The Miracles of Mary

A Seventeenth-Century Ethiopian Manuscript

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The Art Institute of Chicago
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication is the result of the dedicated efforts of many people. However, it would have remained only a dream without the generous financial contributions of The African American Gula Fund, Mary Carol Fee, George Mann, Terry and Cynthia Perucca, and The Woman’s Board in honor of docent Martha McCallister’s 50th anniversary. The scholar of Ethiopian art, history, and culture who have willingly and patiently allowed me, a non-specialist, to consult with them. My sincere thanks go to Dr. David Appleyard, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; Dr. Donald Crumley, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Dr. Gene Gregg, University of Chicago; Dr. Getachew Hailu, Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, St. John’s University, Dr. Marilyn Feldman, University of Missouri–St. Louis; Dr. Donald Levine, University of Chicago; and Dr. Ray Silverman, University of Michigan. Any errors contained in the text are my own.

Within the museum, I appreciate the support and encouragement of James N. Wood, Director and President, and Richard F. Townsend, Curator in the Department of African and American Art. The talented staff of many Art Institute departments have worked together to make this project a success. For their outstanding work on the publication, my warmest thanks are due to Susan F. Rosen, Sarah Guernsey, and Britt Salvesen in the Publications Department; Alan Newman, Chris Gallagher, Eva Panek, and Greg Williams in the Imaging Department; Lyn DelliQuadri and Jeff Wonderland in the Department of Graphic Design and Communication Services; and Brent Riley in the Museum Shop. I am also grateful to Margo McFarland in the Department of Prints and Drawings; Hannah Bennett, Barbara Korbel, Lauren Lestingi, and Susan Perry in the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries; Jane Clarke, Clare Kueny, Maria Marske-Bench, and Rita McCarthy in the Department of Museum Education; Linda Steele, Director of Community Relations; and Ray Ramirez, Barbara Battaglia, and Leah Bove in the Department of African and American Art. Finally, I offer special thanks to Jane Clarke, Lyn DelliQuadri, Sarah Guernsey, and Brent Riley for their encouragement and enthusiasm from beginning to end.

Kathleen Bickford Berzock
Associate Curator for African Art
Since its earliest foundations in the fourth century, Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity has developed a unique character and distinctive forms of practice. Notably, the figure of Mary is invested with wide-ranging and deeply resonant meanings in Ethiopia, where she is honored as the Holy Mother of God, the Mother Church, and Our Lady Mary the Intercessor, who prevails upon her Son to forgive the sins of humanity.

Texts describing miracles performed by Mary, such as the healing of infirmities or forgiveness of sins, first became popular in France in the twelfth century and arrived in Ethiopia via Spain, Palestine, and Egypt. These Latin texts were translated into Arabic and then into Ge'ez, the ancient and liturgical language of Christian Ethiopia, in the fourteenth century. Mary’s significance in Ethiopia intensified in the mid-fifteenth century, during the reign of Emperor Ze’ra Ya’eqob (r. 1434–68).³

Ze’ra Ya’eqob decreed the integration of readings about Mary into daily Church ritual; the establishment of more than thirty feast days in commemoration of her; and the compilation and translation of Marian writings, including the recording of her miracles. In Ethiopian accounts, the number of miracles credited to Mary expanded to over three hundred, and after Ze’ra Ya’eqob’s initiatives the Miracles of Mary became one of the most popular themes for religious books, which served to guide worshipers through the yearly cycle of celebrations for the Virgin.

In the mid-1500s, following a century of warfare with neighboring Muslims and other factions that included the destruction of churches and religious art, Christian Ethiopia experienced a period of renewal. A permanent capital was established at Gonder, in northwest Ethiopia (see map, p.9), and the city soon became a
center of artistic innovation. There, artists working for the glory of the Church painted murals and devotional images, made processional crosses of metal and wood, and produced richly illustrated manuscripts. The arts of calligraphy and manuscript illumination in particular were among the most prominent and sophisticated of the era, at scriptoria staffed by lay clergy in Gonder, and probably also in nearby Axaz, royal patrons could commission luxurious manuscripts for themselves and for presentation to monasteries and churches. Artists and craftsmen engaged in religious work achieved a higher social status than their counterparts who labored making secular objects, but they were nevertheless expected to maintain a proper humility, and today their names are mostly unknown.\(^3\)

The lavish *Miracles of Mary* now in the collection of The Art Institute of Chicago dates from the mid-to-late seventeenth century, and bears the effects of many years of careful use. The manuscript comprises 158 pages, and includes 71 paintings, which are protected by cotton veils that are tied directly to the tops of the pages. The book is bound between wooden boards that are covered with finely tooled morocco leather. These boards are original, but the spine has been replaced and the book rebound, probably in the twentieth century.

The Art Institute’s *Miracles of Mary* is one of a group of closely related manuscripts believed to have been produced at a single scriptorium in Gonder.\(^4\) Although all are thought to be based on a common archetype, these versions are not mere duplicates; each shows a personal approach to illustration that bespeaks the creativity of artists working in proximity and inspired by one another. Here, the uniformity of the script suggests that the volume is the work of a single gifted calligrapher. Likewise, the paintings exhibit a stylistic consistency that could only be produced by an individual artist.

The illustrations in the Art Institute’s manuscript are excellent examples of the style known to scholars as the First Gonderine, after the capital city. This manner of painting is distinguished by the bold outlines used for the figures, schematic shading that enlivens the faces, linear rendering of drapery and hair, an emphasis on decorative textile patterns, and often whimsical depictions of architecture. Artists employed a rich but restricted palette of red, yellow, blue, and green, setting forms against flat, unelaborated backgrounds. While the figures’ faces show little expression, their gestures and interactions convey freshness and vitality. In addition, Gonderine-style compositions tend to present narratives of varying complexity, featuring identifiable religious personages and making reference to the dress and furnishings of the day. The narratives are reinforced by captions—probably added by the calligrapher—that identify people and objects in the scenes. The depiction of different races and ethnicities is worth remarking upon, as it too is based on contemporary experience. Although they repre-

Map of present-day Ethiopia
figures in the Art Institute’s Miracles of Mary are portrayed in the guise of Christian Ethiopians, with dark hair, oval faces, and long noses; by contrast, aggressors have large bodies and bulbous heads, and wear turbans and wide-legged short pants (see plate 9). These figures are probably Muslims, reflecting periodic conflicts between the Christians of Ethiopia and their Islamic neighbors.

The text is written on parchment—the specially prepared, fine-grained skin of a cow, sheep, or goat—in three columns of fifteen lines each, using an elegant script called galez that is distinctive for its clarity and regularity (see plate 10). The calligrapher relied upon scored lines, still visible on the manuscript’s pages, to align the text precisely. The illuminator used sheets of the same scored parchment, indicating that the volume was conceived as a unified whole, incorporating words and images. Unlike the calligrapher, however, the illuminator purposefully disregarded the structure of the columns. This compositional freedom, together with the fact that such manuscript paintings exhibit many stylistic affinities with religious murals of the time, suggests that manuscript painters were not trained exclusively as illuminators. As in other Gonderine collections treating this theme, the text is principally devoted to the standard canon of thirty-two Marian miracles, each illustrated with a narrative painting (see plates 5–11). These are preceded by prayers, hymns, and three illustrated stories from the Life of the Virgin (plates 1–4), and are followed by depictions of the Passion of Christ, Christ in Judgment (plate 12), saints, and martyrs. As is common in manuscripts from this period, the name of the man who commissioned the book, Walada Iyasu, along with the names of his parents, were originally written into the text. References to Walada Iyasu and his family were later erased and replaced in all but one location by the names of a subsequent owner, Kirubel; his wife, Kola Gannat; and in some sections his parents (see plate 10, top of third column of text). Owners also recorded important transactions in such books; here, two notes concerning the sale of land are appended to the text, one at the front and one at the back. These annotations appear in Amharic, the language spoken by most Christian Ethiopians.

This spectacular manuscript speaks to the longevity and unique character of Christianity in Ethiopia, in particular the reverence offered to Mary, the Holy Mother of God. Through the arts such devotion was nurtured and enhanced. The intimate contemplation that this book inspires is a testament to the skill of the artists who made it and to the compelling nature of the stories it contains.
The Miracles of Mary (Ge'ämien Maryam)
Late 17th century, reign of Yohannes (1667–82) or Iyasu I (1682–1706)
Gonder, Ethiopia
Bound manuscript: Parchment, ink, tempers, wood, leather, cotton, and string
Ada Turnbull Hertz and Marian and Samuel Klaastorner Endowments, 2002.4

Interpretations of the illustrations were informed by David Appleyard’s summary translation of the Art Institute’s manuscript, “Miracles of Mary, together with Various Hymns (Salam) and Prayers for Intercession, and Three Stories from the Life of the Virgin Mary” (photocopy in the Department of African and Amerindian Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, n.d.), and by E. A. Wallis Budge’s Legends of Our Lady Mary the Perpetual Virgin and Her Mother Hanna (London, 1933) and One Hundred and Ten Miracles of Our Lady Mary (London, 1933). The numbers in smaller type indicate the location of the images in the manuscript.

Plate 1
The Story of Anna and Joachim
When Anna and Joachim were unable to conceive a child, God took pity on them. On the left, God comes to them in the form of white birds above their heads. Next, an angel tells them they will have a daughter. On the right, Anna and Joachim take the infant Mary, who will ultimately become Christ’s mother, to the Temple. Below, she receives the blessings of the elders, Simeon and Zacharias. The illustration’s protective cotton veil is clearly visible, folded at the top of the left-hand page.

Plate 2
The Story of Mary at Golgotha
After Christ’s death, Mary went regularly to Golgotha to pray at his tomb. In an Ethiopian telling of this story, when the tomb guards harassed her, Christ made her invisible to them. On the left-hand page, Mary stands in prayer while the unwitting guards sit on the ground near Christ’s schematically rendered tomb, surrounded by their shields and spears. Next, the risen Christ addresses his Mother. The right-hand page shows prophets and angels worshiping the Virgin.

Plate 3
Christ and Mary Enthroned
Ethiopian tradition holds that after Christ’s death, angels lifted Mary to heaven, where her Son comforted her and showed her his kingdom. Here, angels and the righteous surround Christ and Mary, seated together on a fabric-covered throne. The prophets appear below them, and King David sits on the right, playing a legnaw, a type of Ethiopian harp.

Plate 4
The Covenant of Mercy
The Covenant of Mercy celebrates Christ’s promise to accept Mary’s intercessions on behalf of humanity—a promise that is honored each time Mary performs a miracle of salvation or healing. Here, Jesus gives his covenant to Mary amid surrounding angels. In Ethiopia the Feast of the Covenant of Mercy, Kidane Mehret, is celebrated yearly on February 23.
Plate 7
Miracle 22, The Story of the Clubfooted Man
The Miracles of Mary have their roots in medieval times, when illness and injury were sometimes perceived as God's punishment for sinfulness, and the curing of such conditions constituted a form of redemption. These beliefs obviously resonated with Ethiopians. In this story, a man shows his clubfoot to an archbishop in the presence of a congregation. Next, the man prays to Mary—who holds a diminutive Christ Child in her arms—and is cured. The man then displays his healed foot to the archbishop.

(100 verses/100 means)

Plate 8
Miracle 23, The Story of the Lepers Bishop Mercurius
Bishop Mercurius, a victim of leprosy, was ordered to leave the priesthood because his body had become impure. Here, Mercurius shows his disease-ridden body to the archbishop. He then prays to Mary and is healed. On the right, Bishop Mercurius reveals to an acolyte and to the archbishop that he has been cured. Finally, he is reinstated to the priesthood and celebrates Mass.

(110 verses/110 means)

Plate 9
Miracle 26, The Story of Barok of Finqel
Though dissolute, Barok of Finqel loved the Virgin and regularly honored her by hosting a banquet for the poor and needy on the festival of her death. On the left, Barok serves a distinctly Ethiopian feast to his guests, with a communal plate and shapely ceramic jugs. On the right, Mary presides over Barok's ordination as a monk, his death by stoning at the hands of his enemies, and his burial in a state of grace.

(120 verses/120 means)

Plate 10
Miracle 27, The Story of the Deacon Anastasius
The Deacon Anastasius of Constantinople (now Istanbul) led a life of devotion to the Virgin; here, he prays to her. Then, on his deathbed, Mary appears to him and offers him comfort. The facing page is covered with the stately gregorian script used throughout the manuscript. In the first and second columns, Mary's name appears in red ink, while in the third column the name of the original owner has been erased and replaced by the names of a subsequent owner, Kirubel, and his parents. The decorative punctuation used throughout indicates transitions between phrases.

(125 verses/125 means)

Plate 11
Miracle 29, The Story of the Cannibal of Qemir
In her role as intercessor between Christ and humanity, Mary may plead for even the most depraved sinner if he has once shown repentance. The story of the cannibal of Qemir is perhaps the ultimate example of Mary's compassion. On the left, the cannibal sits before a group of decapitated corpses in the act of eating his wife. Next, the cannibal offers a drink of water to a beggar while a farmer and his family flee from him. On the right, Christ offers bread to the cannibal while standing, as a miniature figure—hell. Mary then intercedes, literally pulling the cannibal's soul up by his hand. Below, angels weigh the water that the cannibal gave to the beggar against the lives of his seventy-eight victims.

(130 verses/130 means)

Plate 12
Saint Basiledes; Christ in Judgment
On the left, Saint Basiledes—one of the many soldier saints, including Saint George (see plate 6), who have been popular in Ethiopia for centuries—rides a white stallion adorned with fine trappings. On the right, a serene and monumental Christ, clothed in richly detailed robes, sits in judgment. With his right hand, Christ invites the blessed to rise up to the angels in heaven, while with his left he gestures for the damned to be dragged by demons into the fires of hell.

(135 verses/135 means)
Sources Consulted


This small but lavishly illustrated publication marks the acquisition and exhibition of a magnificent seventeenth-century Ethiopian manuscript depicting the Miracles of Mary.

Since its earliest foundations in the fourth century, Ethiopian Christianity has developed a unique character and distinctive forms of practice. The figure of Mary is particularly meaningful: she is honored as the Holy Mother of God, the Mother Church, and Our Lady Mary the Intercessor. Manuscripts such as the Art Institute’s—produced by skilled calligraphers and illuminators working in Ethiopia’s capital, Gonder—were commissioned by royal patrons for their own collections and for presentation to monasteries and churches.

The publication includes a brief introduction, a selection of twelve color plates, and descriptive captions.