Crosses from Ethiopia at the Dallas Museum of Art: An Overview

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The Dallas Museum of Art (DMA) holds one of the largest collections of crosses from Ethiopia. Carried in procession, placed at the top of a church to mark the landscape, held by a priest to bestow blessings, or worn around the neck for protection and to assert identity, the cross, in all its manifestations, has been for centuries a ubiquitous symbol in the daily and religious life of Christian Ethiopians.¹ In 2016, thanks to a burgeoning collaboration between the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History and the DMA, I was invited to take a closer look at this collection which had received some attention in the literature but had not yet been systematically investigated. The collection includes 258 items: ² 178 hand crosses;³ 8 processional crosses;⁴ 5 metal prayer-stick finials;⁵ and 67 pectoral crosses.⁶ As it is obviously not possible to analyse each item in the collection in a paper of this length, the focus will be on some of its highlights.

The history of how these objects came to be acquired by the DMA has been presented elsewhere (Walker 2009: 264–266), but it is worthwhile to recapitulate that information here.⁷ In the 1950s Dr. Kennet Redden spent a period of several years in Ethiopia as part of an American State Department legal team invited by Emperor Haile Selassie for helping to set up the country’s first school of law. He acquired the collection during his stay, though no records survive or where exactly the objects were obtained.

At the time, there was no antiquities protection law in Ethiopia and thus Redden volunteered to draft such a law at the Emperor’s request. According to an anecdote related by Redden, when he presented the proposed legislation Emperor Haile Selassie observed that he had put an effective date of one month after his departure from Ethiopia in the draft. To which Redden replied that he did so because he would have liked to take the crosses back to the United States, causing the two men to have a good laugh. The Emperor did allow him to take the crosses back and expressed the hope that he would eventually leave them to a public institution in order to allow scholars and visitors to learn more about the culture of Ethiopia.

In 1966, three crosses from the collection were displayed, along with a dozen other works from Ethiopia, in an exhibition of African Art organized by the Musée Dynamique in Dakar and the Grand Palais in Paris (M’veng et al. 1966: 111–114), which included loans from several U.S. collectors and museums including the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Cambridge), the Baltimore Museum of Art (Baltimore), the Museum of Primitive Art (New York), and the National Museum of African Art (Washington).⁸ Dr Kenneth Redden and his wife, Dr. Hebe Redden, were listed among the Ethiopian lenders (M’veng et al. 1966: 171). The exhibition included coll. nos. 13 (Fig. 1), 16 (Fig. 2), and a third hand cross which cannot be identified. Interestingly, the catalogue indicates that coll. no. 16 came from Goggaam, which suggests that Dr Redden may have acquired some of the crosses in this region of Ethiopia. The entire collection was subsequently displayed at the University of Virginia in 1972.
Several decades later, in the spring of 1991, Redden and his wife, decided to donate the entire collection to St. Mary’s University. The President of St. Mary’s, the Reverend Father John J. Moder, accepted the gift in writing, but he soon began to think that a broader public would have been able to access the crosses if they were placed in a well-known museum. Thus, the Reddens and Father Moder asked Louise Cantwell, Vice President for Institutional Advancement and General Counsel at Our Lady of the Lake University, to find a new home for the collection. Several museums expressed an interest, but the works were eventually given to the DMA for several reasons including the fact that it already possessed a large collection of African art.

In 1992 the DMA organized an installation to present the entire collection to the public and invited Csilla F. Perczel to give a lecture on Ethiopian crosses and have a better look at the collection which she had only seen through photographs. However, this did not lead to the publication of a catalogue and consequently all the objects in the collection were dated, without detailed investigation, between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries and the matter received limited attention thereafter. A more attentive study of the DMA’s collection reveals that most objects, especially the hand crosses, can be dated to a period between the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, but there are some noticeable exceptions.

For instance, coll. no. 64 is an iron cross that can be ascribed to a period between the fifteenth and sixteenth century (Fig. 3). It has narrow, flat, and slightly flaring arms with rounded finials. Its slender handle terminates with a small rectangle with a loop attached at its bottom which was used for inserting a piece of cloth rather than for suspending the cross around the neck as has been suggested elsewhere. That the loop
had such a function can clearly be seen by looking at several fifteenth or sixteenth-century miniatures, as illustrated by a depiction of Ezra in a manuscript from the monastery of Gundä Gunde (Fig. 4). In a depiction of Habtä Šallase from the same manuscript, the saint holds a cross that recalls the one in the DMA (Fig. 5). A similar cross also appears in a depiction of St. George on a fragment kept in the Vatican Library. The DMA cross can be compared with two similar examples in the collection of the National Museum of African Art which have been dated to the fifteenth century, and to examples published in catalogues of Ethiopian art (Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2007: cat. 85; Langmuir, Chojnacki, and Fetchko 1978: no. 29c), to mention just a few.

Also of considerable age, among the metal hand crosses, is coll. no. 178, a moline-type cross with arms widening at the outer ends and trefoil finials (Fig. 6). Such crosses appear in Ethiopian painting from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards, as illustrated by paintings in the church of Däbrä Sina Maryam in which several saints are shown holding crosses that are almost identical to the DMA one (Chojnacki 2006: 146–147, Figs. 106–108). This example probably belongs to the late seventeenth or eighteenth century. However, as this this type of cross was continuously produced until the twentieth century (Langmuir, Chojnacki, and Fetchko 1978: no. 29b), this suggestion is subject to a degree of error. Similar crosses can be found in numerous parts of Ethiopia and in several museums, works in the Victoria & Albert Museum, the National Museum of African Art, and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) (Hect, Benzing, and Girma Kidane 1990: 52) can be mentioned as examples.

With regard to the wooden hand crosses, coll. no. 28 is among the oldest in the collection (Fig. 7). The horizontal arms of this pattée cross – which are only slightly shorter than the upper and lower arms –
were originally decorated with trefoil finials, though these were probably never as pronounced as the one that appears on the upper arm. Much of the carved decoration has disappeared, but a Greek cross with a crux decussata in each of its angles is still visible on the square base. Wooden crosses in this form are known to us from as early as the fifteenth century (Fletcher 2005: cat. 8), but type of carving on the DMA cross suggest that it belongs to the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Several related examples are found in the collection of the IES18 (Hect, Benzing, and Girma Kidane 1990: 74, 76).

The DMA’s collection includes six wooden hand crosses in which a cross is placed inside a circular or oval-shaped frame (Fig. 2).19 Numerous fourteenth and fifteenth century metal processional crosses feature a greek cross in a circular frame (Di Salvo 2006: 121, 126), as shown by an example in the Walters Art Museum20 (Griffith Man 2001: cat. 80). However, the earliest examples of wooden hand crosses in this form date back to the second half of the seventeenth century. These can be dated thanks to their elaborate and precise decorations which evoke the carvings seen on the back of icons from this period, as illustrated by a couple of examples in the IES21 (Hect, Benzing, and Girma Kidane 1990: 119, 132, 144–45, 146). With the exception of coll. no. 23 (Fig. 8), which could be earlier, the DMA examples of this cross form lack the elegant carving and delicate proportions of the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pieces. This suggests that they were made between the nineteenth and early twentieth century. They can be compared to a number of crosses in the IES Studies22 (Hect, Benzing, and Girma Kidane 1990: 113, 141, 148, 166–67) and a cross in the Walters Art Museum23 (Griffith Man 2001: fig. 29).

Several of the crosses as well as one prayer-stick finial have inscriptions on them. Some, such as coll. no. 13 (Fig. 1) – a late nineteenth-century piece which shows the dead Christ on the Cross, the tip of the
Lance of Longinus, and the hands of angels with cups to collect his streaking blood — simply feature the inscription which Pilate had placed on the cross “Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews” (John 19: 19). Others, mention the owner of the object. So, for instance, an inscription on the base of coll. no. 84 tells us that “this cross belongs to Mämməru [or: the teacher of] Abär” (Fig. 9). Likewise, through inscriptions we learn that coll. 47 — a twentieth-century prayer stick finial — belonged to “Ḫaylā Mika’el” (Fig. 10), that coll. 129 belonged to “qāšši wäldä,” and that coll. no. 102 was donated on “Säne 24, 1951.”

Among the processional crosses, coll. no. 39 (Fig. 11), in silver, is a particularly fine example of late nineteenth-century craftsmanship. Almost rhomboid in shape, it features a square decorated with incised circles at the centre, this is inserted in a quadrilobed frame which is filled by an interlace pattern that extends beyond the frame to envelop four pairs of Latin crosses and support seven pairs of facing birds. Five pairs of birds support a pattée cross with patonce cross finials. Incised lines decorate both the cross and the lower rectangular arms which were added to help the shaft support its weight. The cross can be approximately dated to the reign of Emperor Menelik II (r. 1889–1913) as it is stylistically close to a couple of crosses which can be related to this ruler by inscriptions. One such cross is currently in the collection of the Linden Museum (Stuttgart); another is in the Museu de Cultures del Món (Barcelona); and a third, from a private collection, has been published in a catalogue of an exhibition (Balicka-Witakowska et al. 2007: cat. 74). The similarity between these three examples is evident not so much in the form of the crosses, which are different, but in the treatment of the metal and in the distinctive rectangular lower arms decorated with split palmettes.

Coll. no. 40, is a brass processional cross which features a pattée cross with arms of equal length at its centre (Fig. 12). A tau cross under a double arch is attached to the horizontal and upper arms of this pattée cross, whereas the lower arm is covered by the shaft. It is unclear whether this motif, which has been linked to the window patterns of some Ethiopian church (Moore 1971: 74), can also be interpreted as a stylisation.
of the wings of the Four Beast which surround the cross in some fifteenth-century examples.\textsuperscript{30} The central pattée cross is enclosed in a quatrefoil frame, which, in turn, is placed inside a diamond-shaped frame. The edges of this latter frame function as the base of seven closed pattée crosses. These are joined together by pierced quatrefoil elements and topped by pierced trefoil finials. As noted by Di Salvo (2006: 63), similar finials appear can be seen on the hand cross held by Saint Gâbrâ Mânfâs Qaddus in the church of Peter and Paul north of Wuqro (Fig. 13).

This work, which can be tentatively dated to the eighteenth century, belongs to a group of crosses which have been variously dated to a period between the late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (Moore 1971: 73–74) and are surprisingly uniform in style. To judge on the large number of surviving examples, crosses in this form were produced in large numbers. Indeed, numerous closely related examples have found their way into museum collections, as illustrated by works in the British Museum (Fig. 14);\textsuperscript{31} the Victoria & Albert Museum;\textsuperscript{32} the Peabody Museum (Langmuir, Chojnacki, and Fetchko 1978: no. 24); the IES\textsuperscript{33} (Moore 1971: 74, fig. 59); and the Portland Art Museum (Perczel 1981: fig. 8).\textsuperscript{34}

One of the most intriguing processional crosses is coll. no. 44 (Fig. 15), which does not appear to be Ethiopian but Byzantine.\textsuperscript{35} It may be attributed to a period between the tenth and twelfth centuries and recalls an example in the collection of Archäologische Staatssammlung in Munich (cat. 167).\textsuperscript{36} Traces of Byzantine influences can be seen in Ethiopian art of the fourteenth century (Heldman 1979), but there is little evidence of such influences in art of the previous centuries. It is thus lamentable that we have no records to establish in which part of Ethiopia the cross was acquired and that we are unable to determine when it was taken to the country, though its presence in Ethiopia remains a matter of considerable interest.

Most of the pectoral crosses in the collection are made of silver and can be approximately dated to a period between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. While pectoral crosses were in use in Ethiopia
from at least the fifteenth century (and probably long before), as illustrated by a small number of surviving examples (Heldman 1993: cat. 1; Chojnacki 2006: 119-122, pl. 23; Vanderhaege 2007), the majority of examples found in museums and private collections are far more recent. In nineteenth-century Ethiopia, silver pectoral crosses, such as coll. no. 252 (Fig. 16) were often made from Maria Theresa thalers by using the lost-wax method, occasionally in combination with other techniques, especially filigree, that are still being employed today. The examples in the DMA’s collection can be compared with those in the collection of the National Museum of African Art and in a number of publications (e.g. Chojnacki 2006: 161 –165).

In conclusion, it can be said that the DMA’s collection offers an excellent overview of cross making in Ethiopia between the eighteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. It also includes a small number of interesting works from an earlier period as well as a rare Byzantine cross. Reproductions of the works, in most cases in high resolution, have been made available online as part of the Museum’s more general effort to digitize and give access to its entire collection through its recently redesigned database. It is therefore hoped that this overview will encourage further research on this collection of works from Ethiopia.
References


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1 For a more detailed discussion on the history and functions of different types of crosses in Christian Ethiopia, see Chojnacki 2006: 17-78; Heyer 2003; Moore 2003; and Juel-Jensen 1993. For a study of its symbolism, see Chojnacki 2007: 79-90; and Hect, Benzing, and Girma Kidane 1990: 15–17; also Perzel 1983 deals with his topic, though she provides no substantive evidence for her argument that the interface patterns of Ethiopian crosses evoke the rhythms and shape of the Ethiopic liturgy.

2 All the accession numbers start with 1991.352., followed by a number between 1 and 258; for sake of simplicity, the objects in the collection are here referred to using just the final part of their accession number.

3 37 (coll. nos. 1-2, 4-29, 31-37, 157, 188) are made of wood – the types of wood have not yet been identified; and 141 (coll. nos. 50-156, 158-187, 189-192) of metal (including brass, silver alloy, silver, iron, copper).

4 2 (coll. nos. 3, 30) are made of wood and 6 (coll. nos. 39-44) of metal (brass, copper, and silver).

5 Coll. nos. 45-49 (brass and iron).

6 66 (coll. nos. 192–258) are made of metal (including silver alloy, silver, iron) and 1 of wood (coll. no. 38).

7 The following account is based on documents from the DMA’s archive which I was kindly allowed to access; especially on the correspondence between Louise Cantwell, Vice President for Institutional Advancement and General Counsel at Our Lady of the Lake University (who in the early 1990s helped the Reddens find a suitable destination for their collection) and the museum’s curators.

8 For further remarks about this exhibition, see Biro 2014.


10 The criteria for dating Ethiopian crosses have been outlined clearly by Moore; 1971: 7-8; and 1973 67-68; see also Chojnacki 2006: 91-159. The approach to dating Ethiopian crosses has seen little development in the past decades, and the dating of some examples remains very problematic, though the documentation and publication of numerous works in the past decades does allow us to draw conclusions based on a larger corpus of examples. Nevertheless, unless the cross has an inscription which mentions a date or an owner, the suggested dates remain tentative. This applies to most of the crosses discussed here. Two more points should be made. The first is that the dates given to the crosses in the publications referenced herein are, in most cases, tentative, and that mistakes occur; the most emblematic case is
perhaps a catalogue of the exhibition Æthiopia Porta Fidei, in which several twentieth century crosses are variously dated between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries (Barbieri and Fiaccadori 2012: cat. Nos. 50-52, 54-62). The second, is that an increasing number of fakes are being made in Ethiopia. Thus, when provenance is unknown, caution is due when drawing conclusions about the date of a cross.

21 Moore: 112
22 Nat. inv. no. 324, fol. 125v.
23 Aeth. 260, fol. 1v.
24 Object nos. 2004-7-11; 2004-7-12.
25 Coll. no. 1098-1905.
26 Coll. no. 72-10-5.
27 Coll. no. 5990.
28 Coll. Nos. 6124, 6186
29 Coll. nos. 10, 11, 16, 21, 22, 23.
30 Coll. no. 54.2890.
31 Coll. nos. 6615, 6805, 7035, 7038
32 Coll. no 6595, 7028, 7041, 7133
33 Coll. No. 61.342.
34 For a study of this motif in Ethiopian art and further bibliography, see Gnisci 2014.
35 Also coll. nos. 5, 61, 64, 161.
36 Dedicatory inscriptions mentioning the owner were placed on crosses already during the Zagwé period, see Bausi 2013: 171, n. 33; and continued to be added to object during the Solomonic period, see Tedeschi 1991, for an example.
37 Coll. no. 21089. This cross was donated by Emperor Menelik II to the church of ṢントTestFixture Ragu’el.
38 Coll. no. MEB 267-368. The inscription on this cross attributes ownership to the church of St. Qaddus Mika’el near Ankober, which was founded by the father of Menelik II, Sahle Selassie, which gives us a post-quam date for this work.
39 The cross was donated to the church of ṢントTestFixture Maryam in the late 1880s.
40 For an example, see Moore 1989: Fig. 156; Chojnacki 2006: Fig. 88.
41 Coll. no. Afl1868,1230.8.
42 Coll. no. 1733-1869.
43 Coll. no. 3939.
44 This article by Perczel contains numerous significant factual errors. For instance, the author claims that the symbol of the cross could not have reached Ethiopia prior to the rise of Islam in Northern Africa because such a symbol was not commonly employed by Christians prior to this period (1981: 52), not only is this not true, but the presence of crosses on numerous Aksumite coins shows that the symbol of the cross had reached Ethiopia long before the rise of the Arab Empire, see Munro-Hay 1993 for some examples. The author also claims that “hand crosses are known to have existed in the 16th century” and that “the oldest surviving examples in the collection of the IES […] have been attributed to the 17th century,” (1981: 55) whereas in fact even the collection in question includes several crosses from an earlier period, see for instance coll. nos. 4329 and 6222 (Hect, Benzing, and Girma Kidane 1990: 33–34, 82).
45 I am most grateful to Dr. Anna Ballian, senior curator at the Benaki Museum; Dr. Warren Woodfin, Queens College; Dr. Nikolaos Vryzidis, British School at Athens; and the V. Rev. Archimandrite Dr. Joachim Cotsonis, Hellenic College Holy Cross, for confirming my impression. The author is fully responsible for any errors or omissions. For an introduction to Byzantine processional crosses, with further references, see Cotsonis 1994; and Ballian 2004.
46 Coll. no. 476. I must thank the V. Rev. Archimandrite Dr. Joachim Cotsonis for drawing my attention to this example.
47 On the traditional silversmithing techniques used in Ethiopia, see Silverman and Sobania 1999.