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# Hybrid Images

## *From Photography to Church Painting: Iconographic Narratives at the Court of the Ethiopian King of Kings, Menelik II (1880s–1913)*

Estelle Sohier

Photographs of Haile Selassie (r. 1930–1974) can be seen today on the streets of Addis Ababa and in books, museums, and photo agencies around the world; they have gained as well a new life on the Internet, partly through Rastafarianism activism. While the reign of this King of Kings has been widely depicted in photographic images, particularly in countless portraits (Hirsch and Perret 1995, Perret 1995), Haile Selassie was not the first Ethiopian ruler to exploit photography. Foreigners had brought this medium to the court of Yohannes IV (r. 1872–1889), but it was his successor, Menelik II (r. 1889–1913), who was the first to make extensive use of photography (Pankhurst 1994). A glimpse at his portraits reveals that they were laid out carefully and seem to reflect a triumphant political power (Fig. 1–3). How can these documents be deciphered, beyond the mere observation that these scenes took place, beyond the Barthesian “it-has-been” (Barthes 1980)?

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the advent and development of photography opened new worlds to viewers, who became able to visualize themselves, their communities, and the world beyond through growing numbers of images (Schwartz and Ryan 2003). Inspired by postcolonial theory’s critique of colonial discourses and representations, a number of writings since the 1980s have emphasized the power relations conveyed by photographs taken during this period of rising colonialism, when cameras were used worldwide in a context of cultural, economic, and political inequality and domination. Photography came to be used as an instrument of cultural imperialism, producing symbols of colonialism which stimulated its expansion (see for instance Schwartz 1996, Landau and Kaspian 2002, Palma 2005, Ama Asaa Engmann 2012).

Nevertheless, researchers have recently emphasized the plu-

ral quality of what we call photography (Rouillé 2005) and the need to take into account the environment of a photograph’s creation and the visual culture from which it stems, so as to apprehend how these shape the production, use, and interpretation of images. A photograph implies a “floating chain of signifieds” that can be deciphered in different ways or ignored by viewers (Barthes 1964:44); its meanings can’t be anchored, a feature that facilitated its appropriation by different visual cultures. Disseminated rapidly throughout the world since its invention, this medium was in fact appropriated locally in myriad ways. We know photography was used as a vehicle of symbolic power during the colonial period, but recent studies have enriched this debate by moving away from the Euro-American center of gravity (see Pinney and Peterson 2003). Several authors have shed light on the conditions for the appropriation of the technology in distinct African regions (Geary 1988, 1991; Triulzi 1995; Ouédraogo 2002; Nimis 2005), or on the appropriation of the images themselves, whose meanings change in accord with different ways of seeing, such as in the multiple uses and lives of a 1913 photograph of Sheikh Amadou Bamba in Senegal (Roberts and Roberts 2003).

Ethiopia occupies an exceptional place in the history of African colonization: following the resounding victory of Menelik II’s army against Italy in 1896 at the Battle of Adwa, the country defended its independence right up until the invasion by Mussolini’s troops in 1936. It became an international symbol of resistance to colonization and entered the international system of sovereign nation-states through diplomatic exchanges. As a warrior-king and nation builder, Menelik II had gained heroic status globally, notably in the black world (Hill 2008:28).

If photography had been used as a tool of symbolic power by European colonialists, how might the government of an Afri-



1 Portrait of Menelik II holding a camera. Author and date unknown (end of the nineteenth century)  
Photo: © Museum of the Church of Mary in Addis Alem

can country have used this same medium against colonialism and to defend its independence? Could it use images to inscribe Ethiopia as a recognized nation in a global “image-world” (Poole 1997), that is, in the realm of images circulating among Africa, Europe, and the United States? In other words, to what extent did the Ethiopian court recognize the communication function of photography and the power of its images? What publics were targeted, and how did Ethiopians convey narratives through the pictures? This raises the question of the visual culture used for encoding and deciphering photographs. Interrogating the power attributed to such images requires tracing their itineraries through time and space; considering the uses, values, and meanings accorded to them; and wondering about the possible responses of their viewers (Freedberg 1989).

#### I. THE ETHIOPIAN COURT AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: AN ICONOGRAPHIC LABORATORY

At the end of the nineteenth century, photographic portraits of Menelik II began to be reproduced in Ethiopia and abroad in books and newspapers, as well as on coins, medallions, stamps, advertisements, and even objects such as glasses. Most of the images were based on about twenty *princeps* portraits identified so far. Along with the king, the majority of the dignitaries of the Ethiopian court seem to have posed for photographers from the 1880s on, including the queen, Taytu; the official writer of the court and Minister of the Pen, Gabre Selassie; and the Archbishop *abuna* Matewos. Beyond the court, the main chiefs of the country were also photographed by visitors or when they came to Addis Ababa. During Menelik’s time, foreigners alone took



2 Menelik II by Alfred Ilg, 1896

Photo: © Alfred Ilg's collection, Ethnographic  
Museum of the University of Zurich. VMZ 805\_01\_002

the pictures, inasmuch as photography became an Ethiopian practice only after World War II (Gérard and Pankhurst 1998). Until the beginning of the twentieth century, all were amateurs and included individuals from France, Italy, and Switzerland, either employed by the court<sup>1</sup> or traveling through Ethiopia, particularly after the famed Battle of Adwa. Although the photographers were all foreign, fragments from travel accounts give an idea of the balance of power around the camera and of the agency of the court in the way photography was conceptualized and put to use.

*The Introduction of Photography to the Culture of the Ethiopian Court.* The composition of portraits photographed at the court suggests that they were carefully staged. The position of the bodies, the way the personages interact in group portraits, the costumes, regalia and props—crown, carpets, *shash* (headscarf), *kabba* (cape), *qamis* (striped shirt), *gofer* (lion's skin worn

over the shoulders), weapons and shield—all seem to have been chosen to display symbols of power. Traveler accounts support this idea of political stagecraft: photographs of the dignitaries were not spontaneous and couldn't be "taken," or "stolen," as no photographer was allowed to operate freely inside the *gebbi* (the palace),<sup>2</sup> and pictures of the royal family only resulted from the king's orders. Though all the king's photographers were foreigners, their biographies reveal that they were all trusted men—at least at the time when they were taking court pictures. Each of them made long stays in the country and mastered the Amharic language, which facilitated the establishment of trust and intimacy between them and the figures they photographed. Léon Chefneux (1853–1927) and Alfred Ilg (1854–1916) were among the first to introduce a camera to the court in the early 1880s, and both became photographers and advisers to the king. We may argue therefore that court actors maintained control of the

images, despite their dependence on foreign operators, thereby containing the potentially predatory aspect of the photographic gaze (Sontag 1977).

A photograph can't be considered a mere reflection of reality, nor is its perception a "natural" phenomenon. A photographic portrait is an encoded item that requires the intervention of a photographer, ideally the cooperation of the people being portrayed, and finally an act of deciphering by its viewers. The use of cameras raised questions when it was introduced in Ethiopian societies, as in other parts of the world. In their writings, travelers described how people were sometimes suspicious and reluctant to be photographed in the region in the 1800s, an attitude at times interpreted as an association of capturing an image with

witchcraft (Soleillet 1886:97–98). The introduction of photography at Menelik's court also provoked concern. The biographer of Alfred Ilg relates how, several times after his arrival at the court in 1879, the Swiss engineer was obliged to explain to the king the principal laws of optics, because priests saw photography as an instrument of the devil: they had warned Menelik II against this instrument because it had the capacity to dramatically reduce the size of a person, a group, or a city, and to put it in black and white, and upside down (Keller 1918:35).<sup>3</sup> Having apprehended the operations of a camera, the king is said to have later responded to critics that photography resulted from divine materials: light and silver (Vanderheyem 1896:116).

The king's interest in the new medium is corroborated by the iconographic record. Though there is no indication that he himself became a photographer—as did N'Joya, king of the Bamum country, a few years later (Geary 1988)—the Ethiopian king, in one of his most reproduced portraits, posed with a camera in his hand (Fig. 1). We can interpret the gesture as a sign of the importance he gave to the new medium, inasmuch as all the elements entering court portraits, such as garments and weapons, were significant within the political culture of the royalty (Figs. 2–3).

Scholars have shown how part of photography's great success in the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States grew

**3** Menelik's court in front in the *gebbi* of Addis Abeba receiving an American delegation in December 1903, photographer unknown. Image published in April 1904 in *National Geographic*.

Photo: © Bertolani's collection, ILSAO, Rome. 19/A



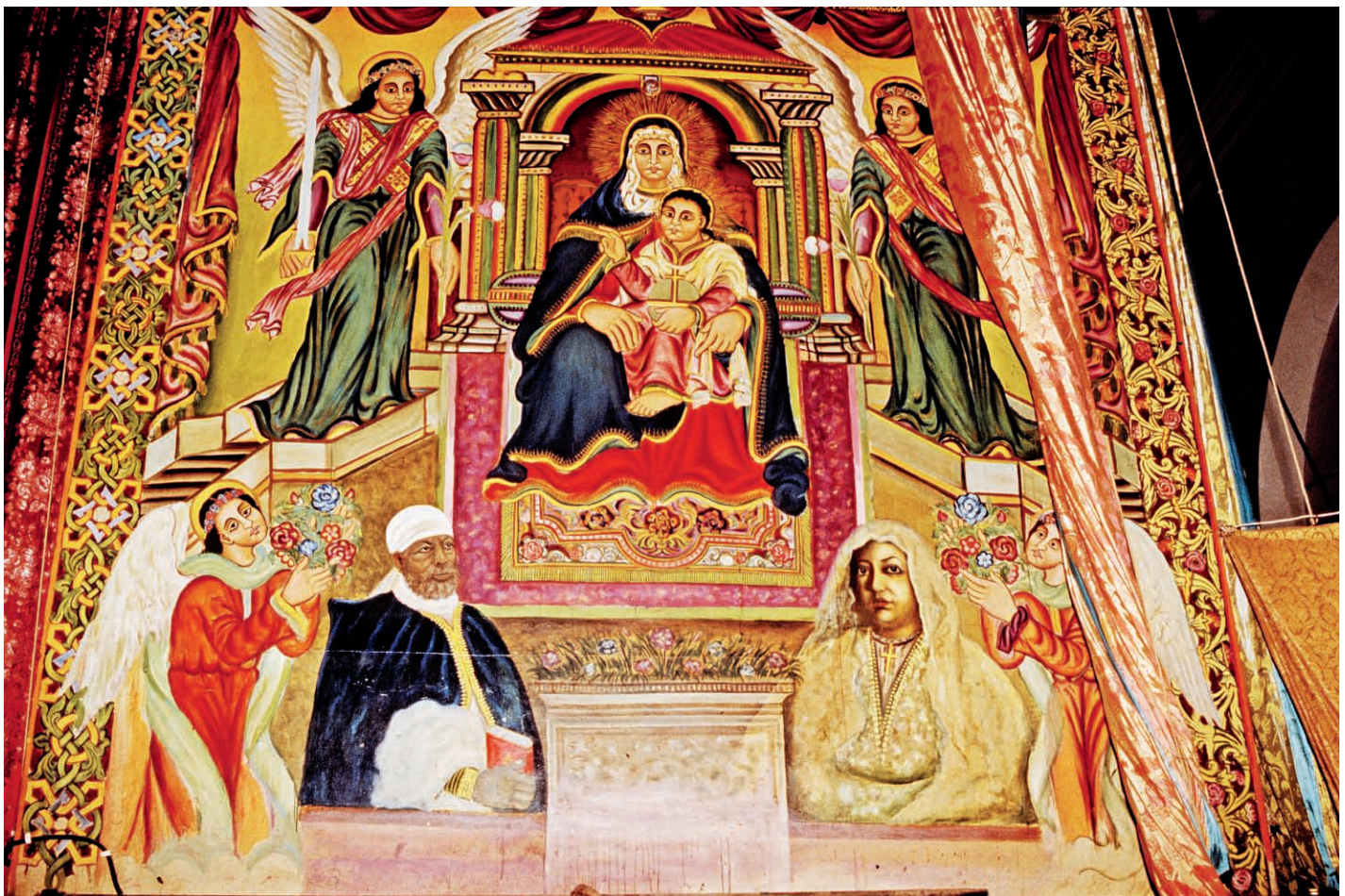
from its symbolic association with modernity and its values, such as science and rationality (Rouillé 2005). Many sources testify to Menelik's genuine interest in innovation and new technologies (Clapham 2007), and the way he supported the introduction of photography to the court proceeded from this tendency. The king's interpretation of photography as the work of divine materials, however, was more than a turn of phrase: it was a way to integrate the new media to the preexisting iconographical landscape of the court, inasmuch as the images in Ethiopian Christian society before the 1880s—and prior to the development of Ethiopian painting destined to foreign markets—were, foremost, church paintings and propitiatory images, realized by religious men for a society seeking God's mercy, protection, guidance, and healing (see for instance Biasio 2006).

The connection between early photography and the religious sphere in Ethiopia is suggested by other elements of its history. Bedros Boyadjian, the first professional photographer to open a studio in Ethiopia, arrived at Menelik's court in 1905 with his employer, the archbishop of the Armenian Church of Alexandria (Berhanou Abebe 2007). The King of Kings requested that the photographer work at his service, and a few months later Boyadjian established a studio in Addis Ababa where he took the official title of "Photographer of his Majesty Menelik II." We can draw a parallel between his trajectory as a Christian Orthodox deacon creating (photographic) images in the service of a religious institution and the culture of the court painters who, until this time, similarly were Christian clerics.

*Images in the Light of Royal Texts.* The study of images and texts produced during the same period at the court may help explain the prompt appropriation of photography by the Ethiopian elite. We can shed light on the success of the new media by focusing on the importance of the visual in contemporary texts, such as Menelik's chronicle, which was authored under the supervision of the king and his wife by a conservative churchman, Gebra Selassie (Guebre Sellassie 1930, 1932). The author never mentioned the work of foreigners at the court, nor the introduction of photography, but his narrative includes extensive descriptions of the resplendent scenery of court ceremonies, the physical appearance of people—whether they were beautiful or ugly—and the splendor of their garments (Guebre Sellassie 1930, 1932). Under the pen of the chronicler, beauty was a metaphor for virtue and power, and ugliness a sign of moral failing and corruption. Hence, we may argue that the photographic medium was adopted by a political culture that gave great importance to the gaze, on the one hand, and to garments, pomp and ostentation on the other. The importance given to the visual sphere in political discourse may have facilitated the introduction and codification of photographic images.

4 Menelik II, Taitu, beneath St. Mary. Painter unknown. Western wall of the *maqdas* of the church of Mary, Entotto.

Photo: Peter R. Gerber, 1993 © Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich and Peter R. Gerber





5 From left to right, Menelik II, the archangel Raguel and the court writer Gebra Selassie. Painter unknown. Northern wall of the *maqdas* of the church of Raguel, Entoto.  
Photo: Ray Silverman)

Interrogating the communication function of the photographs implies understanding the messages the dignitaries wished to convey through them, in a specific political context. If historical photographs can often be dated only approximately, one series of images had been explicitly created shortly after the 1896 Battle of Adwa (Keller 1918:104, Biasio 2004). The photographer, Alfred Ilg, was promoted by the king around this same time to adviser and Minister of Foreign Affairs, in recognition of his engagement against Italian colonization. The photo series seems to have been made to project the idea of military victory and power: in the compositions, the king was adorned with warrior attributes and a lion skin laid under his feet and under his hand (Fig. 2). The impression of authority was reinforced by his solemn pose, his direct gaze at the camera, the sober lines of the scenery, and the

deep contrast of light and shadow. This staging clearly reflected a desire to communicate, and may refer to royal ideology and its motto which was (re)invented during the second part of the nineteenth century: *moha anbesa ze'éménégedé yéhuda*, “The lion of Judah has conquered,”<sup>4</sup> which took on added meaning after the Battle of Adwa.

*The Prestige of New Iconographic Forms.* On reading Menelik's official chronicle, we can also draw an analogy between the interest aroused by photography and the prestige given to images coming from abroad across history. Scholars have emphasized how Ethiopian painting historically assimilated various foreign iconographical forms, drawing from European paintings, illustrated books, delftware, and textiles (Chojnacki 1983, Bosc-Tiessé 2008). Moreover, some imported images were historically praised for their beauty, protective power, and special aura. The worship of images by Christian Ethiopians is still not well known, partly because the practice is not addressed directly in religious texts (Godet 1997), but some images are cherished and praised for their miraculous powers. One of the most famous of them was a painting called *Qwerata re'su*, an imported representation of the Christ in a Luso-Flemish style used as a royal palladium by the Ethiopian court in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see for instance Bosc-Tiessé 2008).<sup>7</sup> Menelik's chronicle



**6** Menelik II beside Mary breastfeeding and the figures of the sacred history. Painter unknown. Eastern wall of the *maqdas* of the church of Gebbi Gabriel, Addis Ababa.

Photo: Estelle Sohler taken with the authorization of the Patriarch, 2005

**7** Portrait of Menelik's court during the succession period (c. 1909), painter unknown. Southern wall of the *maqdas* of the Church of Gebbi Gabriel, Addis Ababa.

Photo: Anaïs Wion, 2012

similarly mentions prestigious foreign paintings. The chronicler emphasizes, for instance, the efficacy of a sacred painting “coming from beyond the sea” that miraculously protected the *se’el bét* (“house of images”), where it was stored, when a fire devastated the royal palace in 1892 (Guebre Sellassie 1930:319).

That image is not identifiable in today’s Addis Ababa, but the correspondence kept in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome reveals that King Menelik II indeed bought a significant number of devotional paintings in Europe. Furthermore, he placed an order with the Turin *pinacoteca* in 1888 for an enormous painting on canvas, of a total surface area of 75 square meters, designed to be hung on the wall of the inner sanctum of a royal church.<sup>6</sup> The content and the form of the eight scenes depicted were chosen by the king with the help of an Ethiopian art student, Afa Warq Gebra Yesus. Instructions were transmitted by way of Ethiopian and European examples, partly through reproductions found in illustrated periodicals, including a Nativity of the French academic painter William Bouguereau (1825–1905) and a scene representing Christ before Pilate by the Hungarian painter Mihály Munkácsy (1844–1900). In spite of these European elements, the Italian painters were to follow Ethiopian painting conventions regarding color, perspective, composition, proportion, and the depiction of human figures. For instance, saints were to be represented with two eyes and the enemies of the faith in profile. The king also ordered that his portrait be included in one of the religious scenes and to this end sent the artists his photograph. The result may have been a “hybrid image” in which foreign influences were integrated to Ethiopian visual conventions, in a delib-



erately considered manner of appropriation open to invention and reinvention (Gruzinski 1999).

Considering the cost of such a work and the logistical challenge in ordering it, we may argue that Ethiopian royalty requested it because of the prestige given to new iconographical forms and because of its potentially higher spiritual “efficacy.” Although this work had been completed, neither trace nor memory of such a canvas can be found today in the royal churches near the old palace. Nonetheless, their walls are covered with other kinds of hybrid images.

## II. FROM PHOTOGRAPHY TO WALL CHURCH PAINTING: MATERIALIZING THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY

The past social life of an isolated photograph found in an archive, and the possible narrative(s) it conveys, are generally difficult to trace. There is no evidence of photographs having been displayed in the royal palace during Menelik’s time,<sup>7</sup> so the use and function of these documents is difficult to assess. Nevertheless, another kind of document helps to reveal the physical and social environment in which such images helped construct a political imaginary which was offered to the community: church-wall paintings. The introduction of photography at the court indeed had an influence on local religious paintings, insofar as photos were used as models to paint the donors on the walls of the main royal churches built during Menelik’s reign. The court thus gained new tools of narration, interlinking images, myths, and the devotional gestures of viewers.

*Hybrid Images.* In addition to importing foreign paintings, Menelik II introduced new iconographical forms to the court by sending young painters to study in Europe. Painters were among the first students sent abroad, a choice that demonstrates the importance given to this field by the royalty. Afa Warq Gebra Yesus, mentioned above, was among these, having been sent to Turin, Italy, in 1887 (for his long and complex career, see Bahru Zewde 2002:52–57). Upon his return to Ethiopia, he may have become one of the first painters there to use photographs as models for portraits, inspired by the work of the painters at the *pinacoteca* of Turin.

Portraits of donors were common in Ethiopian religious paint-



8 First issue of Ethiopian stamps, designed by J. Lagrange and engraved by Eugène Mouchon, Atelier de Fabrication des Timbres, Paris, 1894.

ing, since the main patrons of churches were members of the royal family and the aristocracy. Their portraits formed part of the repertoire of church painting since the thirteenth century, and became common from the end of the eighteenth century. Donors sought salvation and God's protection, so they were usually depicted in an attitude of reverence toward a holy intercessor, such as Mary, one of the most popular saints, celebrated for her efficacy (Balicka-Witakowska 2005:191). But there also are scenes with greater complexity. Historians have shown how the Ethiopian nobility was at times depicted in church wall paintings in ways that played with visual codes, and they have pointed to the political role given at times to such images, for instance during the reign of Queen Mentewwab and her son Iyasu II (r. 1730–1755) (see Bosc-Tiessé 2004, 2008; Biasio 1994; Chojnacki 1999). Furthermore, some of these paintings reveal the wish of certain historical figures to be recognizable in church paintings. In the eighteenth century Mentewwab, for example, was always depicted topped with a unique hairstyle, making her immediately identifiable in her portraits (Bosc-Tiessé 2004:314). But this was an exception in the history of Ethiopian art, and until the end of the nineteenth century, portraits of members of the royal family and of dignitaries generally lacked recognizable features; instead, the subjects were identified by captions. In the nineteenth century, donor portraits became more numerous and diverse, and the copying of photographs helped to transform the practice and gave painters new narrative capacities.

The painters clearly used photographs as models to depict Menelik II in the main churches erected in the royal towns,<sup>8</sup> reproducing the king's face and parts of his body in ways that now were recognizable. The photo of Menelik II holding a camera in his hand (Fig. 1) provided the matrix for several scenes where he is depicted seated or standing beside his wife, Queen Taitu, beneath Saint Mary (Fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> The photograph was only partially reproduced in the paintings, being adapted to the sacred environment by being encoded with other signs, in

form and content, so as to be readable through a new discursive construction. The camera appearing in the original picture was replaced by objects significant in a sacred context, such as the *Dawit* (the Book of Psalms), or by less-defined objects interpreted by priests of today as a *sebel* (flask of holy water) in one case, or a *masho* (oil lamp) in another.<sup>10</sup> The black-and-white images were copied in color, which gave an added margin of interpretation to the painters, who could appeal to the highly codified symbolism of the Ethiopian palette. They also took liberties with the composition of the images, extending the figure in the photograph beyond the chest when a full-length portrait of the king was required. When using photographs, the church painters erased the “substance” of the new media and its references to make the result compelling within Ethiopian Christian visual culture. The clerics took control of the images by considering photography not as an end, but as a means to integrate the idea of resemblance between the image and the figure portrayed.

If opportunities for innovation were extremely limited in religious painting (Biasio 2004:68), iconographic changes may have been easier to introduce with the consent or request of the king, particularly in churches with royal patronage. In a sense, the use of photographs didn't fundamentally change the practice of the Ethiopian painters, inasmuch as the copying of images was a long-standing practice in their training and daily work (Chojnacki 1983:22). The use of photographs as models was an innovation but not a rupture, a manageable way to draw more lifelike forms such that worldly figures became recognizable without the aid of captions.



9 Portrait of Taitu, author and date unknown, c. 1906.  
Photo: Guebre Sellassie 1930

*New Means of Narration.* The representation of Menelik's court in church painting evolved during his reign, gaining complexity. Painters of the court innovated in terms of forms, but also in terms of narration, as donor portraits were progressively integrated to more elaborate scenes in novel compositions, for example, in the Church of Raguel at Entoto, where Menelik stands beside the archangel Raguel and the court writer Gebra Selassie (Fig. 5). Built by Indian, Ethiopian, and Swiss architects and workers, the church was decorated by the most renowned painters of the country, two of whom had been trained abroad, Afa Warq Gebra Yesus (Pankhurst 1966) and the *aleqa* Elyas (Gebre-Igziabiher Elyas 1994:309). Conceived to be the future center of an expanded kingdom to the south, Entoto also held one of the principal libraries established by Menelik II, housed in the Church of Raguel. Paintings and texts were produced at the court by the same group of clerics, and thus the reading of texts deposited in the court library<sup>11</sup> and of the myths sustained by the royalty can again help to decipher the painters' intentions.

In the Church of Gabriel, erected near the palace at Addis Ababa at the end of Menelik's reign, the king was depicted several times on the paintings covering the outer walls of the *maqdas*, a

square chamber at the center of the church that forms the Holy of Holies. On its eastern wall, he wasn't represented in the typical juxtaposed and reverent attitude of a donor, but rather as part of a biblical scene of Mary breastfeeding Jesus (Fig. 6). The exact meaning of this hitherto unseen and quite audacious painting is unknown, but it may refer to a popular book of prayers called *Miracles of Mary*, which includes stories of miracles performed by paintings of the Virgin (See *Le livre éthiopien des miracles de Marie* 2004). The scene may be a call for a miracle addressed both to the biblical personages and to the painting itself, through a kind of *mise-en-abyme*, in a context marked by the considerable decline of the king's health. Menelik II had suffered several heart attacks beginning in 1906, and he remained paralyzed and confined to his palace from 1909, the year this church was consecrated, until his death in December 1913.

On the southern wall of the same church, a mural painting shows the king standing surrounded by his heir, the queen, and the six highest chiefs of the court—all portraits adapted from photographs, except for a white-bearded man emerging from a cloud (Fig. 7). One possible interpretation of the scene is that it refers to the main myth of the Ethiopian royalty, the *Kebra Negast*, or *the Glory of the King* (see *La gloire des rois* 2002). Written in the fourteenth century, the text was a combination of mythical history, allegory, and the Apocalypse. It has as a central theme the visit of the Queen of Sheba (Makeda) to Solomon and the birth of a son, Menelik I, who became the legendary founder of the royal dynasty. The text became a crucial part of the literature and culture of Ethiopia and was exploited by the Ethiopian royalty in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see, e.g., Crummey 1988)—Menelik II was named for the mythological figure. Symbolic elements present in the mural painting of the Gabriel church—such as a pearl, a crown, lions, and a manuscript—may be references to passages of the *Kebra Negast*. Painted within the context of a precarious transition period, the scene as a whole suggests the cohesion of the kingdom behind a group of men united through a historical myth.

Drawing from a range of biblical and mythological texts, the images materialize the invisible and stage the connection between the royalty and the biblical world. They function as visual synopses of the royal ideology, reminding the viewer that the king was elected by God and anointed by the Church, so that he ruled as an intermediary between heaven and the kingdom. Images and texts were in dialogue with one another, bringing the myths to the time and place of Menelik's reign.

*Theaters of the Political Life.* The historical context helps us retrace the life that surrounded these images and how they may have functioned. The portraits and group scenes emerged from a transition period at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, a challenging time for royal power because of the king's declining health and the absence of a unanimously supported heir, as various parties contested the choice made by Menelik II for his succession.

The churches of the palace were in many ways the theaters of political life, inasmuch as the clergy, dignitaries, soldiers of the palace, and nobles visiting Addis Ababa would go to them to pray, either by themselves or collectively during official ceremonies. Writings of the time indicate that politicians and sol-



diers also gathered in the churches to resolve conflicts, search for political agreements, or pledge oaths of allegiance to the sovereign. The images, which were hidden from view by heavy curtains, were exposed only during long and dramatic religious ceremonies, in shadowy candlelight (see Bosc-Tiessé and Wion 2005). They provided the backdrop, and their viewers bowed down in front of them. This “dialectic of display and secrecy” (Roberts and Roberts 2003:80) contributed to reinforce their aura, in Walter Benjamin’s sense of the term, making these unique images inseparable from the sacred places and contexts where they were seen.

The images were also invitations to action, relaying the king’s political injunctions, offering models for behavior, and encouraging viewers to renew their political allegiance. Informing viewers about royal succession, they had a pedagogic function. We can assume that the spectators of the time had interpretative frameworks with which to decipher them, and imagine that the meanings were reinforced through the metaphors of prayers during the ceremonies.

We may wonder about the consequences of painting from photographs in terms of the impact of the documents on viewers. The introduction of likeness to portraits may have been a way to enhance the aura of the paintings, but also to blend different spatiotemporal levels: the spaces of the church, the kingdom, and heaven; the worldly time of the reign and the mythical time of the royal dynasty. It may have been a way to create striking—thus memorable—images, not only to impress viewers, but also to reinforce the idea of an encounter between the political groups depicted and the believers, helping to weave an emotional bond between them. Realistic likenesses also suggested a former physical presence of the king and his men in the sacred place, while reinforcing the function of these images as media of royal instruction.

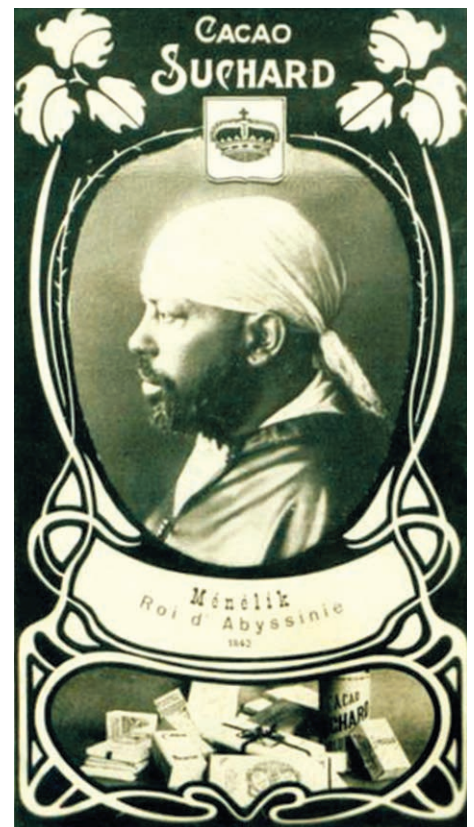
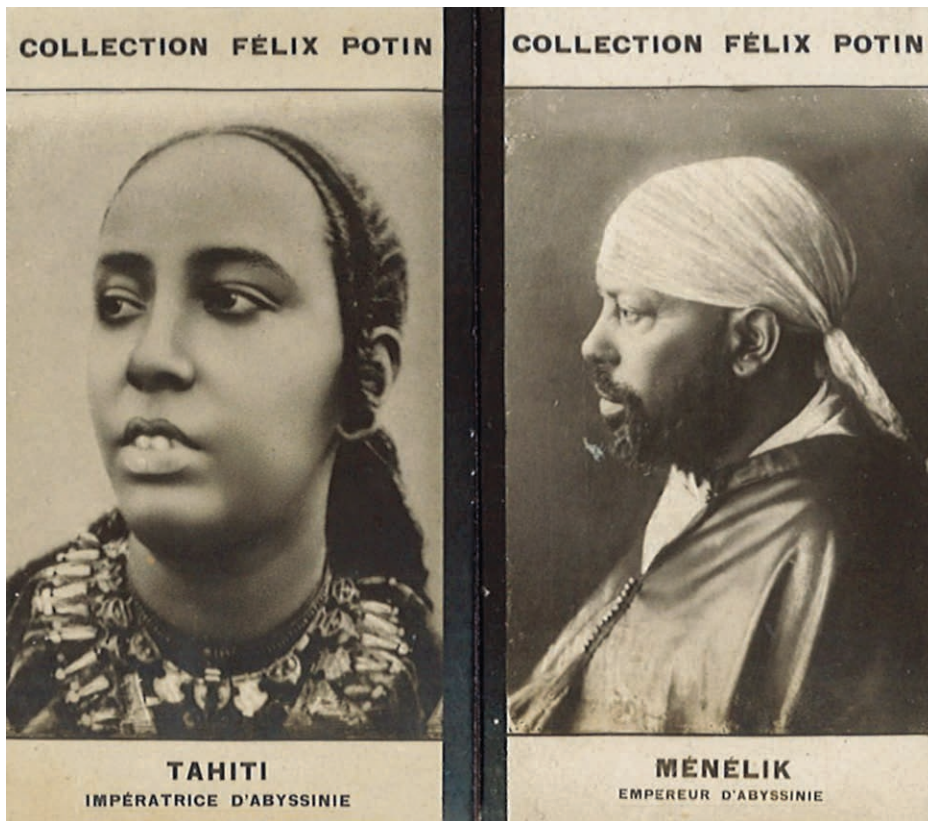
During the main religious celebrations, foreign envoys were at times invited to ceremonies involving the court inside the royal churches. These impressive gatherings demonstrated the unity of the kingdom around the royalty and its political system. Though perhaps few foreigners had access to these scenes and to church paintings, other kinds of iconographical documents seem to have been created purposefully for an international public ... still using photographs as matrix.

### III. IMAGES ADDRESSED TO THE WORLD

Portraits of rulers were among the diplomatic gifts exchanged between Ethiopian and foreign governments since the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> There is no record of Menelik II sending his own photographic portrait to European governments during his reign. Nevertheless, photographs of the king were used as models for the creation of more powerful images at a symbolic level.

*Giving International Visibility to the Nation.* In 1889, not long after Menelik II was crowned King of Kings, Ethiopia and Italy signed a pact at the Ethiopian town of Wichale whereby Italy was granted some territories in the north of the country (today partly comprising Eritrea) in exchange for money and weapons. But the Ethiopian government was deceived though a deliberate mistranslation of article XVII, which in the Italian version proclaimed a protectorate over the country. In 1893, Menelik II officially denounced the treaty to the foreign powers. His assertion of political independence was reinforced symbolically with the issue of stamps and coins one year later: the first run of postal stamps was printed in Paris (Fig. 8), an operation facilitated by the French government’s opposition to Italy’s colonial ambitions in the Horn of Africa.

The stamps had little practical utility: the Ethiopian postal system was in embryonic stages, and the stamps were labeled only in Amharic, a choice which impeded their use in the international



11–12 “Ménelik roi d’Abyssinie.” Advertisements for Suchard cocoa. Date unknown. Private collection.

postal system.<sup>13</sup> Their creation instead was a way for the country to claim its independence by rendering its sovereignty visible through items recognizable in the international diplomatic sphere. This provoked objections in England and Italy, which accused Paris of making useless stamps for political purposes, yet the stamps were sold at the 1900 Universal Exposition of Paris (Sohier 2010). The first modern Ethiopian coins were also minted in Paris in 1894, with similar motivation, though with greater utility.

Both the stamps and the coins were designed from the same photograph of the king in profile and adorned with a crown. This iconographic choice diverged from the conventions of church painting, where only enemies of the faith and morally bad men were represented in profile, but it corresponded to the way sovereignty was displayed on coins abroad, as well as in Ethiopia’s antiquity, during the Aksumite Empire (Hahn 2003). Stamps and coins displaying the effigy of the king together with the name of the country and symbols of sovereignty provided a universally recognizable type of image. Thousands of such pictures helped to create an imagined Ethiopian nation worldwide (Anderson 1983).

The production of these symbols resulted in part from the advice of foreigners present at Menelik’s court, especially Alfred Ilg and Leon Chefneux, already mentioned, though the power of these images and their efficacy abroad was made explicit in Menelik’s official chronicle:

In the same way as a father and a mother protect their children when they are in danger, Menelik II fought with all his might for his land, Ethiopia. Thanks to him, Ethiopia grew up in wisdom and sciences. He showed to his country sophisticated machines and instruments unknown until then. It’s worth noticing that in order to perpetuate his memory, the image of the king had been minted on *thalers*, *alad*, *rub*, *temun*, *gerch* [Ethiopian units of measurement] and postage stamps. People of foreign nations that had then never seen Ethio-

pia nor even knew its location, began to come and go on its territory (Guebre Sellassie 1932:539–40).

Images displayed on the coins were seen as Ethiopian banners sent across the world. They condensed the ideas of sovereignty, a religious identity—Christianity—and an enduring history, all through the reproduction of a portrait on a precious and inalterable material, silver.

It has been shown in various contexts that “the efficacy of representation relies on a ceaseless exchange with other representations” (G. Pollock quoted in Poole 1997:6). The way the Ethiopian court played with the form and vehicles for the pictures echoes back to this idea. The new Ethiopian coins were a way to enter an iconographic dialogue with coins bearing the image, for example, of Empress Maria-Theresa, widespread in the region, or equally King Umberto, used in the Italian colony nearby.

Intericonicity—that is, the presence of one image recalled in another image—was also performed elsewhere, inasmuch as some official portraits of Ethiopian royalty seem to emulate well-known images of power displayed elsewhere in the world at the end of the nineteenth century. One of the later portraits of Queen Taitu, for example, differed entirely from earlier ones: in three-quarter profile, the Queen poses with a crown and a veil and a necklace (Fig. 9). Her pose is comparable to the portrait of the most powerful queen of the world, Queen Victoria, upon her Diamond Jubilee (see Lyden 2014). The similarity with the Jubilee portrait is even more striking in the official portrait of Menilek's daughter, the Queen of Kings Zewditu (r. 1917–1930) (Fig. 10). Images were used to enter in dialogue with foreign rulers, and the use of a new repertoire of iconographic models was a way for the royalty to take its place within the international visual community.

*The Hero of Adwa in National Geographic Magazine.* The then rapidly growing press around the globe gave Ethiopians other windows to the world and means for projection. Various testimonies indicate that Menelik II welcomed not only photographers to his court, but also foreign journalists and cinematographers. Many travelers had been drawn to the country following Ethiopia's victory at Adwa in 1896—an event which coincided with the invention of cinema. During the visit of the first official American delegation to Ethiopia, led by Robert P. Skinner in December 1903, a photograph was taken of the court which was published a few months later in *National Geographic*.

It shows the main dignitaries of the court posed in full regalia, dressed as warriors and carrying weapons, united around the king and his heir, who stands to his left (Fig. 3). The scene was staged, and the men in full dress uniform standing in front of the camera were likely well aware that they were creating an intelligible message through photography. Certainly, for the American public the Ethiopian dignitaries may have appeared exotic, true to the *National Geographic* lens. Nevertheless, the publication of this group portrait in one of the most influential magazines of the United States was also highly symbolic of the American government's recognition of Ethiopian sovereignty (see Skinner 1906). As diplomatic exchanges between Ethiopia and foreign powers grew following the Battle of Adwa, photography helped lend Ethiopia recognizable features and facilitated the formation of an emotional bond with the country whose victory had brought such renown.

12 "En Abyssinie. Ménélik et son palais à Addis-Ababa". Advertisement for Liebig. Date unknown. Private collection.  
Photo: Ray Silverman



Ethiopian leaders saw the royal portraits as means to connect Ethiopia to the rest of the world. The images narrated in a simple but efficient way the independence of the country, its political system, and the legitimacy of its political power. We may argue that the strategy was effective, considering the articles published in European newspapers of the time, or advertisements dating from the beginning of the twentieth century that evoked Ethiopia, such as such as ones for Suchard cocoa (Figs. 11–12) or even more the collectible cards packaged with OXO Bouillon of the European brand Liebig (Fig. 13). These seemingly minor documents demonstrate the recognition achieved by the Ethiopian king, whose face and name were considered sufficiently popular to help sell a product to a wide public. These images and many others helped construct the Ethiopian king as a hero, an indispensable element in the recognition of Ethiopia as an international sovereign state at a time of intensive colonization of Africa (Centlivres, Fabre, and Zonabend 1998).

## CONCLUSION

The adoption of photography in the iconographic repertoire of the Ethiopian court at the end of the nineteenth century reflects in part a historical pattern of integrating foreign forms and

images. The “rawness” (Edwards 2001) of the mechanical picture and the capacity of the medium to be endlessly reproduced helped the royalty to encode, decode, or recode such images easily when transferred to another medium. Its proximity to the referent provided new ways of narrating Ethiopian royalty, playing on the open-ended quality of photography, which can’t be confined to a single meaning. The court of Menelik II was thus an iconographic laboratory where foreign media offered new possibilities for enriching pre-existing forms. The intertwining of different repertoires of texts and images allowed the court to communicate its ideology and the idea of its sovereignty to diverse publics, both in Ethiopia and abroad. The images became one of the instruments with which Ethiopia could respond to the deep political and geopolitical transformations in the horn of Africa and defend the freedom of the kingdom.

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## Notes

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1 Prior to the arrival of the first professional photographer in 1906, the most important photographers of the king were Alfred Ilg, a Swiss engineer; Léon Chefneux, a Frenchman who served as an agent for the king; Leopoldo Travers, of the Italian Geographical Society; and Secondo Bertolani, a member of the Italian legation.

2 With the exception of Alfred Ilg.

3 We can draw a parallel between the expression of this feeling of threat and the fear reported in a few European newspapers in 1839 and quoted by Walter Benjamin, who noted that after its invention the daguerreotype was described by some as a diabolical art coming from France and as an insult to God (Benjamin 1931).

4 The motto echoes two traditions: the lion, as a widespread symbol of power, and the Ethiopian royal ideology, by which the King of Kings is a cousin of the Christ, both being the descendants and heirs of King David, the chief of the tribe of Judah (Rubenson 1965).

5 The sacred painting was stolen by the British army in 1868, after the defeat of the King of Kings Tēwodros in Maqdala.

6 Letter from the general director of the Turin *pinacoteca* to the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, from Turin, 4 February 1889. Archive of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome. *Ministero Africa Italiana*, vol. 1, *posizione* 36/6 (1888–1895). The source only indicates the name “*pinacoteca*,” likely referring to the Turin Academy of Fine Arts.

7 The practice of displaying photographs was recorded later, during the reign of his successor, *ras* Tafari, then Haile Selassie.

8 In Addis Ababa (founded in 1886), the churches dedicated to Gabriel and to the Trinity around the palace of Menelik II; in Entoto (the previous royal city), the churches dedicated to Mary and to Raguel; in Ankober (the birthplace of the king), one of the four churches dedicated to Mary; in Addis Alem (established at the end of Menelik’s reign), the main church dedicated to Mary.

9 Church painters of Addis Ababa at the turn of the century begun to produce in parallel commercial paintings directed toward foreigners, also at times using photographs as models. See for example the testimony of the painter Qes Adamu Tesfaw in Silverman 2004.

10 Testimonies collected by the author from the chief ecclesiastic of Ankober, *lika kahenat* Kale Heymet Habte Wald, and from the clergy of the church of Mary in Addis Alem in February 2005.

11 During his reign, Menelik II gave special attention to the literary patrimony of the kingdom, founding a scriptorium in the palace in Addis Ababa, and encouraging the establishment of libraries in the newly erected churches in the conquered territories (Haile Gabriel Dagne 1987:215).

12 The grandfather of Menelik II, King Sahle Selassie of Shewa (r. 1813–1847), had received a portrait of the monarch Louis-Philippe, for instance, on the occasion of a French state visit to Ethiopia (Biasio 2009).

13 In 1908, after having thwarted Italian opposition, Ethiopia succeeded in joining the Universal Postal Union, and a second edition of stamps was issued, these bearing captions in Amharic and French and serving for both national and international correspondence.

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