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# The Priest and the Painter: the ambivalent role of Orthodox painting in Ethiopia today

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This article compares the ambivalent discourse of a contemporary Orthodox Church painter to that of a priest. Both painter and priest live in Adama (Ethiopia), a city of roughly 300,000 inhabitants situated 100 kilometers to the Southeast of Addis Ababa. Adama, which was the former capital of the Oromo region, can be considered as one of Ethiopia's major crossroads and centers for trucking, as it borders the route from Addis Ababa towards Eastern Ethiopia. Despite the influences brought by trade and transportation, Adama remains predominantly Christian Orthodox[1] with a large number of recently constructed churches with contemporary religious paintings.

Christian Orthodox painting in Ethiopia is a topic that has been previously studied by anthropologists such as Michel Leiris (1996)[2], Marcel Griaule (2001)[3] and Jacques Mercier (1979). The idea that these traditional religious images are meant to play a solely didactic role has been widely promoted:

"Il s'agit de décrire un événement, d'en garder le souvenir et d'en diffuser l'image. L'expansion de cet art est liée à la mémoire du Christ et à l'enseignement des Évangiles." (Mercier, 1979: 21)

It is not surprising that, in Ethiopia, the function of Orthodox art is a biblical one. As Edward Ullendorff write:

"The biblical atmosphere manifests itself in Ethiopia not only in attitudes, beliefs, and a general quality of life that is forcefully reminiscent of the Old Testament world, but it is also expressed in numerous more tangible ways." (1967: 3)

One of these more "tangible ways" is the use of images.

[1] – Christianity emerged in Ethiopia in the mid-4th century. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, as it is officially called, is connected to the Coptic Church of Egypt, which was the first on the African continent, but it has developed its own liturgy, educational system for clergy and laymen, monastic tradition, religious music, and an extensive tradition of commentary and exegesis of the Bible. "Monophysite Christianity, once it had taken root, became not only the official religion of the Ethiopian empire but also the most profound expression of the national existence of the Ethiopians. In its peculiar indigenized form, impregnated with strong Hebraic and archaic Semitic elements as well as pagan residue, Abyssinian Christianity constitutes a storehouse of the cultural, political, and social life of the people. In speaking of this distinctive conglomerate one has to bear in mind three major religious manifestations in Ethiopia – Judaism, paganism and Islam – which are either genetic ingredients of Abyssinian Christianity or at least elements of a long historical symbiosis." (Ullendorff, 1967: 15)

[2] – Michel Leiris joined the 1929 Dakar-Djibouti Mission as archivist and secretary and travelled through Ethiopia.

[3] – Marcel Griaule, who was also a member of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, wrote a short study on Abyssinian graffiti.

The priest, or *Abba*[4], with whom I was able to speak, confirmed this understanding of the religious image. According to him, the role of a painter is to transmit, through images, biblical narrative. That is to say, a painter's function is essentially didactic and knowledge of the Bible indispensable. For the *Abba*, a painter must "know the story or the history of the picture" before he can paint: "Unless he understands he cannot paint[5]." Unequivocally, painting is perceived as a means of religious expression and an instructive tool. This characterization of Orthodox painting seems to border on the schematic. Is it possible to reduce painting, means of expression, to such a limited scope?

The anthropology of art, that envelops the study of Ethiopian Orthodox paintings, should be considered as an evolving discipline. Before the 1960's, anthropologists tended to see art as an "artificial category", meaning that objects were regarded as "ritual objects, functional artifacts, prestige items or markers of status" (Morphy, Perkins, 2006: 8)[6]. As the anthropology of art has developed, "material culture objects" are seen not so much as "passive", but as "integral to the processes of reproducing social relations and developing affective relation with the world" (*Ibid.*: 10).

For Alfred Gell, aesthetics must "make a complete break" (1992: 43) with the anthropology of art, as universal moral discourse should not be a part of this discipline. Nonetheless, A. Gell does recognize that anthropology of art implicates one aspect of aesthetic discourse, namely: "the capacity of the aesthetic approach to illuminate the specific objective characteristics of the art object as an object, rather than as a vehicle for extraneous social and symbolic messages" (*loc.cit.*). In other words, beauty is momentous. Beautifully made objects are the product of technique, and through this technique, objects gain the "power of enchantment" and ensure the "production of the social consequences[7]" . I am interested in the perspective of the artists themselves, and how they use "the power of enchantment" or how this "enchantment" affects them. How are the people who create material objects part of this social dialogue and these social consequences? What status, values and meanings do they ascribe to their own productions?

Zewdu, a painter with whom I have been in contact for the past several years and the central figure of this article, has communicated to me his perceptions of both Ethiopian and Western culture. Zewdu is considered to be Adama's most famous artist and works primarily on commission for various churches. In our first meetings, Zewdu and I discussed his background and training as a painter. During these conversations, Zewdu insisted on his religious approach to painting: to paint was to be close to God, to understand and to communicate biblical texts. As our relationship developed, a different and even transgressive discourse eclipsed his earlier more normative rhetoric. Zewdu began to express an interest in Western religious images and requested that I bring him books on Michelangelo, whom he considers "the most amazing painter" . Zewdu and I spent time together looking at the images of Michelangelo, Raphael, as well as early Ethiopian religious art. He expressed his admiration of these Western painters as he pored breathlessly over

[4] - *Abba* signifies priest (or man with a church function) in Amharic. This particular priest was introduced to me by a friend. The *Abba* lives in the Jesus Church (an Orthodox church in Adama) compounds and survives on the donations of the faithful.

[5] - Taken from an interview conducted in January 2013. All interviews with the *Abba* were conducted in Amharic and translated by Daniel Birhanu and me.

[6] - "The art dimension of the object seemed to be epiphenomenal – at worst the projection of European aesthetic values onto objects produced in quite different contexts for quite different purposes." (Morphy, Perkins, 2006: 8)

[7] - "As a technical system, art is orientated towards the production of the social consequences which ensue from the production of these objects. The power of art objects stems from the technical processes they objectively embody: the technology of enchantment is founded on the enchantment of technology. The enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form." (Gell, 1992: 44)

the pages of the books. In these moments, he would communicate his disdain for the traditional Ethiopian images[8]:

"I don't like this. There are so many things wrong here – the proportions, the faces. But I want to copy the ideas and make it in a new way. I can take it and change it to make it better.[9]"

Through our conversations, Zewdu demonstrated a desire to free himself from the constraints of traditions – ironically, this is what Western painters sought after in the late 19th and early 20th century. In the obverse of Zewdu's perception, Western modernist painters conceived of "Primitive art" as a liberating inspiration. As Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins write:

"Modernism viewed the inspirational works of 'primitive art' as exemplars of a universal aesthetic yet simultaneously built in its own assumptions to explain the liberation nature of their forms: 'primitive art' expressed the fundamental, primeval psychic energy of man, unconstrained by the academic tradition." (*Morphy, Perkins, op. cit.*: 5)

Although Zewdu is not attracted to "Primitive art" (indeed, he is attracted to the Western academic traditions), he is "inspired" by the "otherness" of images foreign to his culture. He is constructing his "own assumptions" about the Western traditions. He admires Michelangelo for his freedom, variation, liberties. He experiences Michelangelo as a rupture from his "academic tradition" and he is seduced by the discovery.

In this article, I attempt to unfold the various dimensions of Zewdu's ambivalent relationship to Orthodox painting. I do not propose any comprehensive theories, nor broad reflections on Ethiopian society as a whole; rather, I present my various dialogues with Zewdu (and the *Abba* whom I have previously referred to) as a kind of intimate portrait. I am interested in how these two social actors as individuals interpret the role of images. How does the image, as a cultural object, allow for a didactic, aesthetic and even moral discourse to materialize? At a certain level, the discourse of Zewdu and that of the *Abba* correspond to the assimilated and canonized understanding of painting in the orthodox tradition – demonstrated by similar verbal motifs in their interviews. Still, there are undoubtedly some rather discordant elements that emerge through the comparison of their discourses. It is through our conversations that an ambiguous tension between the continuity of traditional Ethiopian conceptions of art and the disruptive nature of Zewdu's evolving artistic intentions emerged.

## Zewdu: background and profile

When I first met Zewdu, he seemed eager to be interviewed and was willing to speak about his artistic development. In the interview, he claimed to have been "attracted to images" since childhood. At the age of sixteen, he "saw a man in the street who had drawn a beautiful image" and was thus "inspired to do as he did"[10]. The image that had so "inspired" Zewdu, leaving a "finger print in his mind", was that of Jesus with his hand on his heart.

"The man was not a painter but painted pictures only for pleasure. He was in fact an accountant, mostly he painted pictures on white pieces of paper for his own enjoyment. I had the opportunity to see his picture – but he stopped painting and continued his job[11]."

8 – Zewdu showed me an image of the 18th century Gondarian style.

9 – Taken from an interview conducted in August 2013 in Adama, Ethiopia. All interviews with Zewdu were conducted in Amharic and translated by Daniel Birhanu and me.

10 – All excerpts in this section are taken from an interview conducted in August 2013 in Adama, Ethiopia.

11 – Taken from an interview conducted in January 2013.

Zewdu made a distinction between "the man who painted only for pleasure" (painting was not his "job") and his own maturation as a painter. He closely associates his interest in art, and particularly religious images, with his Christian evolution:

"When I was a child, especially at the age of ten or eleven, I was so rude and noisy. I was often annoying my family and the neighborhood. That is why my family made me go to church so that I would change my behavior. After I attended the Bible lessons a deep and strange thing happened to me – the love of religion and of God was born in my heart. I then started painting to serve God without any payment."

Zewdu communicated to me that his experience in Sunday school "must have had an effect" on his "interest in painting", and that it was there, among his fellow Bible students, that his talent was noticed: Zewdu developed his skill by painting pictures for his friends.

"When I first started, I used painting for bad things in the school. That means, when I was a child, I used to paint body parts for my friends on the blackboard in school. It was for fun but it was such a bad thing. However, my friends didn't expose me to the teacher because I told them that, if they exposed me, I would never draw the pictures for them again. So, they keep it a secret and they were punished for me. But one time, I painted the picture on the board during our break time and my teacher came to the classroom to teach us, she saw the picture on the board but kept quiet. After her class, she asked if someone could paint something for her: she said 'please children, who can paint for me two girls who are combing their hair for each other?' All the students responded in one voice… my name! She knew who had painted on the board at the break time. She called me and advised me not to do such things. I stopped that kind of thing completely, started painting church pictures."

In this narrative told by Zewdu, the act of painting can be used for "bad things", presumably sexual images.

Although Zewdu did not receive formal training from the priests (as priests "do not know how to paint") or other church officials, he was introduced to Alegefelege Selam, a church painter who "helped" him with the "different technics necessary for drawing beautiful pictures". I had heard already about Alegefelege Selam from various other people in the community, as he was considered to be an important and "famous" artist. Zewdu insisted however that most of his training ("75%" according to him) was a result of "practicing alone", and that he would "refer to other professional pictures" and "copy them at home".

Zewdu's particular style adheres to the standards of Orthodox painting, namely it is closely related to the simplified Coptic version of Late Antique and Byzantine Christian art. His figures are typified, even cartoonish, with large almond-shaped eyes. Colours are vivid with a polished application and are symbolic in the Christian tradition[12].

As the majority of the Zewdu's paintings are scenes taken from the Old Testament, the use of the Bible and his contact with the priests in his church were considered to be valuable resources to him: "I am attending church programs and spend time asking the priests. I read and study the Bible in Sunday school, so that I can know about the history of the arts and also their interpretations." For Zewdu, priests know the "history of the pictures" and how the images should be represented (the placement of the figure, how the figures should be clothed, and the appropriate colors):

[12] – Blue traditionally stands for purity, virginity and heaven. Red stands for blood (as in the color of sacrifice of martyrs like Jesus). Yellow refers to the sunlight and to gold (heaven, eternity). Green stands between red (hell) and blue (heaven). It signifies balance and new life as well as Eden (paradise) and hope.

"All traditional painting is related to the Bible. Knowing the Bible makes you perfect in the traditional art world. A person who has learned the biblical histories can perfectly paint in the traditional style. The Bible and traditional paintings are the two faces of one coin: that means nothing can separate them into two separate entities. Also peoples are naturally prone to believe that the invisible God exists through visible images of him that have been done by painters. In this way, painting and the church have a great link between them."

The place of religion in the work and life of Zewdu seemed to be not only valuable in terms of his artistic development and practice, but also an underlying element in his relationship with his fellow artists. Zewdu emphasized the connection between the Bible and his paintings, as well as between painting and "holiness":

"The history of the Bible impresses me, and I want to show that. Holiness makes me happy above all things. Other artists have great problems, for example addiction to drugs, alcohol, and the like. But I keep to myself and am away from this because I am trying to do what Bible orders me to do."

These first conversations with Zewdu were conventional and in accordance with the prevailing discourse of Orthodox painting as a solely religious act. The questions of morality, holiness, biblical knowledge and tradition, upon which Zewdu largely defined himself, are part of the predominant discourse and are echoed by the *Abba*.

## The *Abba* and the religious historic discourse

The *Abba* I met, who was described to me as "being more educated than a priest", lives inside the Jesus Church compound. He was known to spend "all of his time studying the Bible and other texts" and was considered well-read and knowledgeable in "all things" related to the Orthodox tradition. He was thought to be a "true Orthodox" with deeper and "superior" knowledge to that of his fellow clergymen at the Jesus Church. I was informed as well that there exists a tradition, among certain learned clergy, of "knowing the rules of painting". Though this particular *Abba* might well have had these aforementioned characteristics, Donald Levine writes that "Ethiopian priests have never been particularly noted for their moral qualities[13]" (1965: 169).

From what I was led to understand, the *Abba*'s prestige was "unassailable" regardless of his mastery of biblical texts. Let us take for instance the *Abba*'s discourse on the "history of painting"; the *Abba* tells us that painting began at the time of the twelve saints[14].

"During that time, there was much opposition to Christianity. They [the Christians] were persecuted by the pagans. These Christian saints tried to hide in caves beneath the earth and they started to paint [on the walls] the history of Jesus – how he was born and his life with Mary. This is when painting begins. During this difficult period, this history

[13] – "Often they [the priests] are ungenerous and scheming, and ready to exploit their position at the expense of the laity. They are poorly educated in their own tradition, stuttering and misreading sacred texts in a language they have never understood. They are notorious drinkers. Nevertheless, the prestige of the priests was unassailable in Amhara culture. Whatever their personal life, they represented the value of ritual sanctity, which made it possible for the Mass to be performed in the local churches. So long as they had been duly ordained and did not break their lawful marriage bond, they were part of a sacred class." (Levine, 1965: 169-170)

[14] – No exact dates were provided to me during the interview. Nonetheless, the *Abba* may well be referring to the spread of Christianity: "The most important development in the spread of Christianity through the country was the arrival of the Nine Syrian Saints in the later half of the fifth century. They have been gloried in the Ethiopian tradition and commemorations of them remain important in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar, but it is not easy to sift fact from legend." (Henze, 2000: 38)

travelled through the generations. The Christians who believed in God cut their bodies using knives and put salt on their wounds.[15]"

The *Abba* describes painting as a means of recording history, as a collective memory, but he also indicates that the role of a painter is like that of a scribe. This close connection between scribe and painter in Ethiopia has been well established. Traditionally, priests not only acted as scribes in the copying of religious texts, but illustrated manuscripts (Mann, 2001: 95). In Adama, though the clergy is active in the process of the church's graphic design, they do not act directly as painters. When I questioned Zewdu as to whether he learned from a priest how to paint, he was very direct in his statement: "The priests don't know how to paint." He did include that the priests "know the history of pictures, what is represented, about the colors of the eyes, hair, and how Mary should be dressed". The *Abba* was in agreement: "I cannot draw, but I know the history. So I can lead them in how to draw. I can monitor the painters and can lead them. If I were to draw, I would have to practice. To be an artist, training is very important. I cannot paint but, if a painter paints incorrectly, then I can correct him."

In 1928, Marcel Griaule, who visited Gondar during the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, was able to work with the priest and painter Alaqa Kasa who informed him "des principes d'ordonnancement des sujets iconographiques sur les murs des églises, de la symbolique des couleurs, des conditions requises pour peindre, des processus de commande […]" (Bosc-Tiessé, Wion, 2005: 106). Kasa also mentioned the existence of a book (thought to have disappeared) that explained some of the larger principles of the "métier de peintre" and the history of the themes in religious painting furnished with models (*loc. cit.*). Griaule was able to document Kasa's testimony, though largely biographical, about the act of painting, his own particular background, and the various iconographic themes or the church murals[16]. This kind of text referenced by Kasa, or at least a religious text that contained the "canons" for painting, was also mentioned by my acquaintances in Adama, though no one was able to provide me with the actual texts or a summary of their contents. The idea, however, that such texts do indeed exist is known even outside of the church community[17]. Regardless of the reality or the survival of these texts, the fact that they are referenced and thought to exist is telling. The veneration of doctrines (artistic or thematic) appears as a collective value among both clergy and laymen. One possible explanation is that historically painters were priests. Today, the harmony of these statements should not be taken as a direct reflection of the permanent accord between the contemporary painter and clergy, but as a kind of *perceived* ideal. Painter and priest alike perpetuate the tradition of the role of the priest in church paintings. Is this an indication of a desire to hold on to a static continuity of the role of the image, like the perpetuation of written traditions through oral veneration of texts? Both Zewdu and the *Abba* confirm the importance of the priests and the prerequisite knowledge of the Bible. Undoubtedly, there exists a strain of continuity in both the function and execution of Orthodox painting. Even so this norm is not without transgression.

## Norms and transgressions

It is Zewdu who reveals the fissures in the dominant discourse. Though he acknowledges the importance of the clergy and "holiness" in painting, Zewdu feels constrained by the rigidity of the traditional painting style. He wants to be accepted as a "great" church painter, just as he wants to "innovate" the existing style by using Western techniques.

[15] – Taken from an interview conducted in January 2013.

[16] – See Streclyn S., 1954. Streclyn lists various manuscripts, one of which is a copy of a Kasa's. The manuscript can be found at Bibliothèque nationale de France.

[17] – In various conversations with people outside of the Orthodox Church, I was told about the existence of such texts.

Zewdu's graphic training was not limited to the images found in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church or from other Ethiopian painters. He expressed a particular interest in the work of Michelangelo, saying that his work "helps" him to paint. Instead of wanting monetary compensation for the interviews, he asked me to bring him books on Michelangelo and conveyed his admiration for his work. I asked Zewdu to show me in what ways Michelangelo had "helped" him. He brought forwards a canvas of the Holy Trinity in which there was considerable attention given to the draping of the clothing and to the perception of depth of the stones bordering the bottom of the painting. Zewdu explained that he had "learned" from Michelangelo how to paint draped cloth, to give a sense of depth to his figures. The image itself however – the three figures dressed in red – is described as:

"Le Père, le Fils et le Saint-Esprit sont représentés de manière identique sans qu'aucun détail ni attribut ne les distingue. Ils apparaissent comme trois vieillards avec de longs cheveux blancs flottant sur leurs épaules, représentant la description de la vision du prophète Daniel, le buste surplombant celui qui les regarde." (Bosc-Tiessé, Wion, op. cit.: 94)[18]

This image "sous la forme de trois personnes identiques" is thought to have been popular[19] beginning in the 18th century (*loc. cit.*) and cannot be considered as an original composition, nor as a painting solely inspired by Michelangelo.

What is evident is the strong tradition of the images that Zewdu is reproducing: he is part of the continuity of the production of certain types of paintings. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore his individualized deviations – if not in the form of the images he produces then in his discourse from the standardized catalogue of orthodox painting.


Fig. 1 : The Holy Trinity painted by Zewdu Dirrge

In the following dialogue between Zewdu and me a year later[20], he deviates further. When asked if, for a painter, it is more important to please other people or to create for his own purposes, Zewdu responded:

"Good[21]. Do you know Alegefelege Selam, the leader and founder of the Art school in Addis? He was my teacher. He had the chance to attend Art school abroad and, when he came back with new ideas, he mixed these ideas with the traditional Ethiopian cultural paintings to make certain improvements. But people confronted him because they felt he diluted the culture; that is why painters are forced to emphasize the cultural aspects. I am interested to create paintings based on my own ideas, but there is a conflict with the Church.

[18] - For more detailed description of Holy Trinity format, see Colin G., 1988.

[19] - See Chojnacki, 1983.

[20]- From an interview in September 2014.

[21] - "Good" signifies that he liked the question.


Fig.2 : The Trinity, 18th century, from Debre Giyorgis Church, South of lake Tana, acquired during the Dakar-Djibouti Mission in Gondar, 1932

The leaders of the Church don't recognize my inventions, they want the tradition. Painters are forced to accept the priests' ideas about painting. That is why it is hard to find new things.

Me — So when you [as a painter] create new things, it is taking something away from the Orthodox tradition.

Z — Yes, and also away from the Bible.

M — For them the influences from European painting are not biblical influences?

Z — That is why Ethiopian painters do not want to create new things, just copy what was there before.

M — But you said that you make changes to the paintings?

Z — But I will keep them until the priests accept and understand their value.

M — Are people against your innovations? Or do they like what you do and change? Still, you are a famous painter, why?

Z — They like what I have copied, the ideas that I have copied. I don't want to upset the priests and their interests. I have new paintings as well, but I do not sell them. I try to upgrade the priests' ideas.

M — Do the priests appreciate those 'upgraded' ideas?

Z — Yes, if they are done in small ways. For example, in this painting, I put Mary in the painting because she was always with Jesus Christ in the Bible, so it made sense. I read about the stories of the Bible so that I can improve the paintings. In the traditional one, well, I can improve it because the proportions need to be corrected; I can do that.

M — Do you have any new paintings from the last time I saw you?

Z — I have this one that I took from the book you gave me. I want to create my own studio, that is why I created it. It is not for a church. I did this one for myself. The priests have not confronted me about it because it is an image of Jesus, but I did it in a new way. The logic is: the Orthodox Church does not want to emphasize the beauty of the picture but instead just the history."

During this dialogue, I presented Zewdu with a book on Rafael, a painter he had never heard of. His response was as follows:

Z: "I want to work like this painter, but the problem is that the people don't appreciate this work because it is Western. Now, they might understand these things. Before, with Michelangelo, people did not understand his paintings. They would cover them with a cloth.

M — But that was a long time ago?

Z — People, in our country, are like how it was before. Now, I have a place to do such things. I want to do sculptures and paintings outside of the Bible. People can come and see them.

M — So, not biblical paintings?

Z — Biblical paintings! But not in the traditional way.

M — These paintings of Raphael are not modern. They were painted in the 16th century.

Z — But some of the ideas of the Bible are not the same as in Ethiopia. In our country, we cannot show the bodies. It is not good for us. Raphael gave a sex to angels and muscles to man. This must have a meaning for him but we cannot understand that.

M — Why is the body considered bad in the Ethiopian tradition?

Z — There is no muscle in the Bible. Michelangelo must have done it that way to show the power of the holy men, but in our culture painters cannot consider this as holy people mostly pray. They are fasting so they don't have muscle like that. They are tiny and they wear many clothes to cover their body. This means that the Orthodox does not consider these things [the nudity and muscles of Michelangelo] as a beautiful and good thing."

Zewdu is "enchanted" – using Gell's term – by Western paintings. He values them because they transgress the norms of traditional Ethiopian standards and because they are inaccessible. He cannot show this interest outright, but must resort to hiding elements in his work until "they are ready" to "accept these things". Zewdu is able to communicate a sensitivity towards both Western and Ethiopian aesthetics. He is able to judge values of both. The idea of discerning aesthetic values across cultures has been a topic undertaken by Sally Price. She states: "I would argue that subscribers to the universality of aesthetic response have saddled their theory with an implicit and potentially disquieting corollary" (1989: 35). This corollary is that while "primitive" societies have the ability to create objects that are judged to be aesthetic masterpieces by other (Western) cultures; they do not have the ability to make similar judgments about objects made by people outside of their own cultures. S. Price points out that, if one assumes that "all cultures allow for aesthetic response [which] particular individuals in each society develop to varying degrees" (*Ibid.*: 34), then an aesthetically sensitive individual from any culture should be qualified to comment on the art of any other culture. Zewdu is indeed "commenting" on art from both his own and another culture. He goes even further: he is trying to alter the course of the development of Ethiopian Orthodox painting ("I will keep them [the paintings] until the priests accept and understand their value"). He is able to make judgments about time and chronology ("People in our country are like how it was before"), just as he is able to understand cultural, religious and interpretive differences ("This must have a meaning for him [Michelangelo] but we cannot understand that").

## Beauty, pleasure and morality

We cannot disregard the reoccurring theme of beauty in Zewdu's discourse. Zewdu's evident pleasure[22] in forms of painting, the mastery of technique and in the originality of composition are not negligible. Nonetheless, the *Abba*, in his interview, informs us that paintings are not created to be beautiful but informative or, more precisely, religiously informative:

"There are a lot of painters, but painters who draw for the church have to have knowledge of history. Others draw different paintings, out of the church. There are people who create religious images, but these people try to make paintings too beautiful. Their emphasis is on the beauty, not on the direct history. This is bad."

The judgment of the *Abba* is firm. "This is bad" is not morally ambiguous. The *Abba* sees the desire to "try to make paintings too beautiful" as sinful, as if to be "enchanted" by the form, as opposed to the function, were dangerous. The debate of the role of images in Christianity is long standing: this kind of argument against religious images (or images that "emphasize beauty") can be found in Philo Judaeus (1963), and the early Christian writers Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and the Byzantine critics.

David Freedberg writes that images that are "more or less artistic and more or less beautiful" bring "the ethical connotations of images right to the fore" (1989: 63). He adds that "ethical issues proceed from two deep-rooted assumptions […] that the highest form of beauty is spiritual and therefore severed from the earthly and the material […] on the grounds that beauty softens and corrupts" (*loc. cit.*). We find ourselves in the "nexus between awareness of the beauty of art and the slackening of moral fiber" (*loc. cit.*). "The slackening of moral fiber" is an accurate summary of the *Abba*'s thinking: "In this time, painters are focused on beauty and go towards the wrong way of painting by missing the exact meaning and history. It is the wrong way".

As priests no longer serve as painters, there appears to be a clash between religion and art. A flagrant example of this conflict can be seen in the use and function of color. The *Abba* and Zewdu, the painter, both speak about colors as having a symbolic value and about the knowledge of the colors as being part of the "knowledge of priests". Zewdu admits that though "the priests don't know how to paint", they do know about "the history of the pictures" and "about the colors". Yet, when asked "in what ways are the colors important in these paintings", Zewdu answers: "Colors are what make our painting speak what we think; we select colors to show happiness, bright future, deep sorrow and the like". This demonstrates a very different relationship to color than what Zewdu's more formal response indicates. Here, Zewdu confides his personal emotional connection to color, referencing what he feels – happiness and sorrow. There is no mention of doctrine, but rather of emotion. These aspects of the paintings are what frighten the *Abba*: images that "focus on beauty", that generate emotive responses. These images allow for the material world, as opposed to the spiritual world, to take precedence.

## Legitimacy

Zewdu's attempts to prove his skills as an artist by both Ethiopian and Western standards merit exploration. He wants to be respected and valued by the Church, his fellow artists, as he wants to change the tradition of Orthodox painting. In other words, he is seeking

[22] – Pleasure as an element and function of art is described by Franz Boas as part of its most basic characteristics: "The very existence of song, dance, painting and sculpture among all tribes known to us is proof of the craving to produce things that are felt as satisfying through their form, and [of the] capability of man to enjoy them." (1983: 9)

legitimacy across different terrains. Zewdu shows the paintings that he is working on to me, explaining the changes he made to the composition (the position of the hands, the child in the corner, Mary's clothes). I asked him about the history of the painting[23]:

Me: "Whose painting is this originally?

Zewdu — This idea [of the painting] is not from one person. People change it all the time, from year to year, so many things. Even people will copy my changes and improvements.

M — You are part of a moving tradition? You are not required to copy exactly what you see? You can make changes?

Z — The reason why I am not copying the painter who created this image before me is because I feel ashamed. Mostly I want to copy Michelangelo and other such painters, but the painting style of other Ethiopians is what I have to produce so, so it is not a problem for me to copy him [Michelangelo]. But also I want to add something new and surprising to my paintings.

M — You put a personal element in your paintings? Do you want to be recognized for your independent style?

Z — Mostly I am interested in learning from those painters that I consider to be better, to be masters, so I cannot talk about my independence. But I have experience with these images [the Orthodox images] and I can do many things with them. I am not surprised by the artists who live in Ethiopia. I know their work, it is not of great interest."

Unable to directly respond to the question about recognition, Zewdu, nonetheless, alludes to his mastery of the repertoire of Orthodox images and his desire to "add something new" to his paintings. He is dismissive of his fellow Ethiopian artists and "ashamed to copy from them". I was curious if other painters within the framework of Orthodox imagery were also breaking with tradition.

Me: "Do you think that is true of all painters in Ethiopia today? Do they all want new things?

Z — Not at all. Some of them follow business. Some of them to improve their biblical knowledge and some of them to be famous. Here, in Ethiopia, artists are not encouraged to try new ways, so they don't want to change the tradition. But Western artists are encouraged.

M — In the Ethiopian tradition, how did artists work?

Z — By copying. Copy, copy, copy. It was the order of the Church. The Western men, though, gave time to their paintings, to develop new ideas… five or six years. But here, in Ethiopia, people are copying because they are forced by the economic system. They need to do this to have business, they don't have the time to innovate and create new things."

Though Zewdu disdains Ethiopian artists that "copy, copy, copy", he recognizes that to be able to sustain themselves, painters must be legitimate. While in his atelier, I noticed a canvas of intricate knotted motifs and asked him if he had created the design himself. Zewdu responded:

"I just took it from another painting. Anyway, people are not interested in this kind of frame[24]. They are more interested in the images of the painting itself; sometimes I rearrange the colors and designs. But I depend on people's commissions, so I am not worried about such things as it does not interest them. I want to protect the people's interests."

[23] - From an interview in September 2014.

[24] - Although we are discussing a painted canvas, Zewdu indicates that it is frame as sections of the canvas will be cut up and used to 'frame' other paintings.

How can we interpret his response? While contemptuous that other artists copy, he does not see this detail as particularly worthy of a creative appropriation. He is sensitive to his client's interests and feels the need to satisfy their expectations – an understandable reaction. Still, Zewdu contradicts himself again. While looking at the book on Raphael, he becomes excited.

"It is Saint Peter and John! I understand from the picture what Bible story it is. I like pictures that have action, movement... I will spend all night studying these pictures. They are so wonderful for me. This book means a great thing for me. There are no books like this in Ethiopia and I have not had the chance to have these books before. And now this book even belongs to me. I don't want any money, these books give me everything I could ask for. In the future, by reading this book, I will be the one who can paint in this way. It is so extraordinary."

The value of the book outweighs monetary considerations; with it, Zewdu will be able to legitimize his place as a "skilled" painter. He thinks of himself as being the only one (in Ethiopia, as doubtful as this is) to have the possession of this kind of book. It is "extraordinary": Zewdu's aspirations are to find legitimacy within the context of the existing Orthodox painting tradition while, at the same time, transcending it to incorporate his aesthetic preferences.

## Conclusion

Despite certain parallels in the discourse of Zewdu and the *Abba*, we cannot conclude that both actors approach the act of painting, or the creation of religious images, from the same perspective. To a certain extent, the discourse of both painter and priest correspond to a canonized understanding of painting in the Orthodox tradition – demonstrated by the use of similar verbal motifs in their interviews. Still, there are discordant elements that emerge through the comparison of their discourses. Zewdu's perspective is far more ambivalent than that of the *Abba*. The distinction between the didactic and the aesthetic is, for him, inconsistent: Zewdu acknowledges the priest's role as someone who "knows the stories", but feels he can make corrections or adjustments if necessary ("I read about the stories of the Bible, so that I can improve the paintings"). Not only can he make corrections, but he expresses his dissatisfaction with the "traditional" images ("I don't like this. There are so many things wrong here"). To complicate the discourse even further, while Zewdu wants to "change" and "upgrade" Orthodox paintings, he admits to needing to serve the "interest" of his clients ("But I depend on people's commissions so I am not worried about such things as it does not interest them"). Though he says that the "story" and the "symbolism" behind the painting are important, he is moved by the colors and their emotive qualities ("Colors are what make our painting speak what we think. We select colors to show happiness, bright future, deep sorrow and the like").

There is a parallel dimension to Zewdu's discourse on aesthetics: that of the painter as an individual. Zewdu pronounces the act of creation in an individualistic sense, as a luxury ("They need to do this [copy paintings] to have business, they don't have the time to innovate and create new things"). Zewdu himself, however[25], is able to create paintings that he "keeps for himself until people are ready" ("I want to do sculptures and paintings outside of the Bible. People can come and see them"). Though these paintings are not commissioned pieces, but a result of his individual incentives, he still ultimately wants recognition. These paintings he does for "himself" (though also for other people) are both "outside the Bible" and "biblical paintings": how is this possible? But this is just one contradiction in a long series!

[25] - Perhaps due to his relative local fame in Adama.

The paragon of these inconsistencies – which in my mind suggest a moralistic undertone that has been present throughout – are the final words I exchanged with Zewdu on the subject of incorporating Western themes and methods in Orthodox painting. I had asked him if it would be problematic for him to have books on Western painting, if he was not allowed to use the ideas in his paintings. He responded[26]:

Zewdu: "Yes. You can do these things [use Western images] for nightclubs, but the Church is so strict.

Me — You are allowed to create things for nightclubs?

Z — Yes, I do such work. From time to time I do this."

In no previous conversation had he alluded to producing work for nightclubs. He had made out his own rectitude to be exemplary ("Holiness makes me happy above all things. I am trying to do what Bible orders me to do"). Here, once again, we find incongruity: Zewdu judges harshly from a moralistic standpoint his fellow artists for "alcohol and addiction to drugs" but, still, he is willing to create "attractive" Western images (images that are not permitted in the confines of Orthodox art) for nightclubs (traditionally thought of as a place of decadence, sin and carnal pleasures!).

Using the analogy of Zewdu and the *Abba* as actors on a stage, I am tempted to interpret Zewdu's part as being both scripted and off script – as though the actor in a moment of fervor, in front of his audience abandons his lines for improvisational self-expression. However, Zewdu has not abandoned the play: he is enthusiastic about being a church painter. There is a willingness to conform to the norms of the didactic dogma of Orthodox art, just as he is *reactive* to the aesthetic pleasure of Western art. H. Morphy (1994) describes a person's aesthetic reaction to an object as being comprised of two parts: the fairly objective perception of the physical characteristics of an object and the relation of those characteristics to a subjective set of cultural connotations. The former reaction may be universal, but the latter is not. He compares perceiving an object's attributes to receiving an electric shock: noticeable, but meaningless. As H. Morphy states: "The properties of [an] object are not in themselves aesthetic properties... They become aesthetic properties through their incorporation within systems of value and meaning that integrate them within cultural processes" (1994: 673).

Maybe the "system of values", that H. Morphy refers to – one in which the *Abba* feels a loss of control –, is one in which the artist has taken on not only a technical role, but the role of interpretation. The power of an image is also the power that the creator of that image allows it to have. Is Zewdu, as a creator of images, a usurper of power, of "tradition"? Is the *Abba*'s discourse so dogmatic because he needs to maintain some power in this domain? I would like to conclude with a quotation. Donald Levine writes: "The Abyssinian moral order rests primarily upon two pillars: the profession of Christianity and the institution of respect" (1965: 104). What if the painter, as a layman, has the power, through the use of images, to upset this order?

[26] - From an interview conducted in November 2014.

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