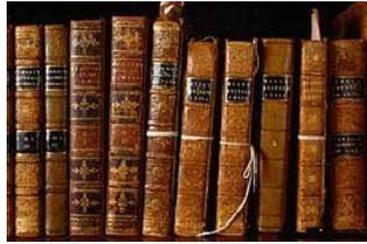


Recensioni - Book Reviews



Claire Bosc-Tiessé and Anais Wion, *Peintures sacrées d’Ethiopie*, Editions Sepia, Paris, 2005. (133 p., 38€, ISBN 2-84280-091-5)

The manner in which Ethiopia’s cultural heritage was robbed by a French scholarly mission, the Mission Dakar-Djibouti, in 1932 is revealed in this recent book by two French scholars, Claire Bosc-Tiessé and Anais Wion. Their beautifully illustrated study constitutes a valuable contribution to the history of Ethiopian art and also makes remarkable reading from the standpoint of the country’s cultural heritage.

The story of this cultural depredation, which was carried out in the interest of the Musée de l’Homme in Paris, began in 1928-9 when the French scholar Marcel Griaule visited Gojjam in north-west Ethiopia, and developed a keen interest in traditional Ethiopian art. Returning to Paris he proceeded to organize the famous Dakar-Djibouti mission which travelled from West to East Africa between 1931 and 1933. The mission’s objectives included the “intensive study of Ethiopian painting” and it was planned to bring a painter from France, who could teach “new techniques”, in particular to render Ethiopian paintings more permanent.

With these ends in mind Marcel Griaule returned to Africa in 1931 and made his way from French West Africa via Ethiopia to Djibouti. He was accompanied by Marcel Leiris, who described the mission’s work in his classic account *L’Afrique Fantôme* (published 1934), Gaston-Louis Roux – the painter selected to teach – and Deborah Lifchitz, an able linguist who only a few years later was to die in a Nazi extermination camp. Bosc-Tiessé and Wion, discussing this stage of the mission, explain that it was relatively easy to operate in French colonial territory, where the authorities willingly put guards and interpreters at the mission’s disposal.

In Ethiopia, by contrast, the visitors found it difficult to import as many fire-arms as it wanted and were kept waiting at the Sudan- Ethiopian frontier for a month!

On duly reaching Gondar, the mission, however, immediately set to work. On 29 June 1932 Griaule succeeded in entering the church of Gana Yohannes and took a “furtive” view of its paintings which greatly fascinated him.

Gaston-Louis Roux, who had arrived in Gondar on 11 July 1932, two days later produced a brightly coloured painting of the Crucifixion “in pure Abyssinian style” with a view to exchanging it for an original 17th or 18th century picture in one of the city’s churches. To that end he poured a bucket of water over it to show the local priests that his paint was more resistant to water than theirs. It was thereafter “easy”, Bosc-Tiessé and Wion report, to “exchange old mural paintings for copies”.

In August, Griaule began dismantling the old 17th century paintings in the church of Abba Antonios to replace them with more colourful - one might say garish - copies. He tried the same thing at the church of Gondaoch Mariam, but its clergy refused to agree to this act of spoliation. The church of Qaha Iyasus was, however more co-operative, and soon afterwards parted with its paintings "on the same conditions as that of Abba Antonios". Many of these substitute paintings were produced by a local Ethiopian artist, Abba Kasa, who was specially employed for the purpose.

Besides wall paintings the mission acquired a unique collection of icons. One, dating from the 15th century and depicting the Virgin and Child and St George, is reputed to be the oldest known work of its kind. Other icons dated from the 17th and 18th centuries and included several representations of the Kwerata Re'esu, or Christ with the Crown of Thorns, as well as other scenes in the life of Christ.

The Dakar-Djibouti mission also succeeded, in five months, in acquiring no less than 370 Ethiopian manuscripts: we do not know how exactly they did this, but the modern Ethiopian historian Professor Bahru Zewde half a century later reported that the Frenchmen purchased such items without "counting the cost".

Griaule was also interested in Empress Mentewwab's ruined church at Gorgora just outside Gondar. One interesting feature of the building was that it was the site of about a hundred 17th or 18th century porcelain tiles, originally imported from Holland, which had had a significant impact on Ethiopian art, as evident from blue and white Ethiopian paintings depicted in churches in the Lake Tana area. The church also had a dozen metal plaques of various interesting designs. Griaule appears to have taken all the tiles and plaques he could find - for none appear to exist in Ethiopia today.

At the end of their stay in Gondar the mission prepared to depart. Though leaving by way of Djibouti they feared customs control there might prove difficult. They accordingly hid their treasures in various cases, and dispatched them via Eritrea, where customs control was thought to be more relaxed.

The presence of a Tabot, or altar slab, in their baggage posed, however, a difficulty. Griaule and his colleagues were afraid that the customs, because of its holy character, might raise awkward questions: the Dakar mission therefore burnt the Tabot, and reduced it to ashes.

This book deserves serious attention of everyone interested in the preservation of cultural heritage.

Richard Pankhurst