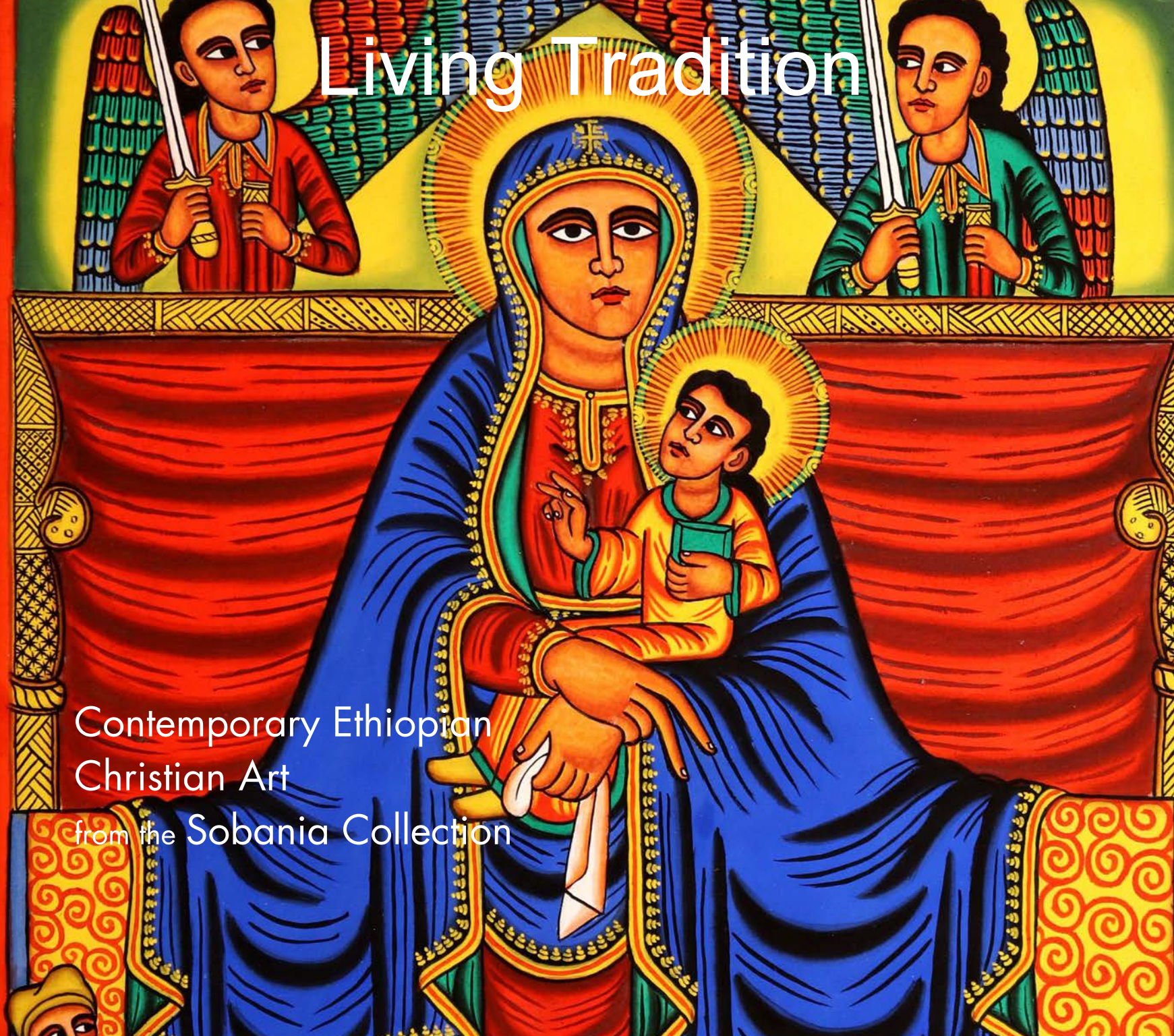


# Living Tradition

Contemporary Ethiopian  
Christian Art  
from the Sobania Collection







Produced by Storming the Castle Pictures for the Kruizenga Art Museum as a catalog for the exhibition "Living Tradition:  
Contemporary Ethiopian Contemporary Art from the Sobania Collection," September 21 – December 15, 2018.  
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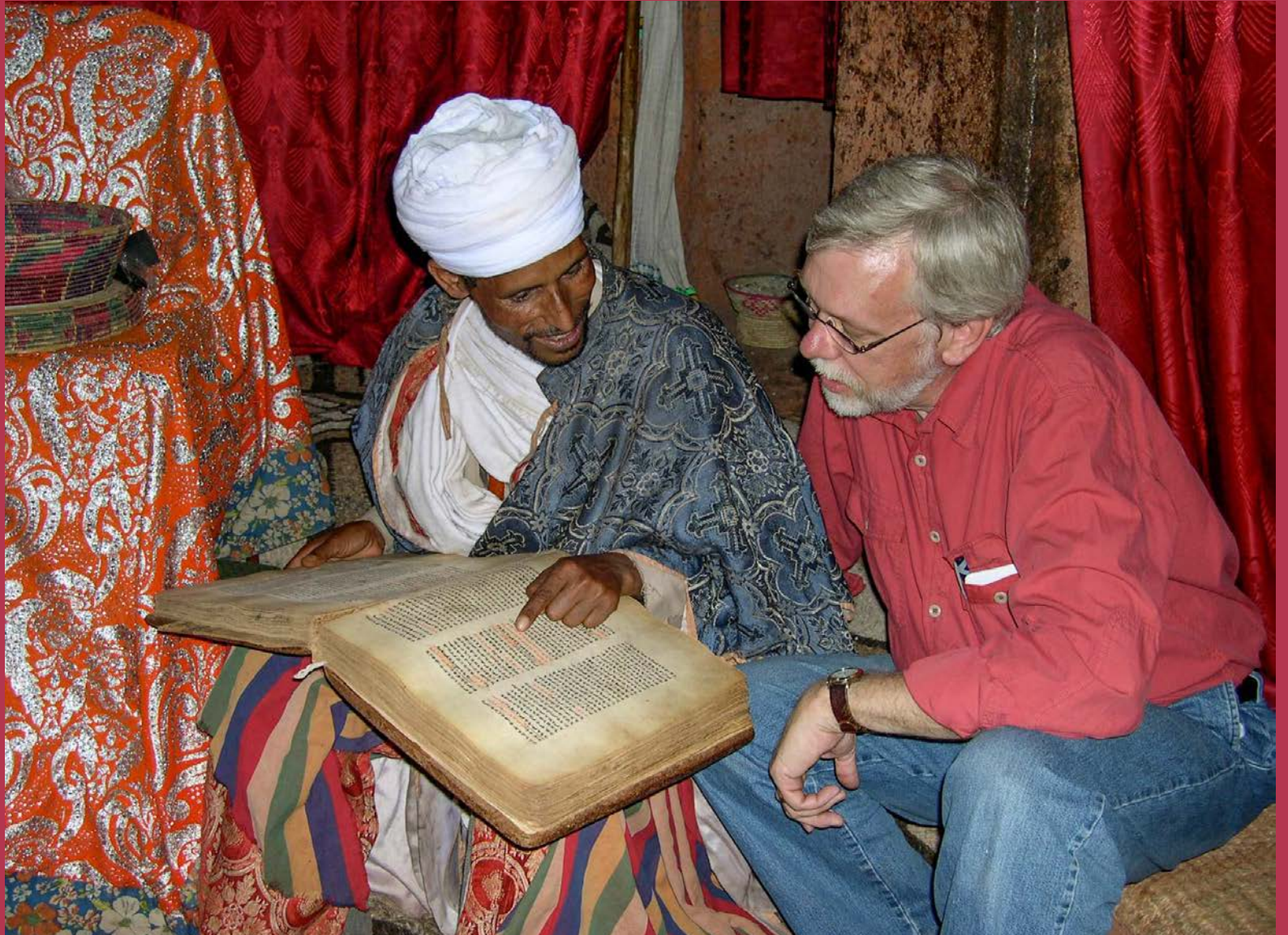












Neal Sobania, Lalibela, 2005



# Living Tradition:

Contemporary Ethiopian Christian Art  
from the Sobania Collection

Exhibition from September 21-December 15, 2018

The Kruizenga Art Museum

at Hope College

Essays and Catalog entries by Neal Sobania,  
Charles Mason and Nina Kay

Photography by Andrew Near, Neal Sobania,  
Raymond Silverman, Tom Wagner

## Introduction

Located in the Horn of Africa on the eastern side of the continent, Ethiopia is home to a vibrant Christian culture dating back to the early 4th century CE. Ethiopia's most recent census in 2007 revealed that approximately 63% of the country's population is Christian while 34% of its people are Muslim. The majority of Ethiopian Christians belong to the Ethiopian Tewahedo Orthodox Church. The term Tewahedo means "undivided" and reflects the Church's belief that Christ's divine and human natures are perfectly united without separation, without mixture, without confusion and without alteration. The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church shares this Christological position with the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria (Egypt), the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church of India, the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Eritrean Orthodox Church. These six churches are in communion with each other and have constituted a distinct branch of the Christian faith since they split away following the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE.

Many people outside of Ethiopia are surprised to learn that one of the world's oldest established communities of Christians resides in Africa, and that this community predates by many centuries the arrival of European and American missionaries on that continent. Westerners whose knowledge of Ethiopia has been shaped primarily by images of famine, war, and long-distance runners winning races are equally surprised to learn that Ethiopia possesses a rich tradition of writing books using an ecclesiastical language (Ge'ez) that also dates to the first centuries of the Common Era, and that its vibrant visual art traditions consisting of illuminated manuscripts, wooden icons and mural paintings are similarly ancient. Indeed, these literary and artistic traditions have been essential components of the Christian church in Ethiopia for nearly seventeen centuries.

As the title of this exhibition makes clear, the production of Christian art in Ethiopia is very much a living tradition. Most contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox Christian art is made, as it was in past centuries, by priests, monks and other artists with significant religious training. It supports the performance of religious ceremonies and private devotions, is used in the adornment of churches, and aids in teaching and sustaining the Christian faith. Some contemporary Ethiopian Orthodox Christian art is also made for sale to tourists and collectors, as well as for Ethiopian churches serving Diaspora communities overseas. The distinction between art made



for the church and art made for the marketplace is not always clear, and many religious artworks could fall into either category depending on who makes them, who acquires them and how they are used. Art made for the church must follow certain traditions governing subject and style and is not considered to have true spiritual power until it is approved and blessed by a priest or monk. Art made for the commercial market often follows the same stylistic conventions as church art, but it may be more innovative in form and subject matter and is generally considered to be decorative rather than sacred.

The works of art featured in this exhibition were collected and donated by Neal and Elizabeth Sobania. After graduating from Hope College in 1968, Neal Sobania joined the Peace Corps and served for four years in Ethiopia. A few years later he lived and worked in Kenya doing graduate research and working for the United Nations Environmental Program. He continued to develop his interest in those countries during and after graduate school and has made East Africa the focus of his academic career for more than fifty years. Sobania acquired much of the art in the exhibition in the holy city of Aksum, in northern Ethiopia. Home to the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion, the spiritual headquarters of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Aksum has long been a vital center for the production of Ethiopian religious art. By visiting Aksum repeatedly over a period of more than three decades, Sobania formed strong relationships with many artists and shopkeepers and was able to assemble a collection of rare quality and depth.

The Kruizenga Art Museum is immensely grateful to Neal and Elizabeth Sobania for donating their art collection and for providing guidance on many aspects of the exhibition. The museum also thanks Daniel Berhanemeskel (Hope College 2003) for assisting with translations, the identification of subjects and the acquisition of a priest's robe; Nina Kay (Hope College 2019) for assisting with exhibition research, design and label writing for the exhibition; and Tom Wagner (Hope College 1984) for designing and producing the accompanying exhibition catalog.

Charles Mason

Director and Margaret Feldmann Kruizenga Curator







## Section One: Wall Paintings







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### **Our Mother Mary and Her Beloved Son**

*Haleqa* Teklai GebreKristos (Ethiopian, born 1940)

2001

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.1

The interior walls of Ethiopian Orthodox churches are typically decorated with panoramic murals that beautify the buildings while also providing instruction and inspiration to the congregations that worship there. Images of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child in her arms are an essential iconographic component of many church murals. The basic composition and style of this Mary and child painting follow models that have been used in Ethiopia since the 16th century. The bold colors, schematic figure drawing, and elaborate surface patterning are all typical characteristics of traditional Ethiopian Christian art. The painting was originally commissioned by an Ethiopian nun whose image appears in the lower left corner. The nun intended to donate the painting to a church where it would have been pasted onto a wall to serve as a focal point for prayers and veneration by the faithful. However, the nun never collected the finished image from the artist and it was later acquired from him by Neal Sobania. The word *Haleqa* in front of the artist's name is an honorific title for a person who is highly educated in church teachings but is either not ordained or not practicing as a priest. *Haleqa* Teklai GebreKristos belongs to a well-known family of religious painters from the holy city of Aksum, where his paintings may be found on the walls of many churches. Most church paintings in Ethiopia have historically been created by artists with extensive religious training.



## Christ, Savior of the World

*Haleqa Berhane Gebrelyesus*

(Ethiopian, born 1959)

2001

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2018.25.2

This painting portrays Christ, flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel, holding a copy of the New Testament in his left hand and making a gesture of blessing with his right hand. The image follows an ancient model known as Christ Pantocrator, or Christ the Savior of the World, which has been popular in Orthodox Christian painting since at least the 6th century CE. The blank space at the bottom of the painting was intended to accommodate a dedicatory inscription from a donor if the painting was ever given to a church. *Haleqa Berhane Gebralyesus* was born into a farming family outside Aksum and first learned to paint by watching artists at work in the churches where he attended school as a child. Painting is seldom a lucrative career in Ethiopia, so *Haleqa Berhane* now makes his living as a carpenter, although his son and daughter, who he taught to paint, continue to produce wedding paintings.









### On the Third Day He Rose Again

Berhanemeskel Fisseha

(Ethiopian, born 1947)

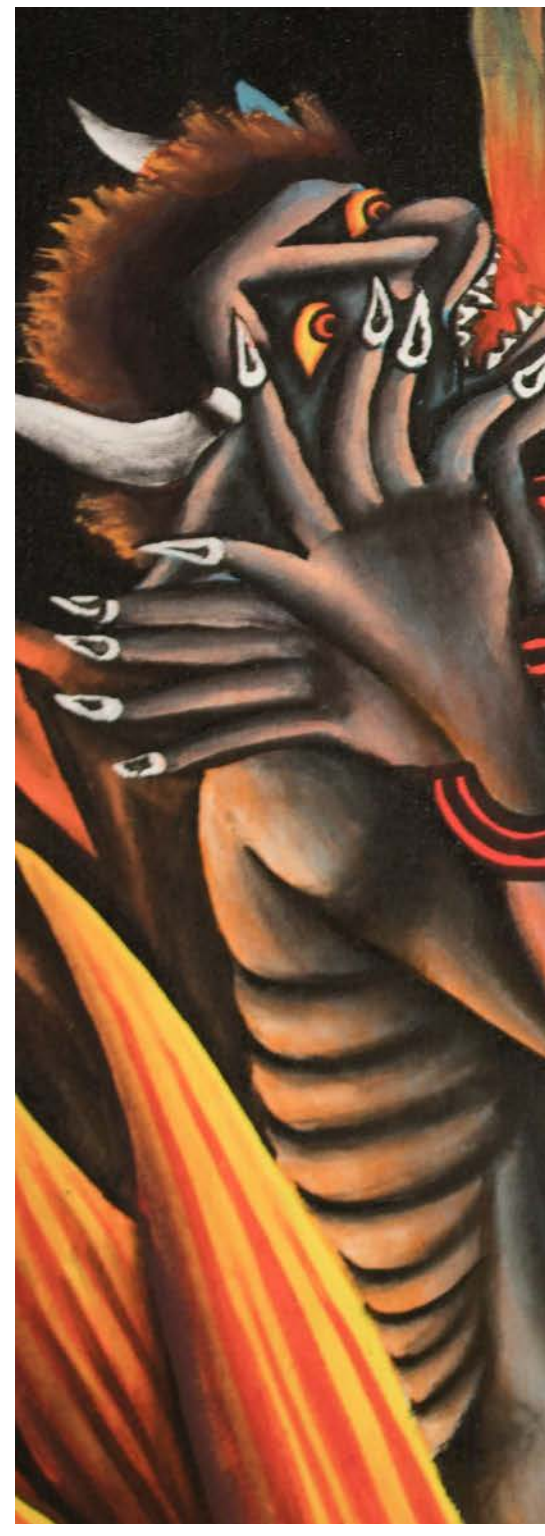
1997

Paint on canvas

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,

2018.25.3

Christ's resurrection and last judgment are common subjects in Ethiopian church murals and icon paintings. This intriguing painting of a glorious risen Christ surrounded by a multitude of the saved while demons gnash their teeth in frustration below combines elements of both subjects but does not conform exactly to the traditional conventions for either one. It was created after Neal Sobania spoke with the artist about a familiar passage from the Apostles' Creed in which Christ dies, descends into hell and rises again on the third day. Sobania asked if these lines were ever portrayed in Ethiopian painting. Berhanemeskel replied that that they were not but that they could be, and he produced this painting without ever mentioning that the Apostles' Creed is not used in the liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Berhanemeskel Fisseha is one of the leading religious painters active in Ethiopia today. He has been commissioned to create large sets of mural paintings for dozens of churches around his home city of Aksum and elsewhere across Ethiopia.













### **Saint George Slaying the Dragon**

Qes Adamu Tesfaw (Ethiopian, born 1933)

1997

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.4

Followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church believe that saints can intercede with God on a person's behalf to provide blessings or absolve sins, so images of saints appear frequently in church murals and icon paintings. Saint George is the most widely venerated saint in Ethiopia. Church tradition says that Saint George was a Roman soldier who was martyred in 303 CE for refusing to renounce his Christian faith. Later writers embellished his biography by telling how Saint George once saved a beautiful princess from a dragon that was demanding human sacrifices. The story of Saint George slaying the dragon has long been a favorite subject for Ethiopian artists, who often portray him in the guise of an Ethiopian nobleman riding a white horse and attacking a dragon with a spear. Such paintings are widely understood as metaphors for Christ's triumph over Satan and reinforce the image of Saint George as a protector figure. Paintings of Saint George are often paired with paintings of the Virgin Mary in Ethiopian church murals and icons since, according to a text called *The Miracles of Mary*, Mary is supposed once to have said to a young person she cured of an illness: "George follows me always. He never parts from me wherever I go. I send him all places for help." The title Qes in front of the artist's name indicates that he is an ordained priest. Qes Adamu comes from the village of Bichena in Gojjam province, which, like Aksum, is known for producing artists. Although he has not been active as a member of the clergy since the 1960s, Adamu's paintings remain firmly rooted in the teachings and artistic traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.









### **Saint Aregawi and Saint Takla Haymanot**

Berhanemeskel Fisseha (Ethiopian, born 1947)

1998

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.5 and .6

Some of the saints venerated in Ethiopia belong to the general canon of Christian saints recognized by many denominations around the world; other saints are more specific to Ethiopia. Saint Aregawi was a Syrian monk who came to Ethiopia in the early 6th century CE and founded Debre Damo, an important monastery in Tigray province. Debre Damo is built atop a steep-sided mountain that can only be scaled using ropes. Legend says that Saint Aregawi first climbed the mountain with help from the archangel Michael and a large snake that carried Aregawi up the steep cliffs in its coils. Debre Damo was a major center of religious education in Ethiopia for more than a thousand years. Among the many later holy men who studied there was Takla Haymanot, a 13th century monk who is said to have stood in prayer on one leg for such a long time that his other leg fell off. Another legend says that when a rope snapped while Takla Haymanot was climbing down from Debre Damo, God saved him by giving him wings so that he could fly safely to the ground. Both stories are referenced in the painting shown here, which portrays the saint with wings and only one foot.





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### **Saint Yared and King GebreMeskel**

*Haleqa* Hailu GebreMedhin (Ethiopian, born 1959)

2001

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2018.25.7

Saint Yared was a 6th century priest and musician who is credited with creating Ethiopia's sacred music traditions. He is said to have drawn inspiration for his music by listening to birds—he is often portrayed with three birds representing the Holy Trinity—and by observing the changing seasons. This painting portrays a legend in which Saint Yared and his patron, King GebreMeskel, were so caught up in one of Yared's musical performances that neither of them noticed when the king dropped his spear and it pierced the saint's foot. Paintings of this story are often found in the narthexes of Ethiopian churches where deacons still perform some of the music written by Saint Yared almost 1500 years ago. *Haleqa* Hailu GebreMedhin is a deacon in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Highly respected for his religious learning, *Haleqa* Hailu has received commissions to paint multi-canvas murals for at least twenty churches in Tigray and Gojjam provinces.









### **The Martyr Marmehnam**

Qes Adamu Tesfaw (Ethiopian, born 1933)

1993

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.8

Tradition says that Marmehnam was the son of a noble family from the city of Athor in what is now modern Iraq. His father was a pagan but his mother was Christian. One day while he was out hunting, Marmehnam encountered a holy man named Matthew who converted him to Christianity. Marmehnam in turn convinced his sister and his retainer to become Christians as well. Marmehnam's father was angered by his son's embrace of Christianity and demanded that he renounce his new faith. When Marmehnam refused, his father had him, his sister and his retainers executed. Marmehnam's mother had the bodies buried in stone coffins, which later became the site of many miracles. Warrior saints like Marmehnam were traditionally venerated by Ethiopia's secular aristocracy, who viewed themselves as protectors of both the church and the common people. This painting was deliberately made to look older than it is, partly to evoke the heroic romance of Ethiopia's pre-modern kingdoms, and partly to allow the shopkeeper that sold it to ask a higher price.





## Jesus and His Apostles Went Up the Mountain

Qes Adamu Tesfaw (Ethiopian, born 1933)

Ca. 2001-2012

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.9

Qes Adamu Tesfaw is an inventive artist whose paintings typically combine a mix of traditional and modern elements, all of which are expressed in a highly distinctive individual style. This painting may have been inspired by a passage from the Gospel of Mark 3:13-15: "Jesus went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons." Qes Adamu conveys the basic elements of the story by placing Jesus in the center of the image facing outward, while the twelve apostles are depicted from the side and from the rear as if they are proceeding toward him. The visual impact of the sophisticated composition is heightened by the bold figure drawing and by the use of repeated colors in different combinations.



## The Arrest of Jesus

Qes Adamu Tesfaw (Ethiopian, born 1933)

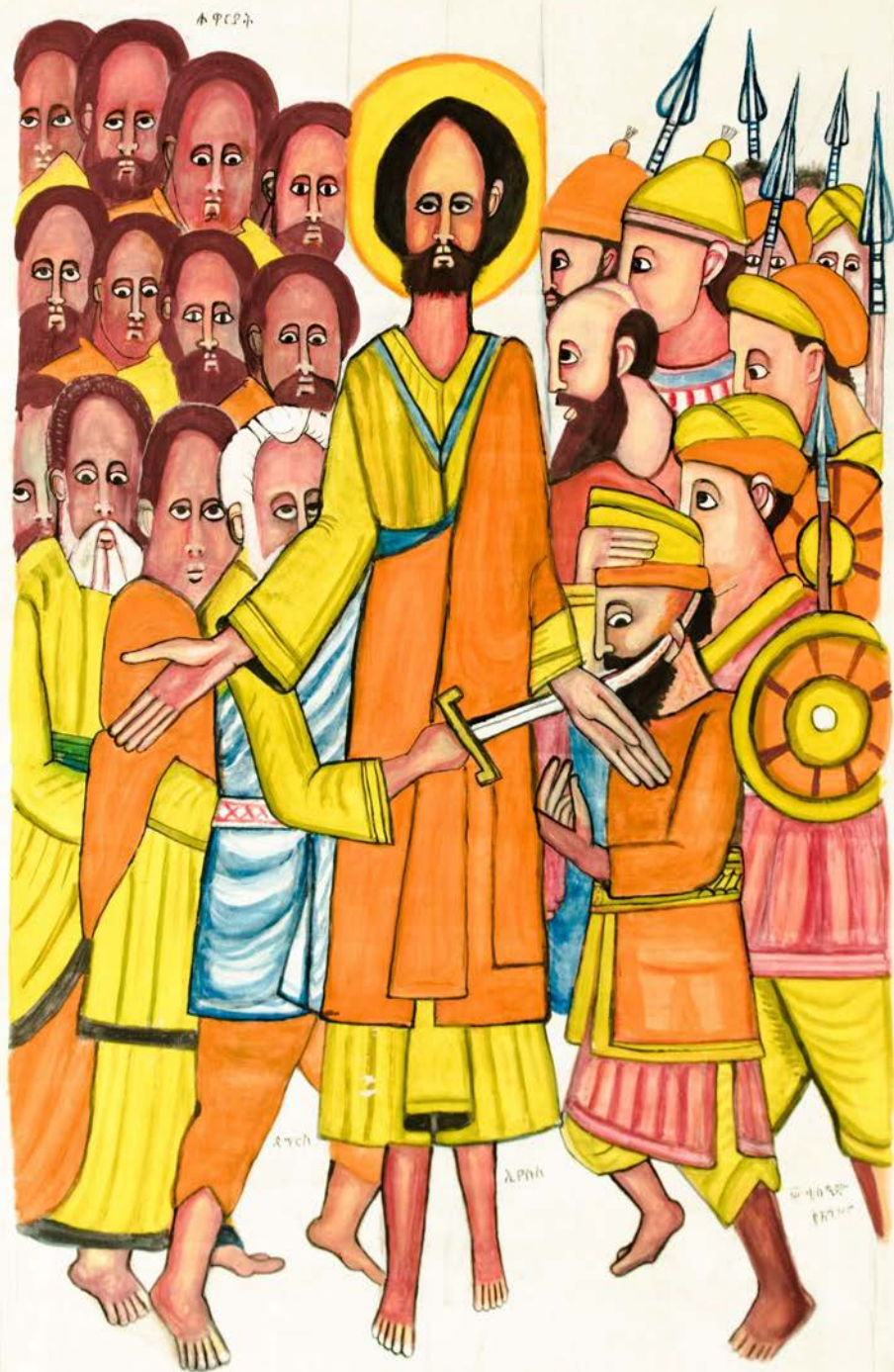
2011

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,

2018.25.10

This painting illustrates a story about the arrest of Jesus that is told in all four gospels. Here is the version recounted in Matthew 26:47-51: "While Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.' At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear." In this painting, Qes Adamu follows the traditional Ethiopian convention of portraying evil characters in profile while good figures are depicted more in the round. With only fifty percent of Ethiopians being literate, narrative paintings of this type are sometimes used in Ethiopian churches to teach Biblical stories and to help worshipers imagine the people and events they hear about in readings and sermons.







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### **Saint George of Lydda, King of Saints**

*Haleqa* Hailu GebreMedhin (Ethiopian, born 1959)

2000s

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.11

Lydda was a city in Roman Palestine where Saint George is said to have been born sometime during the second half of the 3rd century CE. George was serving in the Roman army during the reign of Emperor Diocletian when the emperor ordered him to renounce his Christian faith. George refused and was repeatedly tortured before being executed, after which his body was returned to Lydda for burial. Veneration of George as a martyred saint may have begun locally in Lydda within a few decades of his death and gradually spread among Christian communities throughout the Roman empire and beyond during the following centuries. Saint George has been venerated in Ethiopia since at least the 12th century and is now regarded as the patron saint of Ethiopia. Images of Saint George as the King of Saints often appear on Ethiopian church walls around the corner from images of Saint George slaying the dragon.



### **King Menelik Bringing the Zion Tabot to Aksum**

*Memher* Leaketsion Yohannes (Ethiopian, 1937-2017)

1997

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.12

According to the *Kebra Nagest* (*Glory of Kings*), a 14th century manuscript that records Ethiopia's national epic, the country's first king, Menelik, was the son of Queen Makeda of Ethiopia (also known as the Queen of Sheba) and King Solomon of Israel. When he reached the age of twenty, Menelik traveled to Jerusalem and was anointed as King of Ethiopia by his father. To strengthen ties between Israel and Ethiopia, Solomon sent Menelik home with an entourage of young Israelite nobles and a copy of the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred coffer containing the tablets of the law given to Moses by God. The young nobles, unhappy to leave behind the real Ark, took it upon themselves to switch the copy for the original. Menelik and his followers believed that possession of the Ark—which they called the Zion Tabot—was a sign that God favored Ethiopia as a new Israel and they followed many Jewish religious practices, including the circumcision of male children and the observance of certain dietary laws, some of which still persist in Ethiopia today. After Christianity became the state religion of Ethiopia in the early 4th century CE, many political and religious leaders continued to invoke the presence of the Zion Tabot in Ethiopia as a sign of God's favor. Today the Zion Tabot is kept in a special chapel in the holy city of Aksum where it is guarded by a single monk, who is the only person allowed to know its mysteries.





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### Timket Festival

Marcos Jembere (Ethiopian, born 1958)

Ca. 1993

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.13

The Ethiopian religious calendar is full of holidays and feasts associated with people and events from biblical and church history. Celebrated in late January, Timket is a holiday commemorating the Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River. On the day of the festival, ordained priests remove the sacred altar tablets that consecrate their churches and process outside, holding the tablets above their heads with cloth veils to protect them. Deacons and lay people follow the procession, which usually ends at a body of water where Jesus's baptism is symbolically reenacted. This stylized image of a Timket procession features a veil-covered priest at the center of the painting who is surrounded by turbaned priests and deacons holding their prayer staffs aloft and chanting in time to a drummer visible in the lower left corner. The ceremony is further enlivened by the ululations of women seen singing and dancing in the lower right corner, and by the well-dressed nobles who are seen sitting and standing all around the processional group. Marcos Jembere continues a tradition of religious painting begun by his father, *Qengeta* Jembere Hailu, an ordained priest and highly respected church artist who died in 1994.









### Lake Tana

Berhanu Yimenu (Ethiopian,  
1908-1989)

1989

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2018.25.14

Lake Tana is a large freshwater lake located in the Ethiopian highlands. It is home to numerous island churches and monasteries and has been an important center of religious learning since at least the 15th century. Here we see throngs of turban-wearing priests and deacons paddling in reed boats across the lake to visit the island churches, which look as if they are built on floating platforms rather than natural land formations. The highly schematic style of the painting is typical of Berhanu Yimenu's later work. Berhanu was initially trained as a church painter and later broadened his repertoire while working as a watchman at the imperial palace in Addis Ababa. In the 1960s, Berhanu began making art for Ethiopia's growing tourist market and he continued his commercial painting career even after the Derg came to power in 1974.



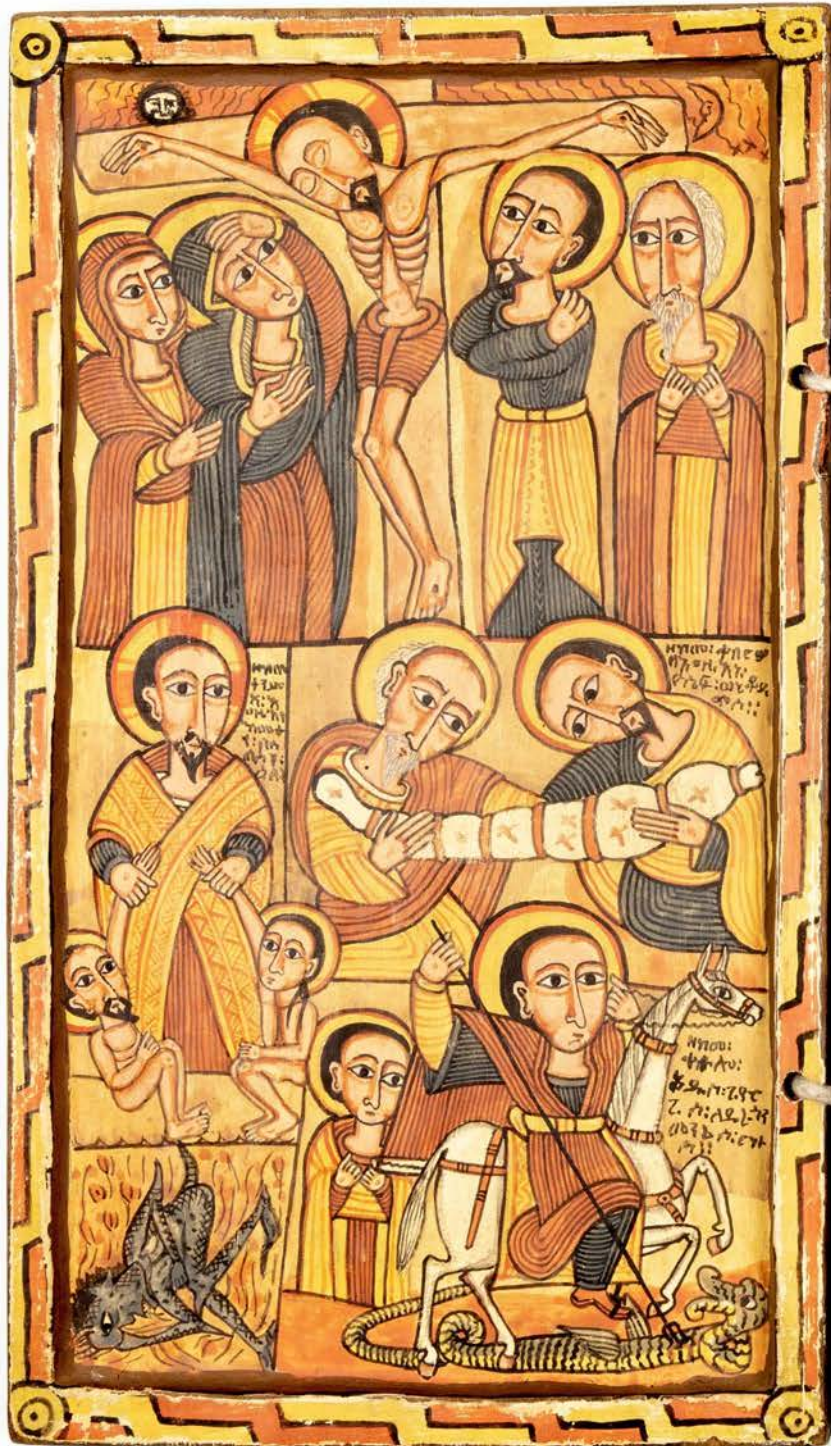






## **Section Two: Icons and Parchment Paintings**







**Diptych Icon with Images of Christ, Mary and Saints**

*Haleqa* Hailu Gebre Medhin (Ethiopian, born 1959)

2012

Paint on wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.15

Icons are images of important figures and narratives from the Ethiopian Bible and other religious texts. Traditionally painted on wood by priests and monks, their existence in Ethiopia is known from examples that have been preserved in churches and monasteries over the past five hundred years. These devotional objects are believed to be filled with the spiritual presence of the saints, especially Saint Mary, and are thus used as focal points for prayer and veneration. Today most icons are painted by professional artists, often to sell to tourists; few are commissioned for churches. Icons are usually rectangular in shape and consist of one, two, or three panels. They may contain one image or multiple images. This type of folding icon containing images of Mary, Christ and various saints first began to be used in Ethiopia during the reign of King Dawit (reigned 1382-1413), and became widely popular when Dawit's son, King Zara Yaqob (reigned 1434-68), integrated the veneration of Virgin Mary icons into church services. [Nina Kay '19]





**Triptych Icon with Scenes from the Life of Christ**

*Haleqa Hailu Gebre Medhin* (Ethiopian, born 1959)

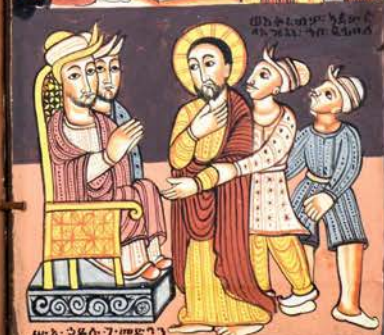
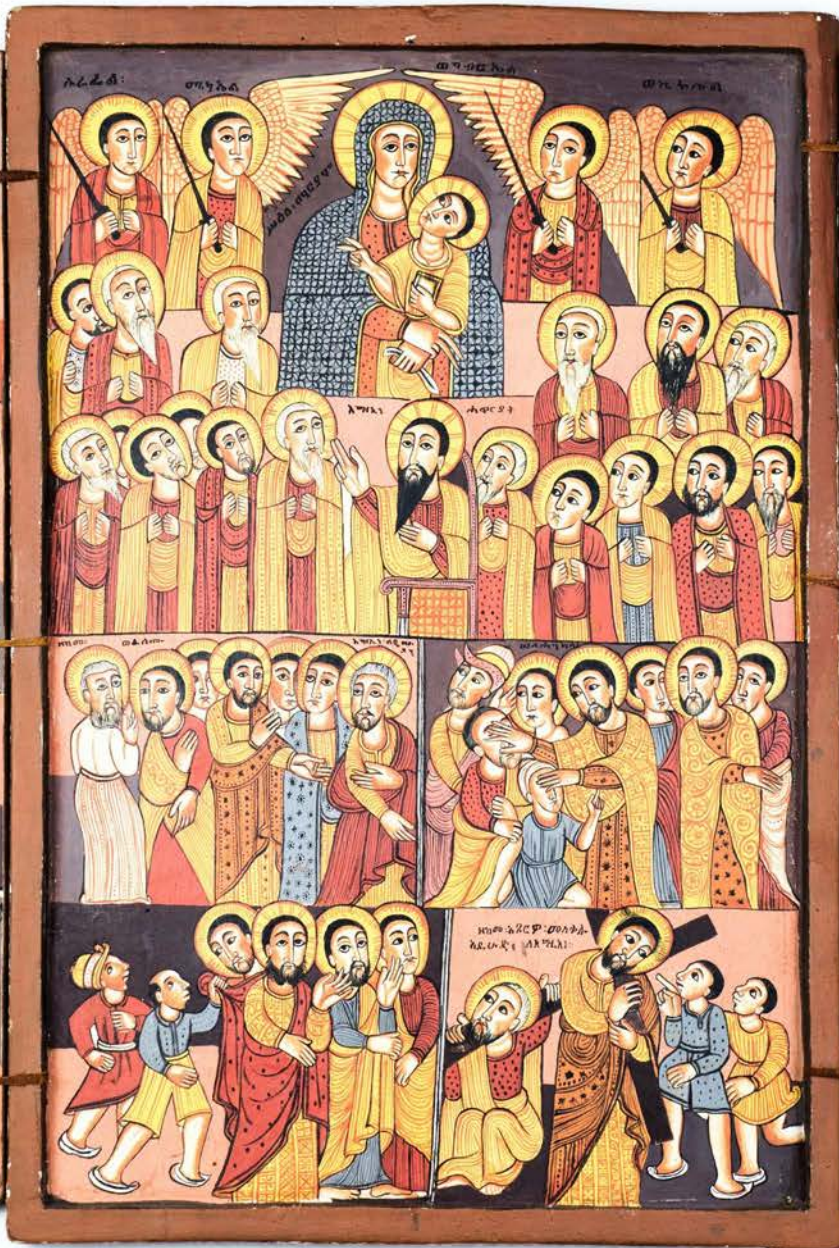
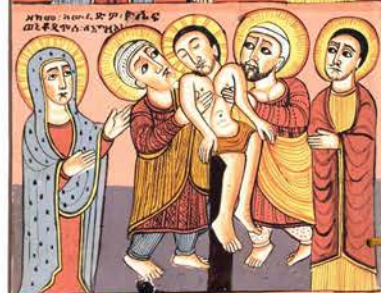
2002

Paint on wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.16

While the number of figures or stories portrayed in an icon painting can vary, some of the most common subjects include Our Mother Mary and Her Beloved Son, Saint George Slaying the Dragon, and the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. As here, the Virgin Mary frequently appears as a central figure in Ethiopian icons and is typically portrayed with flowing blue robes and a glowing halo surrounding her head. The other passages in this icon depict episodes from the life of Christ. Viewed from top to bottom, the scenes depicted in the central panel below the image of Our Mother Mary and Her Beloved Son are: Christ teaching the saints; Christ gathering the apostles; Christ healing the blind; the arrest of Christ; and Christ carrying the cross. From top to bottom the right panel depicts Satan tempting Christ; Christ transforming water into wine; Christ washing Peter's feet; and Christ being questioned by Pontius Pilate. The scenes on the left panel depict the crucifixion of Christ; Christ being taken down from the cross; the entombment of Christ; and the resurrection of Christ, represented by the raising of Adam and Eve. [Nina Kay '19]











following pages

**Diptych Icon with Images of Christ, Saint Mary and Saint George**

Gebre Merha Yohannes (Ethiopian, born 1975)

1997

Paint on wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.17

**Diptych Icon with Scenes from the Life of Christ**

Daniel Berhanemeskel (Ethiopian, born 1980)

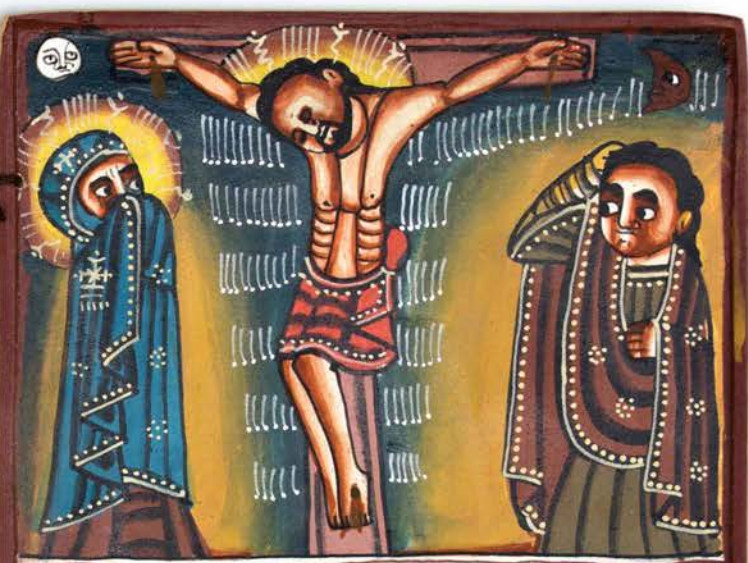
1998

Paint on wood

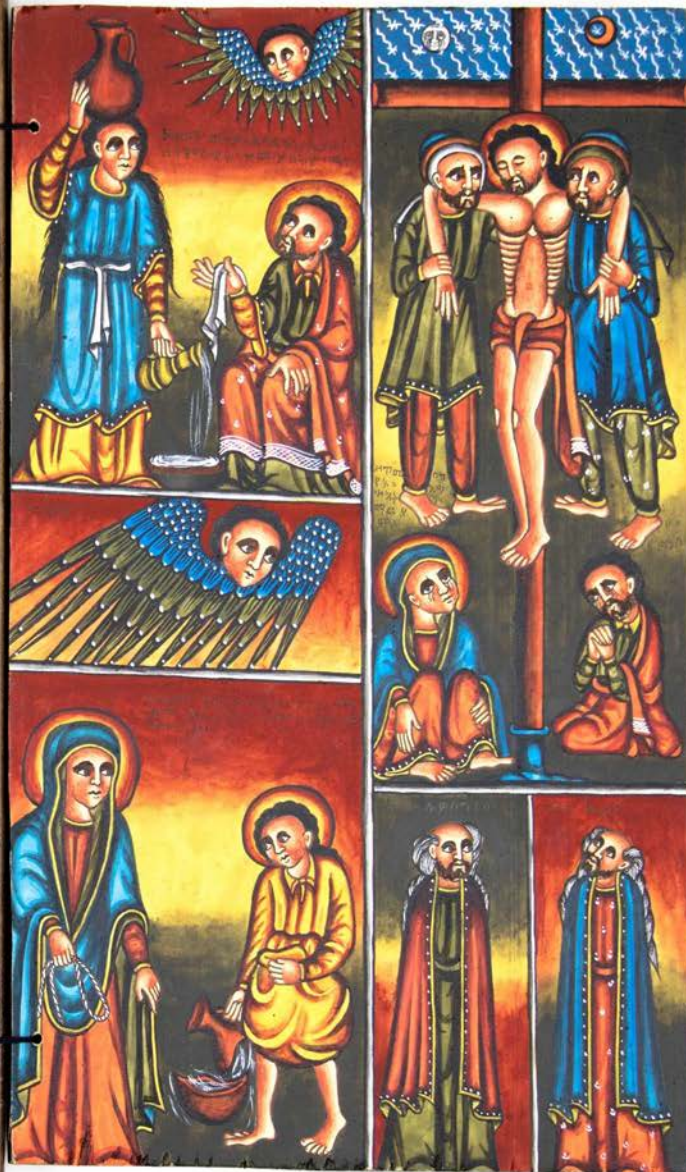
Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.18

Most Ethiopian icon paintings follow a common set of aesthetic conventions, but there is also room for artists to demonstrate individual styles. This stylistic diversity is fully intentional as artists are encouraged to start developing their own artistic hands early in their training. Young artists are typically first taught to draw and paint by copying the work of an established master. This allows for core stylistic features to be passed down from generation to generation while still granting young artists the freedom to express their own creativity within certain parameters. The individual styles of different artists can be seen in their line drawing techniques, in their color palettes, and in details such as the shading of faces and how they paint the drapes and folds of clothing. Gebre Merha Yohannes and Daniel Berhanemeskel are respectively the grandson and great-grandson of *Haleqa* Yohannes Teklu (1882-1979), a well-known and highly respected priest-painter whose works can be found in numerous churches throughout northern Ethiopia. Though they are close in age and members of the same family, Gebre and Daniel have each developed their own styles of painting. [Nina Kay '19]











**Pendant Icon with Our Mother Mary and Her Beloved Son and Saint George Slaying the Dragon**

Gard Gidey (Ethiopian, born 1976)

2012

Paint on wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.19

**Pendant Icon with the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ**

Gard Gidey (Ethiopian, born 1976)

Ca. 2002

Paint on wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.20

Although they are no longer commonly worn in Ethiopia, pendant icons were traditionally strung on a leather cord and hung around the neck to express the wearer's faith, to protect him or her from harm, and to have a devotional object close at hand. Depending on the depth and quality of the wood case, pendant icons can be either single or double-sided and typically contain two to four images. The two most common subjects in pendant icons are Our Mother Mary and Her Beloved Son paired with Saint George Slaying the Dragon. Other common subjects include the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ (usually represented by the raising of Adam and Eve) along with images of various Ethiopian saints. The use of pendant icons in Ethiopia dates back to the 15th century and reached a peak during the 17th and 18th centuries. It is important to note that although many contemporary pendant icons are made for the tourist trade, anything that depicts biblical imagery still has great religious value in Ethiopia. A deacon in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Gard Gidey learned to paint by copying murals in the church of Seaka Enda Iyesus in Adit, a locale near Aksum. Early in his career Gard sold many of his paintings to foreigners through a souvenir shop in Aksum, but today much of his work is made directly for churches on a commission basis. [Nina Kay '19]









View of Front



View of Back





### **Pendant Icon Case**

Qes Kellem HaileSelassie

(Ethiopian, born 20th century), carver

Ca. 2001

Wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.21

Most pendant icons have intricately carved exterior surfaces. The quality of the exterior carving is often as important as the painting for determining the icon's value. Pendant icon cases are judged based on the style and depth of the carving, the type of wood used, and other distinctive qualities that demonstrate the maker's skill. Qes Kellem is a priest from the Tembien region in eastern Tigray province. He is widely regarded as one of the finest carvers of pendant icon cases active in Ethiopia today. [Nina Kay '19]





View of Front

**Pendant Icon with the Holy Trinity  
and Saints Takla Haymanot and  
Aregawi**

Daniel Berhanemeskel

(Ethiopian, born 1980), painter;

Zorahu Yohala

(Ethiopian, born 20th century), carver

1997

Paint on wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,

2018.25.22

Like all denominations of Christianity, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has its own distinctive iconographic traditions. One example of a distinctly Ethiopian iconographic tradition is the depiction of the Holy Trinity seen in this pendant icon. In Ethiopian art, the Holy Trinity is usually portrayed as a trio of identical-looking bearded men. The men are typically shown seated in a row, wearing white robes and holding orbs that signify the world. Each figure makes a gesture of blessing, with two fingers and the thumb bent inward while the other two fingers are bent outward. Such portrayals of the Holy Trinity can be found in Ethiopian paintings dating back at least to the late 11th century. It is worth noting that not all icons are as old as they look. Many contemporary icons are made to meet the demands of the tourist market which favors older-looking artifacts. [Nina Kay '19]





Views of Each Side Open



**Pendant Icon with Saint Yared and  
King GebreMeskel and King David  
with His Harp**

Gard Gidey (Ethiopian, born 1976)

1997

Paint on wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2018.25.23

Not everyone who wants to own an Ethiopian icon wants one with subject matter drawn from the New Testament. Some artists, such as Gard Gidey, recognize this and paint subjects that illustrate other narratives but are still very much Ethiopian. For instance, one panel of this icon depicts Yared, the 6th century saint who is recognized as having brought sacred music to the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church. In keeping with the conventions for this subject, he is shown with his sistrum and prayer staff chanting before King GebreMeskel. Both are so enchanted by the hymn Yared is singing that neither has noticed that the king's sharp spear has pierced Yared's foot. The other panel of the icon depicts the story of King David playing his harp, but in this case the harp is a *begana*, a large, deeply resonant stringed instrument that most Ethiopians would readily recognize.









### Hand Cross with Icon Paintings

Mabratu Yemene

(Ethiopian, born 1980), painter;

Zorahu Yohala

(Ethiopian, born 1950), carver

1996

Paint on wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,

2018.25.25

In Ethiopia, hand crosses are used only by ordained priests and monks, but some crosses are also made to be sold to tourists. These hand crosses have been cut in half vertically to create flat surfaces for icon paintings and contain additional images painted in window panels on the front and back sides of the two halves. Examples of Ethiopian hand crosses that contain painted icons can be found as far back as the 17th century, but it has always been a rare form because of the great skill that is required to carve the crosses and prepare the painting surfaces. The two crosses shown here were carved by brothers Azuzum and Zorahu Yohala. [Nina Kay '19]











**Hand Cross with Icon Paintings**

Ermias Zeluel

(Ethiopian, 1975-2003), painter;

Azuzum Yohala

(Ethiopian, born 1973), carver

1997

Paint on wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.24











**Icon with Images of Christ and Saint Mary**

Daniel Berhanemeskel

(Ethiopian, born 1980)

1990s

Paint on wood

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2018.25.26

Contemporary Ethiopian artists and dealers sometimes experiment with new and unusual icon forms as they seek ways to distinguish themselves in the country's competitive tourist art market. The form of this icon is modeled after the canopied coffers called *manbara tabot* that contain the sacred altar tablets of Ethiopian Orthodox churches. The interior surfaces of the icon are painted with stories from the lives of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Daniel Berhanemeskel first learned to paint from his father, Berhanemeskel Fisseha, who is one of Ethiopia's leading church artists. He came to the United States in 1999 to attend Hope College and later went on to earn an MFA degree from Michigan State University. He currently lives in Washington, D.C.





**Triptych Icon with Saint George, Our Mother Mary and Her Beloved Son, and the Holy Trinity**

Gabra Sellase Abadi Woldemariam  
(Ethiopian, early 1900s-1986)

Ca. 1970

Paint on cardboard, cotton thread

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2015.39.12

The nature of the Holy Trinity has been debated in Ethiopia many times over the centuries. The 15th century king Zara Yaqob likened the Trinity to three suns whose rays unite to create one divine light. His view was challenged by the monk Estifanos who compared the Trinity to a single sun that has three components: its form, its light and its heat. This triptych—with its images of Saint George, Our Mother Mary and Her Beloved Son, and the Holy Trinity—was painted by a priest-artist who was active in the city of Mekele in Tigray province. Gabra Sellase Abadi Woldemariam attended church school as a youth and learned to paint through an apprenticeship with an established church painter. As an adult, Gabra Sellase created murals, icons and religious manuscript paintings for churches across northern Ethiopia. The paintings in this exhibition belong to a body of work that Gabra Sellase produced mainly for tourists and expatriates working in Ethiopia during the 1960s and early 70s. The images are painted on pieces of cardboard that Gabra Sellase found or otherwise obtained from local businesses and residents.

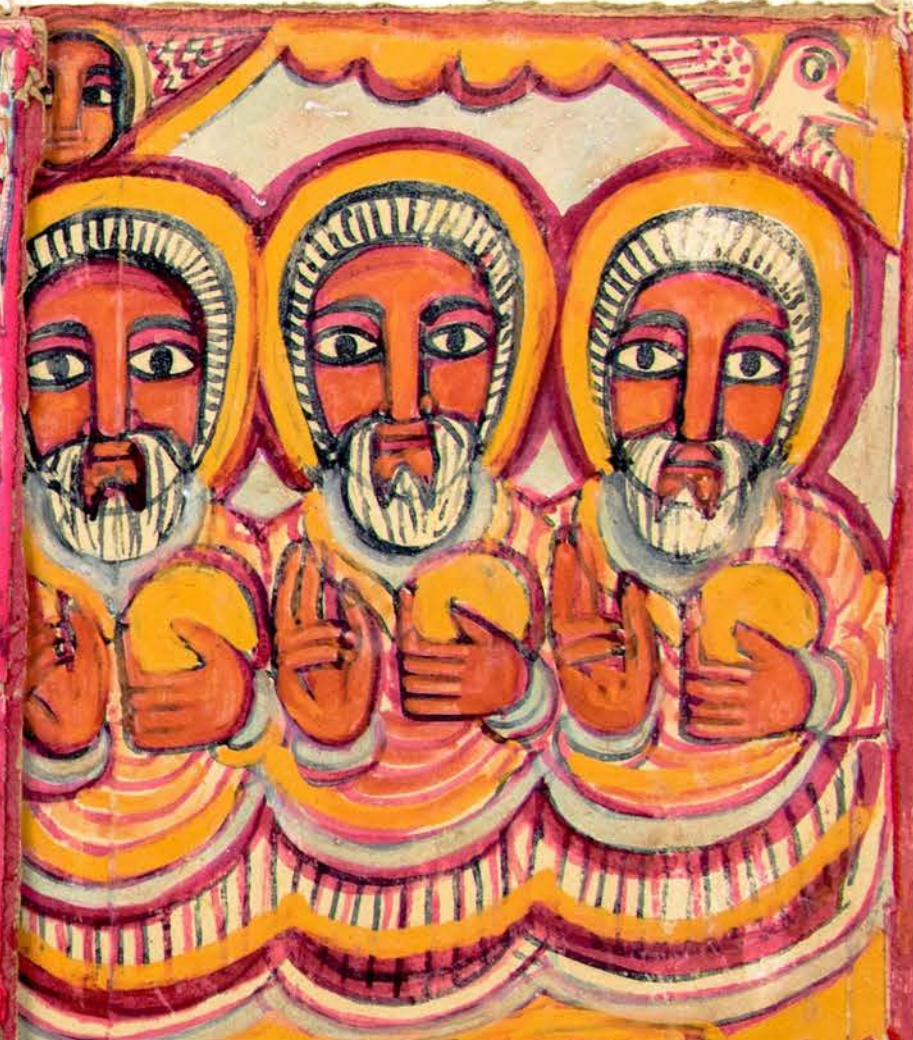






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### Icon with the Archangel Gabriel

Gabra Sellase Abadi Woldemariam  
(Ethiopian, early 1900s-1986)

Ca. 1970

Paint on cardboard, cotton thread

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2015.39.4

Angels play an important role in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and are portrayed frequently in Ethiopian religious paintings. This painting depicts the archangel Gabriel, who appears as God's messenger in the holy texts of all three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church considers Gabriel a saint and celebrates him with a feast day on the 19th of every Ethiopian month. He is considered a protector of homes and churches and is often depicted in Ethiopian art together with the archangel Michael as a guardian of Christ and the Virgin Mary.



**Icon with Saint Gebre Manfas Qeddus**

Gabra Sellase Abadi Woldemariam

(Ethiopian, early 1900s-1986)

Ca. 1970

Paint on cardboard, cotton thread

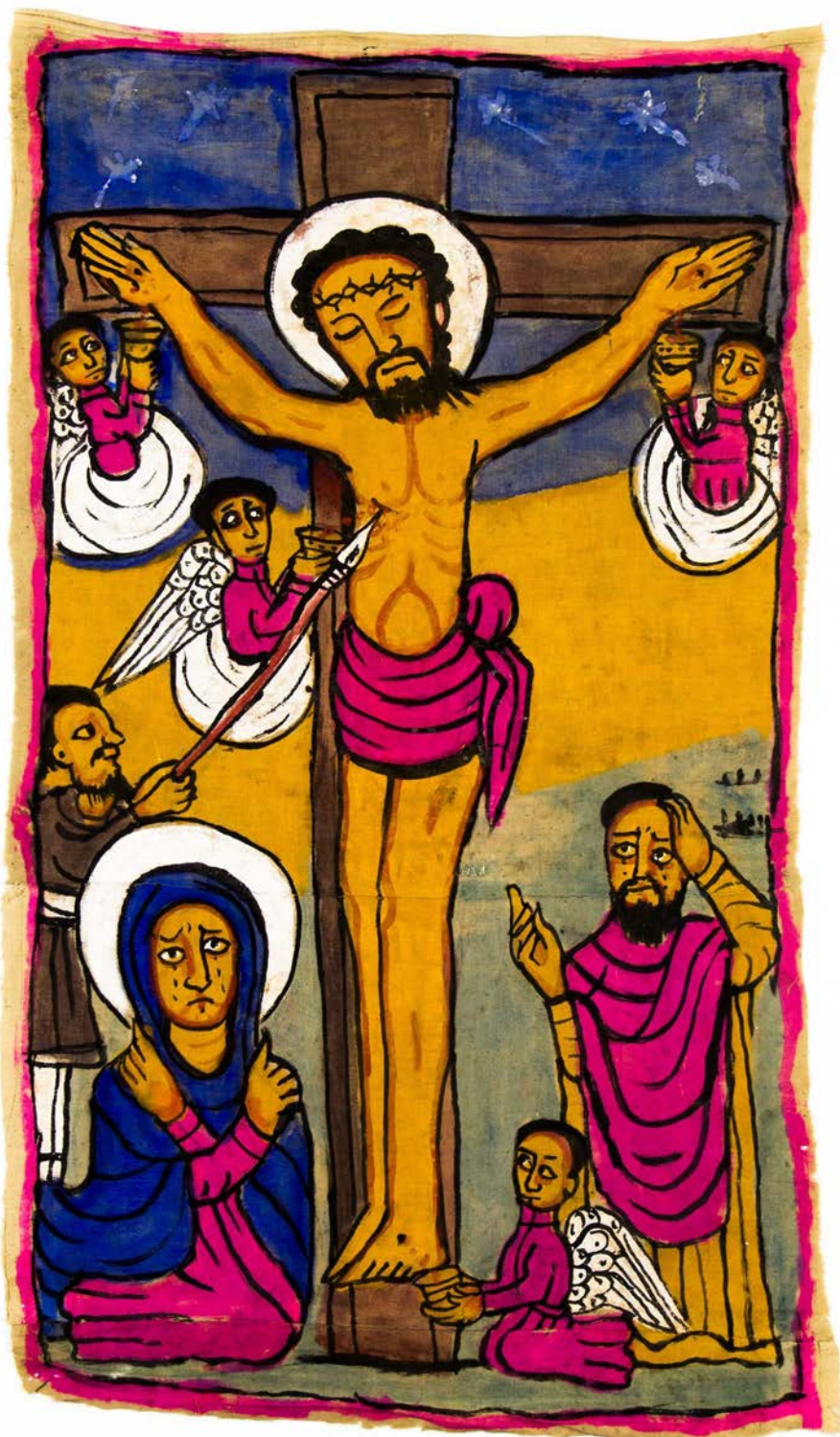
Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,

2015.39.8

Gebre Manfas Qeddus was an Egyptian monk who came to Ethiopia sometime around the 14th or 15th century and founded the monastery of Zuqualla in today's Amhara region. Tradition says that Gebre Manfas Qeddus spent many years living as a hermit in the desert and that during this time his hair and beard grew so long that he was able to wear the hair as a robe. He is also said to have befriended lions and leopards while living in the desert, and that these normally fierce animals were transformed into peaceful companions by the saint's holy power. Gebre Manfas Qeddus is typically portrayed with both arms raised in prayer. Here he holds a cross in one hand and a bird in the other. The bird refers to a story in which the saint rescues a bird that is dying of thirst by allowing it to drink fluid from his eye.









**Crucifixion Icon**  
**Saint Mary Icon**

Ethiopian

Ca. 1970

Paint on cloth

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2015.39.13 and 2015.39.15

These simple but powerful icons were painted by an unrecorded priest artist who was active in the city of Mekele in Tigray province during the 1960s and early 1970s. This artist painted on pieces of cloth using commercial pigments that he purchased with money earned from selling his art to foreigners. Although they are recent, the paintings follow much older traditions of Ethiopian icon painting. In the crucifixion icon, the anguished faces of Mary and John the Evangelist emphasize the sorrow of Christ's death while the angels collecting his blood remind us of his resurrection's redemptive power. The Saint Mary icon depicts Mary offering her handkerchief to a suppliant as a demonstration of her mercy.













Previous Pages

**Four Panels with Saint George, Saint Mary and Christ**

*Haleqa* Hailu GebreMedhin (Ethiopian, born 1959)  
2012

Paint on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.27

Dating back to the 17th century, *sensul* are folding icons painted on parchment that can be used for private devotions. These *sensul* paintings juxtapose images of St. George and St. Mary with images of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, following an iconographic program also commonly seen in wooden icon paintings. Each painting is bordered by elaborate endless knot designs that symbolize eternal life. Called *harag* in Ge'ez, the ecclesiastical language of Ethiopia, such knot designs have been used in Ethiopian painting and manuscript illumination since the 14th century.

Image to Right

**Our Mother Mary and Her Beloved Son**

*Haleqa* Hailu GebreMedhin (Ethiopian, born 1959)  
2012

Paint on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.28

This single leaf parchment painting was made for the tourist market but derives from an older tradition of parchment paintings that were used in illuminated manuscripts. The circular throne on which Mary sits in this image is not typically seen in Ethiopian painting and may have been copied from a different Orthodox painting tradition. Many contemporary Ethiopian artists are exposed to foreign art traditions through books, magazines and the internet and some take inspiration from those sources to experiment with new styles, compositions and color schemes. Art intended for church use must follow prescribed conventions, but art made for tourists can be more inventive.









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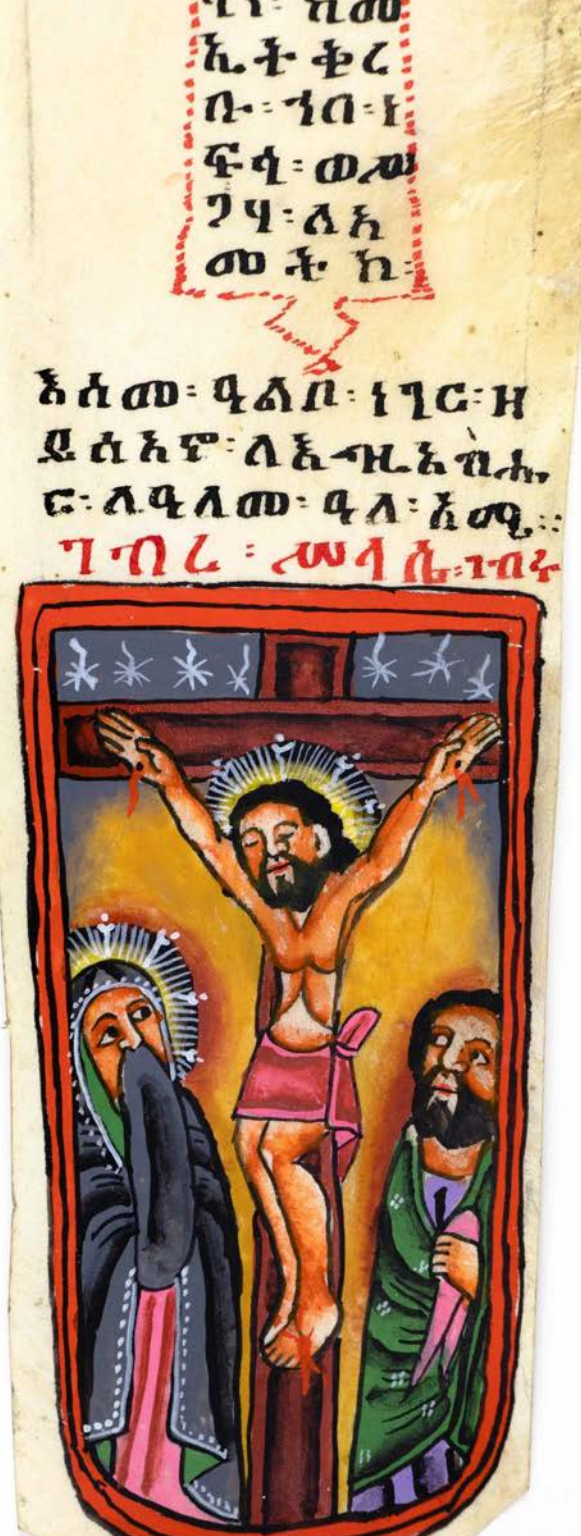
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Especialty in rural Ethiopia there is widespread belief in the power of both good and evil forces to shape daily life. Some people attempt to manage these forces by commissioning special scrolls that can be used to restore health, ward off demons and bad luck, and provide other types of protective magic. The scrolls are prepared by scribes known as *dabtara*, who are generally unordained clerics with special training in astrology and traditional medicine. When someone wishes to commission a healing scroll, the *dabtara* instructs them to purchase a sheep or goat and have it ritually sacrificed. The animal's skin is then cleaned and scraped to produce strips of parchment that are sewn together to create the scroll. In many cases, the length of the scroll corresponds to the height of the person for whom it is being made. The *dabtara* inscribes the scroll with passages from the Bible or other religious texts that address the owner's spiritual and physical needs. Finally, the *dabtara* adds religious or talismanic paintings to enhance the scroll's protective powers. Healing scrolls may be hung in the owner's house or carried by the owner rolled up and worn like an amulet. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church does not endorse the creation and use of healing scrolls but they still exist in Ethiopian popular culture.







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**Healing Scroll with Angels and Talismanic Designs**

*Haleqa Hailu GebreMedhin*

(Ethiopian, born 1959)

2001

Paint on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2018.25.30

Healing scrolls often include references to guardian angels in their texts and in their paintings. In Ethiopia angels are revered as protector figures and also as intercessors with the saints and Virgin Mary. Many scrolls also include star-shaped designs featuring images of human eyes and faces. These designs are sometimes referred to as “Solomon’s Seal,” and are believed to function as talismans against bad luck and evil influences.









**Saint Mary Blessed Saint  
Ephraim with Her Cross**

*Memher Legesse Mengistu*  
(Ethiopian, 1932-2009)

1993

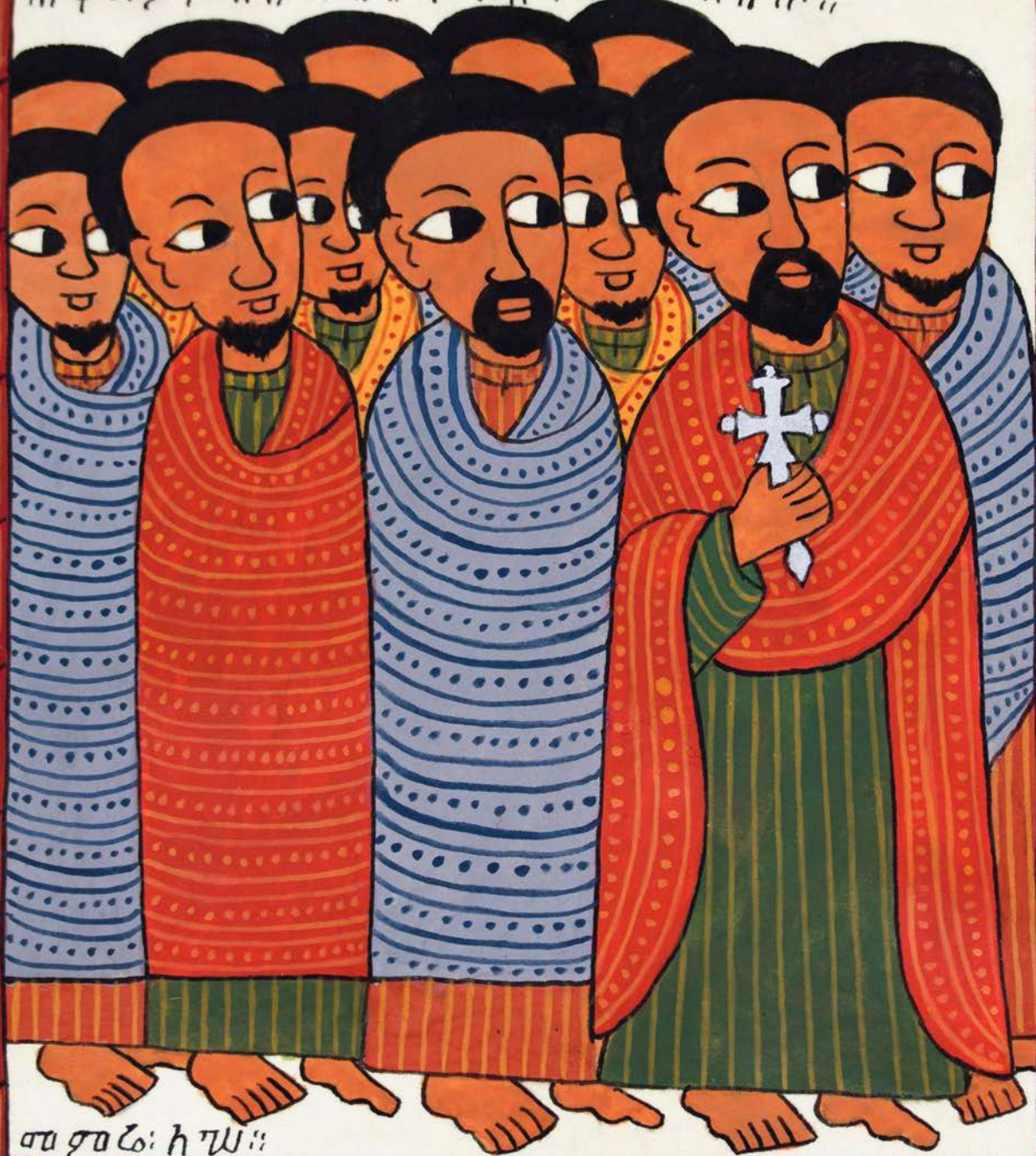
Ink and paint on parchment  
Gift of Neal and Elizabeth  
Sobania, 2015.39.19

Saint Ephraim was a  
4th-century Syrian monk  
known for his poems, hymns  
and sermons. This painting  
shows Saint Mary blessing  
Ephraim with a hand cross.





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**Jesus Invited the Disciples on Thursday Night**

*Memher Legesse Mengistu*

(Ethiopian, 1932-2009)

1993

Ink and paint on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2015.39.18

Easter is the most important holiday in the Ethiopian Orthodox religious calendar. The celebration of Easter begins with Jesus's entry into Jerusalem, called Hosanna in Ethiopia, and continues in earnest with the Feast of the Last Supper, which commemorates the final meal shared by Christ and his disciples on the night before his arrest and execution.

Following Pages

Left

**Saint George Slaying the Dragon**

*Memher Legesse Mengistu*

(Ethiopian, 1932-2009)

1993

Ink and paint on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2018.25.32

Right

**Saint Gebre Manfas Qeddus and  
Saint Takla Haymanot**

*Memher Legesse Mengistu*

(Ethiopian, 1932-2009)

1993

Ink and paint on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2018.25.33





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## On Collecting

As a youth I was introduced to collecting—stamps, marbles, baseball cards. On family vacations I added postcards of historical sites. By college most kids have left this sort of thing behind. However, while in Czechoslovakia with Hope College I was given a woodcut of the Charles Bridge, and my fervor for collecting was reignited. After graduation, while serving as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia, followed by research and work in Kenya, I found myself surrounded by distinctive and exceptional objects. There was never a goal of actually becoming a collector; that was simply the unintended result of a desire to learn more about where I was living and to discover what insight objects of material culture might add to my understanding of the people among whom I was conducting research.

Ethiopia in the 1960s and early 70s was hardly a tourist destination (nor was the north of Kenya in the 70s and 80s) and it had none of the figurative art of west and central Africa that museums collected and exhibited. Indeed, the scholarly world hadn't yet fully embraced Ethiopia, unsure how "African" it was. The few shopkeepers that sold "handicrafts" at that time didn't encourage their manufacture, but resold from local markets the objects still produced and used by Ethiopians in everyday life. But new household goods were arriving and when they could, Ethiopians were discarding the old in favor of the new—wooden coffee trays for enameled ones, storage baskets for plastic jugs, and manuscript books of parchment for Bibles printed on paper. I was fortunate that for four years my responsibilities took me from one end of Ethiopia to the other where I could purchase items in local markets, or visit the Addis Ababa Mercato (said at that time to be the largest outdoor market in all of Africa) and practice speaking Amharic (then the national language) with the shopkeepers. I acquired what appealed to me aesthetically, each a wonderful addition to my unfurnished apartment—an intricately woven basket from Harar for a wall, a head rest with a rich, glossy patina for a bookend. Each object reminded me of where I'd been or an experience I'd had—a pipe with a beautifully shaped wooden stem, a choker necklace of colored beads and buttons intricately mixed with wire chain, a healing scroll with talismanic paintings.

For the longest time I had no idea I had a "collection": just things I liked and (fortunately) so did Liz, my loving wife who was generally tolerant of my habit. What she didn't like stayed in the basement. Once I received as an anniversary present the permission to buy a particular piece, not the object, just the permission to buy it. Each time I returned from Ethiopia with a more silver neck crosses she would ask if I didn't have enough, but she always patiently listened to my explanation that each one was different. Only later did I get caught out when she realized that any object made using the lost wax process would always be different from any other one. Then in the early 1990s I was introduced to an



African art historian, Raymond Silverman, who pronounced my boxes of “stuff” a collection! When he later asked me to co-direct the research for a major exhibition of Ethiopian art, a fast friendship grew that soon led to additional collaborative research projects. We first focused on traditional metalworkers and later on contemporary painters, especially those producing the art that covers the walls and sometimes the ceilings as well of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Churches. Conference papers were presented, research was published, and a more refined focus to collecting grew. Specifically this has meant works produced not by anonymous makers, but by individuals who are recognized and respected as creators of objects that remain vital to the communities in which they live. This has resulted not only in richly detailed documentation of objects that are part of a vibrant and living tradition, but friendships and relationships with those who create objects that remain vital to the communities in which they live and work, and with a community that now seems like a second home.

Today, Liz and I still collect. This began in England when wedding gift money allowed for the purchase of a few contemporary British prints. In Japan we were introduced to contemporary Japanese prints. With Africa always so far away, interest in having a research project closer to home led us to the American Southwest and the Hopi world of katsinas and their carvers, and Navajo folk art. And now that we live in the state of Washington surrounded by the beauty of Northwest Coast art....

Neal W. Sobania

July 11, 2018

Neal Sobania is a professor emeritus of history who taught at Hope College (1981-1995) and at Pacific Lutheran University (1995 –2015), while at the same time serving at as Director International Education at Hope and Executive Director of the Wang Center for Global Education at PLU. As a historian he has written and published on aspects of Ethiopian visual culture, and on Kenya’s history, using oral tradition to write on ethnic identity, migration, and environmental issues. He is co-author with Raymond Silverman of the forthcoming book, *Icons of Devotion/Icons of Trade*. Current projects include a book on historical stereoscopic imagery of Africa and a history and culture of Ethiopia through stamps.

In the field of global education he has written extensively on study abroad, served on regional and national boards of directors, and consulted widely. His most recent publication is the book, *Putting the Local in Global Education: Models of Transformative Learning through Domestic Off-Campus Programs*.







## Section Three: Liturgical Objects









## **Liturgical Vestments for an Ethiopian Priest**

Ethiopian

2018

Silk, silk embroidery, cotton

Gift of Daniel Berhanemeskel ('03), 2018.27

When performing church services or other religious ceremonies, Ethiopian Orthodox priests and deacons typically wear brightly colored, elaborately decorated robes, hats, capes, stoles and sashes. The splendor of these vestments is intended to honor God and to celebrate God's presence in the world. As in other Christian denominations, the colors and designs of Ethiopian clerical vestments change according to the different seasons of the church calendar. Religious vestments must be blessed by a bishop or priest before they can be worn in a church ceremony. These vestments were acquired for the Kruizenga Art Museum at a religious market that is held in Aksum every year during the Easter season. The garments have not been blessed by a bishop or priest and therefore can be displayed in this exhibition without violating Ethiopian church law, which otherwise holds that sacred vestments should not be worn or used outside of a religious context.









### **Censer**

Ethiopian

20th century (before 1971)

Brass

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,

2018.25.34

Incense has been used in Judeo-Christian worship for thousands of years. The most common type of incense burned in Ethiopian church ceremonies is frankincense, which is derived from the resin of trees in the genus *Boswellia* that grow in Ethiopia, Somalia and the Arabian peninsula. Highly valued as a symbol of holiness and righteousness, frankincense was one of the gifts offered to the baby Jesus by the three magi according to the Gospel of Luke. This censer was designed to be carried in church processions and is fitted with metal chains and bells that produce a pleasant jingling sound when it is swung back and forth.











**Sistra**

Ethiopian

20th century

Brass

Gifts of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania,  
2018.25.35 and .36

Originating in ancient Egypt, sistra are percussion instruments used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to establish a cadence for liturgical chants and dances. They typically have U-shaped metal frames with horizontal crossbars and metal rings that create clanking or jangling sounds when shaken. Many of the religious songs and dances in which sistra are used today are credited to the 6th-century priest and musician Saint Yared.







## Prayer Staff Finials

Ethiopian

20th century

Brass

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.37 and .38



Ethiopian prayer staffs are typically between four and five feet long and consist of a straight wooden shaft topped by a T-shaped finial. As the name suggests, prayer staffs are used by priests and deacons to support their bodies during long periods of prayer and worship. The staffs are also used to keep time in liturgical chants and dances by moving them forward and back as well as tapping them on the ground. Prayer staffs are sometimes said to symbolize the staff of Moses and thus function as reminders of early church law. Another explanation says that the staffs symbolize the cudgels that were used to beat Jesus before his execution and therefore serve as reminders that Christ suffered and died for our sins.





**Processional Cross**

Fitsum Gebrehiwot  
(Ethiopian, born 1953)

2001

Brass

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth  
Sobania, 2018.25.40

This elaborate cross was likely made using the lost wax technique, whereby the cross was first modeled in wax before being packed in clay. When the clay was fired in a kiln, the wax melted away leaving a hard ceramic mold that was filled with molten brass to create the finished cross.



## Processional Cross

Ethiopian

20th century

Brass

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth

Sobania, 2018.25.39

As they do in other Christian denominations, crosses play an important role in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, symbolizing not only the suffering of Christ but also his triumph over death and the hope he offers us for salvation. Processional crosses are mounted on long shafts and are used in religious ceremonies both inside and outside of churches. Their bold forms and shiny surfaces are designed to attract the eyes of worshipers. The visual impact of the crosses is further enhanced by adorning them with brightly colored scarves that are said to symbolize the burial wrappings left behind by Christ after his resurrection. Processional crosses are often commissioned by patrons who donate them to churches in gratitude for blessings received or sins absolved.







### **Hand Crosses**

Ethiopian

20th century

Iron and steel

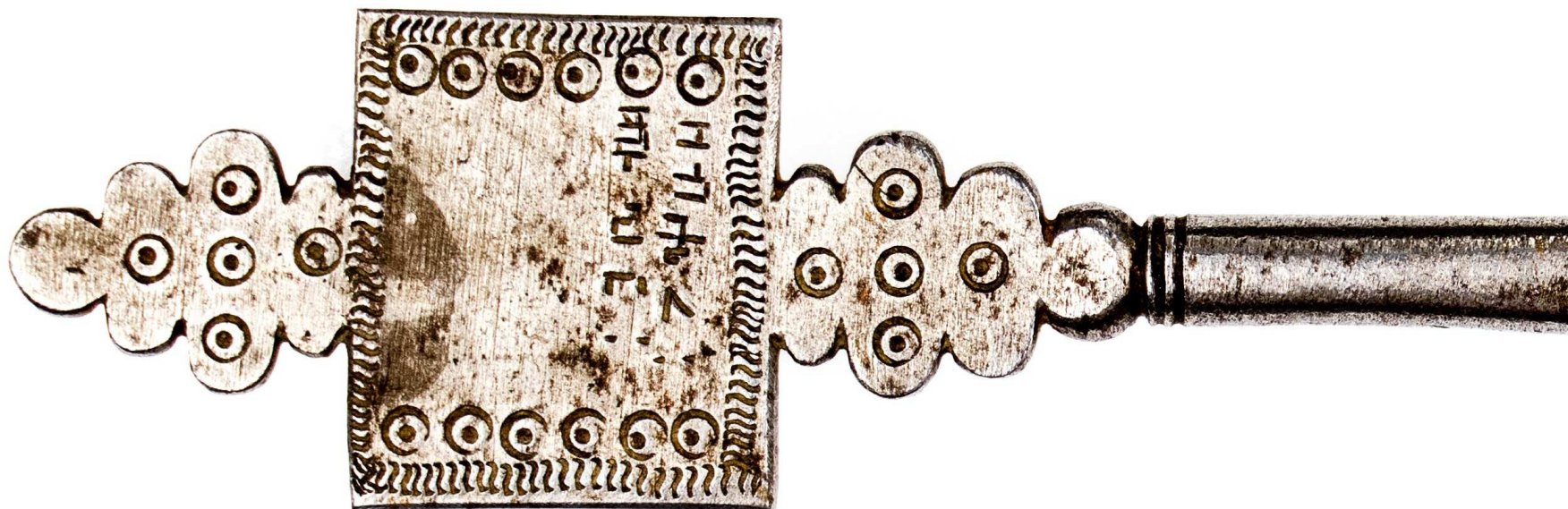
Gifts of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.41 and .42

Hand crosses are carried by individual priests and monks and are used by them when administering benedictions or offering absolution of sins. They are typically made of metal or wood and their forms can range from simple to complex. Some hand crosses are made by priests and monks for their own use while others are made by skilled artisans who either sell them or give them to the clerics.





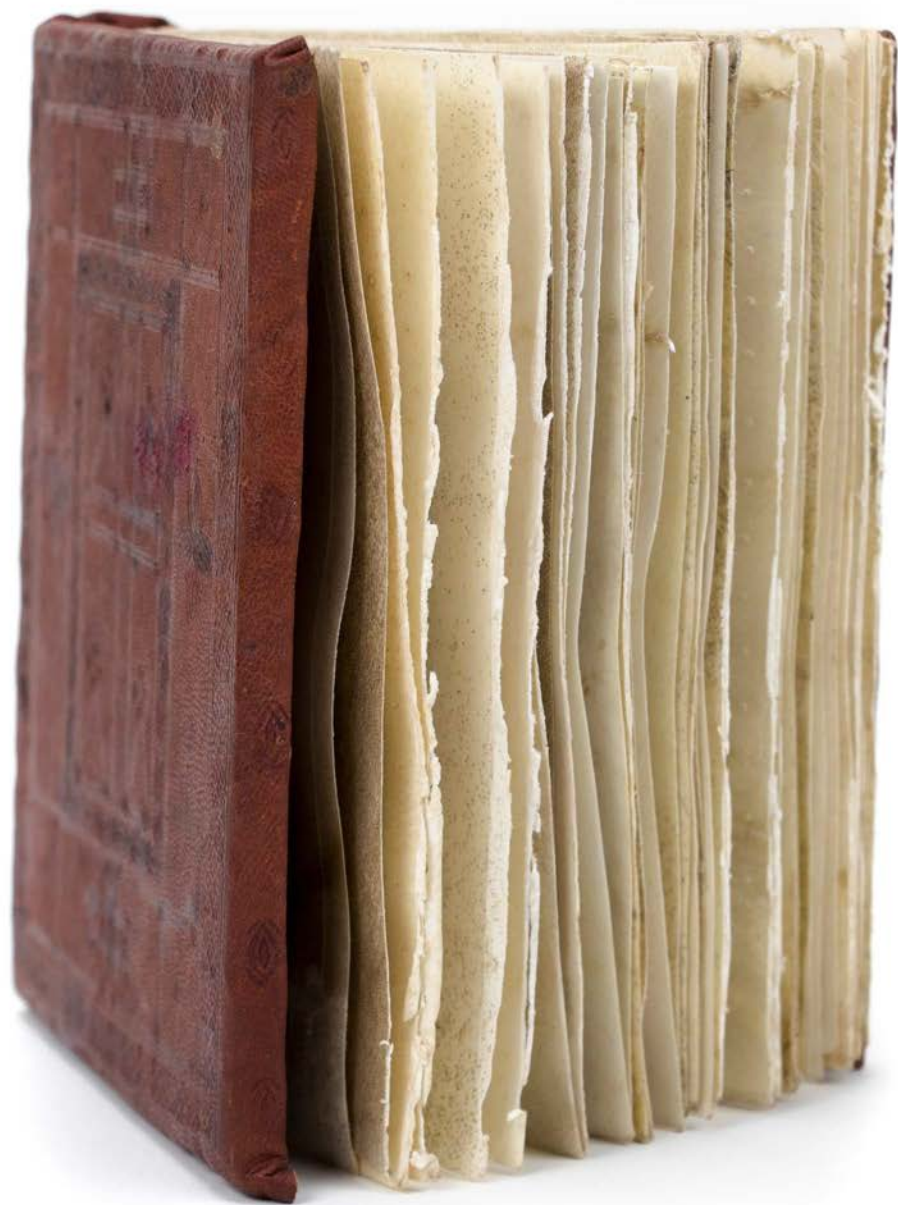




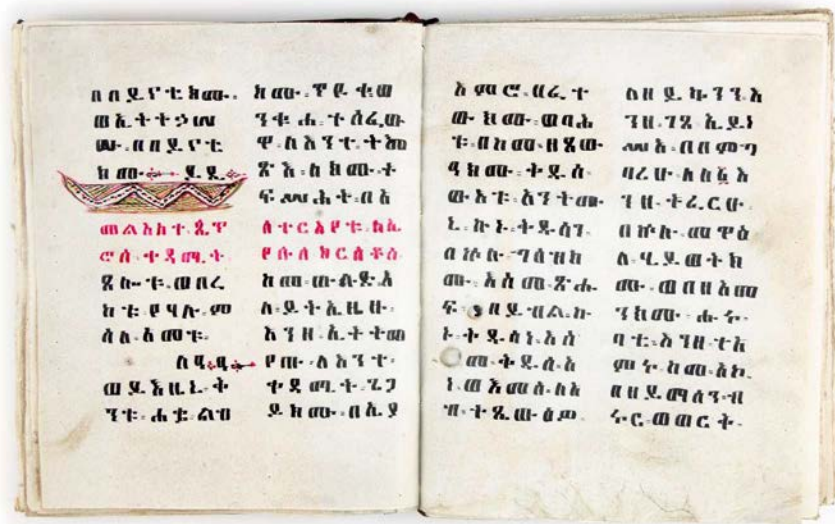
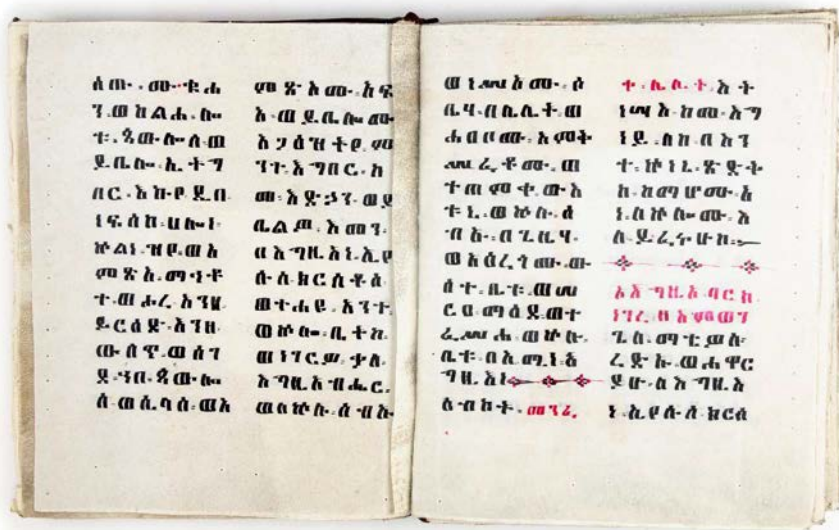












### Codex Manuscript with Gospel of John and Selected Letters of Saint Paul

Qes Aragawi TaklaHaimanot (Ethiopian, born mid-20th century)

2012

Ink and pigments on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.43

A codex is a book constructed of multiple sheets of paper or parchment that are sewn together along one edge and protected by a set of wood or leather covers. Most religious texts in Ethiopia have historically been handwritten codices, and despite the introduction of printed books during the 20th century, codex manuscripts are still being made and used in Ethiopia today. This codex contains the Gospel of John along with some of the letters from Saint Paul that are found in the New Testament. The text is written in Ge'ez, the ancient language of Ethiopia that ceased to be spoken more than a thousand years ago but that remains in use for religious art and sacred documents. Because codex manuscripts are bulky and time-consuming to produce, most contain only a few texts selected from the Ethiopian Bible that are of particular interest to the books' owners.









### **Model of an Ethiopian Church**

Tolera Tafa (Ethiopian, born 1971)

1990s

Sorghum stalks

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.44

Ethiopian churches exist in a wide range of forms. This model represents a polygonal church form that can be found throughout Ethiopia. Following the layout of ancient Hebrew temples, Ethiopian churches typically contain three concentrically arranged interior spaces. The outer ring of the church is an ambulatory where cantors sing hymns and lay congregants who have ritually purified themselves gather during services. The middle ring is where the priests and deacons perform the worship ceremonies and offer communion to those who qualify to receive it. The innermost space, which is usually square, contains the church's consecrated altar and is only accessible to ordained priests, monks and bishops. This model church is made of sorghum stalks that were left over from the harvest on the artist's family farm. Using a razor blade as his only tool, the artist created the church by cutting lengths of the sorghum stalk's soft inner pith and tacking them in place using short narrow pieces of the plant's hard outer skin. Sorghum-stalk models of buildings, vehicles, airplanes, and other things were a popular form of folk art in Ethiopia from the 1960s to the 1980s, and helped to supplement the incomes of rural families.



## Section Four:

# Women and the Church

The place of women within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is complex. Although women may not be ordained as priests or deacons in the Ethiopian church, they may become nuns. Women are permitted to take holy orders early in their lives, but most typically become nuns later in life after the deaths of their husbands. Ethiopian nuns wear distinctive yellow robes and often live together near churches and monasteries where they engage in lives of prayer and service. Opportunities for lay women to participate in the church are also limited. Ethiopian church buildings are gender segregated, with women and men having their own entrances and worship areas. The women's entrance is located on the south side of the church building, and the paintings on the sanctuary wall facing this entrance traditionally feature a heavy concentration of Virgin Mary images. The ability of both women and men to enter a church and participate in communion is governed by strict rules about cleanliness, including dietary laws and those regarding sexual intercourse. Since female menstruation is regarded as unclean, women who are menstruating must also refrain from entering church buildings. Instead, those women and men who are excluded congregate outside church buildings to participate in worship ceremonies, including some led by priests who perform services especially for them. It is thus common to see crowds of people, especially women in traditional white dresses and shawls, standing outside church compounds. [Nina Kay '19]











**Two Nuns Visiting Aksum**

Neal Sobania (American, born 1946) and  
Raymond Silverman (American, born 1953)

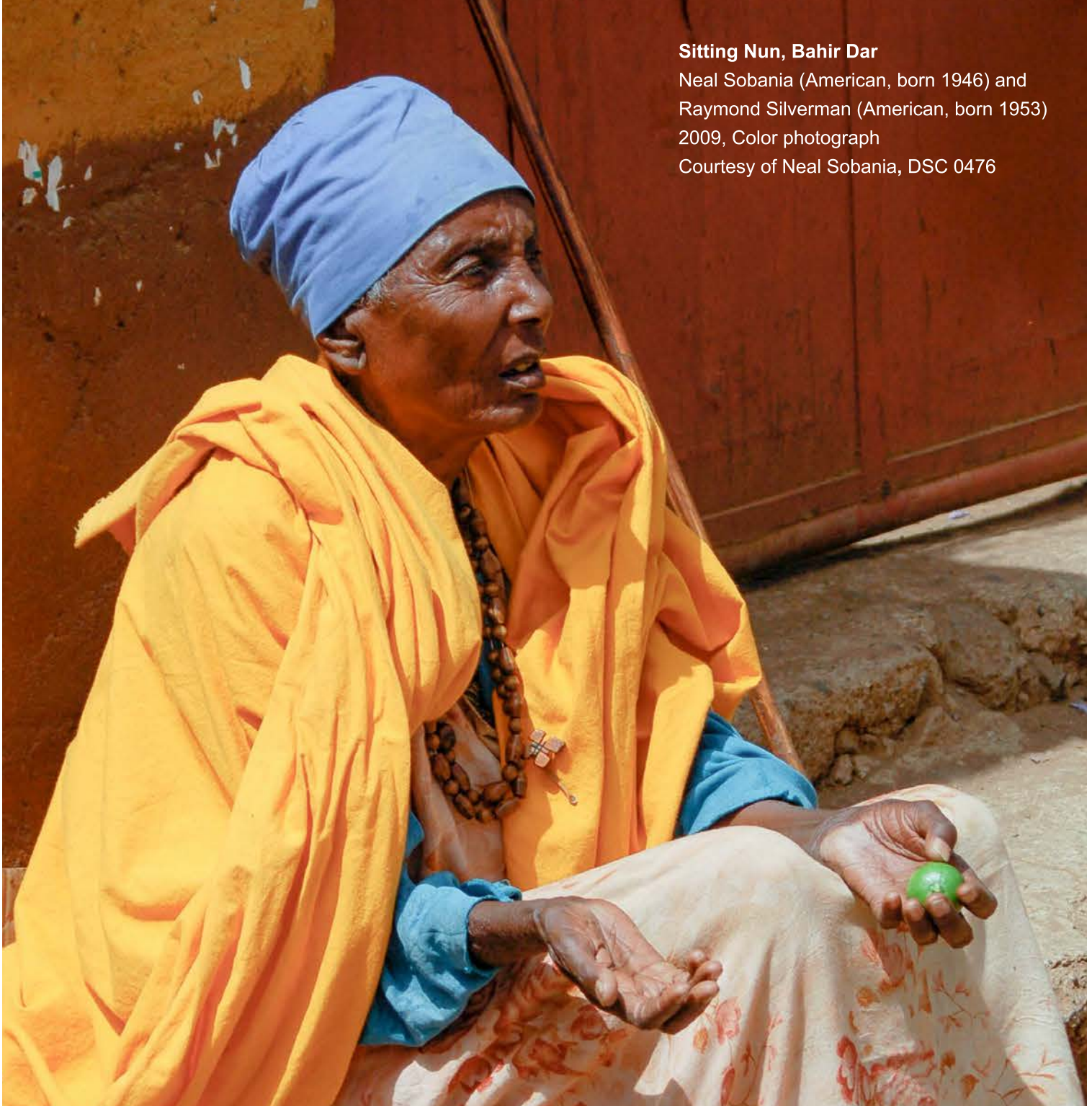
2005, Color photograph

Courtesy of Neal Sobania, DSCN0071



**Sitting Nun, Bahir Dar**

Neal Sobania (American, born 1946) and  
Raymond Silverman (American, born 1953)  
2009, Color photograph  
Courtesy of Neal Sobania, DSC 0476





**Women Gathering Outside the Arbaat  
Ense Church, Aksum**

Neal Sobania (American, born 1946) and  
Raymond Silverman (American, born 1953)  
2009

Color photograph

Courtesy of Neal Sobania, DSC 0630







**Women Praying Outside Enda Iyesus Church,**

**Aksum** Neal Sobania (American, born 1946) and

Raymond Silverman (American, born 1953)

2009

Color photograph

Courtesy of Neal Sobania, DSC 0605





**Young Woman with Pectoral  
Cross, Aksum**

Neal Sobania (American, born 1946)  
and Raymond Silverman (American,  
born 1953)

2001

Color photograph

Courtesy of Neal Sobania, ethp0198







**Genet Gidofa and Her Mother, Leta  
BirhanSelassie, Wearing Traditional  
Jewelry and Cruciform Tattoos**

Neal Sobania (American, born 1946) and  
Raymond Silverman (American, born 1953)

1998

Color photograph

Courtesy of Neal Sobania, DSC 0243



## Pectoral Crosses

Ethiopian

Late 19th-early 21st centuries

Silver

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.50-53

Pectoral crosses are worn on cords around the neck as expressions of faith and to protect their wearers from harm. There is textual evidence for the use of pectoral crosses in Ethiopia as early as the 15th century, but most of the crosses found in Ethiopia today date from the late 19th and 20th centuries. Both men and women may wear pectoral crosses, but they are more commonly seen on women. They are typically made of cast silver and are found with a wide variety of engraved, openwork and filigree designs.









# Female Artists

Although women have been patrons of religious art in Ethiopia for centuries, the number of women who have made religious art in Ethiopia has historically been quite small. One reason for this is that women have generally lacked access to advanced education in religion and the arts. Most male artists who make religious art receive years of theological and artistic training under the auspices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Because women have limited access to the church while they are menstruating or sexually active, and because they are typically expected to marry and attend to domestic duties after marriage, most women simply do not have the same opportunities as men to become religious artists. Women are able to participate more prominently in other areas of artistic activity, such as basket making, textile embroidery, and pottery. However, because these arts are not imbued with the same spiritual and cultural significance as religious art, the women who participate in these fields generally do not enjoy the same status and prestige as male church artists. [Nina Kay '19]





Etsubdink Legesse







**St. Mark**

Etsubdink Legesse (Ethiopian, born 1968)

2012

Ink and paint on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.45

Etsubdink Legesse is the daughter of the priest-painter *Memher* Legesse Mengistu. Though she trained and worked as an accountant, Etsubdink was always interested in her father's painting. From the time she first began to assist him during summer school vacations to the times she painted with him as an adult, he was always teaching her to be an artist. As she recalls, he left her all his parchment paintings so she could continue to paint and learn. "They are a visual dictionary for me." This painting of the Gospel writer Saint Mark shows how close Etsubdink's style is to her father's style. One of Legesse's six children, Etsubdink is the only one who paints. Today she lives and works in Addis Ababa as a full-time artist and is occasionally assisted by some of her children.







**Meskel Scene**

Etsubdink Legesse (Ethiopian, born 1968)

2012

Ink and paint on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.47

Meskel is the first major holiday of the Ethiopian religious calendar. Celebrated in late September, it commemorates the finding of the True Cross by Queen Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine. Large bonfires are burned as part of the Meskel ceremony, which usually also coincides with the end of Ethiopia's rainy season.







**Nativity Scene**

Etsubdink Legesse (Ethiopian, born 1968)

2012

Ink and paint on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.46

To make parchment from either sheep- or goatskin is hard work. Etsubdink does not make the parchment on which she paints, but purchases it ready made. However, she still must cut it to size and if it not as refined as she would like, she smooths it with sandpaper until it almost has the quality of heavy paper. On these pieces of parchment she carries on her father's tradition of painting events from Jesus Christ's birth to resurrection, as well as themes of cultural and historical significance and scenes of daily life.







### **Village Church School**

Etsubdink Legesse (Ethiopian, born 1968)

2012

Ink and paint on parchment

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.48

For many centuries, the village church school, taught by a priest or monk, was the only source of education in Ethiopia. In these schools, children first learned through constant repetition the basic characters of Ge'ez, the ecclesiastical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Later they learned to read, write and chant the Psalms. The first chapter of the *First Epistle of John* was the text used by children to learn how to read. For most children this was the end of their education, although some boys continued to study theology and liturgical music on the path to becoming a deacon or priest. Opportunities for education have expanded since the early 20th century with the establishment of non-church public and private schools, but economic status and gender still play a large role in determining who receives schooling in Ethiopia.



# Reverence for Mary

In the late 14th and 15th centuries, King Dawit and King Zara Yaqob began promoting veneration of the Virgin Mary as a way to unify different theological and ethnic factions within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. King Dawit commissioned the first translation into Ge'ez of a 4th or 5th century Arabic text called *The Miracles of Mary* that recounted numerous stories of Mary's merciful nature and saintly powers. King Zara Yaqob introduced a liturgical role for icon paintings of Mary in church services and encouraged people to use images of Mary in their personal devotions as well. The great reverence for Mary continued to grow in subsequent centuries, such that she is now venerated above all other saints, because her son so dearly loved her that he will grant her every prayer (The Covenant of Mercy). More Ethiopian churches are dedicated to Mary than to any other saint and she is celebrated on thirty-three feast days throughout the year. Nevertheless, the great respect given to Mary has not translated into equal treatment for women in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church or in Ethiopian society more broadly. Ethiopian women face many challenges with respect to education, health care and employment and much work is needed for them to achieve greater parity with men in those areas. [Nina Kay '19]













**Icon with Images from *The Miracles of Mary***

Yordanos Berhanemeskel (Ethiopian, born 1983) with  
Daniel Berhanemeskel (Ethiopian, born 1980)  
1999

Paint on wood

Loan from the collection of Philip and Nancy Miller

First written down in Egypt or Syria sometime around the 4th or 5th century CE, *The Miracles of Mary* is a collection of stories about the mystical appearances and saintly works of the Virgin Mary. The text quickly gained popularity in Ethiopia after it was first introduced there during the 14th century and it has provided inspiration for many church murals and icon paintings ever since. This icon was painted by Yordanos Berhanemeskel, daughter of the famed church painter Berhanemeskel Fisseha who began training in the art of painting at age ten. She painted this icon at age sixteen with assistance from her brother who signed the painting. Shopkeepers knew Daniel's work and an icon by him would have been more salable than one painted by a young girl. Today Yordanos is married and raising three children, but she still paints and received commissions in her own right.



## **The Flight into Egypt**

*Abba* GebreMeskel Mebrathom

(Ethiopian, born 20th century)

2009

Paint on canvas

Gift of Neal and Elizabeth Sobania, 2018.25.49

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church celebrates the Feast of the Holy Family every year in late October or early November. The feast follows a period of forty days during which people are supposed to reflect on the difficulties experienced by the Holy Family when they fled to Egypt to escape the murderous wrath of King Herod. Mary in particular is venerated during the Feast of the Holy Family for her role as a protector of both Christ and Christ's followers. Along with the expected figures of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, Ethiopian paintings of the Flight into Egypt often include the nurse-maid Mary Salome, Saint Mary's sister, whose presence on the journey is mentioned in several early but non-canonical Christian texts. The inclusion of Salome in these images makes perfect sense to Ethiopian audiences, who are used to seeing children raised in extended families that include aunts, sisters and cousins. The title *Abba* in front of the artist's name and his yellow robe indicate that he is a monk. Neal Sobania acquired the painting in 2009 directly from the artist at an annual religious festival market held in Aksum during Holy Week.





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Berhane Gebrelyesus, 1 and 2

1



2

3

Qes Kellem, 3 and 4



4







Berhanemeskel, 5, 6 and 7





8



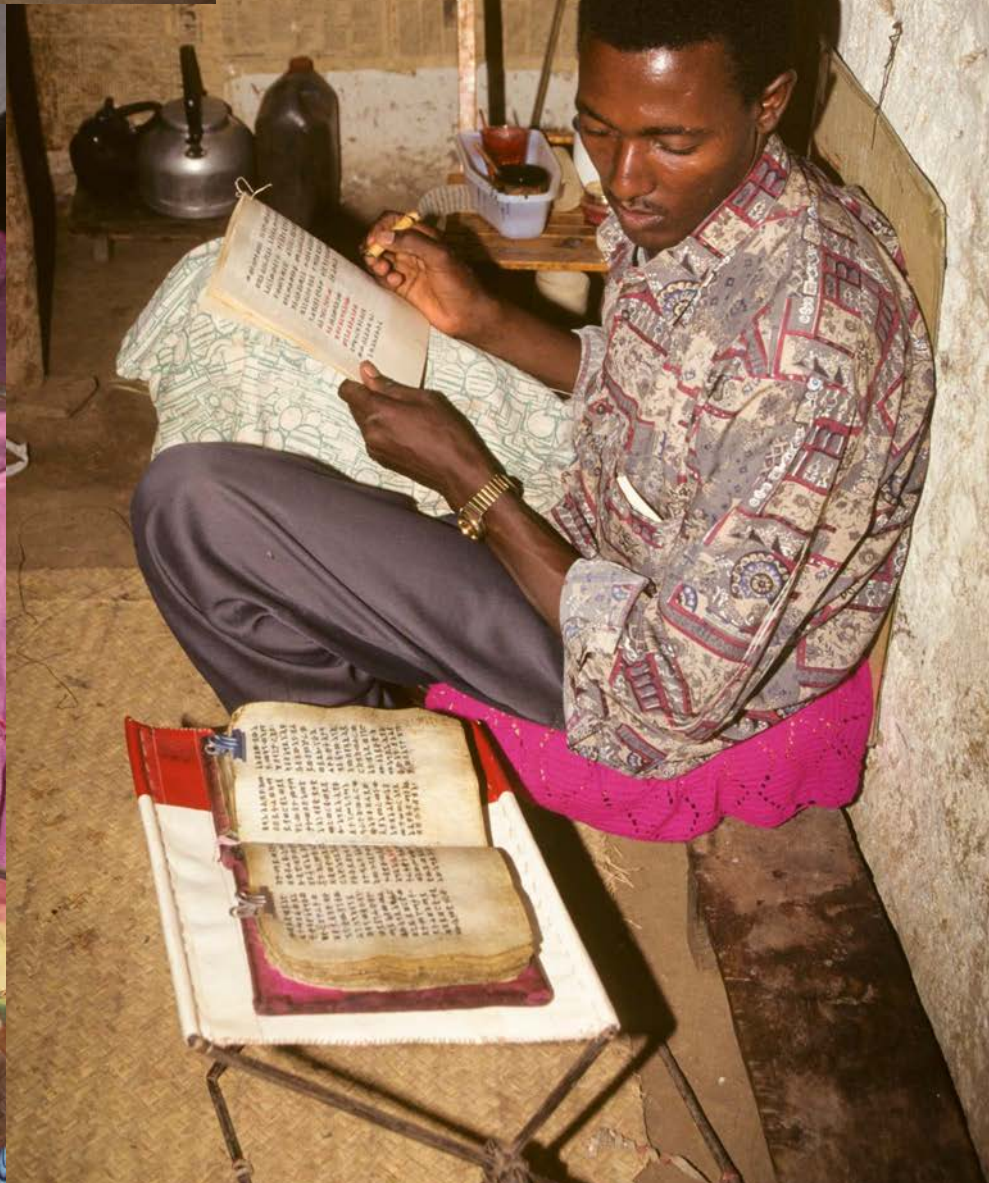
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11



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Gebra Merha, 8, 9, 10 and 11





13



15

Haleqa Teklai, 15

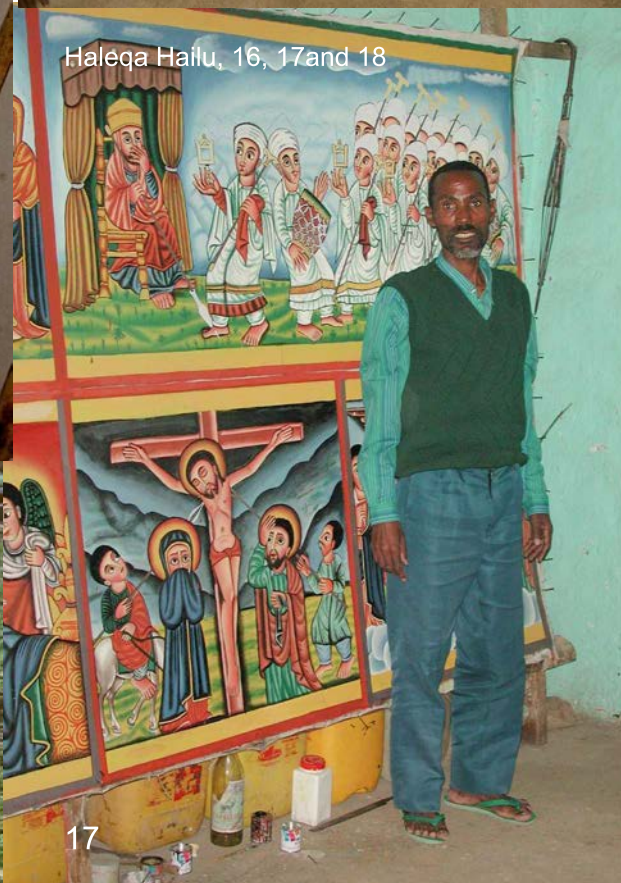


16



14

Tolera, 13, 14



Haleqa Hailu, 16, 17 and 18

17



18



# Kruizenga Art Museum Mission

The mission of the Kruizenga Art Museum is to educate, engage and inspire the students, faculty, staff and alumni of Hope College, as well as the broader communities of Holland and West Michigan. By presenting art from a wide range of cultures and historical periods, the museum fosters the qualities of empathy, tolerance and understanding that are essential components of Hope College's mission to provide an outstanding Christian liberal arts education while preparing students for lives of leadership and service in a global society.







