

Silverman, Raymond A., ed., *Ethiopia Traditions of Creativity* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1999).

Ethiopia: Traditions of Creativity, is a product of a coordinated research project on artists and artisans in Ethiopia. This research venture resulted in the above-mentioned volume and an exhibit on the occasion of the 12th International Ethiopian Studies Conference at Michigan State University. The book, edited by Raymond A. Silverman, a Professor of art history and adjunct curator of African visual culture at Michigan State University, brings to light the artist and artisan, members of Ethiopian society who are often not considered. Each scholar, within his/her analysis, weaves common themes of "...the challenge of interpreting other cultures, occupational specialization, the social status of artists and artisans, how people acquire their special knowledge and skills, creativity in Ethiopian culture, the sharing or borrowing of material traditions and finally the problem of dealing with the idea of tradition and change." (5) The scholars are from various parts of the world, each approaching the topic from their specific discipline, lending the volume strength and diversity. Readers will receive extensive and differing views with regards to art and the position of artists and artisans in African societies.

The volume is specifically concerned with understanding the individuals who are creators of the objects that make up the Ethiopian material culture. Silverman notes that there are a great many Ethiopian objects in various collections, both public and private, throughout the world, but the creators have remained anonymous. "The makers are unknown because the people who originally collected the objects were uninterested in recording the names of the people who made them. Regrettably, the anonymity associated with the creative process now is erroneously perceived as a characteristic of most Ethiopian, as well as other African, societies." (4) Each contributing scholar is charged with correcting this by considering both the life and work of individual artists and artisans not only in personal life, but also as members of their communities.

In the Introduction, Silverman notes that most writing, "about Ethiopian art and material culture deal[s] only with the painting associated with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church." (3) As much attention as Ethiopian religious painting has received, "... little is

known about the context in which religious paintings were produced and functioned" in society (144). This silence is due mainly to the approach of scholars, which gives "...the impression that the sources of creativity, innovation and change always came from outside Ethiopia." (147) For this reason, the main objective of this volume is to explore Ethiopian artistic productions and the artist to "introduce some of the traditions and perhaps contribute to a better understanding and appreciation of their cultural significance." (4)

Silverman points out that a western definition of 'art' tends to exclude many of the creations that do not meet its limited criteria. Labels such as "craft", 'handicraft', 'artifact' and so on" are used for "aesthetic objects that do not meet these basic criteria" (6), as established by Western ideas and values. Within Africa, art generally serves a utilitarian purpose in addition to being an artistic creation. The purpose of the item is of great importance in the initial creation of the object. However, within a Western value system, the label 'art' is reserved for pieces that "...serve primarily as objects of aesthetic contemplation." (5) Due to the precedence of utility within African artistic creations, for long periods of time, the western scholars had assumed that Africa did not produce 'art', but rather 'artifacts' and 'crafts'.

Silverman states that the notion of 'art', as defined above, is new to Ethiopia, not because there have been no artistic traditions or artistic productions in Ethiopia but in large measure due to the fact that "prior to the present century there were no traditions that isolated things to serve primarily as objects of aesthetic contemplation." (5) Although Western concepts of art and the impact they have had on labeling African objects are not discussed at length, Silverman's approach enables the average reader, who may not have a background in art, to comprehend this often complicated discussion.

The volume offers great insight into the creative tradition, especially on gender divisions of activities, in various areas of Ethiopia. In most parts of Ethiopia, women spin cotton and usually make baskets while men weave textiles, work metals, carve wood and engage in leatherworking. Interestingly, there is a great overlap of duties based on gender, and the production of many of the objects "require the involvement of both men and women." (11) In the essay written by Mary Ann Zelinsky-Cartledge and Daniel M. Cartledge, in the Gamo highlands in south central Ethiopia, "generally only men and boys actually weave...[and] in a complimentary manner,

female family members are responsible for spinning of cotton.” (245) Similarly, the essays also discuss the social status of artists and artisans. In the volume each artist or artisan and his/her work are viewed in their social settings. This particular treatment allows the reader to get a glimpse of the social conditions that influence the artist.

Within Ethiopian society, individuals “...who produce material objects...belong to special groups...often described as ‘caste’.” (13) The Ethiopian contexts of ‘caste’—woodworkers, and blacksmiths, and in some groups, pottery makers—are placed in the periphery of the community. Given the extremely hierarchical social organization of Ethiopian society, an individual’s birth into one of the above-mentioned groups not only determines his profession but also determines his/her social standing. In the essay “Tabita Hatuti: Biography of a Women Potter,” Tsehai Berhane-Selassie discusses how the Wolayata arrange their society along occupational lines with the farmers as the upper class and the artisans as the lower class. The farmers look down on the artisans and “...treat them almost as if they belong to a despised ‘caste’.” (217) Similarly, the social standing of woodworkers among the Fuga and the concept of ‘caste’ are discussed in the section authored by Alula Pankhurst and Worku Nida.

However, interestingly, this social classification does not apply to painters, both secular and non-secular. Silverman writes, “Throughout highland Ethiopia artists and artisans hold a lower social status than farmers and the clergy. It is noteworthy that the little evidence that does exist suggests that these values did not apply with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.” (143) Religious painting, because of the long tradition of Christianity and the position of the church in society in Ethiopia, is viewed as an honored profession, and painters most often occupy within a community a place of admiration and respect, which is lacking for other artists and artisan working in other media.

An added bonus for the reader is the wide array of photographs of both the artists and the researchers from the field. The volume is also filled with vivid and colorful pictures of the objects in addition to the vibrant cover depicting several artists and artisans at work creating their products. Each artist and artisan featured in the essays is also pictured in their home, communities and, in some cases, along with their families. The depiction of the

artists in their daily lives provides a clearer understanding of the social circumstances of the artists and the position he/she occupies in society. This follows the pattern of making the artist and artisan central to the volume, a goal that was first stated by Silverman in the introduction.

This volume has great value beyond its obvious use as a tool for the study of art history in general and African art in particular. The great detail given to the position of artists and artisans in their respective societies would be of vast significance to students and instructors of both Sociology and Anthropology. Additionally, the wonderful pictures and ease with which each scholar discusses his/her subjects make this volume accessible to anyone regardless of artistic or Africanist background.

Azeb Lemma