he has not yet officially published his findings, the discovery is referenced in Phillipson 2003:20–21.

2 I first learned about these chromolithographs from Raymond A. Silverman, professor of African art at the University of Michigan and contributor to this special issue. He wrote a research note exploring the topic and calling for further study and exploration (in press). At the suggestion of Silverman and Peri Klemm, I went to Ethiopia in summer 2007 to study chromolithographs for my MA thesis. I observed the use of images in both private and public settings and conducted interviews in Amhara, Tigrai, and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regional states, as well as in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.

3 Chromolithographs of Mecca and other Muslim holy sites are also available for purchase by Ethiopia’s large Muslim population while secular prints depicting Indian babies, bodybuilders, and famous Western and Indian music and film stars are popular with Ethiopia’s youth. These chromolithographs do not, however, relate to the EOC artistic tradition; therefore I do not consider them here.

4 Ethiopians are referred to by their given first name because their second name is that of their father. In this note, I have followed the tradition of using the first name when referring to an Ethiopian individual in the text or in citations. In the References cited, Ethiopian authors and interview participants are alphabetized by their first names.


9 Ibid.


11 Aleqa is the church title for the chief priest of a parish church. It may also be used for someone who is not a priest but is informed in the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Silverman 2005:38).


13 Ibid.

14 Qes is the title for a priest in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Silverman 2005:38).


16 Ibid.

References cited