Large print
exhibition text

AFRICA & BYZANTIUM

THE MET

AFRICA AND BYZANTIUM

In 330 CE, the Roman emperor Constantine moved the imperial capital from Rome to a city further east, Byzantion. The emperor's "New Rome" (modern-day Istanbul) became popularly known as Constantinople. We use the term "Byzantium" to refer to the eastern Roman Empire, which ruled until the fifteenth century. Despite being a vast and historically significant empire that spanned parts of Africa, Europe, and Asia, Byzantium's extensive connections to northern and eastern Africa are not well known. This exhibition explores Africa's position within the Byzantine world's artistic, cultural, economic, and sociopolitical life.

Africa & Byzantium traces three artistic arcs. From the fourth to the seventh century, early Byzantine visual and intellectual culture was shaped by wealthy patrons, artists, and religious leaders in northern Africa. As Islam became a dominant faith of the region in the mid-eighth century, distinctive Christian religious and artistic traditions nevertheless flourished in African kingdoms. After the Byzantine Empire fell in 1453, Ethiopian and Coptic artists in eastern Africa

continued to find inspiration in Roman and Byzantine art through the twentieth century. The exhibition design follows these transformations by evoking and gradually abstracting Byzantine architecture in Africa. The vibrant and inspiring art displayed throughout, culminating with a group of contemporary works, brings alive themes of translation, circulation, and memory, raising critical questions about where and when Byzantium “ends.”

Hear experts illuminate northern Africa’s key role in the Roman and Byzantine worlds.
metmuseum.org/AfricaAndByzantium

Provenance

How did that get here?

“Provenance” is the term we use to describe an artwork’s ownership history. Every effort has been made to track object provenances as thoroughly and accurately as possible based on available scholarship, traceable transactions, and the existing archaeological record.

Provenances of objects in The Met collection are updated as additional research comes to light; visitors are encouraged to visit metmuseum.org and to search by an object’s accession number for its most up-to-date information.

Mosaic with Preparations for a Feast

Tunisia, Carthage, fourth quarter 2nd century
Marble, limestone, glass paste

Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities, Paris

A diverse group of men carry daily objects such as table utensils, wine carafes, and food. Depicting preparations for a feast, such images decorated dining rooms throughout North Africa. Scenes like this one conveyed the status and privilege of elite patrons.

Mosaics adorned the floors of homes in North Africa before the Roman conquest in the second century BCE through the late antique period and possibly later. Examples of floor mosaics survive in greater numbers in the North African provinces than anywhere else in the Roman Empire, and the skills of North African mosaicists were highly prized throughout the world.

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Mosaic with Lion Attacking Onager

Tunisia, Hadrumetum (Sousse), 150–200
Stone, glass

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California (73.AH.75)

Lions are a recurrent theme in mosaics, rock crystal figures, and terracotta tiles attributed to North African artisans between the second and seventh centuries. The image of a lion attacking a horselike animal frequently represents the triumph of political authority. Here, an African lion tears into an onager, a wild animal found mostly in western and central Asia. This scene is a small portion of the floor that decorated a villa in Hadrumetum, one of the most important cities in Roman Africa.

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AFRICA IN LATE ANTIQUITY

“Who now knows,” Saint Augustine of Hippo asked his congregation in Carthage (near modern-day Tunis), “which peoples in the Roman Empire were what, since all have become Romans and all are named Romans?” The year was 416 CE, and Augustine’s question emphasized both the political unity and cultural diversity of the Roman Empire. During the late antique period (around 284 to 641), every major city in the Mediterranean basin, particularly northern African ones, was diverse and multicultural.

For almost 700 years, some of the Roman and Byzantine empires’ wealthiest, most important provinces were in Egypt and northern Africa (now Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco). The region was one of the largest producers of olives and grains, staples in the Mediterranean diet. It was home to dynamic centers of learning and literature, and significant Christian communities developed along the southern Mediterranean basin and down the Nile valley. Kingdoms in Nubia (Sudan) and Aksum (Ethiopia, Eritrea, and parts of Yemen) were also

closely connected to Rome and Byzantium, as seen in their art, religion, and culture.

Background: Ancient ruins at Carthage, Tunisia, with the Mediterranean Sea. Image: Lukasz Janyst

Vase

Tunisia, Tunis el Aouja (Navigius school), 290–320
Clay (African terra sigillata C)

Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities, Paris

Bottle

Proconsular Africa, 275–325
Clay

Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities, Paris

Amphora

Tunisia, Tunis el Aouja (Navigius school), 290–320
Clay (African terra sigillata C)
Inscription, in Latin, incised at the top of the neck:
ex Officina Navigi

Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities, Paris

Jug

Tunisia, Tunis el Aouja (Navigius school), 290–320
Clay (African terra sigillata C)
Inscription, in Latin, incised at the top of the neck:
ex Officina Navigi

Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities, Paris

Lagynos

Proconsular Africa, 290–320
Clay

Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities, Paris

North African workshops made glossy red pottery that circulated across the Mediterranean basin. Successful workshops in Byzacena (modern Sousse, El Jem, and Sbeitla) and Proconsular Africa (Carthage and surrounding area) withstood the region's unstable political upheavals during the late Roman, Vandal, and early Byzantine periods.

Notice the Latin text *ex Officina Navigi* (from the workshop of Navigius) on the jug and amphora, a reference to one of Tunisia's most well-known pottery

production centers. Navigi vessels were stamped or incised with this phrase, just as luxury brands today include their logos to announce the authenticity of their products.

This workshop was known for a complex vessel type called the head flagon (*lagynos*), which emerged from an ancient tradition of depicting youths, elders, or foreigners. The intricate scenes show the exploits of storied mythological characters, such as Dionysus and Victory. These wares were made by joining two or three elaborately molded pieces together before firing. Often, the fingerprints of the potters can be seen on the vessels' sides.

Mosaic with the “Lady of Carthage”

Tunisia, Carthage, 4th–5th century
Marble, limestone, and glass paste

Musée National de Carthage

Archaeologists discovered this mosaic in an elite villa in Carthage. The nimbed (haloed) woman gestures a sign of blessing while grasping a scepter firmly. Her military attire consists of an intricately embroidered coat fastened with an imperial fibula, or clasp. This figure is not a portrait. Rather, she likely embodies the personification of Carthage.

North African mosaics from the fifth and sixth centuries had a muted color palette compared to those from earlier centuries, hinting that some local Roman quarries ceased their operations. This mosaic might have been made after the Vandals, a Germanic tribe, conquered central North Africa in 439.

Statuette of a Lion

Tunisia, Carthage, 3rd–4th century

Rock crystal

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Ada Small Moore, 1955 (55.135.6)

Bowl

Tunisia, Carthage, 3rd–5th century

Rock crystal

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Ada Small Moore, 1955 (55.135.8)

Fragment of a Bowl

Tunisia, Carthage, 3rd–5th century

Rock crystal

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Ada Small Moore, 1955 (55.135.7)

Statuette of a Dolphin

Tunisia, Carthage, 3rd–5th century
Rock crystal

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Ada Small Moore, 1955 (55.135.9)

Dish in the Form of a Temple

Tunisia, Carthage, 3rd–5th century
Rock crystal

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Ada Small Moore, 1955 (55.135.5)

These delicate rock-crystal objects were found together in a cistern in Carthage, Tunisia, but despite their secure archaeological provenance, their precise function remains unknown. Their composition in rock crystal, which was thought to have healing powers, situates them within a global network encompassing northeast Africa, the Mediterranean basin, and South Asia, among other regions. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century, noted that the material was sourced not only from the Indian subcontinent and Northern Europe, but also from the region between the Fayyum, in Egypt, and the Sinai desert.

Earrings

Egypt, 6th–7th century
Gold, pearls

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.1665, .1666)

Necklace with Pendant Crosses

Egypt, 6th–7th century
Gold, pearl sapphire, smoky quartz, quartz

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.1667)

Jeweled Bracelets

Egypt, 500–700
Gold, silver, pearl, amethyst, sapphire, opal, glass, quartz, emerald plasma

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.1670, .1671)

Pectoral with Coins and Pseudo-Medallion

Egypt, ca. 539–50
Gold, niello

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.1664)

Bracelets

Egypt, ca. 400
Gold

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.1668, .1669)`

Multicolored jewelry was very popular in the early Byzantine world. Artisans procured gold and gems from African trade routes, while pearls were likely sourced from the Persian Gulf. The luminous small crosses hanging from the small necklace displayed the owner's faith and wealth.

Although it was found in Egypt, the jewelry shown here has connections to Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium. For example, a personification of that city appears on the back of the central medallion of the large necklace (pectoral). Notice the female figure holding an orb with a cross and a scepter, both

symbols of authority. The front of the medallion and the smaller coins depict Byzantine emperors. This imperial imagery suggests that the pectoral was made from a collection of military trophies that once belonged to a distinguished general or member of the imperial court.

Byzantine Egypt

Egypt was of strategic importance to Byzantium, thanks to its location at the intersection of western Asia, northern Africa, and the Mediterranean Sea. For hundreds of years, the province of Byzantine Egypt was an intellectual, economic, and religious center where people spoke and read Egyptian, Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and Persian. Alexandria, one of the most important cities in the world, was a hub of learning and commerce. Its port supplied Egyptian grain to Constantinople, the imperial capital. Religious debates there led to the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary, and the image of the Virgin nursing her son spread from Egypt across the Mediterranean basin. Byzantine Egyptian jewelry and large-scale textiles incorporated both secular and religious imagery with significant links to the imperial capital and shed light on the lasting impact of the classical Greco-Roman past. Elite patrons throughout Byzantium commissioned luxury objects made in Egypt as markers of class and status.

Map caption:
Byzantine Egypt, 4th–7th century

Panel Painting with Isis

Egypt, 2nd century
Tempera on wood

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California

Box with Isis-Tyche-Aphrodite and Dionysus-Serapis

Egypt, mid-4th–5th century
Ivory

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Byzantine Collection, Washington, D.C.

The style and iconography of this box and panel are part of a Hellenistic tradition, yet the meaning behind the works has roots in Egyptian religion. The woman in the painting has features of the goddess Isis, including a crown of feathers rising from a sun disk framed by cow's horns. Constructed from two pieces of sycamore wood, the panel was likely paired with one of Isis's companions, such as Serapis.

Syncretic imagery that combined different forms of belief remained popular in Egypt through the early Byzantine period. For example, on the ivory box, Isis bears the same attributes featured on the painted

panel. She also carries a basket of fruit and a rudder connecting her to the Roman goddess Tyche-Fortuna, while the Eros holding a mirror to her left links her to Aphrodite. On the other side of the box is the Greek god Dionysus. He is flanked by a maenad (left) and a satyr (right).

Image caption:
Panel with Painted Image of Serapis, 100–200, tempera on panel. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Digital image courtesy Getty Open Content Program

Textile Fragment with Satyr and Maenad

Egypt, 4th century
Undyed linen and dyed wool; plain-weave ground with tapestry weave

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund (1975.6)

A satyr and maenad embrace beneath an arcade, the positions of their feet suggestive of dancing. This fragment was originally part of a larger wall hanging, likely connecting to another section depicting Dionysus, the Greco-Roman god of wine and fertility. With its painterly tapestry weave and monumental scale, the textile is considered a masterpiece of Egyptian textile production. Classical imagery on early Byzantine textiles spoke more to the personal identity of the user than to their religious beliefs, often communicating ideals of social class and education. This monumental textile may have adorned the walls of a grand home or public space, expressing an atmosphere of conviviality.

Funerary Figure of a Woman

Egypt, Oxyrhynchus (El Bahnasa), 3rd–4th century
Limestone, gesso, and pigment

Brooklyn Museum, New York, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund (70.132)

Combining Greco-Roman and Egyptian styles, this funerary portrait was originally nestled into an architectural niche. The woman wears a floral garland and holds a ritual container for oil or Nile water. She was likely from a wealthy community in Oxyrhynchus (modern El Bahnasa). While we are not certain what language she spoke, Egyptian was used by most of the population. At the same time, Greek was the main language of written communication in the early Byzantine period, and, like the art of the period, aspects of it inflected the Egyptian language and culture.

Shroud with Woman Wearing a Fringed Tunic and Red Socks

Egypt, possibly Antinoöpolis (Sheikh Abada); said to be from Fayyum, 170–200
Tempera on linen

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1909 (09.181.8)

The woman on this painted shroud appears to be wealthy and is adorned with luxurious jewels. She wears red socks of fine fabric, perhaps silk. Roman Egyptian and early Byzantine Egyptian art often juxtaposed Greco-Roman styles with indigenous themes; for example, here Egyptian deities flank the standing figure. The linen foundation might have been woven on a horizontal ground loom, a continuation of Pharaonic Egyptian traditions. The shroud is possibly from Antinoöpolis (modern Sheikh Abada), an important Hellenic, or predominately Greek-speaking, city founded in 130 by the Roman emperor Hadrian in Middle Egypt.

Pair of Curtains

Egypt, Akhmim(?), 6th–7th century
Linen and wool; tapestry and plain weave, including warp fringes

The British Museum, London

The three large textiles in this gallery belong to a distinctive group of weavings, all characterized by their representations of dark-skinned figures. Due to their large size, curtains such as these are rarely displayed at full length. Look up. The plump, small figures with dark skin and blondish hair hold garlands with fruit, and women carry a jeweled cross with a Greek inscription. The decoration represents ideals of victory and joy. Like many weavings from late antique and Byzantine Egypt, these curtains survive due to Egypt's dry climate and the ancient custom of wrapping the dead in recycled textiles.

Curtain Fragment with Riders

Egypt, 5th–7th century
Linen and wool; tapestry and plain weave

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George F. Baker, 1890 (90.5.905)

Mounted riders, woven in black wool, race across this textile with their hunting dogs. Nude and harnessed, the men hold stones and bows. Men on horseback have traditionally represented symbols of political, military, or religious power. The other figures in the textile, winged women and an additional rider, were woven with pink and white threads. Diverse figures appeared in various media in late antique art across the Mediterranean basin and northern Africa, but the purpose of marking skin-color differences in this material is unknown. Overall, the themes of the textile point to victory, success, and prosperity.

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Textile Fragment with Artemis and Actaeon(?)

Egypt, Akhmim(?), 5th–7th century
Linen and wool; tapestry and plain weave

The British Museum, London

The Greek goddess of the hunt, Artemis, hovers in the air. She carries a bow and wears a crown of arrows. The hunter Actaeon is on the left and leans on his staff. Vibrant dancers sway in three columns. To understand their story, audiences needed a basic familiarity with Greek or Roman literature and plays. In the early Byzantine period mythological scenes like this marked status and education and were popular in domestic contexts, appearing on textiles, furniture, boxes, and chests. This fragment was likely woven at a workshop in Panopolis (Akhmim, Egypt), a town renowned for its production of gorgeous, large-scale textiles.

Beaker

Nubia (Sudan), Meroë, ca. 50–250
Paint on ceramic

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

Globular Jar with Stamped Decoration

Nubia (Sudan), Meroë, 50–250
Ceramic

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

Cup with Impressed Decoration

Nubia (Sudan), Meroë, 50–250
Ceramic

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

Cylindrical Jar with Two Small Handles

Nubia (possibly Sudan), ca. 300 BCE–350 CE
Paint on ceramic

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

Did you know that there are more pyramids in Sudan than in Egypt? These beakers, cups, and jars were among the most common vessel types discovered at the royal pyramids in Meroë, the southern capital of the Nubian kingdom of Kush (ca. 591 BCE–350 CE).

The tall jar features distinctive Meroitic decoration that incorporates Hellenistic attributes, such as the spiraling scroll of ivy with spear-shaped leaves that wraps around its upper body. Painted pottery from the region often bears a cream slip with red, brown, or black paint. However, stamping formed the core of its decorative program and remained central to Nubian artistic practice despite Ptolemaic, Roman, and early Byzantine influences that heavily utilized paint. Meroitic pottery featured motifs that were popular in Egypt, such as the ankh symbol. This variation of the ankh, tucked into a half-crescent, appears frequently in Meroitic ceramic decoration.

Image caption:
Pyramids in the Nubian Capital of Meroë (Sudan).
Image: Shutterstock, photo by Urosr

Bridal Chest

Nubia (Sudan), Qustul, 4th–6th century
Wood and ivory

Egyptian Museum, Cairo

After the fall of Meroë, the royal family shifted their cemeteries to the twin sites Ballana and Qustul. This wood chest, found at Qustul, has twenty-one inlaid ivory panels, incised and filled with red and green wax paste. The panels depict mythological motifs related to fertility and prosperity. The figures represent the Egyptian god Bes, elegant maenads, and satyrs killing mythological beasts. The wood and metal were likely local materials, and the ivory was procured from trade routes controlled by the Aksumites.

Image caption:
Side view of bridal chest when it was discovered at Qustul, Sudan, 1930s. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Teri Aderman

IN CASE

Box

Nubia (Sudan), Karanog, 100 BCE–300 CE
Wood and ivory

Lent by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia (E7519)

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Box

Upper Egypt or Lower Nubia (Egypt or Sudan), 4th–6th century
Wood, ivory, and bronze

The British Museum, London

An ornate panel on the dark brown wood-and-ivory container depicts two women standing in architectural niches, beneath which lie a pair of sphinxes or lions. The box was excavated from a grave in Karanog, a Nubian town with both elite and middle-class houses and a cemetery with graves that contained numerous goods. The wood-and-ivory box with bronze fittings does not have a known archaeological context, but it was likely made in late antique Nubia as well.

Though none of the women on these boxes has dark skin, their full noses and braided hair may encourage modern viewers to describe them as Black. Nonetheless, the use of this term unhelpfully conflates modern and ancient perceptions of skin color and race. From these representations alone, we cannot know the original intent of the Nubian artist.

IN CASE NEAR GALLERY ENTRANCE

Bust of an African Child

Egypt, Samandhond, 2nd–3rd century
Bronze

Lent by Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke (11.035)

Lamp

Algeria, Thamugadi (Timgad), after 100
Bronze

Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities, Paris

These vessels are distinctive among ancient anthropomorphic metalwork for how they treat otherness. In particular, bronze figures of Black Africans were used throughout the Roman Empire and attest to the Roman world's diversity. The bust of an African child is in the form of a perfume or incense holder, called a *balsamarium*. These containers usually have two loops and a lid, and generally were made through a lost-wax process, by pouring molten metal into a mold with a wax-and-clay core.

The lamp was found in Thamugadi (present-day Timgad, Algeria), an important ancient city in Numidia. When in use, a flame would have protruded from the figure's lips, animating the lamp. Careful rendering of the hair and facial features suggests that the metalworker was familiar with the physiognomy of Black Africans.

Aksumite Coinage

Pre-Christian Aksumite coins feature helmeted or draped rulers on the obverse, while the reverse depicts wheat, alluding to abundance, and crescents and disks, symbolizing the moon and sun. Important changes in coinages take place during the reign of ʿEzana, between about 340 and 380. The cross begins to appear in silver and copper coinages, while gold coinages retain the symbol of wheat. The usage of the cross in Aksum is the earliest occurrence of an overtly Christian symbol in any monetary system.

Image caption:
Stelae marking the graves of Aksumite kings and their elite entourages, Aksum (Ethiopia), built 4th century. Courtesy Jessica L. Lamont

all coins Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, New York

TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

Coin of Endybis

Aksum, 295–310
Gold
Obverse: draped bust, facing right, wearing a headcloth, flanked by two wheat stalks on each side; legend, in Greek: ΕΝΔΥΒΙC ΒΑCΙΛΕΥC, “King Endybis.” Reverse: same bust and wheat stalks; legend, in Greek: AXWMITOU BICIDAXY, “of the Axumites, man of Daku”

Coin of Apuilas

Aksum, 310–early 320s
Gold
Obverse: draped bust, facing right, wearing a headcloth, with an È to the right; no legend. Reverse: legend, in Greek: ΑΦΙ/ΛΑC/ΒΑCΙ/ΛΕΥ, “King Aphilas”

Coin of ʿEzana

Aksum, mid-340s–80s
Gold
Obverse: crowned and draped bust, facing right, flanked by two wheat stalks; legend, in Greek: HZANACBA◡CYLEYC (or HZANACB◡ACYLEYC). Reverse: draped bust, facing right, wearing a headcloth and holding a flywhisk, flanked by two wheat stalks; legend, in Greek: AΞWMITWN◡BICIA′ΛEN E (or AΞWMITWN◡BICIA′ΛENE), "of the Aksumites, man of Alene"

MIDDLE ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

Coin of ʿEzana

Aksum, mid-340s–80s
Gold
Obverse: crowned and draped bust, facing right, flanked by two wheat stalks; legend, in Greek: HZANACBA◡CYLEYC (or HZANACB◡ACYLEYC). Reverse: draped bust, facing right, wearing a headcloth and holding a flywhisk, flanked by two wheat stalks; legend, in Greek: AΞWMITWN◡BICIA′ΛEN E (or AΞWMITWN◡BICIA′ΛENE), "of the Aksumites, man of Alene"

Coin of Nezool

Aksum, late 5th century
Gold
Obverse: crowned and draped bust, facing right, with outstretched index finger, surrounded by two wheat stalks and with a large cross above; legend: NEZANABACΛEYC, “King Nezana.” Reverse: draped bust, facing right, wearing a headcloth and holding a flywhisk, flanked by two wheat stalks; legend: NEZANABACΛEYC, “King Nezana”

Coin of Armah

Aksum, 530s–50s
Copper alloy
Obverse: crowned and draped full-length seated figure, facing right, holding a standing cross; legend, in Gə ʿəz: ኦነገሠኦረመሐ, “King Armah.” Reverse: Latin cross with small hole-punched center, atop a small orb, encircled by two wheat stalks; legend, in Gə ʿəz: ፈሠሐለየከነለኦሐዘበ, “Let there be joy to the peoples”

BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

Anonymous Coin

Aksum, mid-4th–mid-6th century
Silver
Obverse: draped bust, facing right, wearing a headcloth, encircled by the legend BAX ACA (or variant inscribed), potentially, “King of the land of Abyssinia.” Reverse: cross inlaid with gold, encircled by the legend TOYTOAPECHTHXWRA, “May this please the country”

Coin of ∃llä Gäbäz

Aksum, 550s–60s
Gold
Obverse: crowned and draped bust, encircled by two wheat stalks; legend: +ΕΛΛΑΓΑΒΑΖΝΓ. Reverse: same bust, wearing a headcloth; legend: +BA+CI+ΛE+VC, “King”

Early Christian Africa

Christianity has a long history in Africa. According to tradition, the evangelist Saint Mark brought the religion to Egypt in 49 CE and established the Alexandrian church. North Africa was the birthplace of influential religious leaders such as the father of monasticism, Saint Anthony, who was from Egypt, and Saint Augustine of Hippo, who came from modern-day Algeria. By the fourth century, Christian communities in Egypt were flourishing. The Aksumite Empire, which spanned present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and parts of Yemen, formally adopted the religion in about 330. Aksum became a key ally and economic partner of Byzantium.

For hundreds of years, African Christian nations were linked with Byzantium and engaged in religious, commercial, artistic, and even political dialogues across land and sea, resulting in a lively interchange of beliefs and culture. South of Egypt, in Nubia (today part of Sudan), Byzantine missionaries sent by Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora helped convert local communities in the sixth century. By this

time, Nubian royalty were already closely connected to Byzantium. Many of their subjects were fluent in Greek, and they filled their tombs with remarkable artworks that intertwined late Hellenistic and early Byzantine motifs with Nubian forms.

Map caption:
Northeast Africa, the Mediterranean, and Arabia, ca. 6th century

IN CASE, THEN RIGHT TO LEFT

Two Metal Crowns

Nubia (Sudan), Qustul, 5th–6th century
Silver and gemstones

Egyptian Museum, Cairo

Nubian kings and queens maintained close connections with their Christian counterparts in Aksum and Byzantium but still held on to indigenous symbols in their royal attire. These crowns are broad circles of beaten silver, richly encrusted with various gems and adorned with royal and divine insignia, including representations of Horus and Isis. Some have human figures with an Atef headdress, one of the traditional symbols of authority in the Nile valley. The crowns were found on or near the heads of skeletons in burials at the royal cemetery of Qustul. The burials included jewelry, crowns, and wood-and-ivory boxes with Hellenistic motifs.

Capital with Acanthus Leaves and Putti Holding Wreaths

Egypt, Kharga Oasis, Hibis, second half 4th century
Limestone; carved in relief

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1910 (10.177.1)

Jug

Nubia (Sudan), Karanog, 100 BCE–300 CE
Bronze

Lent by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia (E7513)

Lampstand

Nubia (Sudan), Qustul, 4th–5th century
Bronze

Egyptian Museum, Cairo

The Kingdom of Aksum (Ethiopia) possibly conquered Meroë around 350. Still, Nubians maintained contact with the early Byzantine world. Thousands of metal objects with Hellenistic themes have been found at late antique Nubian burial sites. The lampstand of Apollo juxtaposes symbols popular in Egyptian and Hellenistic art and was found in a royal tomb in Qustul. The jug was found in Karanog, an upper-middle-class Nubian town. Recent research in Sudan has revealed extensive iron mining in the region through the sixth century and established that metalworking was an indigenous Nubian trade.

Ashburnham Pentateuch

Rome or North Africa, late 6th–early 7th century
Ink and colors on parchment

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

The Ashburnham Pentateuch, comprising scenes from the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, includes exceptional depictions of people of color. The upper register of this folio represents the tenth plague—the death of the firstborns of Egypt. Anguished mothers, painted in a light shade of pinkish beige, mourn their eldest male children. The fathers and boys are painted dark brown. The skin differences suggest the multiethnic composition of Egyptian society. Other pigments rarely found in late antique manuscripts appear as well, including indigo and Egyptian blue.

Late Antique Capitals at the Monastery of Apa Jeremiah

The column capitals in this gallery are from the Monastery of Apa Jeremiah, a monastic community near the pyramids of Saqqara, Egypt. The site included a main church, which was opulently decorated. The walls were painted, and colored-glass windows filled the space with brilliant light. Smaller buildings at Apa Jeremiah also had extensive decorative schemes, likely embodied by the so-called jeweled style, in which various media in vivid colors and patterns worked together to create an awe-inspiring visual atmosphere.

Capitals produced between around 400 and 550 were reused in later structures, and would have helped give the buildings their jeweled aesthetic. When repurposed, the capitals were mismatched, and some were also repainted, resulting in an appealing, colorful dynamism. In some, carved acanthus leaves evoke the abundance of nature, while others have flower motifs and curvilinear bends. In situ, the capitals would have appeared to spill over with leaves illuminated by radiant beams of heavenly light, suggestive of paradise.

Image caption:
Site of the church at the Monastery of Apa Jeremiah, early 20th century. Image: J. E. Quibell, *Excavations at Saqqara (1907–1908)* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1909), pl. 3, image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Teri Aderman

Icon with the Virgin and Child, Saints, Angels, and the Hand of God

Possibly Constantinople, second half 6th century
Encaustic on wood

The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt

This painting is one of the oldest surviving icons in the world. Mary sits on a bejeweled throne wearing red shoes, attributes of imperial imagery. Holding the infant Jesus on her lap, she is flanked by Saints Theodore and George holding their martyrs' crosses and wearing military dress. Behind these stiffly formal figures, two angels lean backward, looking upward to link the scene to the hand of God extending down from the heavens. Similar images remained popular for centuries from Constantinople to Ethiopia. The icon was possibly given to the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai by the Byzantine emperor Justinian when he ordered the site fortified and provided with a church, between 548 and 565.

Capital with Acanthus Leaves

Egypt, Saqqara, 6th century

Limestone; carved in relief

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1910 (10.175.48)

Ampulla of Saint Menas

Egypt, 5th–6th century
Earthenware

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Bruce Ferrini in memory of Robert P. Bergman (1999.230)

Ampulla of Saint Menas

Egypt, 5th–6th century
Earthenware

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Bruce Ferrini in memory of Robert P. Bergman (1999.231)

Ampulla of Saint Menas

Egypt, ca. 610–50
Earthenware

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.194.2291)

Ampulla of Saint Menas

Egypt, Abu Mena, late 6th–mid-8th century
Earthenware

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1927 (27.94.27)

These molded earthenware ampullae (flasks) feature the image of the Coptic saint Menas, his arms

outstretched in a gesture of prayer (orant). An important figure in African Christianity, Saint Menas was a Roman Egyptian soldier martyred in the third or fourth century. He appears framed by two camels, which are believed to have carried his body after his death to the site of his burial. These flasks were produced for pilgrims from across Africa and the Mediterranean basin who visited this site.

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Capital

Egypt, Saqqara, 6th–7th century

Limestone; carved in relief

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1910 (10.175.56)

Painting of Holy Men

Egypt, 5th–6th century
Paint on linen

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Nanette B. Kelekian, 2020 (2021.37.12)

This painting on cloth presents fragments from a larger grouping of saints. The men wear himation mantles, cloaks that had come to be identified with wise men, philosophers, and, in Christian imagery, Christ and his apostles. The Greek letter eta (H), displayed prominently on their shoulders, often connoted divine power and wisdom. Without archaeological documentation, the purpose of the painting remains unknown: was it a wall hanging meant to decorate a home, chapel, or tomb?

Icon with the Virgin Enthroned

Egypt, 6th century
Wool; slit- and dovetailed-tapestry weave

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Fund (1967.144)

This textile is among the earliest extant icons. Mary, holding the infant Christ, sits on a jeweled throne with the archangels Michael and Gabriel at her sides. “The Holy Mary” is inscribed above her in Greek. Columns with ornate capitals that resemble those in contemporary churches support a lintel. The entire cloth is surrounded by a floriate border, with busts of the evangelists and the apostles in roundels encircling the lower portion. The textile probably served as a wall hanging in a place of worship. Though likely produced in Egypt, the icon resembles sacred objects throughout the larger Byzantine world and beyond.

Capital with Acanthus Leaves

Egypt, Saqqara, 6th–7th century

Limestone; carved in relief

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1910 (10.175.46)

Wall Painting with Holy Men and a Coptic Inscription

Egypt, 6th–7th century
Stucco, paint

The British Museum, London

This wall painting displays groups of holy men of the past. The central panel is an image inspired by the book of Daniel, and depicts Ananias, Misael, and Azarias. Their service as the wisest men of King Nebuchadnezzar's court ended with their refusal to worship the king's idol. Here, they are miraculously unbound and unharmed amid the flames. The inscriptions identify the sixty martyrs of Samalut as local Egyptian holy men and saints from the Eastern Roman Empire.

Damage to the painting was sustained upon its removal from the "Villa of Daniel," near the Monastery of Apa Thomas at Wadi Sarga in Egypt.

IN CASE, LEFT TO RIGHT

Two Lamp Molds with Christogram

Tunisia, 6th century
African red slip ware

Musée National de Carthage

Oil Lamp with Angel

Tunisia, late 6th century–first quarter 7th century
African red slip ware

Musée National de Carthage

Oil Lamp with Cross and Birds

Tunisia, 6th century
African red slip ware

Musée National de Carthage

Oil Lamp with Christ Crushing the Serpent's Head

Tunisia, 6th century
African red slip ware

Musée National de Carthage

Oil Lamp with Christogram and the Heads of the Apostles

Tunisia, first half 5th century

African red slip ware

Musée National de Carthage

Oil Lamp with Menorah and Christ Crushing the Serpent's Head

Tunisia, 6th century

African red slip ware

Musée National de Carthage

Lamp

Tunisia, found in Egypt, 4th–5th century

African red slip ware

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. G. W. Neville and Miss Cardwell, 1906 (06.1232.96)

Lamp with the Three Hebrews before Nebuchadenezzar

Tunisia, 5th–7th century

African red slip ware

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1927 (27.94.29)

Oil Lamp Reflector with Adam and Eve

Tunisia, 6th century
African red slip ware

Musée National de Carthage

The earliest production of African red slip ware oil lamps in Tunisia seems to date to the late second to third century. Lamps like these appeared widely throughout the Mediterranean world for more than two centuries, with key centers of production located in northern and central Tunisia. As Christianity spread throughout the region, new motifs appeared, including crosses, angels, and religious symbols such as doves. Some lamps also included a Jewish menorah, exemplifying the rich intermingling of religions and cultures in late antique North Africa.

Papyrus Fragments with Seth on Mount Sinai

Egypt, 5th–6th century

Ink on papyrus

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1934 (34.1.226)

Pottery Fragment with Figure

Egypt, 4th–7th century

Paint on pottery

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1925 (25.10.25.53)

Amulet

Egypt, 6th–7th century

Hematite; carved in intaglio, with silver mount

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.491)

Ostrakon with an Invocation or Charm

Egypt, Thebes, 580–640

Ink on pottery

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1914 (14.1.172)

Spell to Acquire a Beautiful Voice

Egypt, 6th–7th century
Ink on papyrus

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

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IN BACK

Necklace and Pendant Cross

Egypt, Medinet Habu, near Thebes, 500–700
Rock crystal with silver mount

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1908 (08.202.27a, b)

Archaeologists discovered many of the objects displayed here in monastic contexts throughout Egypt. Artisans and scribes produced ritual protective texts and images alongside other religious objects in the late antique and medieval periods. Incantations to ward off evil as well as alchemical texts or “spells” appear on this group in both Coptic and Greek. For example, written in two different (quite sloppy) hands, a pair of charming Coptic love spells instructs on how to acquire a beautiful singing voice. Notice the Coptic

letters emanating from the angel's trumpet. Natural materials such as hematite and rock crystal, believed to have apotropaic properties, were also used to make amulets.

These bits and pieces have been described as "magical" objects. The works illuminate everyday desires, such as protection, love, and good luck. Magic is not necessarily the most precise term to describe these works, which blur the lines between multiple faith practices. Still, scholars and the public often use the word to describe texts or objects like these that do not seem to fit into traditional devotional or miraculous categories.

Tile with Abraham's Sacrifice

Tunisia, Cillium (Kasserine), 6th–7th century
Terracotta, beige slip

Musée National de Carthage

Tile with Vegetal Decoration

Tunisia, Carthage, 5th–6th century
Terracotta, beige slip

Musée National de Carthage

Tile with Daniel in the Lions' Den

Tunisia, Thysdrus (El Jem), early 7th century
Terracotta, gray slip with red ocher

Musée National de Carthage

Tile with Deer

Tunisia, Carthage, second half 6th century
Terracotta, beige slip with red ocher (on the deer) and green paint (on the raised edges)

Musée National de Carthage

Tile with Lion

Tunisia, Carthage, second half 6th century
Terracotta, beige slip

Musée National de Carthage

Relief-molded terracotta tiles are specific to Tunisia, where they served as ceiling and wall decoration in Christian basilicas in the Vandal (5th century) and Byzantine periods (6th–7th century). More than five thousand examples have been found across ninety archaeological sites in Tunisia. Square or rectangular in shape, architectural decorations like these were standardized in terms of their dimensions and limited decorative repertoire, which consisted of lions, deer, and vegetal and geometric motifs. It is likely that these tiles incorporated styles and techniques borrowed from Amazigh (Berber) visual culture.

Mosaic with Latin Inscription

Tunisia, Enfidha, late 4th–early 6th century
Limestone tesserae

Musée d'Enfidha

This mosaic panel comprises two distinct parts. The upper section features a medallion with a Christogram, an abbreviation of the name Jesus Christ, and inverted alpha and omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, symbolizing the beginning and the end from the book of Revelation. An epitaph, in Latin, is spread over eight lines and occupies the lower section of the panel. The text tells us that the deceased, F. V. Dion, died at the age of eighty and specifies that he planted four thousand (olive) trees during his lifetime. Olive cultivation, along with that of grains, was the main agricultural activity of Proconsular Africa (Carthage and environs).

Mosaic with Latin Inscription

Tunisia, Furnos Minor (Messadine), 375–425
Marble and limestone

Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Antiquities, Paris

The fourth century witnessed the arrival of mosaics as an artistic medium in Christian contexts. Tombs, for example, displayed Christian images and symbols, notably the Chi-Rho, a monogram for the name Jesus Christ, and alpha and omega signs referring to the end and the beginning from the book of Revelation. This mosaic was excavated at a funerary site at Furnos Minor, a town in the Roman province of Proconsular Africa. The town once had a vibrant and active Latin-speaking Christian community, evident here from the Latin inscription. This funerary mosaic commemorated a young child named Carthage, who died at one year, two months, and fifteen days.

Jewish and Islamic Africa

Though the focus of this exhibition is on Byzantine and eastern Christian visual culture, other religious communities thrived in Africa during the late antique and medieval periods. People continued to practice local religions at home and in congregations. Jewish communities lived in Africa for millennia, particularly in Egypt. The writings of ancient Jewish intellectuals, such as Philo of Alexandria, Josephus, and Ben Sira attest to the diversity of the Jewish population in Alexandria as early as the last few centuries BCE. After the seventh century, Islam flourished in northern and eastern Africa.

The Islamic conquest of Egypt and the area spanning modern-day Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia—referred to as Ifriqiya—profoundly affected the region's relationship with the Byzantine Empire. Despite this shift, the new political system continued to rely on the artistic and cultural traditions of Byzantium to communicate its legitimacy. This can be seen through new Islamic administrative centers such as Kairouan and Fustat and also in the material culture of the

region. The mosaics, wood lintels, and manuscripts in this gallery prompt the question of what makes a work Byzantine, Jewish, Islamic, or even African?

Map caption:
Northern Africa, 8th century

ON PLATFORM TO RIGHT

Hammam-Lif Mosaics

The most extensive archaeological evidence for Jewish life in ancient North Africa is found in the remains of the synagogue at Hammam-Lif (Naro), located about twenty kilometers southeast of present-day Tunis. The structure at Hammam-Lif was unearthed in 1883 by French soldiers under the command of Captain Ernest de Prudhomme, whose methods, unfortunately, destroyed many of the synagogue remains. The mosaics displayed here would have decorated the floor of a single room in the synagogue and integrated several distinct Jewish symbols with regional motifs and styles.

Mosaic with Date Palm

Tunisia, Hammam-Lif, 6th century
Stone and mortar

Brooklyn Museum, New York, Museum Collection Fund (05.14)

Date palm trees have special meaning in the Mediterranean basin and along the Nile valley. Women eat dates to quicken labor, and funerary sites are often covered with date palm leaves. Mosaics like this one were commonly depicted in North African visual culture from the period and were found in various decorative settings. Some synagogue community members may have associated the image of the date palm with Jerusalem, as the Hebrew Bible describes this image in Solomon's temple.

IN CASE

“Mosaics at Hammam-Lif,” from Revue archéologique *(Antiquité et Moyen Age)*

Ernest Renan (French, 1823–1892)

Vol. 3, no. 3, January–June 1884

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Thomas J. Watson Library

Due to destructive excavation practices at Hammam-Lif, this plate remains our best source for what the synagogue’s complete mosaic floor would have looked like before its panels were separated and dispersed. At right and left are representations of wildlife against a foliage pattern, including images similar to non-Jewish mosaics in the area, indicating that the mosaics were produced in regional workshops.

Incense Burner

Egypt, 5th century
Bronze

Brooklyn Museum, New York

This incense burner is made in three distinct parts, possibly constructed at different times. The cup contains an image of a menorah and is inscribed with three lines of a Greek blessing, which is unusual for Jewish objects from this period. The blessing's form and rendering in Greek provides an example of potential syncretism, or fusion of beliefs, between Jewish and Christian communities:

In fulfillment of a vow of Auxanon:
Blessed are you, O Lord,
Who separates the holy from the profane.

ON WALL, RIGHT TO LEFT

Mosaic with Menorah, Lulav, and Ethrog

Tunisia, Hammam-Lif, 6th century
Stone and mortar

Brooklyn Museum, New York, Museum Collection Fund (05.26)

Mosaic with Menorah

Tunisia, Hammam-Lif, 6th century
Stone and mortar

Brooklyn Museum, New York, Museum Collection Fund (05.27)

These two mosaics originally accompanied a dedicatory inscription of the synagogue benefactor, Julia. Other donor inscriptions from the region use similar decorative frames to showcase family crests. The second menorah is depicted alongside a lulav (palm branch) and ethrog (citron), two ritual objects mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and used for pilgrimage festivals. While the lulav and ethrog may have been restored later, the depiction of the menorah with a tripod stand is typical for this period.

Image caption:
Dedicatory inscription from the Hammam-Lif mosaics, Tunisia, 6th century. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Mark Morosse

Mosaic with Lion

Tunisia, Hammam-Lif, 6th century
Stone and mortar

Brooklyn Museum, New York, Museum Collection Fund (05.18)

Is this a Lion of Judah, or just a lion? Depictions of lions often accompanied ritual inscriptions in Levantine mosaics, but they also became more prevalent in mosaics found in villas, basilicas, and churches after the Byzantine conquest of North Africa. The placement of this section alongside other wildlife scenes on the mosaic floor indicates that the lion here reflects a regional style rather than the specific Jewish symbol.

Dedicatory Inscriptions from the Ben Ezra Synagogue

Egypt, Fustat (Cairo), above: 13th century; below: 1220
Walnut wood

The Jewish Museum, New York (S 727e, S 727d)

Beginning in the tenth century, the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo) served as a leading center of Jewish communal life in Egypt. According to early modern accounts, these inscriptions were positioned above and below the synagogue's central wood Torah ark. They include passages from the book of Psalms as well as a dedication commemorating the donations of Obadiah and Solomon ben Japhet, members of the eminent al-Maʿali family, who served at the Egyptian Muslim court. These carvings represent a common vocabulary of artistic forms that was fostered through interaction in workshops comprising Muslim, Jewish, and Christian craftspeople.

IN CASE, LEFT TO RIGHT

Double Folio from a Qur'an

Tunisia, Kairouan, late 7th–early 8th century
Brown ink on vellum

Musée National d'Art Islamique de Raqqada, Kairouan

Textual production has a long legacy in North Africa and flourished well after the Islamic conquest. This double folio from an oblong-format Qur'an is in Kufic script, an early style of writing Arabic. The left-hand folio features verses from the Sura of Prostration, and the right-hand folio, from the Sura of Confederates. The script in this manuscript marks a transition point between Hijazi Kufic, of the seventh century, and Abbasid Kufic, which developed in the ninth century.

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Folio from a Qur'an

Tunisia, Kairouan, Aghlabid dynasty (800–909), early 9th century
Ink on parchment and decorated vellum

Musée National d'Art Islamique de Raqqada, Kairouan

This folio, written in plain Kufic script, features a section of the Sura of the City and the beginning of the Sura of the Sun. The two sections are separated on the page by a thick band of interlacing ribbons, a decorative feature that was popular throughout the Byzantine and Islamic worlds. This manuscript likely originated in the library of the Great Mosque of Kairouan, which experienced a golden age between the ninth and twelfth centuries.

Coins in Ifriqiya

Notice the Latin script on these coins. Ifriqiya, as North Africa was called, was not fully Arabized after the Islamic conquest. Minted in the early eighth century during the Umayyad dynasty's rule in Tunisia (705–50), this type of coin was unique to North Africa and Spain in the eighth and ninth centuries. Recent scientific analyses of the Arab-Latin coins have revealed close similarities in the material compositions of Byzantine and early Islamic coinage, suggesting that the latter were recycled from Byzantine coins, likely originally minted in Carthage.

Half-Dinar

Ifriqiya (North Africa), 708–11
Gold

Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, New York

Dinar

Ifriqiya (North Africa), 712–13
Gold

Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, New York

Coinage of Sulayman

Ifriqiya (North Africa; minted in Spain), 716
Gold

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, Médailles, et Antiques, Paris (Monnaie musulmane i, 136)

Letter to the Superiors of the Monastery of Saint Paul the Anchorite

Upper Egypt, Jeme, September 13, 698
Ink on papyrus

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1924 (24.2.3a–c)

This papyrus provides rare historical documentation of the early years of Islamic rule in Egypt. Transitions can be slow, and the concerns of everyday people during turbulent times were often mundane. The letter concerns a donation offered by a monk named Moses to the Monastery of Saint Paul the Anchorite. The bulk of Moses's letter is written in Coptic, the vernacular language of much of the Egyptian population in late antiquity. The text also opens with an invocation to God in Greek and Arabic, and names the governor of Egypt at that time, Abd al-Aziz, in Arabic.

“BRIGHT AS THE SUN”: AFRICA AFTER BYZANTIUM

After decades of devastating wars in the seventh century, the Byzantine Empire no longer controlled the southern Mediterranean. Still, Christian communities in northern and eastern Africa remained interconnected, both with Byzantium and across the African continent. By the fifteenth century, Christianity in Africa remained strong. As a witness to this strength, the medieval Ethiopian emperor and author Zärʾa Yaʿəqob (1399–1468) exclaimed that the faith of his people was “bright as the sun.”

Copts, Nubians, and Ethiopians traveled throughout the Byzantine world. They were guests at the imperial court in Constantinople and spent time in important monastic and pilgrimage centers, such as the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai. The Coptic Church, which had separated from the Byzantine church hierarchy in the fifth century, remained a unifying force across Africa until the early twentieth century. High-ranking members of Egyptian monastic communities were often elected patriarchs of

Alexandria, a position that also oversaw Nubian and Ethiopian churches. Echoes of Byzantium remained in the icons, manuscripts, and wall paintings created in northern Africa. The art of northern African Christians retains distinctive characteristics that are still important to the cultural identities of these communities today.

Background: The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, the oldest active Orthodox monastery, Sinai, Egypt, founded 6th century.
Image: Lex20

RIGHT TO LEFT

Icon with the Virgin Hodegetria Dexiokratousa

Possibly Constantinople, first quarter 13th century
Miniature tesserae (gold and other materials), set in wax, on wood

The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt

The Virgin gestures to the infant Christ in a pose made famous by the icon housed at the Hodegon Monastery in Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium. Its fame spread so widely that the so-called Virgin Hodegetria (She Who Shows the Way) became known throughout the Christian world, its influence reaching Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia.

The extraordinary quality of this miniature mosaic icon, housed at the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai, Egypt, suggests that it was produced in a Constantinopolitan workshop after the Fourth Crusade (1202–4), when the city was under Western rule, and brought to Sinai by a Byzantine or Crusader pilgrim. The Holy Monastery, transformed in the sixth century by Emperor Justinian from scattered monastic settlements into a great walled basilica at the

traditional site of Moses’s Burning Bush, remains one of the most important monastic and pilgrimage centers in the Orthodox world.

Vita Icon of Saint George with Scenes of His Passion and Miracles

Egypt, possibly Sinai, early 13th century
Tempera and gold on wood

The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt

Saint George was an eastern Christian Roman soldier said to have been martyred in Syria in the early fourth century. Images of the saint on a white horse appear around the world, from Constantinople to Ethiopia. “Vita icons” were developed to narrate the lives of saints admired by the varied multiethnic and multicultural peoples coming to pilgrimage centers such as the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine. In this vita icon, Saint George’s large image is surrounded by twenty narrative scenes, including one at the lower left showing him on a white horse with a princess and a dragon.

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Icon with the Virgin Galaktotrophousa

Byzantium, 1250–1350
Tempera on wood

The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt

The Virgin Galaktotrophousa (She Who Nourishes with Milk) shows the Christ Child suckling at his mother’s breast. The first references to the Nursing Virgin and the significance of her milk appear in the writings of early Egyptian church fathers—Clement of Alexandria (died 215), Athanasius of Alexandria (died 373), and Cyril of Alexandria (died 444). Sixth- to seventh-century representations of the Nursing Virgin are known at a number of sites in Egypt, suggesting that the image may have originated there. By the fifteenth century, examples of the type were known in Ethiopia.

Icon with the Virgin Hodegetria

Eastern Mediterranean, possibly Egypt, 13th century
Tempera and tin leaf on wood, with gesso relief ornament

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Mary and Kathryn Jaharis Gift, in honor of Helen C. Evans, 2020 (2020.401)

This intimate version of the Virgin Hodegetria (She Who Shows the Way) epitomizes the transcultural dialogue that peaked at the Holy Monastery of Catherine at Sinai and elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean during the thirteenth century. Several works by the unknown artist of this icon survive at Sinai. The face and hands of the Virgin and Child are Byzantine in style, while their experimental pose suggests that the artist might have been from the West. Icons produced across the Mediterranean, not only in Africa, juxtapose local conventions with forms associated with Byzantine art.

Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes

Possibly Sinai, early 11th century
Brown, white, and red ink and gold on parchment

The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt

Originally written in Greek by Alexandrian merchant Cosmas Indicopleustes (“[He] who sailed to India”) in the sixth century, this copy of the book is a travelogue of sorts. Among the many maps Cosmas provided are those of trade routes along the coast of Africa, especially Aksum. For more than a thousand years, this book has been cared for by the monastic fathers of the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai. This text represents how significant documents originating from northern Africa circulated throughout the world.

IN CASE IN CENTER OF GALLERY

Casket with Warriors and Dancers

Byzantium, Constantinople, 11th century
Ivory, bone, and gilded copper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.239)

Like the late antique Nubian boxes in the previous gallery, Byzantine ivory boxes were carved with playful scenes and a diverse cast of characters. Childlike figures tending to animals, performing battles, or dancing adorn this box. At least three depicted appear to be Black Africans with tightly curled hair. The ivory for this box likely made its way to Constantinople through a trade port in Alexandria, Egypt. Indian Ocean and Red Sea trade routes were Byzantium’s primary networks for ivories, which were sourced from Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, and India.

IN LONG CASE, LEFT TO RIGHT

The Saint Michael Collection and the Coptic Liturgy

The Saint Michael Collection comprises forty-seven Coptic manuscripts produced between 823 and 914 at a monastery dedicated to the archangel Michael. A complex network of scribes, patrons, and donors created this group, and their names are memorialized in the notes at the back of each book. Five are displayed here.

Many of the books in the collection were meant to be read during church services. Although the Christian liturgy in Egypt has features unique to the region, influences from other practices have occurred throughout its two-thousand-year history. Several avenues enabled liturgical migrations to Egypt from Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople. At the same time, Egyptian traditions influenced the liturgy in regions south of the Nile valley, namely, the Nubian and Ethiopian kingdoms.

Encomium on the Four Bodiless Beasts

Egypt, Fayyum Oasis, 892–93
Ink on parchment

The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

Between 892 and 893, Apa (Father) Isaac of Ptepouhar, Egypt, copied and painted this book, whose text was composed by Saint John Chrysostom in the fourth century. The frontispiece presents a full-page composition of the enthroned Virgin. The infant Jesus, holding a scroll, sits on her lap as she nurses him. Beneath the Virgin’s throne is an inscription by the scribe, in Greek: “By Isaac, the priest, the humble one, I have written [it].”

Homily

Theogenidos (Perpnoute), Egypt, 902–3
Ink on parchment

The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

Deacon Gabri and his son, Makoure of Perpnoute, copied and painted this book, the Homily on God’s Mercifulness and the Freedom of Speech of Saint Michael Archangel. The text is attributed to Severus, the fifth-century Byzantine patriarch of Antioch and head of the Syriac Orthodox Church, who spent his formative years in Alexandria, Egypt. On this page, the archangel Michael has features common to representations of him in Byzantine art, such as a trilobed scepter, an orb with a cross, and a diadem.

Martyrology of Saints Theodore the Anatolian (the Oriental), Leontius the Arab, and Panigerus the Persian

Egypt, Fayyum Oasis, after December 31, 867
Ink on parchment

The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

Moses, Mena, and the subdeacon Khael copied and painted this book, commissioned by a woman named Ama (Mother) Phelabia. The frontispiece is based on the Byzantine story in which Saint Theodore saves a widow and her children, who were threatened by a demon-serpent. Theodore carries a staff that pierces the demon. While the painters were familiar with Byzantine iconography appropriate for the subject matter, they were also well-versed in the painting style favored in this region.

Miscellany

Egypt, Fayyum Oasis, 913–14
Ink on parchment

The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

Between 913 and 914, the monks Kalamon and Stephen painted and hand-copied the texts in this book, which include the Homily on the Incarnation, attributed to Demetrius of Antioch, and the Homily on the Virgin Mary, attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem. On this page, the archangel Gabriel comes to Mary, announcing the divine birth of the infant Jesus. Byzantine artists often interpreted this theme, giving visual expression to the Virgin as Theotokos, or The One Who Bore God.

Bible with Ancient Binding

Egypt, Fayyum Oasis, text 822–914; binding 7th–8th century

Ink on vellum and papyrus; leather binding

The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

This is the only complete four-Gospel manuscript in the Saint Michael Collection, perhaps the earliest. It includes full versions of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John and portions of the Gospel of Luke. The skillful hand of the small letters and of the paintings suggests an experienced copyist. There are oil smears and finger rubbings in the side margins, which point to the manuscript’s frequent use.

Three Textile Fragments with Coptic Inscription

Attributed to Egypt, 810–1010
Tapestry weave in polychrome and undyed wool on plain weave ground of undyed wool; a row of stitches in undyed wool

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George F. Baker, 1890 (90.5.877)

This cloth is a form of *tiraz*, an inscribed fabric that conventionally features Arabic-language inscriptions with the place and date of their manufacture. In Egypt, some Christians inscribed cloth with petitionary prayers or quotations from the Psalms in Greek or Coptic.

While the inscription on this textile is largely illegible, the words “use it in happiness and rejoice” can be deciphered. Such well-wishes recall colophons in ninth-century manuscripts in the Saint Michael Collection, indicating commonalities between inscribed Christian objects across media.

OTHER SIDE OF GALLERY, RIGHT TO LEFT

Triptych with Crucifixion

Eastern Mediterranean, possibly Egypt, 13th–15th century
Tempera and gilding on wood

Coptic Museum, Cairo

The dramatically emotional Crucifixion, when Christ was executed by Roman soldiers, at the center of this triptych is surrounded by scenes related to the events preceding his death (known as the Passion of Christ; left), and those that followed, culminating in the Anastasis, or Resurrection, when he rose from the dead (right). Stylistically, the delicate figures and poignant images relate closely to Italo-Cretan icons found in Egypt dating from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. Here we see a combination of Byzantine styles and motifs that remained popular across the Christian Mediterranean and the Nile valley.

Pentaglot Psalter

Egypt, 12th–14th century; restored and rebound 1636
Ink on parchment

Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City (Barb. Or. 2.)

This book is likely from Dayr al-Suryan, a multicultural and multilinguistic monastic community in Egypt. The book contains a psalter written in five languages, several canticles, or hymns of praise, of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. From left to right are the following languages: Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, Armenian, and then, Syriac again. One purpose of such polyglot texts would have been to facilitate comparative study of the Bible, but they also would have facilitated common readings in the liturgy.

IN CASE, LEFT TO RIGHT

Excerpt from Shenoute of Atripe’s “Discourse” 8

Egypt, 8th–9th century
Ink on parchment

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut

Book of Revelation

Egypt, 9th–10th century
Ink on parchment

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut

The library at the Monastery of Saint Shenoute (White Monastery) was one of the largest in medieval Egypt. Presumably connected to the monastery’s church, it once held a collection of more than one thousand codices made in scriptoria across Egypt. Over the past two centuries, these books have been dismembered and dispersed among Western and Egyptian collections.

Some of the most significant holdings include the writings of Saint Shenoute himself. His works are

primarily divided into two groups, the Canons and the Discourses. With some exceptions, the Canons offer rules related to the governance of Shenoute’s Federation, while the Discourses, such as the one shown here, compile Shenoute’s public sermons of a liturgical nature. Other texts in the library range in subject from the lives of the saints to homilies to biblical works, like this Coptic version of the book of Revelation.

Taʾrih tudkar fihi ahbar min nawahi Misr wa-aqtaʿ iha (History of Churches and Monasteries)

Egypt, Cairo, 1338
Ink on paper; leather binding

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Paris (Arabe 307)

Composed in the late twelfth to early thirteenth century, the *History of Churches and Monasteries* is a key document within Coptic literary and religious history. Comprising four volumes, the medieval Arabic encyclopedia includes exhaustive lists of religious institutions throughout Egypt as well as in Nubia, Ethiopia, and the remainder of the African continent. It also includes detailed descriptions of important ecclesiastical and monastic institutions such as the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai and Shenoute’s Federation.

ABOVE

Plan of Dayr al-Suryan, Wadi al-Natrun

Egypt, 1911
Watercolor on paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Archives of the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters

Plasterwork in the Church of al-ʿAdra, Dayr al-Suryan, Wadi al-Natrun

Egypt, 1911
Watercolor on paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Archives of the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters

The name Dayr al-Suryan, or Monastery of the Syrians, derives from the community of Syrian monks that settled there in the early eighth century. At various points, Dayr al-Suryan was also home to contingents of Ethiopian and Armenian monks.

The schematic plans show the buildings within the monastic enclosure. The structures were built in a narrow plane against the protective walls. One can see the location of the monastery’s churches as well as monastic residences, the kitchen, the library, and

storerooms. The drawings of the church’s interior document the building’s varying state of preservation in the early twentieth century.

The White Monastery

Film by CPT Studio Roma in collaboration with Yale Monastic Archaeology Project and the American Research Center in Egypt
Color, silent, 2 min., 56 sec.

This video shows the architecture of the church at the White Monastery in Sohag, Egypt, part of a large Christian monastic federation founded in 442. Its abbot, Shenoute of Atripe (died ca. 466), and many like him used architecture to redraw the map of the Byzantine world, creating sites of authority. Shenoute led three same-sex communities, two for men and one for women, that focused on prayer and overcoming bodily desires. Archaeological remains from the federation include monumental churches with wall-painting programs, administrative buildings, refectories, and food preparation and water distribution facilities. Still in use today, the church highlights the extraordinary importance of art and architecture in constructing identity and status.

Medieval Nubia

Starting in the sixth century, three Nubian kingdoms—Nobadia, Makouria, and Alwa (or Alodia)—gradually adopted Christianity. This conversion brought the royal courts into closer contact with Byzantium. Nubian cities such as Faras and Qasr Ibrim were cosmopolitan centers of artistic production, trade, religion, and learning whose churches mirrored those in Byzantium in both architectural and artistic programs. The wall paintings in this gallery are a result of the artistic connections between Byzantium and Nubia. When Arab Muslim forces attempted to conquer the region in the seventh century, they were resisted by the Nubian army. The peace treaty they eventually forged, known as the Baqt (an Arabized version of the Greek word for “pact”), stipulated that in exchange for Egyptian grain the Nubians would send persons to be enslaved, facilitating the circulation of enslaved Africans in Egypt and the Mediterranean basin.

By the eighth century, the Nubians had adopted Byzantine political language, art, and culture. For example, King Merkourios was called “the New

Constantine,” while local religious leaders wore Constantinopolitan-style attire. From the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries, the three Nubian kingdoms consolidated into a centralized state known by the indigenous name Dotawo. Despite its close connections to Byzantium and the imperial church, the church of Dotawo remained under the Patriarchate of Alexandria, creating a complex dynamic between Nubia and the Coptic Church.

Map caption:
Medieval Nubia, 8th–15th century

Qasr Ibrim

The objects displayed here come from Qasr Ibrim, a major commercial and ecclesiastical site in late antique and medieval Nubia. It was also a center for pilgrimage, and its bishops were of considerable importance, second in hierarchy only to those of Faras. The site was continuously occupied from at least the Napatan period (700–300 BCE) to the early twentieth century.

TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

Ostrakon

Nubia (Egypt), Qasr Ibrim, possibly 6th century(?)
Ink on pottery

The British Museum, London

This ostrakon offers a rare clue into the history of Christianity in Nubia. Toward the bottom is written *apa logginos episkopos*, which may be interpreted as “Abba Longinus the Bishop.” One of the first bishops of Nobadia, or northern Nubia, Longinus helped bring Christianity to Alwa (Alodia), or southern Nubia.

Document in Old Nubian

Nubia (Egypt), Qasr Ibrim, 12th century
Ink on parchment

The British Museum, London

The illustration in this manuscript shows a bishop on his episcopal throne, reading a book, or perhaps preaching a sermon. The accompanying text is a literary work in Old Nubian describing a conversation between a bishop and an unknown speaker about the crowning of a king.

BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

Plank with Bilingual Psalm

Nubia (Egypt), Qasr Ibrim, 11th–14th century
Wood

The British Museum, London

This wood plank was excavated from the burial crypt in the cathedral at Qasr Ibrim. The text written on the plank is a bilingual version of Psalms 149 and 150, with verses in Greek alternating with verses in Old Nubian.

Benedictional Cross

Nubia (Egypt), Qasr Ibrim, 14th century
Iron

The British Museum, London

Excavations at Qasr Ibrim uncovered the body of Timotheos, a bishop of Faras in the 1370s. Timotheos was buried with this wrought-iron benedictional cross, which had been placed on his breast. It is the physical symbol of his spiritual and ecclesiastical authority to “tend his people.”

Document in Old Nubian

Nubia (Egypt), Qasr Ibrim, 9th–10th century
Ink on parchment

The British Museum, London

Written in Old Nubian, this is a fragment from a sermon on the archangel Raphael attributed to Saint John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople from 397 to 403. This manuscript is similar to an Arabic version of the same sermon and reflects Christian Nubia’s adoption of broader Mediterranean Christian traditions.

OTHER SIDE OF GALLERY, THEN LEFT TO RIGHT AROUND GALLERY

The Cathedral of Faras

Film by Władysław Jurkow
3D design by Daria Tarara
Color, silent, 46 sec.

This video shows a reconstruction of the seventh-century Cathedral of Faras (Pachoras), located on what is today the border of Egypt and Sudan. For almost a millennium, the building was painted with biblical figures, Nubian church officials, and Nubian royalty. The cathedral was rediscovered in 1961, when UNESCO and the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology at the University of Warsaw rescued Nubian cultural monuments and documented archaeological sites slated to be flooded by the Nile after the completion of the Aswan High Dam. The paintings and parts of its architecture were removed and dismantled; today, these salvaged artworks, including paintings displayed in this gallery, are held at the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum and the National Museum in Warsaw.

Due to the current civil war in Sudan, medieval Nubian cultural heritage is increasingly endangered, and it is critical for the international community to uplift Sudan’s contribution to world history.

Wall Painting with Bishop Petros Protected by Saint Peter

Nubia (Sudan), Faras, late 10th century
Plaster and tempera

National Museum, Warsaw

This painting features Bishop Petros protected by his heavenly namesake, Saint Peter the Apostle. Petros is dressed in episcopal robes, with a book in his left hand and his right raised in a gesture of blessing. Wound around his fingers is an *enchirion*, a liturgical scarf that was an element of the episcopal costume distinctive to Nubia. His name is found in the Greek inscription accompanying the image: “Abba Petros, bishop and metropolitan of Pachoras [may he live] many years!” The inclusion of his name indicates that the image was painted in the bishop’s lifetime.

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Wall Painting with a Nubian Dignitary Protected by Christ

Nubia (Sudan), Faras, mid-12th century
Plaster and tempera

National Museum, Warsaw

Christ holds a book in his left hand, raising his right in a gesture of blessing to protect a young man. While Christ wears a Byzantine-style chiton (tunic) and a himation (cloak), the young man is dressed in typical garments worn by Nubian rulers, with a characteristic flared robe, a sash, and a crown with a half-moon. On his chest hangs an *encolpion*, a cross medallion with an icon. The Greek inscription accompanying the painting suggests that the ruler’s name may have been Aaron. Nubian artists often depicted biblical figures with yellow and white paint and contemporary figures with shades of brown. We do not know why the Nubian artist decided to mark color difference in their paintings.

ON COLUMN TO RIGHT

Wallpaper:
View of the northern vestibule of Faras Cathedral with pulpit in the foreground. Image: Mieczysław Niepokólczycki

Wall Painting with the Virgin and Child

Nubia (Sudan), Faras, 8th century
Plaster and tempera

National Museum, Warsaw

A youthful Jesus sits on Mary’s left-hand side. She raises her right hand in a sign of blessing, a difference from the iconographic type of the Virgin Hodegetria (She Who Shows the Way), which typically shows the Virgin pointing toward the infant Jesus. A Greek inscription “Holy Mary” is partially preserved by her right shoulder. The figures have oval faces with delicate features and boldly drawn, wide-open, almond-shaped eyes characteristic of eighth-century Nubian paintings. Here we see the Nubian artist juxtaposing local iconographic types with Byzantine forms.

Icon with the Virgin and Child

Possibly Constantinople, mid-10th–mid-11th century
Ivory

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.103)

Carefully cut from a plaque of African elephant ivory, this statuette follows a widespread Byzantine image type called the Hodegetria, in which the Virgin supports the Christ Child with her left arm and gestures to him with her right hand. It derives its name from an icon housed in the Hodegon Monastery in Constantinople, and the image appears in media from Constantinople to Nubia and Ethiopia.

Medieval Ethiopia

Like the medieval Nubian kingdoms, the Ethiopian kingdom centered in Aksum (ca. 150–960 CE) remained independent after the Arab Muslim conquest of North Africa in the seventh century. The following Ethiopian kingdom, the Zag^{w}e dynasty (900–1270), based in Lasta, had far less communication with the broader Byzantine world than its Aksumite predecessors. In the central highlands, King Lalibäla (reigned ca. 1204–25) commissioned a complex of ten monuments entirely carved into rock, and created church architecture drastically different from what was known in Byzantium.

In the thirteenth century, Emperor Yəkunno Amlak (reigned 1270–85) established a dynasty that would go on to rule in Ethiopia until the mid-twentieth century. He expanded international relations for the region, and exchanged gifts and letters with the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos (reigned 1261–82).During this period, Ethiopian leaders, artisans, and merchants traveled throughout Africa, the Mediterranean basin, and the broader Byzantine

world. Manuscript and icon production flourished in artistic centers throughout Ethiopia. The art of Ethiopia in this period testifies to the profound impact of these cross-cultural connections.

Map caption:
Centers of artistic production, 8th–15th century

LEFT TO RIGHT AROUND GALLERY

Panel Painting with the Crowned Nursing Virgin and the Twelve Apostles

Ethiopia, second half 15th century
Paint on wood

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Joseph and Patricia Brumit; Conservation of this work supported by the Smithsonian Institution Women’s Committee (2004-7-1)

The inscription on the upper frame reads “Our Lady Mary with her Beloved Son.” First seen in the 1450s, the iconography of the Nursing Virgin became the main motif of Ethiopian panel paintings depicting Mary for several centuries. The theme was also developed in homilies included in the synaxarion, a collection of readings for liturgical feast days. During this same period, the Crowned Virgin often also assumed the form of the Nursing Virgin, an aspect rare in many Christian traditions but well developed in Ethiopia and Egypt.

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Mäṣḥafä Bərhan (Book of Light)

Ethiopia, ca. 1450–68
Black and red ink on parchment

Collection of the Académie des Sciences / Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Paris (Ethiopien d’Abbadie 69)

During his reign, from 1434 to 1468, King Zärʾa Yaʿəqob composed homilies intended to be read in all the churches of his kingdom. Assembled in his expansive *Book of Light* are precise instructions to the clergy and the faithful. With the assistance of this text, Zärʾa Yaʿəqob expanded the cult of Mary in the Ethiopian Church and instituted the ritual veneration of Marian icons. This entire codex was copied under the supervision of the priest-administrator (*qäys gäbäz*) Səmʿon, in and for an unidentified church.

Folio from a Gospel Book with a Portrait of Saint Luke

Ethiopia, ca. 1440–80
Ink and tempera on vellum

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund (1999.212)

Folio from a Gospel Book with a Portrait of Saint John

Ethiopia, ca. 1500
Ink on parchment

Private collection

These portraits are detached pages from the same Gospel book. On the left is Saint Luke. The caption above him reads, in Gəʿəz, “Picture of Saint Luke who narrated, in the guise of an ox. May his prayer and blessing be upon us. Amen,” the ox being Luke’s symbol. The portrait on the right depicts Saint John with his symbol, the eagle. The caption above him reads, “Picture of Saint John the Evangelist, in the guise of the flying eagle. May his prayer be for us a wall against the power of the enemy and torment. Amen.” Evangelist portraits accompanied by their symbols are rare in Ethiopian art, making these leaves distinctive.

Gospel Book

Ethiopia, late 14th–early 15th century
Tempera and ink on parchment; acacia wood

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1998 (1998.66)

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the central scriptures of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Gəʿəz inscription above this image identifies the man as Saint John the Evangelist. Bright colors, schematic forms, and geometric patterns stand out as characteristic of fifteenth-century monastic book production in northern Ethiopia, where this book was made. The book contains all four Gospels, each introduced by a portrait of its respective evangelist-author. Their likenesses are among the twenty full-page illuminations in the manuscript, most depicting scenes from the life of Christ.

Diptych with the Kiss of Christ to His Beloved John and the Nursing Virgin

Ethiopia, possibly ca. 1480–1500
Tempera on wood

Private collection

Placed on Christ’s lap is a book displaying the opening phrase of the Gospel of John in classical Ethiopic (Gəʿəz): “In the beginning was the Word. . . .” By the 1400s, John and his Gospel held particular importance in Ethiopian liturgy. John is also named as the author of texts that emphasize the centrality of Mary in the Ethiopian Church. Here, Christ kisses him, a rare motif referencing his status as Christ’s favored disciple that is found almost exclusively in fifteenth-century Ethiopian painting. The inscription next to Christ’s halo reads, “Picture of Our Lord, how he kissed his beloved John.”

Diptych with the Apostles and the Virgin and Child

Ethiopia, ca. 1480s–1520s (or possibly later)
Paint on wood
Inscribed, in white pigment, center of the left panel, second line: *Made on the order of our Father (Abunä) Täklä Mäsqäl*

Private collection

This image of the Virgin and Child with the apostles combines local conventions such as reddish skin tones with stylistic features associated with Nicolò Brancaleon, a Venetian-born painter active at the Ethiopian court between 1480 and at least 1520. Note especially the Italianate, volumetric rendering of the Virgin’s face. On the back of the right panel is an incomplete inscription that includes the letters NIC and V[E], which may designate “Nicolaus Brancaleon the Venetian.”

Diptych with Saint George and the Virgin and Child

Ethiopia, late 15th–first half 16th century
Paint on wood

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of Joseph and Patricia Brumit; Conservation of this work supported by the Smithsonian Institution’s Women’s Committee (2004-7-2)

Panel paintings became widespread in Ethiopia only in the fifteenth century, likely in response to the expansion of Mary’s cult championed by the emperor Zärʾa Yaʿəqob (1399–1468). This diptych features images popular in Ethiopian art of this period. Here, the Virgin and Child face a mounted Saint George, who, according to contemporary texts, remains at the Virgin’s side when not carrying out a mission on her behalf. Independently, the image of him slaying the dragon to save the princess of Beirut spread across Ethiopia to the eastern Mediterranean and Horn of Africa, inspired by the growing circulation of texts on the saint’s life.

Processional Cross

Ethiopia or Eritrea, mid-15th–early 16th century
Copper alloy

Brooklyn Museum, New York

Hand Cross with Relief Carvings

Ethiopia, early 16th century
Wood

Private collection

Processional Cross

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 12th–13th century
Copper alloy

Brooklyn Museum, New York

Pendant Cross

Ethiopia or Eritrea, 15th century
Bronze

Private collection

Since late antiquity, the cross has symbolized the Christian faith in Ethiopia and neighboring Eritrea. It appeared on coins issued by King ʿEzana, the first Aksumite ruler to convert to Christianity, in the mid-fourth century. Christian Ethiopians wore crosses

around their necks, and rulers held cross-topped scepters. Beginning in late antiquity, crosses also figured in paintings and carvings in churches. Churches themselves could be built on a cross plan or dedicated to the symbol.

Based on their use, Ethiopian crosses are divided into three principal types: the processional cross, the hand cross, and the pendant cross. As displayed here, Ethiopian processional crosses appear still and bare. However, it is important to remember that they originally would have been enlivened by solemn liturgical movements. Draped in precious fabrics, surrounded by other sacred objects, and held by individuals who strove to become like angels, these crosses would have been viewed in a symbolically charged and sensorially rich environment permeated by the smell of incense and the sounds of scripture uttered aloud.

IN CASE

Tray

Egypt or Syria, 1250–1300
Brass; inlaid with silver and a black compound

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Edward C. Moore Collection, Bequest of Edward C. Moore, 1891 (91.1.604)

Late thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Mamluk trays at Lalibela (Ethiopia) are covered entirely with lavish silver inlays. These rare examples illustrate the virtuoso craftsmanship of the metalworkers still active in Cairo during a time when the growing scarcity of metal supplies contributed to the industry’s decline there. Characteristics of that production era include the concentric design with prominent calligraphy inscribed in elegant *thuluth* (that is, script with tall letter shafts), which the Mamluks then preferred. Similar trays were found in the church treasuries of Lalibela.

IN CASE IN CENTER OF GALLERY

Candlestick Base

Egypt, late 13th–mid-14th century
Brass, inlaid with silver

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1971 (1971.40)

Among the artifacts preserved in the monasteries and churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia, is a group of medieval Islamic inlaid metalwork from Egypt in the Mamluk period (1250–1517). The works shed light on the connections between Christian and Muslim societies in Africa. They also expand our knowledge of the various uses of Islamic inlaid metalwork, furnishing elite households and church treasuries, and the wide geographic boundaries in which it circulated, from West and sub-Saharan Africa to Europe and probably even China. The example here is representative of the metalwork found in Ethiopian churches.

Image caption:
Candlestick base, probably Egypt, late 13th–mid-14th century. Brass; inlaid with silver and a black compound. From Betä Maryam, Lalibela; now preserved in the Lalibela Church Museum.

Gundä Gunde Manuscripts

The large manuscripts in this case offer dramatic testimony to the creative achievements of the Stephanite monastic communities, which were nestled in Highland Ethiopia and produced distinctive illuminated texts during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Stephanite monks, who were followers of the fifteenth-century monk Ǝsṭifanos, were especially focused on the Gospels, the most important form of Christian holy writing. The style of their paintings, with muted colors, lively figures, and bold compositions, is loosely referred to as the Gundä Gunde school, after the mother monastery of the Stephanite order.

Gundä Gunde Gospels

Ethiopia, 1440–80
Ink and pigment on parchment

Private collection

The illuminated manuscripts produced at Gundä Gunde share certain distinctive features, such as figures with elongated faces and textiles rendered as interlocking geometric patterns. One can see the style in the folio shown here, of the Virgin and Child with the archangels Michael and Gabriel. It exemplifies the exceptional quality of all the paintings in the manuscript, with their vivid red, green, blue, and yellow hues showing few signs of fading.

Psalter

Ethiopia, 15th century
Ink and tempera on parchment

Collection of the Académie des Sciences / Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Paris (Ethiopien d’Abbadie 105)

Ethiopian psalters usually contain the Psalms of David, with the Canticles (praise hymns), the Song of Songs, and the Magnificat of Mary. According to the Ethiopian Church, King David was the sole author of the Psalms. Here, his full-page portrait shows him playing the *begena*, a type of box-lyre. Until the twentieth century, the instrument was an Ethiopian status symbol, played only by elite and royal men and signifying their high social and economic standing.

Gospel Book with Journey of the Magi

Ethiopia, Northern Highlands, ca. 1510–30
Ink and tempera on parchment; wood and leather binding

Private collection

While Ethiopian illuminators typically drew from existing pictorial models, this manuscript stands apart for its remarkably original visualization of sacred history. Here, the prefatory cycle of the Gospel, which traditionally features selected episodes from the life of Christ, focuses instead on an expansive treatment of the Journey of the Magi, which is transformed into an unprecedented nine-page royal entourage. The procession, featuring baggage trains, guards, attendants, porters, musicians, and a large encampment, culminates on the next folio in a scene of adoration, where an angelic host encircles the Virgin Mary and Jesus.

Diptych with Saint Giyorgis (George) and the Virgin Eleousa

Ethiopia, ca. 1500, and possibly Crete, ca. 1480–90
Tempera and gold on wood

Private collection

This diptych pairing Saint George with the Virgin and Child provides a fascinating insight into how Ethiopian artists responded to changes in the religious culture associated with Zärʾa Yaʿəqob (reigned 1434–68), whose declaration of Marian devotion prompted a surge in the production of panel paintings in a wide range of formats. What makes this diptych exceptional is its creative combination of distinctive painting traditions. While the image of Saint George, whose white horse rears up as if to honor the image of the Virgin, reflects local artistic practice, the right-hand panel was executed by an artist trained in a workshop closely connected to Italo-Cretan painting circles.

LEGACIES & REFLECTIONS

Byzantium's legacy in Africa continued after the last emperor, Constantine XI Palaiologos, died in 1453. Byzantine-style works dating from the sixteenth century to today can help us understand such issues as identity, belonging, and memory among African Christian communities. These sacred objects also illustrate how the convention of dividing artistic developments into distinct "periods" may make less sense than looking at the long-term interactions between the arts of Africa and Byzantium. For example, Ethiopian artists from the early modern period to today continue to translate and adapt new motifs and styles from Byzantine art.

This gallery displays paintings from the small church of Abba Ǝnṭonyos, dedicated to the Egyptian saint Anthony. The church is located in the vicinity of Gondar, the capital city of Ethiopia from the 1630s until the start of the reign of King Tewodros II in 1855. Oral histories of Gondar attribute the construction of Abba Ǝnṭonyos to the patronage of Emperor Yoḥannəs I (John, reigned 1667–82). The wall paintings, manuscripts, and panel

paintings in this gallery blend motifs unique to Ethiopian art with themes from Byzantine and medieval Christian art.

Background: Rock-hewn Church of Saint George (Bete Giyorgis), active church complex, Lalibela, Ethiopia, carved late 12th–early 13th century. Image: © Rudolf Ernst / Dreamstime.com

TO LEFT

Double Diptych Pendant

Ethiopia, Central and Northern Highlands, early 18th century

Tempera on wood with string

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1997 (1997.81.1)

In the seventeenth century, Ethiopian artists continued to adopt visual forms from the Byzantine past. During this period, double-sided diptychs became popular among the nobility, who wore them as pendants suspended by a cord around the neck. Here, we see Saint George and the Virgin and Child, side by side. This pendant is a classic example of the painting style developed during the late seventeenth century at Gondar, the trading center where King Fasilädäs (reigned 1632–67) established his capital.

IN CASE IN CENTER OF GALLERY

Chalice Case

Egypt, mid- to late 18th century
Painted wood

Coptic Museum, Cairo

The Virgin Hodegetria (She Who Shows the Way), the archangel Michael, Saint Basil, and a depiction of the Last Supper appear on each of the four sides of the wood chalice case. After the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, saints across the eastern Mediterranean, including in Egypt, were increasingly depicted wearing garments evoking the Byzantine royal court, as can be seen on this chalice. Images like these circulated throughout Ethiopia, which remained under the umbrella of the Coptic Church until 1959.

LEFT TO RIGHT AROUND GALLERY

ʾÄrganonä Maryam (Organ of Mary)

Attributed to Basəlyos (scribe) and the Night-Heron Master (illuminator)
Ethiopia, Lasta, late 17th century
Pigment ink on parchment, wood, leather, and fiber

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Louis V. Bell Fund, 2006 (2006.99)

This prayer book combines Christian and "magical" imagery. Christian and magical (or noncanonical) beliefs entangle in Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Typically included in scrolls or codices, talismanic images (*ṭälsämat*) are a particular kind of representation of magical belief; they depict the invisible world.

This page depicts Abba Giyorgis of Sägla, the fifteenth-century author of this hymn of praise. He was notable for writing original compositions in Gəʿəz, whereas most Ethiopian religious texts were translated from Greek, Coptic, or Arabic sources. Elements of the geometry of the *ṭälsämat* were incorporated into Abba Giyorgis's robe.

Täʾammərä Maryam (Miracles of Mary)

Ethiopia, Gondar, late 17th century
Ink and tempera on parchment, wood, leather, cotton, string

The Art Institute of Chicago, Ada Turnbull Hertle and Marion and Samuel Klasstorner Endowments

In the early modern period, Gondar had a thriving book production center. The stories in the *Täʾammərä Maryam* encouraged viewers to address their prayers to the Virgin Mary, whose strong motherly bond to Christ is the source of her special intercessory power. This two-page spread recounts three major episodes in the Virgin's miraculous healing of a man with a club foot: On the left-hand page, the afflicted man offers prayers in the presence of a prominent person. In the central image, he addresses the Virgin directly, and on the far right-hand side, reveals his healed leg, testifying to her miraculous cure.

Ethiopic Prayer Book

Ethiopia, Gondar, 17th century
Ink and tempera on parchment and vellum; wood and leather binding

Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

For centuries, African scribes and artisans crafted complex manuscripts made of parchment and wood with a standardized technique developed in the early Byzantine period. Each African region adopted its own production methods. For example, the binding of this book of prayers exemplifies a technique unique to Ethiopia: wood boards sewn with the thread used to attach individual sections. This approach to book production may have been derived from Coptic models.

The Church of Abba Ǝnṭonyos (Saint Anthony) in Gondar, Ethiopia

The small church of Abba Ǝnṭonyos, dedicated to Saint Anthony, is located near Gondar, the capital city of the Ethiopian kingdom from the 1630s until 1855. Oral histories attribute the church's construction to the patronage of Emperor Yoḥannəs I, who ruled during the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Paintings executed on overlapping strips of cotton canvas adorned the sanctuary walls. The canvas was covered with a ground layer of calcium sulfate, onto which the underlying design was traced with carbon black. Paint was applied flatly within these outlines, which were occasionally redrawn, sometimes in red, but most often in black. The Ethiopian painter Wäldä Maryam likely created the masterworks in this gallery.

Image caption:
Fasil Ghebbi (Castle of Fasilädäs), Gondar, built ca. 1660s. Image: Magdalena Paluchowska/Alamy Stock Photo

Wall Painting with Abba Ǝnṭonyos (Saint Anthony) Receiving the Cap and Scapular

From the Church of Abba Ǝnṭonyos (Saint Anthony), west sanctuary wall
Ethiopia, Gondar, second half 17th century
Paint on canvas remounted on cotton, fixed to frame during conservation

Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris (71.1931.74.3590)

This image is of Saint Anthony, the Egyptian founding father of monasticism. He is shown receiving the monastic attributes from an angel: the *qob*, or monastic cap, and the *askema*, or scapular, which takes the form of a leather cord with braided crosses worn crossed over his chest. The inscription above Saint Anthony describes these attributes.

Wall Painting with a Priest of Heaven

From the Church of Abba Ǝnṭonyos (Saint Anthony), upper part of the sanctuary
Ethiopia, Gondar, second half 17th century
Paint on canvas remounted on cotton, fixed to frame during conservation

Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris (71.1931.74.3610)

This is an image of one of twenty-four “priests of heaven,” or Kahənatä sämay. The designation refers to the Elders of the Apocalypse, who, according to the teachings of the Ethiopian Church, fall under the category of angels. Equipped with crowns and censers, they celebrate the divine liturgy, arrayed in a composition typical of the seventeenth century. The cut of their garments and the cloth’s dotted, striped, or floral patterns reflect elite tastes for textiles and clothing imported from India and Turkey.

Wall Painting with Saint Filatäwos (Philotheos of Antioch)

From the Church of Abba Ǝnṭonyos (Saint Anthony), east sanctuary wall
Ethiopia, Gondar, second half 17th century
Paint on canvas remounted on cotton, fixed to frame during conservation

Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris (71.1931.74.3591)

This painting features one of the holy horsemen, martyrs intended to serve as exemplars for men, Saint Philotheos (Filatäwos as he is known in Ethiopia) of Antioch. These men, tormented for their Christian faith under Emperor Diocletian (reigned 284–305), are shown striking down emperors and idols opposed to their faith, in this case, the bull that Philotheos's family worshipped. Here, the saint is presented as an Ethiopian dignitary. He wears contemporary noble attire such as a flowing overcoat, wide-legged trousers, and satin or leather slippers.

Wall Painting with Saint Sosənna (Susanna) and Her Persecutors

From the Church of Abba Ǝnṭonyos (Saint Anthony), east sanctuary wall
Ethiopia, Gondar, second half 17th century
Paint on canvas remounted on cotton, fixed to frame during conservation

Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris (71.1931.74.3586)

On the wall of the church was an image of Saint Susanna taunted by her persecutors for having been propositioned by two old men while she was bathing. The inscription above says, “How the elders seized Susanna.” Her biography, which presented her as an exemplar of chastity and purity, was well-known in Christian texts along the Nile valley.

This painting might have been left incomplete: The saint’s cloak has not been colored in; the patterns of her dress are incomplete; a knot at the chest has been added; and the clothes and shoes of her persecutors are also unfinished.

Healing Scroll

Ethiopia, 19th century
Pigments on parchment

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Anonymous Gift, 2011 (2011.377)

“Magical” prayers in Ethiopia are culturally accepted. Commonly known as magic scrolls, amulets and the rituals involved in making and using them exert influence upon harmful demons and spirits, helpful angels, and significant constellations of stars. The aim is to cure those suffering from illness and misfortune and to lessen the effects of curses cast by those who wish harm. To date, no scrolls made before the seventeenth century have been identified, even though they are mentioned as early as the fifteenth century in saints’ lives and Church writings. To be effective, scrolls had to be used daily, whether worn on the body day and night or placed under a pillow.

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Healing Scroll

Ethiopia, 18th–19th century
Ink and pigments on parchment, with cotton

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Marie Sussek Gift, 2012 (2012.5)

Known locally as *ketab*, Ethiopian amulet scrolls are made of parchment, usually two or three strips sewn together, and are rolled vertically. Kept in leather cases, mere possession of them had a protective effect, as did reading their prayers aloud. Amulet scrolls are often illuminated at the top with an image of a guardian angel or archangel with his sword drawn, and again at the middle and end of the scroll with imagery symbolizing good and evil powers—those forces conjured for protection, and those to be guarded against and vanquished.

Triptych with Saint Ewosṭatewos and Eight of His Disciples

Ethiopia, north of Goǧǧam, late 17th century
Tempera on wood, bound with cord

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Louis V. Bell Fund, 2006 (2006.98)

This large-format triptych spotlights the fourteenth-century Ethiopian saint Ewosṭatewos, at center, surrounded by his eight disciples. Each figure wears a priestly turban, carries a hand cross, and is identified by the clerical title *abunä* (our father). Ewosṭatewos was from a noble family and became a monk at a young age. He was exiled due to theological differences with the ruling kings, and spent many years in Egypt, Jerusalem, and, finally, Armenia. Devotional images such as this icon would have been placed prominently inside a church to encourage prayer and to serve as a model of piety.

Wall Painting with Saints Täklä Haymanot and Ewosṭatewos

From the Church of Abba Ǝnṭonyos (Saint Anthony), south sanctuary wall
Ethiopia, Gondar, second half 17th century
Paint on canvas remounted on cotton, fixed to frame during conservation

Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris (71.1931.74.3588)

This painting of Saints Täklä Haymanot (died 1313?) and Ewosṭatewos (ca. 1273–1352), the founding fathers of major Ethiopian monastic traditions, was originally on the south wall of the Church of Abba Ǝnṭonyos. The color palette and materials are similar to other wall paintings of the same period: vermilion, sometimes mixed with black, for draperies and clothing; orpiment for yellow; red lead for orange; and smalt for blue, following a recipe developed in Europe, implying long-distance international trade. Other organic materials may have been used that have since faded with time.

Virgin and Child in Front of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore

From the series *Septem Urbis Ecclesiæ Primariæ*
(Seven Basilicas of Rome)
Published by Philip Galle
Netherlands, 16th century
Engraving

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund

Starting in the sixteenth century, the Jesuits globally disseminated prints such as this one after an eleventh- to thirteenth-century Byzantine-style Marian icon housed in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. When the prints arrived in Ethiopia around 1600, artists there quickly translated the prototype image into regional forms. They depicted the Virgin and Child as contemporary Ethiopians, with appropriate hairstyles, dress, and accessories and in local settings.

Image caption:
Virgin of Santa Maria Maggiore. Byzantine, ca. 11th–13th century. Tempera and gold on wood. Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome. Image: William Perry/Alamy Stock

IN CASE

Processional Cross

Ethiopia or Eritrea, mid-15th–early 16th century
Copper alloy

Private collection

Processional crosses were produced in a rich variety of shapes, sizes, and materials and feature an extensive range of geometric patterns that carried theological and symbolic meanings. The elaborate interlace patterns of these liturgical objects may have been inspired by similar patterns that appear in contemporary illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts. A majority of crosses made during this period feature a representation of the Virgin and Child on one side. Other subjects include God in Majesty, as we see on this example.

Triptych with the Virgin and Child, Saints, and Scenes from the Life of Christ

Ethiopia, late 16th–early 17th century
Tempera on gesso-primed wood

The Newark Museum of Art, Purchase 1995 Avis Miller Pond Bequest Fund (95.47.2)

Notice Christ's red and yellow banded nimbus (halo), which is unique to this painting style featuring parallel, wavy, and straight lines. At center, he sits on his mother's lap, reaching out to touch her shoulder. Christ's tender pose and his mother's hands are suggestive of earlier Byzantine icons like the Eleousa (Virgin of Tenderness) and Glykophilousa (Sweet Kissing).

Triptych with the Virgin and Child, the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, Saints, and Scenes from the Life of Christ

Ethiopia, late 17th century
Tempera on linen mounted on wood, bound with cord

The Art Institute of Chicago, Director's Fund

This triptych's style suggests that an artist painted it in or around the royal capital Gondar. Below, twelve haloed apostles clutch small crosses. The upper register of each wing carries scenes from the life of Christ: at left, the Harrowing of Hell, and at right, the Crucifixion and the Kʷərʿatä rəʾəsu (Striking of the Head). Egyptian and Ethiopian saints stand at lower right, while two saints on horseback ride along the bottom left panel.

Contemporary Reflections

The works in this gallery bring the past into the present. The exhibition's themes of memory and legacy are prevalent in Tsedaye Makonnen's sculpture and textile installations. Engraved on the metal columns are the names of contemporary East African women who died while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. These complicated, dangerous migration routes also existed in the medieval period and connected Africa to the Byzantine world. The women are memorialized here by the addition of Copto-Ethiopian crosses (*mäsqäls*), forming structures akin to modular tombstones. Light boxes shown both attached to the wall and freestanding are reminiscent of the classical architecture referenced in artworks throughout the exhibition. The installations thus invite us to exercise remembrance for lost traditions and lives.

Theo Eshetu's video overlays scenes of the return of the Aksum Obelisk to Ethiopia from Rome in 2005 with images of Ethiopian painting. The nonlinear narrative, screened on fifteen channels simultaneously, exposes

the complexities of restitution (the return of culturally significant objects to their countries of origin) presently at the forefront of discussions among museum professionals and art historians. Eshetu's video highlights the challenges that come with transporting a physical monument across water and land. At the same time, the work displays how ideas of identity, translation, and memory become entangled in and gradually supersede the monument itself, echoing the complex history of Byzantium and Christianity in Africa.

Nefsé Nets'a Mawt'at Däbtäras | ነፍስ ፡ ነፃ ፡ ማውጣት ። ደብተራ ። | The Soul Is Set Free Magic Scrolls I–V

Tsedaye Makonnen (Ethiopian American, born 1984), in collaboration with the artist's mother, **Asnakech Ayele** (born 1955), and son, **Senai Makonnen Livingston** (born 2010)

2023

Cotton, water-based screenprinting ink, and mirror acrylic

Collection of the artist

The *Soul Is Set Free* series, comprising lino block prints on Ethiopian scarves (*netelas*), derives from the artist's meditations on how to protect Black people crossing borders or doing something as mundane as stepping outside. Each scarf is an imaginative womb that, when worn, encases one's body in a protective egg.

The scarves, mimicking magic scrolls, carry their own migratory imprints. The Amharic characters hand-printed on the textiles are a series of poetic prayers the artist wrote after reading accounts of the violence

against Black people migrating to Europe from Africa. In this latest iteration, Makonnen has included her immigrant mother's translations, correcting her misspelled and mispronounced Amharic prayers. The artist's process of composing, copying, translating, and correcting prayers mirrors similar artistic and scribal practices that have thrived in northern and eastern Africa for millennia.

Aberash | አበራሽ | You Give Light II
Tsedaye Makonnen (Ethiopian American, born 1984)
2023
Mirrored stainless steel, plexiglass, LED tubes, and assembly bolts and nuts

Collection of the artist

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Tsehai | ፀሐይ | Sunlight
Tsedaye Makonnen (Ethiopian American, born 1984)
2023
Mirrored stainless steel, plexiglass, LED tubes, wall-mounted cleats with corresponding hardware

Collection of the artist

The Byzantine and African artworks on display in this exhibition were often made in memory of loved ones or important members of an artist's community. The names of these artists and their dedications are frequently forgotten or lost from the historical record.

Acknowledging this persistent historical erasure, Tsedaye Makonnen created these two light sculptures in remembrance of Anadith Danay Reyes Álvarez; Jismary Alejandra Barboza González; Tori Bowie; Ajike Shantrell Owens; O'Shae Sibley; Mulugeta Gebrekidan; Ta'Kiya Young; Tina Turner; queer, transgender, and nonbinary Ethiopians and Eritreans; and Black people migrating across the Darién Gap, the Mexico-U.S. border, and the Black Mediterranean.

The Return of the Aksum Obelisk

Theo Eshetu (British Ethiopian, born 1958)

2009

Fifteen-channel digital video installation, color, sound, 21 min., 43 sec.

Collection of the artist

Assistive listening
metmuseum.org/AfricaByzantiumListening
For best results, join our free Wi-Fi network (MetMuseumFreeWiFi).