Ahmad Muhammad Issa. *Painting in Islam. Between Prohibition and Aversion.* Istanbul: Waqf for Research on Islamic History, Art and Culture, 1996, 137 pp., text in English (pp. 1—56), text in Arabic (pp. 80—137), colour plates (pp. 57—75).

The work under review here is an example of a popular Muslim publication which is also of scholarly interest. The ban on the depiction of living things seems to be an inexhaustible topic in the history of Islamic art. However, this is the sort of problem that is never likely to be resolved. The appearance of the work under review here is linked to the periodically renewed discussion on the possibility of figurative depiction as such. This topic has once again become current in connection with the polemics that have arisen in fundamentalism Muslim circles.

Despite the fact that the edition is intended primarily for a broad readership, its appearance is quite indicative and deserves attention from specialists. The book “Painting in Islam: Between Prohibition and Aversion” was published with the aid of the Waqf for Research on Islamic History, Art and Culture foundation, in Turkey, one of the first Muslim publication which is also of scholarly interest. The book “Painting in Islam: Between Prohibition and Aversion” was published with the aid of the Waqf for Research on Islamic History, Art and Culture foundation, in Turkey, one of the first Muslim publication which is also of scholarly interest.

The author formulates his conclusions on the basis of extant written sources which convey the views of Muhammad’s contemporaries on the possibility of depicting living things which do not cast a shadow (p. 19) and on the basic possibility of creating such works as long as they are not used as objects of religious worship, which would entail a return to paganism.

The Islamic rejection of figurative art was the consequence of a general tendency which arose in the Mediterranean in the sixth century. This manifested itself in the ever greater disapproval with which Judaism and Christianity viewed the worship of divinity with the aid of hand-created representations. The latter gradually came to be viewed as a concession to paganism.

In the author’s opinion, the danger that such representations would arise and that faith in idols which represent divinity would replace faith in divinity, and the struggle with this phenomenon as a reflection of the struggle with polytheism came to Islam from Christianity in the eighth—ninth centuries (pp. 32—3). Since the Qur’an does not contain explicit prohibitions on representation, the basic source for the author’s conclusions are the hadiths. In accordance with their affiliation with this or that circle of the Prophet’s companions, the hadiths not only ranged from the categorical to the tolerant, but sometimes contradicted one another. The author cites, for example, the hadith which states that “Those who will be most severely tormented on the Day of Resurrection are those who make representations” or “The angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog or in which there are representations”. These hadiths can be regarded as most intolerant. At the same time, one can find in a hadith from ‘À’isha: “The Prophet never left in his house anything which bore a tasaltib without destroying it”. From Mǎlik b. Anas comes a hadith which tells of how Muhammad asked ‘À’isha to rehang a curtain in her home in such a way that the representation on it was not visible from where he usually prayed, as the drawings distracted his thoughts during prayer: “Draw it back away from me, for its representations keep occurring to my mind while I am praying” (p. 25). And, finally, a hadith ascribed to ‘À’isha contradicts the others cited here, as it tells of how the Archangel Gabriel brought Muhammad a portrait of her in green clothes with the words “Here is your wife for this and for eternal life”.

The author attempts to render even the intolerant hadiths in such a way that suggests the possibility of reinterpretation. In this regard, it is appropriate to cite the author’s complaints against the editorial policy of the journal *Majallat al-Azhar* in relation to letters they receive with questions on this issue. Their position differs little from the utterances found in the works of early medieval authors. It lacks independent consideration or unbiased reflection. In the author’s view, instead of presenting an original, contemporary, and authoritative commentary, the journal usually limits itself to citing the views of the Committee on Fatwas or to a comment by a companion of the Prophet, ending with the words “God only knows” (p. 42).

In his conclusion to the work, the author insists that Muhammad, seeking to guard the faithful against the sin of idolatry (Sūra 6, verse 74), objected only to those representations which were created with the aim of substituting them for the true God as an object of worship (Sūra 19, verse 42). In the author’s view, the debate on the permissibility or impermissibility of reproducing living things in art — painting, graphic art, sculpture — is beside the point. He also holds that the very arguments which arise on this issue...
merely discredit Islam by shunting believing Muslims off to
the hinterlands of cultural development and civilisation (p. 48).

Taking into account that the book under review here is
not a scholarly edition, we do not undertake a critical dis-
cussion in the context of the scholarly literature. Still, one
can only welcome works such as “Painting in Islam”, which
testify to a profound respect for the ancient humanist tradi-
tions of true Islam. The support of such a prestigious Waqf
foundation in the publication of this work is the best rec-
commendation not only of the Waqf’s position, but also of
the views of a significant part of the Muslim religious com-
 community which protests against a return to societal norms fro-
zen at the level of the middle ages.

F. Abdullaeva

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E. Balicka-Witakowska. La Crucifixion sans Crucifié
dans l’art éthiopien. Recherches sur la service de
l’iconographie chrétienne de l’Antiquité tardive. —
Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica, No. 4, herausgegeben

This monograph by E. Balicka-Witakowska, which con-
cerns the complex iconographic issue of crucifixion scenes
in Ethiopian art where the crucified Christ is not depicted, is,
her doctoral dissertation, written under the direction of Pro-
fessor Karl Otto Nordstrom. The work was defended at the
University of Uppsala (Sweden) on May 20, 1993. The
study has appeared as an independent book in the series
Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica with the help of the Centre
for Mediterranean Archaeology Studies at the Polish Acad-
emy of Sciences in Warsaw.

The author has analysed an extremely broad array of
both written and non-written sources from the Christian
East and Latin West, including not only appropriate pas-
sages in the synoptic gospels but apocrypha as well, com-
mentaries by the Church fathers, liturgical texts, and spiri-
tual poetry. In determining the place in Eastern art of Ethio-
pian manuscripts with miniatures which depict the
 crucifixion scene in a particular iconographic way, the
researcher structures her work with an eye to the following
three basic questions: (i) what were the sources which led to
the emergence of such an original composition; (ii) what is
the ideological import of such a scene; and (iii) how could
such an iconographic variant arise?

The book is divided into five chapters and presents in
an appendix a catalogue of Ethiopian manuscripts with
miniatures the author deems noteworthy. Chapter 1 contains
a description of manuscripts which belong to the category
of illuminated Gospels. They are all decorated in accord-
ance with the same principle. First come canonical depic-
tions and the “Source of Life”; portraits of the Evangelists
precede the texts of the corresponding gospels. The place-
ment of the Crucifixion scene is not linked directly to the
text, but remains in keeping with the chronology of events.

Typologically, Balicka-Witakowska places the mini-
atures into three stylistic groups. The division is based on
the forms of the Golgothan cross, its ornamentation, differences
in the personification of the Sun and Moon, and in the de-
piction of the lamb against the background of the half-
sphere. In her opinion, the dates in the colophons relate to
the texts, not the miniatures; one must date the latter by
their stylistic features. The author admits that attempts to
link manuscripts with specific scriptoria and centres have
not yet borne fruit.

The second chapter deals with the ideological sources
of the depiction of crucifixion scenes without the crucified
Christ. Having analyzed the contents of numerous apocry-
pha in Greek, Latin, Coptic, Arabic and Ethiopic, which
speak of Christ’s death on the cross and his immunity from
suffering, the author concludes that one should seek a
theological explanation not in heretical treatises, but in
works by Christian apologists, primarily Tertullian and Ori-
gen. Also, the absence of Christ in crucifixion scenes is not
linked to the teachings of the medieval Ethiopian sects of
the Michaelites and Stephanites. Ethiopian miniaturists
copied early Byzantine sources before the Council in Trullo
in 692, which banned the symbolic depiction of Christ. The
decrees of the Council were not accepted by the monophy-
site Church in Ethiopia as well as by the Latin West.

Specific sections of chapter three in the book under re-
view here present an iconographic analysis of crucifixion
scenes and their various components — the lamb, the caged
bird, the Sun and Moon, the good and evil thieves, the sol-
dier with a spear and the soldier with a sponge, and people
standing at the foot of the cross. She does not neglect the
form of the cross or the ornamentation of engraved stones
which covers its surface. The latter feature is viewed in the
cost of the stones and their attendant symbolism. The
explanations draw not only on familiar medieval treatises,
but also on more specialised materials which were espe-
cially popular in Ethiopia and provided the basis for local
versions. Among them is the “Book of Heavenly and
Earthly Secrets”, where sapphire symbolises the legs of
Christ and topaz his wounds.

In the analysis of each of the components enumerated
above, Balicka-Witakowska provides varied and worthwhile
observations which in a number of cases lead the author to
original conclusions. To enumerate only a few, the lamb —
a symbol of Christ, the human nature of the Saviour and the
Eucharist — is in Ethiopian miniatures linked exclusively
with the idea of sacrifice, such as the lamb which replaced
Isaac in the “Sacrifice of Abraham”. The horns of the lamb
reveal themselves to be full of hidden meaning — a symbol
of the cross. The same is true of the hide destined for re-
moval, which symbolises the very act of crucifixion. Other
associations are found in the rod which the lamb bears: it is,
like the rod of Moses, a symbol of the cross. The bush or
tree near which the lamb stands is a prefiguration of the
cross; the cross itself is the tree of life.

In Ethiopian miniatures, the connection between the
lamb and the cross is always direct — it stands on the upper
horizontal beam of the cross and is conceived as crucified
and imbued with radiance, for as we find in the Book of
Revelation (21, 23), heavenly Jerusalem is sanctified by the
glory of the Lord, and his torch is the lamb. The caged bird, which in early Christian and Byzantine art signified the soul of man encumbered by material existence, is treated in Ethiopian art as an image of the suffering Christ abandoned by his disciples. Furthermore, if the bird is depicted with its wings spread, it becomes a symbol of the crucified Christ. Balicka-Witakowska explains the simultaneous appearance in miniatures of the bird and the lamb as an original feature of the ancient Church's iconographic language, where the juxtaposition expressed the dual nature of Christ. The depiction in Ethiopian miniatures of the Sun and the Moon on both sides of the cross is identical to other Eastern Christian depictions, with the sole difference that the heavenly bodies are presented as turning away from the Crucified Christ. This device underscores the absence of Christ on the cross, as the averted Sun and Moon signify the darkness which concealed the body of Christ.

Balicka-Witakowska makes two observations on the iconography of the thieves. These observations are of importance both for theologians and for art historians. Firstly, of the two basic forms of the crucifixion — the Jerusalem, in which the bodies of the crucified and their hands are extended along the beams of the cross, and the Eastern, in which their hands are held behind their backs along the vertical beam — Ethiopian miniaturists preferred the second. The miniatures included in the catalogue give only one example of the Jerusalem form. Secondly, the depiction of an angel receiving the soul of the good thief and of a demon receiving the soul of the evil thief goes back to apocryphal texts of the Revelations of Peter, Paul, the Virgin Mary, and Gregory; such depictions are attested for Western iconography of the fourteenth century, whence they likely were adopted by contemporary Ethiopian miniaturists.

In the positions of the soldiers alongside the cross and in their actions — where the offering of a sponge soaked in vinegar and the blow with a spear take place simultaneously — the author sees the prevalence of a symbolic, not historical, principle of depiction. Moreover, in the author's opinion, the location of the soldier with the spear on the right side of the cross betrays the influence of Gnostic ideas, according to which the right side was linked to the spiritual and the eternal, whereas the left side represented things earthly. Regarding the figures arrayed at the base of the cross, Balicka-Witakowska gives grounds for rejecting current hypotheses which view them either as Roman soldiers casting dice or pilgrims. The author of the monograph proposes that we see here a symbolic representation of the peoples of the ecumen to whom the cross brings the light of the eternal, whereas the left side represented things earthly. The depiction in Ethiopian miniatures of the Sun and the Moon on both sides of the cross is identical to other Eastern Christian depictions, with the sole difference that the heavenly bodies are presented as turning away from the Crucified Christ. This device underscores the absence of Christ on the cross, as the averted Sun and Moon signify the darkness which concealed the body of Christ.

Chapter four is an essay on one relic — a marble ciborium held in the San-Marco Cathedral in Venice. It is the only artifact outside of Ethiopia which represents the crucifixion of the lamb. The final fifth chapter contains a collection of materials from late antiquity and the early Byzantine period, primarily the fourth—seventh centuries, which depict the crucifixion without Christ. They are classified according to chronology, location, and iconography. This section of the work provides answers to questions posed in the introduction about the ideological import of what is depicted and about the means by which the aforementioned iconographic recensions made their way to Ethiopia.

The thrust of the arguments brought to bear by Balicka-Witakowska suggests to the reader that the depiction of the Crucifixion without the crucified Christ, that is, without the cross — the tree of life, called "angelic and victorious" — is an expression of Theophany. The appearance of this iconographic schema in Ethiopia was made possible through the mediation of Syrians and Copts, who brought with them pilgrims' eulogies. At the same time, the author rejects the thesis that the sources of such a composition go back to pictorial decorations in the Holy Land temples, since there is no direct evidence of precisely which biblical episodes adorned those places of worship and the existence of various versions of the same episode excludes the possibility of a single prototype. Nor does the author accept that the craftsmen who prepared the pilgrims' eulogies could have copied the representations found on medallions specially produced in Constantinople in the fifth—seventh centuries. Such craftsmen would hardly have had access to valuable jewelry from the capital of the empire, even if such objects made their way to the Holy Land. In all likelihood, Palestinian craftsmen employed various sources for their depictions and could have combined them as they saw fit in what they placed on the surfaces of the small objects they produced. In turn, Ethiopian miniaturists copied the eulogies which came to their country from the holy places.

Balicka-Witakowska's book deserves recognition as a profound, careful, and thorough study of medieval Ethiopian miniatures. The abundance of sources the author employs, both written and non-written, renders her work a valuable reference guide of the sort so essential to historians, art researchers, and specialists in religious archaeology. The collection of artifacts which depict the crucifixion without the crucified Christ is not only imposing, it is nearly exhaustive. The author has omitted only a bronze cross with an engraved depiction of the bust of Christ Emmanuel held in the Museum of the city of Aquileia and tessaeras, found in many numismatic collections, which depict the bust of Christ the Almighty above a cross-shaped monogram venerated by angels. One can see this same scene on a seventh-century gold signet-ring (the British Museum) and on a twelfth-century Italo-Byzantine cameo cut on sardonyx (the Hermitage). One should note that the work under review was carried out in accordance with the most demanding scholarly standards. The text is accompanied by a list of sources and a bibliography which includes publications on the topic up through 1993.
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“The hunter sits atop a lion which has sunk its teeth into his elbow”, miniature from manuscript A 448 in the holdings of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, fol. 24b, 7.5 x 6.5 cm.

Back cover:
Plate 1. “A hunter stands with his hunting dog which grips in its teeth a cat it has dragged out its burrow”, miniature from the same manuscript, fol. 5b, 8.0 x 7.5 cm.
Plate 2. “A dog licks blood off a wounded rabbit”, miniature from the same manuscript, fol. 66a, 7.5 x 7.0 cm.
Plate 3. “The lion devours one of the two bulls”, miniature from the same manuscript, fol. 57a, 7.0 x 6.5 cm.