

Conservation of Ethiopian Church Treasures – a symbiosis between scientists and clergy?

– a personal opinion –

by Annegret Marx

At the end of the year 1984 I took part in one of Prof. Dr. Friedrich Heyer's field trips to the highlands of Ethiopia visiting monasteries and church schools. The scholarly priests, with whom Prof. Heyer conversed, impressed me absolutely; I can describe them best with an appearance of "self-possessed dignity" although they faced a highly precarious situation of their living conditions, characterized mainly by famine, in the highlands of Ethiopia.

Since that time I am close-knit with the church-schools that are supported by the Tabor Society since 1976. They are the following monasteries: Bethlehem in Gayent, Suramba, Esté Mekane Iyesus, Mähedärä Maryam and Gubaya bet at the church Medhane Alem in Gondar. Moreover since that time, I have very good personal contacts with the nunnery in Sebata. I had been a board member of the Tabor Society for twenty years and I had visited Ethiopia a number of times – travels, which were not restricted to a visit to Addis Ababa, but also to the monasteries in the high lands and to the nunnery. In addition I am loosely involved with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Germany since 1982.

My special interest is painting: since I had some training in east European icon painting I was tempted to bring the pictures of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church into play in my former work both in the catholic and the protestant church. Lacking of suitable pictures I began to paint Ethiopian Icons copying old paintings, which are collected in museums. Naturally I was not only interested in the technique of painting, but also in the study of the old culture of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This mix of mediation, presentation, research and documentation of Ethiopian objects of church art characterizes my work until today.

Because of my long lasting experience I think I can form a reasonable opinion on the problems of the conservation of the sacral treasures of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church distributed and hidden in the highlands of Ethiopia. In 1992 I visited the church in Suramba and observed that part of a 17th century mural of a plinth literally peeled off and flakes fell to the ground. I became aware that the murals of these old churches could not be adored any longer by future generations unless they are restored within the next years. At the same time I noticed that I could not share my feeling with the Ethiopians, who were much less concerned with restoring their art treasures than I, the visitor from Europe. Today, I believe, I can understand this incongruity somewhat better. The extreme diverse living conditions in the two countries – a secured life in Germany without imminent famine in contrast to the bare fight for the sheer survival in Ethiopia – are at least one of the reasons for the different views of the same theme.

I think another, perhaps an even more important reason for these divergent views, is due to the strong emphasis of the immaterial culture of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (see church schools), which is still present in Ethiopia. In the western world this immaterial culture has been lost in the course of the "Age of Enlightenment" and several other historical developments.

How can we solve this ethical dilemma? Should we, the people from the western world inspire the people of Ethiopia to value their cultural heritage? If we want to do that, how should we proceed? I think we can only achieve, if we include the Ethiopian clergy in our thoughts, considerations and discussions. In the following paragraphs I will show you how I proceeded and how far I got so far.

During the conference of ORBIS AETHIOPICUS in Vienna in 2006 I showed a number of icons that were collected in Ethiopia during the period of 1986 to 1991. On the basis of these examples I could illustrate there in which direction the art of church developed when the objects of art are produced for foreigners buying these objects and not for the cultural use in church. At the same time I could also demonstrate that old techniques were revived due to lack of some materials.

After my talk at this conference Mme. Christine Chaillot asked me whether I could give a further workshop in Ethiopia comparable to one I had given in the German Cultural institute in 2003. (The Source of Colours:

<http://www.dworschak-marx.de/ChristlicheKultur/persoenliche-Arbeiten-workshops.html>)

I accepted provided that the workshop will be held at the Holy Trinity Theological College (HTTC) the academic training school for priests of the Orthodox Ethiopian Church. With the financial support of the organization "Dialogue entre Orthodoxes" (I thank Christine Chaillot the secretary of this organization for her strong assistance) I held this workshop in spring 2007 after I had been invited officially by archbishop Abuna Timoteus, who is in charge of HTTC.

Deacon Daniel Seife Michael Felleke was my local assistant, who organized the workshop and contacted some of the important people. He is a member of the department of Research and accompanied J. Mercier during numerous travels through the country (for instance to the monastery Haiq for the restoration of a large icon of the 15th century). In the meantime Daniel Felleke finished his study of museology at the IES. I remember him working very dedicated and reliable.

My condition to hold this workshop on Ethiopian icon painting only at the HTTC, and at no other place in Ethiopia, is based on my firm conviction that we must include the Ethiopian clergy in the preservation of the Ethiopian cultural heritage. Let me list my points of view in detail:

- As long as the Ethiopian orthodox clergy does not know the cultural and historical value of the treasures of art belonging to their church they will not be interested in substantial mutual aid.
- The preservation of the rich heritage of the Ethiopian Orthodox church is not possible without the inclusion of the church, its priests and laymen.
- We can recognize old paintings and make plans for their preservation only when we are familiar with the techniques of the old masters and the materials they used.
- The study of the paintings is not possible without involving the clergy, a condition, which will be difficult to realize. We might succeed by trying to inform the clergy and involving some of their members in specific steps. As an example, we could ask someone from the clergy to collect and secure material from murals that has dropped to the floor. This method is a totally different one from the approach of a foreign scientist taking samples by himself. The samples obtained locally can be collected by the Research Department of HTTC to become the core of a database for further examinations. (The Department of Chemistry of AAU and also National Herbarium are just vis-à-vis of HTTC entrance.)
- The participants of the workshop are metaphorically speaking multipliers in the domain of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Besides, there were two women who worked in Sunday schools and can spread their knowledge within a group of laymen. All of them will built a network for future work.

For your information I will include the time table of the workshop including its curriculum: :

Workshop at Holy Trinity Theological College, Addis Abeba 2007

	Theory	Practical work
Monday February 26	<p>Introduction</p> <p>"Painting tradition of the Church" <i>(Powerpoint presentation)</i></p> <p>"Ethiopia – An African Icon tradition" <i>(Powerpoint presentation)</i></p>	<p>The material of painting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pigment - Binding media - Parchment /paper - Priming -the tools for painting work <p>Preparation for the next day: Grinding of earth material for pigments and soaking</p>
Tuesday February 27	<p>"Rules of church paintings" <i>(Powerpoint presentation)</i></p> <p>"A Sample of an Ethiopian Church of Menelik's time: Zuquala" <i>(DVD)</i></p>	<p>Preparation of Binding media:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - egg yolk, - egg white, - gum arabic <p>choice of patterns</p> <p>Painting of different samples with earth pigments and classical pigments like orpiment, cinnabar, indigo</p>
Wednesday February 28		<p>Preparing of test cards with earth pigments and two binding agents – egg yolk and gum arabic</p> <p>Working on the drawings on parchment</p>
Thursday March 1		<p>Preparation of a small exhibition for the participants of the reception for the presentation of the book „Ethiopian Church“ of Christine Chaillot in Amharic</p>
Friday March 2		<p>Working on parchment</p>
Saturday March 3	<p>Visit at IES Museum</p> <p>Excursion to Entoto collecting earth material</p>	
Monday March 5	<p>How to choice and prepare a wooden panel for icon painting</p>	<p>Preparing a wooden panel for icon painting</p>

Tuesday March 6	How to make a good priming – the different steps	Priming of an icon panel
Wednesday March 7	Closing of the workshop - Dinner of the group of participants	

Throughout the workshop the students were especially open-minded about the tradition and showed a great interest in this extracurricular course. I was surprised to find so many (more than 30) students attending it. One of their tasks was to select a motive from old icons and to paint a picture on parchment with self prepared paints for their personal use. The preparation of such a painting was an important experience for them, which they will probably not forget..

You can find a brief report and the pictures of the students in my WEB-Site:

<http://www.dworschak-marx.de/ChristlicheKultur/persoенliche-Arbeiten-workshops.html>

During a common visit to the museum of the IES I observed that practically all students had not seen old icons before and that they were deeply impressed by them.

The students showed me numerous pictures for devotion, which are presently printed and are on use in Ethiopia. They are cheap modern prints of bad quality. I think that they are hardly suited to establish an emotional connection with the original cultural heritage of this country. The beautiful old images of Ethiopian Icons are well known in the Western world; they are printed in art books and are the object of many academic studies. On the other hand they are hardly know to most Ethiopians. The dissemination of these beautiful old images by affordable prints should be one of the next additional valuable steps in Ethiopia so that the people in Ethiopia can appreciate their cultural heritage..

I advise all scholars working on Ethiopian Art and culture who plan to visit Addis Abeba to approach HTTC with the offer to give a talk on their own research on Ethiopian art and culture. I can assure you that the students and teachers will be very interested and thankful.

Aachen, June 25th, 2007