PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIRST
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE
HISTORY OF ETHIOPIAN ART

Sponsored by the Royal Asiatic Society

Held at the Warburg Institute of the University
of London, October 21 and 22, 1986

The Pindar Press
London 1989
III

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE DEPOSITION IN ETHIOPIAN PAINTING

Ewa Balicka-Witakowska

As shown by research on the iconography of the Deposition, this scene was first created in the ninth century in the art of Eastern Christianity. In Ethiopia it is known from the beginning of the fifteenth century but was seldom represented.

The earliest Ethiopian Deposition known today is found in the Gospels of the Church of St. Gabriel on Kebran-Island, (fol. 18v), written circa 1410, (Fig. 30). The scene represents the so-called first Byzantine type, one of the earliest images of which comes from the tenth-century Byzantine Gospels (Florence, Bibl. Laurenziana, Conv. soppr. 160, fol. 114v). This type was derived from a Crucifixion scene and it still keeps some traits of the latter: the symmetrical composition, the upright body of Christ attached to the cross except for the right hand, and the figure of John not participating actively in the event but standing aside, usually holding a book or making the orator gesture. Nicodemus was shown in this type as drawing the nail from the left hand of Christ while supporting the arm, and Mary raising up the other hand of the Son to her face, her hands being veiled as a mark of respect. To the same formula belong also Joseph and Nicodemus standing on a ladder and a stool respectively. Contrary to the Ethiopian miniature they were distinguished from each other both by physiognomy and clothing: Joseph appears as a dignified old man in a long robe and Nicodemus as a young assistant in a short tunic. One more element revealing the direct connection between some Depositions and the Crucifixion is the presence of the women accompanying Mary. We can see them in the Kebran miniature standing motionless, with their hands covered to mark respect, i.e. according to the Byzantine tradition prevalent up to the mid eleventh century. The number of the women was never fixed. For instance in the Byzantine Gospels of the eleventh century (Paris, Bibl. Nat. Ms. gr. 74), in the miniature illustrating the text of Matthew (fol. 59v) there are two of them, but in the illustration to John (fol. 208v) only one. In the Ethiopian scene one of the women stands to the left of the cross, that is in the place reserved for John, according to the generally accepted iconographic convention of both the
Deposition and the Crucifixion. We may surmise that carelessly copying his model the Ethiopian artist changed the disciple into a woman. Our supposition is supported on the one hand by similar errors or transformations in the other miniatures of the manuscript,\(^9\) and on the other, by the rarity of the multi-figure Deposition scene without John.\(^10\)

There are two other Depositions belonging to the same iconographic type as the scene from the Kebran Gospels: one in the manuscript of Gešen Amba, dating most probably from the end of the fifteenth century,\(^11\) (Fig. 31) and one in its copy made in the seventeenth century, Octateuch-Gopels-Senodos, (London, Brit. Lib. Or. 481, fol. 106v),\(^12\) (Fig. 32). The changes which we see here in relation to the previous scene are of little importance: Joseph and Nicodemus are portrayed as middle-aged men, with black beards and greying hair, without a ladder or a stool, Mary as touching her Son's hand, her hands unveiled. So are the hands of an accompanying woman—Mary Magdalene according to the inscription.\(^13\) Some characteristics of the scene, originating most probably with the author of the miniature of the Gešen Amba manuscript, are the image of Mary in contrast to the other persons without a halo, and the pincers in Nicodemus' hands as thin as a string. The crown of thorns, the nails and Christ's bleeding wounds in the seventeenth century miniature are in accordance with the iconography of that epoch and are not present in the two hundred years earlier original.\(^14\)

The scene of the diptych IES No. 4132, dated to the sixteenth century,\(^15\) represents a very rare iconographic formula, (Fig. 33). The body of Christ is completely detached from the cross, which is still seen in the background. It is in horizontal position and bent trapezoidally; the torso with the limply hanging head and arms repose on the chest of the one of the disciples who supports the body by the waist; the legs rest on the shoulder of the other disciple.\(^16\) Thus what the artist has shown is in fact not so much the moment of the deposition itself as the carrying of the Saviour's body to the grave by two disciples.

The trifigural Deposition, that is the type based on the Gospel narrative, was created as early as the ninth or tenth century. One of the oldest representations of this type, dating from 913 is preserved in Tavşanlı Kilise in Cappadocia. We see here Christ's body, with both hands released from the nails, sliding down onto the chest of Joseph who supports it, while Nicodemus is busy with the feet.\(^17\) The Deposition scenes composed in this way are however known first of all from Carolingian and Ottonian art, where they occur in two variants.\(^18\) In the first Christ's legs are still nailed to the cross and Nicodemus is just drawing the nails out, as for instance in the miniature of the Sacramentary of Robert de Jumiège (Rouen, Bibl. Munic., MS Y 6 No. 247, fol. 71v), 1006–23.\(^19\) In the second, the body released from all the nails is carried by the disciples, while Joseph supports its upper part and Nicodemus the feet, as in the miniature of the Gospels of Echternach (Codex Aureus Epternacensis, Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Cod. I 19, fol. 101), circa 990.\(^20\) It might be assumed, that the latter version was the archetype of the painting of the Ethiopian diptych, but there is an important difference: in the European representations Christ is always turned face down, whereas in the Ethiopian face upward. This is, however, the position in which the body was often represented much later, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially in Northern Europe, as we can see for example in the triptych of the Meister des Marienliebens (Köln,
Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Kreuzabnahme Altar) 1460–90.\textsuperscript{21} We can surmise, that the artist could not manage such a complex multi-figural composition and therefore picked only the central, most significant group.

It seems that the Deposition scene of the triptych of IES No. 3672, dated to the end of the sixteenth century,\textsuperscript{22} (Fig. 34), is also a result of abbreviation of a late Medieval European painting. Christ's body bent at the waist with the arms hanging down, supported by the two disciples, is characteristic of the aforementioned variant of the Deposition in Carolingian and Ottonian art. In this variant, however, the Saviour's legs are always free of nails, Joseph and Nicodemus stand on the ground and the carried body takes the form of an arc. On the other hand, the body bent far forewards, the tall cross and the disciples climbing the ladder, are all elements of the scene typical of Gothic images, especially those which strove for dramatic effect. So for example two Deposition scenes of the Meister der Heiligen Veronika of the mid fifteenth century (Köln, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, WRM No. 62 and No. 794),\textsuperscript{23} if we disregard the secondary figures, display close similarity with the Ethiopian painting. Nicodemus is even making the same gesture as he grasps Christ's elbow. However, the Ethiopian artist could not manage the posture of Joseph, who in his model was probably shown taking upon himself the whole burden of the body so that he disappeared behind it almost completely, as in the German paintings. In the Ethiopian scene he is only lifting the Saviour's other arm, that is he plays the role usually assigned to Mary. Consequently the scene makes a somewhat strange effect, as the body holds itself in an unnatural position without any real support.

We know of three examples of the Deposition scene which are connected with the 'classic' period of the so-called first Gondarene style and consequently dated to the mid seventeenth century. They can be found in the manuscripts: Ta'amrā Maryam, (Fig. 35) and two Gospels, (Figs. 36, 37) (all London, Brit. Lib., Or. 641, fol. 252v, Or. 508, fol. 95v, Or. 510, fol. 5v.).\textsuperscript{24} These representations differ from the earlier ones mostly in that here it is Mary and John\textsuperscript{25} who are taking down the body from the cross, while Joseph and Nicodemus are turned into assistants occupied with less important tasks. Although the three miniatures are quite similar to each other, they were most probably copied from different models.\textsuperscript{26} These are not easy to reconstruct, however, for it seems that Ethiopian painters did not quite correctly understand the models, and by faulty identification of persons represented in them, created a new, otherwise unknown iconographic formula.\textsuperscript{27}

John as a person playing an active role in the deposition appears in the iconographic type which became popular both in the East and in the West from the eleventh century. It shows him and Mary each supporting one of Christ's arms, while the weight of the body reposes on Joseph.\textsuperscript{28} So it is, for instance, in a miniature of the Armenian Gospels of 1057 (Erevan, Library of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, Matenadaran 3784, fol. 9v).\textsuperscript{29} It is only rarely that John does anything more: such an exception is the Deposition in the French ivory polyptych of the fourteenth century, (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, No. 140–1866), where he embraces Christ's body about the waist and kisses it.\textsuperscript{30} Duccio in the Maestà-retabulum, 1308–15, (Siena, Museo della Opera del Duomo)\textsuperscript{31} introduced the Deposition in which John embraces Christ's legs about the knees. He was followed by Lorenzetti in the fresco of San Francesco
at Assisi, circa 1330, and other painters of the Sienese School. John in the
three Ethiopian miniatures is however quite different from all the represen-
tations mentioned above. His position under the cross and his role in the
removal of the body shows clearly that he must have been confused with
Joseph.

Mary supporting Christ's body appears first in the so-called second Byzantine
type of the Deposition, which developed at the end of the eleventh century
under the influence of the *Threnos*. Accordingly, Christ's mother was depic-
ted as holding one elbow of her Son and bringing her head close to His head in
order to support it, as can be seen for example in the Deposition in the Church
of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi, 1167. Later, roughly from the fourteenth cen-
tury on, she was shown as supporting the whole upper part of His body, as
for example on the fresco of the Church of the Peribleptos at Mistra, circa
1350. However, she is always helped by Joseph, who stands either behind or
beside her, whereas John stands apart, or holds one arm of Christ – the gesture
which in the miniature of the MSS Or. 641 and Or. 508 is attributed to Mary. In
the miniature of MS Or. 510 the mother of Christ clearly supports the lower part
of His body. This motive must originate with the Ethiopian painter, as it does
not appear in any other image of the Deposition Eastern or Western.

Apart from the central group, other elements of our miniatures, such as two
assistants on high ladders and a third at the foot of the cross, the presence of
Mary Magdalene and other Holy Women, finally the use of the shroud suggests that the basis of these representations too is to be sought in late
mediaeval West European Depositions. As usual they were transformed and
simplified by the Ethiopian artist. So Mary Magdalene is not represented
embracing and kissing the Saviour's legs but as holding and supporting one of
his feet in the Deposition of the MSS Or. 510 and Or. 508. In the MS Or. 641 her
place at the foot of the cross is taken by the squatting Mary, sister of Lazarus.
The assistants in two latter scenes help to support Christ's body or to bring it
don a shroud, but in the MS Or. 510 their presence becomes meaningless,
as they are deprived of their usual functions. The small figure of the third
assistant represented in the MS Or. 641 deserves particular attention. He has no
implement in his hands and he is holding his nose with his fingers. The most
probable interpretation which crosses one's mind is that the Ethiopian artist
depicted in this way a person recalcitrant to Christ, manifesting his contempt for
the dead body.

The Deposition in the diptych from a private collection in the USA, (Fig. 38),
is painted in a style that is a continuation of the first Gondarene style and must
be dated to the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The
representation belongs to the same type as the three miniatures described
above. One can even gain the impression that the diptych painter chose some
elements from each and combined them in his painting: this may be how this
new variant of the scene came into being. Thus the group of Jesus, Mary, John
and the assistant on the left is very similar to that of the miniature in MS Or. 508
in the position of the figures, their gestures and the proportions of their bodies.
The figure of the other assistant, however, differs from that in all the previous
representations, as he is clearly supporting Christ's arm. The woman kneeling
at the foot of the cross and identified by the inscription as 'Mary of the
perfume' is reminiscent of that in MS Or. 510, although in the diptych she is
much larger. The second woman, squatting, is called Salome like the woman in MS Or. 508, but her dress is different. Mary Magdalene is unexpectedly the smallest of the women and resembles the Salome of MS Or. 641. A characteristic of the diptych scene is the halo which surrounds only Christ’s head, whereas in the three miniatures it is placed at random.

Two other images of the Deposition dated to the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are represented in the diptych of IES No. 3892, (Fig. 39) and in a painting of the Church Qaha Iyasus near Gonder, (Fig. 40). Practically the same iconographic formula can be seen in both of them. It shows Christ’s body completely separated from the cross, with Joseph holding it by the head and Nicodemus by the knees. The composition of these representations as well as their particular elements point again to a European model, perhaps one similar to the Deposition of the Meister der Heiligenblut-Kapelle (Köln, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, WRM No. 422), 16th century, or the Maître de Flémalle (Liverpool, Walter Art Gallery), 1430. The Ethiopian painter reduced the number of figures to two disciples and their helpers. In the diptych Mary is also shown in half-figure. She stands behind one of the disciples and is not touching the body. We may presume, however, that in the model she supported Christ’s left hand, since in the Ethiopian version the hand is still raised, although nobody supports it.

This is not the only illogical element, from our point of view, to be noticed in the two Ethiopian Depositions. They show clearly how many problems the Ethiopian painters had in copying crowded, perspective pictures with many superimposed details. Thus in the diptych Joseph stands on a ladder leaning ‘against the air’, since the difficulty the painter had showing the cross, which in the original was in the second plane, led him to shift it to one side. In the painting of Qaha Iyasus one of the assistants can be seen climbing a ladder that leans against the rear of the cross. And yet, against logic, Joseph is climbing the other side of the same ladder. What is more, the second assistant is also hanging in the air, since his ladder is occupied by Nicodemus.

The Deposition of the triptych IES No. 3329, which most probably was painted in the first half of the eighteenth century, (Fig. 41), differs both in style and iconography from those mentioned above, although all three date from roughly the same period. The robust figures with large heads and the range of colours betray the connection of our triptych with the so-called second Gondarene style, which had developed since the beginning of the eighteenth century. While the painter adjusted his style to the fashion of the epoch, in iconography he followed a very old model. The representation of Christ with both hands unnailed, supported by Joseph while Mary touches His hand and Nicodemus is busy with His feet, appears in Tokali Kilise in Cappadocia at the beginning of the tenth century. This oriental type was followed by Byzantine and Western artists. It became particularly popular in Gothic art and developed several variants. The Ethiopian painting, which is similar to some of these, shows however one important difference: in all the Byzantine and Western images Christ’s feet are still attached to the cross and either Nicodemus or an assistant is unnailing them. In the Ethiopian representation Christ’s feet have already been freed from the nails and a person below the cross is clearly supporting them. The person’s face is bearded, young and surrounded by a halo, thus suggesting his identification as John. By showing John in such a
function the Ethiopian painter departed again from the usual iconographic formula according to which John should be standing aside playing no role in taking the body down.

The triptych of IES No. 4327, (Fig. 42), attributed by S. Chojnacki to the Master of Arabic Script and dated to the beginning of the eighteenth century, also contains the Deposition scene. According to that author, two parts may be distinguished in it: the lower part, in which John and Mary are shown in accordance with the convention known from the second Gondarene style Crucifixion, and the upper part for which a late Mediaeval, Renaissance or Baroque European painting was the model. Putting them together gives an effect of glaring contrast between the static figure at the foot of the cross and the dynamic group placed high above it. The central point of the group is Christ’s body represented as if sitting and supported by four figures. We do not know exactly which of them are Joseph and Nicodemus and which are assistants; in the early iconographic types of the Deposition, it was only Mary and the disciples who could touch the holy limbs and then according to prescribed rules, but later the rules were not strictly observed. As an example we may point to the Deposition of Rosso Fiorentino of 1512 (Volterra, Pinacoteca), very similar to the Ethiopian scene, where the body is supported by two assistants, while Joseph from the top of the cross and Nicodemus from the ladder direct their work.

The Deposition of the Church of the Trinity at Däbrä Berhan, Gonder, (Fig. 43), painted circa 1820 represents stylistically a continuation of the second Gondarene style. The characteristic of this representation is the strong accentuated verticalism of the composition which develops in three parallel lines. The central line is constituted by a high cross and Christ’s body being brought down with a shroud by one of the assistants. The assistant stands on a high ladder which composes the second line with the figure of Nicodemus supporting Christ’s feet. The third line is marked by John and Joseph, the latter standing on a ladder stretching his hand upwards. The artist attains the effect of additional elongation of the whole picture by placing Mary on a lower level than the foot of the cross.

The Deposition composed with pronounced verticalism was introduced in the fourteenth century by Duccio and the Sienese School, but it was willingly taken up by many European artists in the fifteenth century and later. Its popularity may be explained by the fact that this type of scene enhanced the dramatic atmosphere of the event by a new effect — the impression of great distance between Christ’s body high up on the cross and the persons gathered below. The Ethiopian artist copied one of his paintings, presumably one similar to the miniature of Jean Fouquet, Livre d’Heures d’Etienne Chevalier, (Chantilly, Musée Condé), 1450–58, but of course made some changes and simplifications. In the original John was most probably depicted with his hands raised up, ready to receive the body, as for instance on the fresco by Niccolò Gerini at Pisa (San Francesco, Sala di Capitolo di Bonaventura); in the Ethiopian variant his hands are raised too, but to embrace the trunk of the cross. Joseph, who is making a somewhat vague gesture with his left hand, was undoubtedly represented embracing the body with one hand and holding the transverse of the cross with the other, as can be seen in another miniature by Jean Fouquet, Les Belles Heures de Jean de France, Duc de Berry, fol. 149.
Finally Mary, who in the European paintings of the above-mentioned type was usually depicted with her hands raised toward her Son, in the painting of the Church of the Trinity at Däbrä Berhan looks like the Mary of most of the Crucifixions painted in the second Gondarene style.

The same type of scene as the painting at Däbrä Berhan is represented by the Deposition in the triptych IES No. 4189, (Fig. 44), most probably from the end of the eighteenth century. Although Mary is here omitted and the figure of John with his back to the cross belongs to the neighbouring scene of the Crucifixion, the central group composed of Joseph, Nicodemus and an assistant, all supporting the body, is presented in almost the same way. The verticalism of the composition is however lost because on the one side the figures are crowded together, while on the other, the figure of a female donor prostrated in worship, placed horizontally at the foot of the cross, reduces the apparent height of the picture. A great emphasis on physical pain can be perceived in representation of Christ’s body: besides the drops of blood flowing from His head surrounded by the crown of thorns, we can see the bleeding wounds from the flagellation.

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the paintings on the walls of qeddus geddusan in the Church of Mary at Ențọtto were done by Aleqa Heruy. As a model for the Deposition scene, (Fig. 45), the painter must have used some true copy of Rubens’ painting of 1611 (Antwerp Cathedral), which he copied in his turn very accurately. The composition is the same as the Flemish master’s: a diagonal line is formed by the bearded body of Christ, which is being lowered in a shroud and held and supported on all sides by many figures. Of these, the depiction of the two disciples is most faithful to the original: their position, facial features and clothing are the same as in Rubens’ painting. The same could be said of the assistants standing high on the ladders were it not for their faces, which the Ethiopian painter shows en face, inconsistently with the complicated position of their bodies as they bend over the transverse of the cross. A striking awkwardness is also seen in the representation of Mary’s left hand, which is unnaturally enlarged. A closer look at the Deposition from Antwerp suggests that the error must have arisen by joining Mary’s raised hand with the hand of Joseph, which is only poorly perceptible under Christ’s arm. The departure from the Rubens painting is most clearly seen in the way of representing John and Mary Magdalene. In the original the disciple is bending far backwards when he takes the weight of Christ’s body as it slides down; Mary Magdalene is supporting the Saviour’s leg, its foot reposing lightly on her arm. In the Ethiopian version John is kneeling rigidly, his face turned to the spectator; Mary Magdalene seems to be falling under the burden of Christ’s huge foot, which reposes on her neck. The inscription accompanying the scene differs from all those quoted previously, as it is an exact citation of Luke 23, 52–53.

To the repertory of the Deposition scenes described above one more may be added, which although done in Ethiopia was not the work of a native but of a European artist. It is one of the miniatures signed by Niccolò Brancagone, now in the Church of Wafa Iyasus, Gayent, (Fig. 46). We can see there one of the disciples depicted as a middle-aged man supporting by one arm the body of Christ, which is slipping down onto his back. The other disciple, an old man
with a hoary beard, is on his knees drawing the nails from the Saviour’s feet. It remains unexplained why Brancalione instead of taking inspiration from contemporary paintings, which he had certainly seen in his native country, took up an archaic type originating in the ninth to tenth century. He modernized it only slightly—Christ’s feet are fixed with one nail only, and Joseph and Nicodemus are confused in either function or age.

From the material presented above the following conclusions may be drawn:

The iconography of the oldest Ethiopian Deposition known today—a miniature dated to the beginning of the fifteenth century, is based on an early Byzantine type of scene with developed in the tenth century. The most important change made to this type, probably by the Ethiopian artist, is the replacement of John by a Holy Woman. The same Byzantine iconographic formula, changed only in details, is depicted about a century later in the manuscript of Gešen Amba and in its seventeenth century copy.

It seems that the Byzantine models were abandoned by the Ethiopian artists in the sixteenth century. Two Deposition scenes known from this period—both painted on wood—are versions of European paintings of the fifteenth or sixteenth century, with greatly simplified compositions and fewer figures.

The same kind of models were used by the artists who painted in the first Gondarene style and their followers. In contrast to the artists who worked in the preceding century, they tried—with varying results—to preserve the narrative character of the models and their complex composition, with the action developing on more than one plane.

The same may be said about the Ethiopian Depositions painted during the eighteenth century and later, although here, the technical problems connected with the copying of European, often very emotional compositions, are solved in a way testifying to a better comprehension of the rules by which the models were created.

The exceptional Deposition by Brancalione, reverting to a very old iconographic type, was never imitated by Ethiopian painters, as far as the evidence shows.
Fig. 32. Octateuch-Gospels-\textit{Senodos}, MS London, British Library Or. 481

Fig. 33. Diptych, IES Coll. No. 4132
Fig. 36. Gospels, MS London, British Library, Or. 508

Fig. 37. Gospels, MS London, British Library, Or. 510
Fig. 40. Painting on canvas. Church of Qaha Iyasus near Gondar

Fig. 41. Triptych, IES Coll. No. 3329
Fig. 42. Triptych, IES Coll. No. 4327

Fig. 43. Wall-painting, Church of the Trinity, Dübrä Berhan, Gonder
Fig. 44. Triptych, IES Coll. No. 4189

Fig. 45. Aleqa Heruy, wall-painting, Church of Mary, Entotto
Fig. 46. Niccolò Brancaeleone, Book of Miniatures, Church of Wafa Iyasus, Sayent