

'African Zion' Exhibits 14 Centuries Of Christianity

By Angela Walker

BALTIMORE (AP) - The image of a white Madonna and child is familiar to most Americans, but a new exhibition presents Christ and the Virgin Mary as people of color dressed in brightly patterned Ethiopian garb.

"African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia" chronicles the tradition of Christianity in the East African country from the 4th century through the 18th century with more than 100 manuscripts, icons and gold and silver metalwork on display.

"I think that when people think of African art, they think of art from West Africa," said Margaret Booher, executive director of InterCultura, a nonprofit organization based in Fort Worth, Texas that is co-sponsoring the exhibit. "This brings to light the Christian side of art from the east." The national tour of the exhibit began at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore Oct. 17. It runs through Jan. 9 before moving to New York, Houston, Dallas, Chicago, Cambridge, Mass., Cincinnati and Los Angeles.

The Ethiopian epic "The Glory of the Kings" contends that the biblical Queen of Sheba traveled from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to seek the wisdom of Solomon. The rulers of Ethiopia claimed descent from the kings of Israel through Sheba and Solomon's son, Menelik.

Two captured Syrian slaves, Frumentius and Aedesius, converted the Emperor Ezana to Christianity in the 4th century. After his freedom was granted, Frumentius was consecrated a bishop in Egypt, but later returned to convert the Ethiopian people.

"African Zion" showcases illuminated manuscripts guarded for centuries in local monasteries that will be on display for the first time outside of Ethiopia.

"A number of the objects come from monasteries and churches in the countryside that even as a tourist traveling to Ethiopia you wouldn't be able to see," said Marilyn Heldman, a professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and a curator of the exhibition.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity." Ethiopian Christian religious art incorporates the spiritual images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints and angels with images of everyday worshippers.

"There's a wonderful fusion of the real and the spiritual," said Gary Vikan, curator of medieval art at The Walters Art Gallery.

Richly patterned and colored icons were used in public ceremonies and in private worship. Smaller versions were worn as talismans to protect wearers from harm, Vikan said.

"Icons are something that transcend any religious affiliation," he said. "They speak to an aspect of human spirituality that everyone admires." The exhibition also includes filigreed processional crosses, and coins that were the first ever

to use crosses in their design, Heldman said.

Abuna Pawlos, the head of the national church of Ethiopia, will travel to Baltimore for the exhibition, said the curator, who met with the patriarch and his private secretary to negotiate the loan of the sacred objects.

"They are very pleased that people in America will be seeing these works of art, because it's important for them to realize the unique culture of Ethiopia," she said.

Photographs of Ethiopian worshippers in the United States by photographer Chester Higgins Jr. also will be on display as part of the exhibit.

Support for the exhibition from Baltimore's black residents has been overwhelming, said Julia Forbes, school programs coordinator at The Walters. Several businesses have made donations, and more than 30 volunteers have trained to be tour guides.

"This exhibition really allows us to reach out to the African-American community," Booher said. "I hope it will help African-Americans, who might have been put off by museums, to bridge the gap where they may not have felt they had access before." The city has donated two buses to allow about 4,000 public school students to tour the exhibition. A hands-on gallery will enable children to try on Ethiopian clothes and listen to traditional and modern music, Forbes said.

"Cross-cultural programs like this gallery help children recognize that people are people wherever they live," said Diane Stillman, the education director at the gallery.

"African Zion" will be on display through Jan. 9, 1994 at The Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore; Feb. 1, 1994-March 29, 1994 at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York; April 21, 1994-June 16, 1994 at the Menil Collection in Houston; Sept. 28, 1994-Nov. 30, 1994 at the Museum of African American History in Chicago; March 20, 1995-May 15, 1995 at The Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass.; August 25, 1995-October 20, 1995 at the Cincinnati Museum of Art, Cincinnati; Nov. 12, 1995-Jan. 7, 1996 at the Museum of African Art in Los Angeles.



The coffee plant was known in Ethiopia before A.D. 1000, where its fruit was used for food and wine.

African American History

October 23

1947 - The NAACP petitioned United Nations on racial conditions in the United States.

October 24

1964 - Zambia gained independence from Great Britain.
1972 - Jackie Robinson died.

October 25

1945 - Jackie Robinson signed by Branch Rickey to play professional baseball on the Brooklyn Dodgers team. First African American in the "big leagues".

1992 - Toronto [Canada] Blue Jays manager Cito Gaston became the first African American to manage a baseball team to World Series title.

October 26

1911 - Mahalia Jackson born. Gospel singer.
1921 - Solomon P. Hood named Minister to Liberia.

October 27

1821 - New York paper advertised Negro stage play.
1954 - Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. became first African American general in United States Air Force.

October 28

1972 - Jackie Robinson biography published.
1981 - Edward M. McIntyre elected first African American mayor of Augusta, Ga.

October 29

1938 - Roscoe Conklin Giles became first African American certified in general surgery.
1949 - Alonzo G. Moron became first African American president of Hampton Institute, Va.
1974 - Muhammad Ali vs. George Foreman.

Photographer Saves Black Families' Histories in Pictures and Words

By Martha Waggoner

If Atlanta photographer Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier visits your home, prepare to scrounge through closets, trunks and forgotten boxes hiding in the back of drawers for the treasure that she seeks.

Linnemeier, who's working on a project to record the lives of blacks in the South through pictures and oral history, doesn't want to see the formal portraits that hang on walls. She wants snapshots taken at birthdays, family reunions and church picnics.

"A lot of people, you say you're looking for photos, they pull out portraits taken in studios," said Linnemeier, a native of Southern Pines, where much of her family still lives. "Somehow, there's also a little box with photos hidden away. They say 'You don't want to see that.' I say, 'Yes, I do. That's when you get the really beautiful kinds of things. Things in boxes and under the beds and in closets - the photos that take my

breath away." Linnemeier, who did a similar project in Mississippi, has just started going through North Carolina, asking black families to let her copy their family snapshots. The project, called "North Carolina Self-Portrait," is being paid for by the North Carolina Humanities Council and the Duke University Center for Documentary Studies.

The idea for the project dates back about 20 years to when Alex Harris, now a professor of public policy studies at Duke and a founder of the documentary studies center, was a young photographer

in Alaska. As a favor to the Eskimos, he copied some of their family snapshots. Some snapshots were tattered and the family wanted better copies; some were the only copy and the family wanted more.

"I began to notice how different their snapshots were than mine," Harris said. "Their pictures were in many ways much more revealing and honest than the ones I was making. ... Their pictures changed a great deal the way I began to photograph Eskimos." Some of those family photos made it into the book that Harris and another photographer put together on the Eskimos.

So when a project came up to illustrate the lives of blacks, Harris remembered his experience in Alaska. "What better way to do it than through the photographs that blacks themselves have chosen and made to represent themselves and placed in their family albums," he said.

Another photographer began the Mississippi project in 1988 and Linnemeier took over a year later. The North Carolina project is just beginning. Linnemeier visited Southern Pines last week and plans to be in Asheville Nov. 15-21; New Bern, Dec. 13-19; and Durham, Jan. 10-16. Because of limited money, she's staying in people's homes during her travels.

When the North Carolina project is completed, the materials will be used, along with those gathered in Mississippi several years ago, to create a book and

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