

The hunt in Ethiopia

For the very first time a great number of Ethiopian folk art paintings, from the stores of several public and private collections, have been gathered together, expertly ordered according to theme, age, style elements, etc., displayed in a large exhibition and documented in a catalogue published for this occasion.

The following article about the hunt in Ethiopia was composed to further interest in the exhibitions of folk art painting which took place in the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich, in 1985–1986. The paintings were classified into nine different themes, for example: hunting, war, rulers, farm life, etc. Since I regard the hunt as a most interesting aspect of Ethiopian painting – and one not too generally known – I chose this theme for my article.

Before going into details of the hunt I shall offer some general explanations concerning this type of folk art painting. In earlier times Ethiopian painters were solely occupied with religious themes. Profane subjects were forbidden. The patrons of religious pictures were wealthy citizens and, in particular, the rulers.

Only after the diplomatic recognition of Ethiopia – as a result of the war won against Italy in 1896 – when foreigners entered the land, did profane themes begin to appear in Ethiopian paintings: diplomats and their colleagues sought contact secretly with the native artists and commissioned paintings. Pictures with scenes of farm life or hunting emerged though generally unsigned and without note of the place of origin since the painters were working «illegally».

In Ethiopia it was not customary to decorate homes with profane paintings. For that reason the examples which reached Europe in the possession of diplomats are unique products of the painting of this time.

Since these pictures, for the above mentioned reasons, were usually neither dated nor signed, the historical occurrences represented (favorite motifs were the war of 1868 against England and 1896 against Italy, the first airplane in Ethiopia, hunting scenes, the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon, the crowning of Haile Selassie 1930, etc.), together with the initial entry in museum registers and the biographies of donors are important helps in dating the works.

The collecting activities of the diplomats were concentrated on the years between 1896 and 1913. Interrupted by the First World War they recontinued from 1920 to 1935 until the Italian-Ethiopian war, and later the Second World War put an end to diplomatic relations and therewith to the possibility of collecting.

On the basis of these exactly dated phases of collection even the pictures whose contents offer no clue as to date can be ordered: pictures such as the Queen of Sheba, royal banquets and hunting scenes.

In the special painting technique of Ethiopian folk art painting, which is atypical for the rest of Africa, there are admixtures of Byzantine, Roman, Arabian and Judaean elements.

As painting ground the artist mostly used cloth or skin stretched onto frames. The outlines of the painting were sketched in with charcoal and then filled in with color. Just like the charcoal, the colors were also produced by the artists themselves: ground mineral and organic substances were mixed with the help of egg white or egg yolk. In recent times artists have begun to use European tube colors. The old tempera painting is slowly but surely being replaced by oils.