

AFRICAN ART COLLECTION

Ethiopia

“Striking of His Head” (Kwe’ata re’esu) Triptych

Mid-seventeenth–early eighteenth century

Pigments on copper and gesso-covered wood panels, cloth

Closed: 7 ³/₈ × 6 × ⁵/₈ in. (18.7 × 15.2 × 1.6 cm)

Open: 7 ³/₈ × 8 ¹/₄ × ⁵/₈ in. (18.7 × 21 × 1.6 cm)

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This Ethiopian triptych icon represents an important and historically significant crosscultural exchange of ideas. The several elements, including a central panel, the frame, the casing, and side panels, were produced at different times and by artists of different cultural backgrounds. A most extraordinary cross-culturalism is evident in the paintings on the center and side panels and the backing, which reflect diverse European, Indian, and Ethiopian styles and iconographies. The image on the central panel is of Christ crowned with thorns, or “Striking of His Head,” translated from the Amharic as Kwe’ata re’esu. This version of the image is based on a Luso-Flemish prototype produced in the sixteenth century and brought to the Portuguese embassy in Ethiopia in 1520, combined, perhaps for the first time, with the fifteenth-century pictorial tradition of the same theme. Deviations from the original Kwe’ata re’esu image include rendering Christ in full figure rather than half figure, barefoot, with dark beard and reddish-blond hair, and depicting the two soldiers grasping spikes and hammers. The central panel reflects the greatest Indian influence, with iconography and style reminiscent of Persian-inspired Indian Mogul painting. Christ’s disk-shaped halo with beams of light radiating from the rim resembles those of Mogul emperors and rajas. The regal cape draping his shoulders appears to be made of red Indian silk, while his tunic appears to be a jama, a wide, ochre-colored Indian robe of fine cotton. The dress and weaponry of the two soldiers flanking Christ, and the gilded floral-patterned field, are also elements from India. It is likely that the artist who painted this image was employed in Gondar at the



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royal court in the mid-seventeenth century but knew much of Indian art and culture. The frame surrounding the central panel was probably made in a workshop patronized by Emperor Iyasu II (ca. 1740–1755), whose artisans were identified with the Qwārāña school. The frame is affixed to a board that serves as a backing for the central panel; the panel itself is a copper plate inserted between the board and the frame. The cloth-and-gesso-covered board is ornamented with cinnabar red paint with a rope pattern in green and yellow lines drawn with a ruler, a feature that is exceptional in Ethiopian panel painting. A medallion in the center of the board has a stylized floral design reminiscent of Indian printed cotton cloth used for the binding of seventeenth-century Ethiopian manuscripts, and similar designs are seen in Islamic stamped leather bookbinding. The trees and birds on the outer face of the panels in yellow and cinnabar red reference the designs of Indian silk fabric.

The iconography and style of the four motifs on the inner surface of the side panels, including the Crucifixion, Mary and Child, and Saint George and Saint Susenyos killing the demoness Werzelya, are transitional from the First to Second Gondar style, so we can reasonably assume they belong to either the last two decades of the seventeenth century or the early eighteenth century. Remarkably, the artist reversed the traditional positions of the Virgin Mary and the Crucifixion and depicted a star on Mary's veil in the Crucifixion scene, thus deviating from Ethiopian canonical imagery and asserting his individual style.

