Continuity and Innovation in the Ethiopian illustrated manuscripts: the case of Geometric Art

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ABSTRACT

In the history of the traditional Ethiopian art one recognizes a process of “transition” of formal elements from the African substrate into the Christian imagery. Through the different stylistic phases and schools a geometric solution recurs as the result of a formal abstraction process, through which the art moves towards the archetypal to express the divine in its powerful distance from reality.

KEYWORDS

Illuminated Manuscripts, Ethiopian Art, African Art, Ethiopian Christianity, Aesthetics
The concept of substrate derives strictly from historical linguistic studies and indicates the action “from below” exercised by the oldest languages over others that have got the better within a given territory. In particular, the more recent languages show in the vocabulary, grammar and syntax, “innovative” elements referable to the influence exercised by the substrate, as in the case of the Agaw languages that have modified the Ethiopian Semitic (Moreno 1948).

Similarly, the Christian art of Ethiopia has fed on influences of “substrate”, coming from that “African” land on which the “Mediterranean” models have been grafted. Though responding fully to specific doctrinal and liturgical needs imposed by the belief and the worship centered on Jesus and the Gospel, the Christian art of Ethiopia shows – through its various phases – to have received and incorporated into its repertoire of forms also elements that belong to the land on which the new religious message has taken root. Also in the historical-artistic field, therefore, we can speak of cultural “transition” with reference to “transition” of African elements into the Christian creativity of Ethiopia and to their “transition” through the centuries within Ethiopian art.

Particularly in the case of manuscript illuminations, the stylization process operated on the human figure and its attributes seems to characterize, more or less, all forms of representation that appeared in time. Like all religious art in general, traditional Ethiopian art feeds on repeated contaminations with external experiences, but the trend towards a geometric solution seems to be a constant that recurs with variable evidence. In this sense, Ethiopian painting appears to be the bearer of its own “originality”, which sinks its roots even deeper, in the continent of which Ethiopia, despite the singularity of its history, is an integral part. From the earliest medieval manuscripts we observe the emergence of an aesthetic instance that tends to reduce the figures to more or less elaborate geometric shapes.

1. 13th-14th CENT. – THE “GEOMETRIC STYLE”

The predominant stylistic trend in the 13th and 14th centuries, and for much of the 15th c., is to translate the drawing of the human figure in a system of lines and geometric shapes. The expression “geometric style” coined by European scholars is obviously a simplification but it is indicative of this mode of representation which presents many variations. The general trend is to reduce the narrative scenes to a few key figures and objects whose symmetrical composition tends to create a balanced and totally static equilibrium, where nothing is granted to naturalism or spatial illusion. The human figure, reduced to geometric shapes, presents a high level of abstraction and is strongly two-dimensional. The figures are portrayed frontally and often placed in the centre of large backgrounds characterized by geometric decorative patterns, as in the paradigmatic illustrations of a 14th cent. Gospel book coming from Däbrä
Qǝsqǝm, Ahǝyya Fägg, Wǝllo (Spencer 1993; Barbieri, Fiaccadori 2009: 121, repro. ibid.: 118, fig. 7). Probably the same scriptorium has produced also the miniatures of the Gospel book housed in the library of Maryam Șǝyon church at Lake Zǝwǝy (IES no. 2475; Chojnacki 1983: 490-91, repro. ibid.: 520, fig. 233; Heldman, Munro-Hay 1993: 130-31, cat. no. 55, repro. ibid.: 122-23, 131; Balicka-Witakowska 1997: 127, pl. V). According to the dedicatory note this manuscript appears to come from northern Ethiopia, and it seems likely that it was one of the many objects carried to Lake Zǝwǝy for safekeeping during the Adalite invasion of the Christian highlands in the early 16th cent. The images of evangelists introduced the corresponding Gospel. Their stiff hieratic pose on a saturated background of repeated geometric patterns is characteristic of this style.

2. LATE 14th CENT. – THE “EVOLVED GEOMETRIC STYLE”

A variant of the “geometric style” established itself in northern Ethiopian scriptoria. The illustrations of a manuscript of the late 14th cent. (ab. 1382-1413), a Gädlä Sǝma’ätat (Acts of Martyrs) preserved in the Maryam Șǝyon church on the island of Tulluu Guddoo, at Lake Zǝwǝy, represent the most significant example of this “evolved geometric style” (EMML no. 7602; Chojnacki 1983: 490, repro. ibid.: 519, fig. 232a-b; Heldman, Munro-Hay 1993: 179-80, cat. no. 70, repro. ibid.: 150-51). In these illustrations the representation of the human figure reaches a very high level of stylization. A distinctly geometric intent involves the drawing of the figure and clothes. The volumes are the result of a strict game of vertical, diagonal and parallel lines that fill the wide chromatic backgrounds of the tunics. Typical is the frontal position and the elongated forms. A special feature of this style, which allows its immediate recognition, is given by the enlarged hands with long curved thumbs. In this collection, portraits serve as frontespiece miniatures introducing each biography (gādl) of a monastic saint. Elongated forms, enlarged hands and geometricized webs of drapery characterize these impressive portraits. The particular style of illustrations places the manuscript within a small group that includes also a liturgical Psalter of the second half of 15th cent. (IES no. 74; Heldman, Munro-Hay 1993: 180, cat. no. 71, repro. ibid.: 152-53). The manuscript comprises the Psalms of David, the Song of Songs, introduced by its purported author, King Salomon, and Night-Prayers, introduced by Saint Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism. Also these portraits are typical of a highly abstracted figure style. The apparent simplicity is the result of a complex process of stylization from a more naturalistic style. Although strictly two-dimensional, the illustration through the net of parallel and diagonal lines makes the complex movement of garments and drapery folds.
3. 15th -16th CENT. – THE “HOUSES” OF EWOŞTATEWOS AND ĖŞTİFANOS

A sophisticated geometric mannerism characterizes aesthetically two styles that flourished in Eritrea and in Tigray (northern Ethiopia), between the late 15th and the beginnings of the 16th cent., around two schismatic ecclesiastical orders, named, after their founders, the “House” of Ewostatewos (born 1273 in eastern Tigray, died 1352 in exile, in north-eastern Anatolia) and the “House” of Ėşṭifanos (born 1397/98 in central Tigray, died 1444 in prison). The activity of illuminators at two main monastic centres explains the simultaneous development of different styles of illustrations (Heldman 1989).

The first Ewostatewosite workshop was located at the monastery of Däbrä Maryam of Qoḥayn in the Eritrean region of Sära’e. The scriptorium was active from the foundation of the order, but the illuminated manuscripts date to the middle of the 15th cent. It is a particularly refined style that testifies to the high technical and artistic level reached by the copyists. The richly decorated Psalter housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (Abb. 105 = C.R. 19; fully reproduced in Balicka-Witakowska 1983) is a magnificent example of the style developed at the Ewostatewosite monastery. The elegance of the stretch depicting scenes and characters joins to the elaborate design that precisely reproduces the fabrics, the decorations and the garments of the nobles of the time, as well as the draperies obtained with the copious use of parallel lines and geometric decorations. In this style the option for the figurative solution has a clear geometric layout. This is particularly evident in the more purely decorative parts like the crowns and the peculiar stools, that are stylized shapes of elaborated interlaces.

The Ėşṭifanosite workshop gave rise to a style that, in the late 15th and the first half of the 16th c., was developed primarily in the scriptorium of Däbrä Gärzen or Gundä Gunde (‘Agame, Tigray). The illustrations of Ėşṭifanosite manuscripts show greater stylization compared to the Ewostatewosite style. The geometrical tendency is further accentuated and the use of broken lines becomes exasperated by involving the entire scene. The illustration of the Madonna and Child (sǝ’ǝlǝ aγǝ’a’tǝnǝ mǝryǝn mǝslǝ fǝqur wǝlǝdǝ, “Portrait of Our Lady Mary with Her Beloved Son”) in the Gospel book from Gašǝn Maryam (Wållo) is a beautiful example of the style associated with the Ėşṭifanosite monastery (Barbieri, Fiaccadori 2009: 121, repro. ibid.: 122, fig. 12). The narrative scenes and the individual figures are the result of elaborate geometric drawing, which manifests itself mainly in the decoration of garments, with intricate patterns of dots and broken lines. These characteristics that distinguish the style are the most evident aspects of a geometrical instance that reveals itself above all in the decorative aspects.
4. **16th-17th CENT. – THE “PARALLEL LINES STYLE”**

The geometric instance is aesthetically expressed in particularly sophisticated forms in the “parallel lines style”. Already introduced in the 16th cent., this style reached the peak of its evolution in the early decades of the 17th cent. It is characterized by the extensive use of parallel lines in a highly stylized form in which the rigid schematization of the lines is balanced by a sophisticated drawing rich in imagination. The original levels of formal elaboration reached by this style involves even iconographic models coming from abroad. A triptych dated 17th cent., housed in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa (IES Mus. 4128; Chojnacki 2000: 380, cat. no. 135, repro. *ibid.*: 158; Heldman, Munro-Hay 1993: 245, cat. no. 105, repro. *ibid.*: 213), is a magnificent example of the advanced stage of the geometric style. The “Portrait of Our Lady Mary with Her Beloved Son”, in the central panel of the triptych, represents a western derivation model. Her crossed hands, the left one carrying a mappula, fall in the characteristic gesture of the holy icon of the Madonna of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (also called *Salus populi Romani*), the likeness of which was widely disseminated by Jesuit missionaries in authorized prints (Heldman 2010). Even in this example of contamination with models coming from abroad we can see this original tendency towards geometrization that seems to cross deeply Ethiopian art like an underground vein that feeds on absolutely indigenous experience.

5. **17th CENT. – ART OF LASTA**

An evident geometric intent seems to drive a style that emerged in the 17th cent. in the Lasta region. Beautiful examples of this style are the miniatures of some manuscripts from the monastery of Āšätän Maryam (Henze 2005), attributed to Basǝlyos, the so-called “Ground Hornbill artist” in reference to the stylized animal – a typical bird of Ethiopian fauna – that frequently appears in his paintings (Fletcher 2005: 92-93, pl. 37). The striking feature of these illustrations is the absolute simplification of the scene through a process of complete geometrization that makes them more like graphic works than paintings. The human figures, represented rigidly frontal with the emphasis put on eyes, consist of a patchwork of geometric ornaments. A few basic colours are applied as a flat wash. The palette is dominated by red, black and yellow ochre. The geometrization of the shapes is part of a process of elaboration through which an image acquires an apotropaic value. In fact, Geometric Art is typical of the images of magic scrolls that have a declared apotropaic value. It is plausible to hypothesize that through the geometric instance the apotropaic intention enters in religious art.
6. 18th-19th CENT. – ART OF ŠÄWA

The sacred and the magical interact each other in the illustrations of a manuscript coming from Kärän in Eritrea and currently housed in the Archivio Provinciale dei Capuccini Lombardi of Milano (APCL E 191 004). This manuscript, dated to the first half of the 19th cent., contains a Dǝrsanā Mika’el

Figure 1 APCL 191 E 004, f.2v – Image of Mika’el
that includes two full-page illustrations. The first is the image of Mika’el (Figure 1). The other one shows the images of Mika’el and Gäbro’el (Figure 2). All the figures are portrayed in a strict frontality, with the sword in his right hand and the sheath in the left one. They are absolutely expressionless with wide square faces where stand out two huge astonished eyes with large rectangular pupils. Nothing in the drawing is realistic and the image is reduced to

![Image of Mika'el and Gäbrə'el](image)

**Figure 2 APCL 191 E 004, f.102v – Images of Mika'el and Gäbro'el**
horizontal and vertical, curved and broken lines that draw the physiognomy and the clothes of figures. Stylistically these illustrations are closely related to the characteristic figurative forms of the “art of Šäwa” of 18th-19th cent.

The scholar who first approached this repertoire was Stanislaw Chojnacki (1983: 469-97; 2002) who coined the label of the “art of Šäwa” from the region in which this style initially manifested itself. Examples of this style are the illustrations in the manuscript of Dǝrsanä Mika’el from the Gubarya Giyorgis church (Yäḡǧu, Wållo; Chojnacki 1983: 480, reprod. ibid.: 508-09, figg. 221a-e). In these miniatures the realistic intention is completely abandoned. The painted characters have heads like circles covered with red wash. The faces recall the anthropomorphous representations of the sun and the moon in early Ethiopian art as exemplified by church murals in Lalibāla, Mäkinä Mädhane ‘Alām and Gānnätā Maryam in Lasta (Chojnacki 1983: 480). The wide open eyes under heavy curve of the eyebrows suggest hallucination. The insignificant flat nose and the lacking mouth are symptomatic of Šäwan painting. The human figure, conceived as a geometric drawing of patterns of lines, undergoes powerful distortions that remind on one hand the formal solutions of other artistic phases, eg the “geometric style” of Tulluu Guddoo or the “parallel lines style” of 17th cent. manuscripts, and, on the other, the painting on scrolls. Indeed the production of the so called magic painting on scrolls (kǝtab, ṭälsăm) was an important feature of life in traditional Ethiopia and the Šäwan manuscripts illustrations show remarkable stylistic similarity to scroll paintings.

7. MAGIC SCROLLS

The scroll illustrations are the most powerful expression of geometric art where the intensive use of lines and geometric shapes in a strict rhythm is essential in the process of stylization. Each figure becomes nothing else than a spontaneous expression of this rhythm. Such inner rhythm also pervaded early Ethiopian painting. In this kind of painting the impact of the African roots of the Ethiopians is all the more perceptible: the abundance of geometric motifs and the spontaneous rhythm of lines rather than the well-organized reflection of the visual world seem to recall the phantasmagoria of African art.

Created by däbtära, non-ordained priests that accompany the liturgy and practise religious medicine, magic scrolls are an example of religious syncretism. It is likely that the same cultural context produced both the sacred books and the scrolls and that in many cases the artists were the same, although in the scrolls the emphasis on the process of abstraction and stylization is greater in order to increase the magical efficiency. Typical of the scroll images is the inversion of the usual order of perception, from the general to the particular and from dark to light, in order to produce the experience of
hallucination. The effect is achieved primarily by distorting the proportions. The largest part of the figure appears to be the head where stand out for size and importance, the eyes. In a magic-ritual sense, the meaning of the eyes is crucial as they have the power to capture the “evil presence” and direct the “magic forces” (Mercier 1997). The other details that are not involved in the process of visual hallucination are neglected to the point that they can be reduced in size or completely eliminated. Thus the body, less important for the direct magic involvement, retreats from the visual field and defines a gesture or movement of the pictorial narration. The eyes are the essence of magic drawing and indeed they are found everywhere, even outside their natural anatomical context, inserted into crosses or in geometrical repetitive patterns. The emphasis on the eyes in Ethiopian scroll painting is a sign of the hallucinating intent, but is not correct to attribute to them the same “evil” significance as in the Mediterranean world. The eyes in scrolls as well as in Šäwan paintings belong to beneficial action and figures, including those of the angels (see APCL E 191 004, Figg. 1-2). This action is based on the recognition of the power of the sacred image. There is a rich literature about the miraculous power of sacred images in Ethiopia. In this sense the sacred images of the icons or the manuscript illustrations or the mural paintings do not differ from the illustrations of the magic scrolls. The difference from a traditional painting is that a magic scroll presents characters of individuality: it is made for the one to whom it is addressed, specifically created to treat someone suffering from physical and mental illnesses and virtually it functions as a talisman.

Ethiopia is the same cultural milieu in which the ornamentation of the scrolls and religious books flourished side by side. The geometric solution creates a strong link between magic scrolls and illustrations of sacred books and seems deeply rooted in Ethiopia culture feeding on the old background of the native forms of expression. Now it appears even more evident that more than a direct influence between different styles, it is plausible to suppose that these artistic expressions belong to a wider cultural context involving Ethiopian creativity in its entirety and which are expressed artistically through a spontaneous tendency to a geometric solution. The geometrization of the figure express the will to render visually the supernatural through a process of abstraction from reality. This hypothesis could find confirmation in the concept of spiritual beauty. This aesthetic-religious concept can be represented in painting through the process of geometric stylization of the human figure so as to reduce its earthly characteristics as much is possible. This formal process finds correspondence also in other African cultures.
8. SPIRITUAL BEAUTY

The canon of spiritual beauty is defined by the Ethiopian ecclesiastical authorities with the term *mänfäsawi*, that is ‘that which is like the spirit’. This concept is defined in opposition to that of *səgawi*, which means ‘that which is like the flesh’. A painting considered too naturalistic can be judged not suitable to cover the walls of a *mäqdäs* of a church. The choice of a non-naturalistic representation is a constant feature of religious Ethiopian art. The subjects to be represented do not belong to the world, therefore to be inspired by real models could betray the wording that wants the sacred image to keep its spiritual character. Based on this assumption the abstraction of the figures, the lack of expressiveness, the rigid frontal position, far from being the result of a technical failure, has to be considered rather as a precise stylistic choice that intends to make the invisible visible.

9. ETHIOPIAN AFRICAN ART

Ethiopia shared with Christian Nubia as well as Coptic Egypt the Judaic prohibition of carving three-dimensional figures. The lack of Ethiopian statuary has posed a dividing line between Ethiopian and African art. Ethiopia, a country with an ancient written tradition, chose an artistic idiom that is expressed in colour and lines on a flat surface through the medium of wall painting, illustration of books and icons. Africa traditionally expressed itself in the tridimensional forms of sculpture. The conventional general characteristics of African art as exemplified in representations of human forms are: 1. an absence of realistic bodily proportions; 2. an exaggeration of the size of the head; 3. frontality and vertical symmetry and 4. static poses. These are considered the fundamental macroscopic differences between West African and Ethiopian art. But to a more detailed analysis the differences between the two representative idioms are less marked than the macroscopic examination suggests. African statuary in fact equally rejects realistic representation.

Although the previous rough technical definition does not outline all features of African art is however indicative of a similarity between the two aesthetic conceptions that in no case can be explained by anything like an actual influence, but rather by the action of kindred aesthetic inspiration expressed in similar but independently evolved techniques. Robert Farris Thompson, Yoruba art scholar, notes that in the depictions of idols the Yoruba’s *mimesis* is intended as a relative similarity, since it must be close to the human figure without becoming a concrete and specific copy (Thompson 1980). The referent of the similarity is a human being but an indeterminate human, not identified or identifiable. The representation is inspired by an archetypal im-
age of the human being that is not that of any man in particular. Likewise the Dagara’s *betib*, despite its human form, does not look like a particular person. It must be like a man, but like a man in general. This kind of art, that is a sensitive form of spiritual entities, cannot be considered an imitation art as it doesn’t represent but makes present. The Ethiopian modalities of representation of the sacred presupposes a similar distance from the reproduction of reality. In this sense Ethiopian painting can be considered also an art of making-present: the painting makes present what is depicted in it. The painter must therefore signify its model and not represent it, because it is a model that is inaccessible in reality. The referent is not human: the deities are not “persons” but “powers” and therefore the intention cannot be imitative. They are actually spiritual entities within human shapes. The human image makes them approachable, visible; the distance from natural proportions preserves the substantial difference.

In this deliberate mix of recognition and estrangement is represented the supernatural. The geometric solution, that informs different artistic expressions such as an almost imperceptible but powerful underground transition surfacing in seemingly distant cultural contexts, is the result of a formal abstraction process through which the art moves towards the archetypal to express the divine in its powerful distance from reality.
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