

Reflection:

Translocations and Changes in Perspective

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“The Story of an Ethiopian Icon” is the subtitle of an article on an article published on a website¹ promoting the return of objects taken from Maqdala in today’s Ethiopia. Under the heading “The Treasure” it gives a summary of the history of a specific painting which is indeed fascinating, referred to in Ethiopian as the *Kwər’atä rə’əsu*.² This article will follow the different stages in the reception and interpretation of this object, and explore the genealogy of the story, its sources, their dependability and the varying historiographical approaches.

The web page supplies several references. It is mainly based on two articles by Richard Pankhurst from 1979 and 1982.³ Apart from Pankhurst, it quotes an academic publication by Stanislaw Chojnacki from 1985.⁴ Furthermore, there are references to an article published anonymously in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1905,⁵ to a reader’s letter by Luiz Reis Santos that the *Burlington Magazine* printed in 1941,⁶ and to an article published

1 www.afromet.info (<http://www.afromet.info/treasure/archives/000062.html>, accessed on 22 March 2018).

2 The icon is called *Kwər’atä rə’əsu*, ‘Smiting of his [Christ’s] head’ in the Ethiopian tradition. This name might have been derived from Matthew 27:31 of the Ge’ez (ancient Ethiopic) New Testament which translates as ‘and they spat on Him [Christ] and smote Him using a rod’. In fact, the icon depicts Christ with the crown of thorns.

3 Richard Pankhurst, ‘The *kwər’ata rə’əsu*: The history of an Ethiopian icon’, in *Abba Salama* 10 (1979), 169-87; Richard Pankhurst, ‘The History of the *Kwər’ata Re’əsu*: an Ethiopian Icon’, in *African Affairs* 81(322), 1982, 117-125.

4 Stanislaw Chojnacki, *The ‘Kwər’ata rə’əsu’: its Iconography and Significance. An Essay in Cultural History of Ethiopia*, (Napoli: Istituto universitario Orientale, 1985).

5 A Flemish Picture from Abyssinia, in *Burlington Magazine* vol. 7, August 1905, 394.

6 Luiz Reis Santos, On A Picture From Abyssinia, in *Burlington Magazine* vol. 79 (1941), 26-29.

in the *Art Newspaper* in 1993 by Stephen Bell.⁷ Last not least, the painting in question is mentioned as having appeared at auction with Christie's in London. There is also a black and white photograph of the picture in question, depicting the head of Christ with the crown of thorns and his hands raised with palms facing outwards.

Going back to the *Burlington Magazine* article of 1905, we find that the same black and white photograph appears there for the first time. The caption reads: "Head of Christ, Bruges School; formerly in the possession of King Theodore of Abyssinia, now in the possession of Sir Richard Holmes, K.C.V.O." In the article, the picture is described as a small sixteenth-century painting on panel, possibly painted by an as yet to be identified Northern European or Flemish artist. Suggested attributions are, firstly, the School of Bruges or an artist close to Adriaen Isenbrandt. The condition of the painting is described as very good. Sir Richard Holmes "discovered" it when it was "hanging above the bed of the dead King Theodore when Magdala was captured by the British forces under Lord Napier in April 1868".⁸ Holmes had indeed travelled to Maqdala on behalf of the British Museum to accompany the British punitive expedition of 1868. In the article, its provenance is linked to a painting held in high religious and political esteem by the Abyssinian imperial household for centuries, and it is implied that Holmes acquired the picture *in situ* in 1868.

Sir Richard died in 1911. Subsequently, the painting was sold twice at auction by Christie's in London. From the information provided in the sale catalogues, it seems clear that the information given in the *Burlington Magazine* was accepted as correct. The attributions and provenance match those suggested in the article. At the auction in 1917, the painting was consigned for sale by C.J. Holmes, possibly Sir Richard's nephew Sir Charles John Holmes. It was attributed to the School of Bruges, and described as "found in King Theodore's house at Magdala in 1868".⁹ It sold for four hundred and twenty pounds to a buyer by the name of Reid.

In 1950, the painting made another appearance at Christie's. It was catalogued, again in line with the article in the *Burlington Magazine*, as Adriaen Isenbrandt. The provenance lists both Sir Richard Holmes and King Theodore of Abyssinia. The picture sold for only three hundred and fifteen pounds this time and was bought by Appleby's firm of dealers.¹⁰ The consignor's name was Mrs M.W. Reid, on behalf of J. Reid of Wimbledon. It seems likely that the consignor was from the same family as the buyer in 1917.¹¹

7 Stephen Bell, As the Ethiopian art show opens in the US, we ask, where is this painting now?, in *The Art Newspaper* no 32, November 1993, 12.

8 A Flemish Picture from Abyssinia, in *Burlington Magazine* vol. 7, August 1905, 394.

9 We are most grateful to Christie's librarian Lynda MacLeod for her assistance in sourcing the sale details (14 December 1917, lot 135).

10 They were an established family firm. In 2010, Christie's held a series of auction sales comprising circa 2,000 lots from the collection of the late John Appleby.

11 Again, we are grateful to Lynda MacLeod for her assistance with researching the sale details.

Christie's specialists ignored a somewhat tenuous suggestion that had been put forward in 1941, when a Portuguese art historian, Luiz Reis Santos,¹² attributed the painting to the Portuguese painter Lázaro de Andrade in a reader's letter to the *Burlington Magazine*.¹³ The author's interest in putting forward his theory appears to be to claim this object for the art history of Portugal. Unfortunately, comparatives for the attribution he proposes on stylistic grounds are few and far between.¹⁴ The letter also accepts the provenance given in the *Burlington Magazine* Article of 1905 and in both Christie's catalogues, and states furthermore that Sir Richard Holmes had taken the picture in 1968 "when the mission with which he had been entrusted was ended".¹⁵

The next time the picture made an appearance to a wider public was in a 1982 article by the historian and campaigner Richard Pankhurst. It describes an "icon of the Kwer'ata re'esu", a picture of Christ, which played an important role in the history of the Ethiopian rulers. Pankhurst's article illustrates the same photograph originally featured in the *Burlington Magazine* article, with the caption "...secretly acquired at Magdala by Sir Richard Holmes in 1868".¹⁶ He also quotes from a letter written by Richard Holmes on 16 April 1868, where Holmes describes how he acquired other objects on behalf of the British Museum by buying them off the soldiers who ransacked the buildings. Holmes makes no mention of this painting, though. Pankhurst implies that Holmes kept quiet deliberately: "Holmes in his reports to the Museum is, however, entirely silent about the Kwer'ata re'esu, though as he in fact knew, it too had been removed".¹⁷ Pankhurst then continues to describe the Ethiopian government's first demand for restitution in 1872. The details provided by the government of Emperor Yohannes IV in 1872 of what they must have regarded as a well-known object were somewhat scant: "... a picture of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ ... surrounded with gold and in the midst with colours".¹⁸ The response from the British Museum and the Royal household was that the picture could not be found. At that time, Holmes was employed as Royal Librarian at Windsor Castle, casting doubt on the thoroughness of the investigations which presumably excluded his private collection. Pankhurst also reports that even before the *Burlington Magazine* article in 1905, the Dutch ambassador in London had alerted the Memling specialist A.J. Wauters to the existence of a potential Memling in the collection of Sir Richard Holmes in 1890. When he went to see the picture, Wauters did not accept it as a Memling, but published

12 Luiz Reis Santos, *Paisagem e monumentos de Portugal* (Secretariado Nacional da Informação, 1940); Reis Santos, *Vasco Fernandes e os pintores de Viseu do século XVI* (Lisbon: O autor, 1946); Reis Santos, *Masterpieces of Flemish painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Portugal* (Lisbon, 1962);

13 Luiz Reis Santos, On A Picture From Abyssinia, in *Burlington Magazine* vol. 79 (1941), 26-29.

14 He suggests de Andrade as the author of the picture in question, but admits that without having another confirmed work by this artist as a comparison, the theory cannot be supported further.

15 Ibid, 26.

16 Richard Pankhurst, The History of the Kwer'ata Re'esu: an Ethiopian Icon, in *African Affairs* 81(322), 1982, 117-125, ill.

17 Ibid, 121.

18 Richard Pankhurst, The History of the Kwer'ata Re'esu: an Ethiopian Icon. 117-125, ill.

an article in a little known publication in 1895 where he first mentioned an inscription on the back of the picture, quoted as “Magdala - April 13, 1868”.¹⁹

The final act in the pre-internet publication history of the painting in question was provided by *The Art Newspaper* in 1993.²⁰ In a further twist, Stephen Bell revealed that Luiz Reis Santos managed to purchase the painting after it had been sold to Appleby’s at Christie’s in 1950. There is also a contemporary black and white photograph of the same picture illustrated in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1905, taken in Portugal where the picture was “in the hands of a private collector unwilling to be identified”.²¹ Furthermore, the article states that Reis Santos had “offered it for sale to the Portuguese government to present to Emperor Haile Selassie during his state visit to Portugal in 1965”, since he was “mindful of its Ethiopian links”. The offer “was declined”. The historical provenance described in the article conforms to the history given by the *Burlington Magazine* and Pankhurst’s publications. Last not least, in an article of 27 March 1998, the *Daily Telegraph* reported on the story and quoted the journalist and art historian Martin Bailey who had seen the picture in Portugal in 1993. According to the *Telegraph*, Bailey’s description of the inscription was more extensive than that of Wauters, as it is quoted as follows: “R R Holmes/FSA/Magdala 13 April 1868/taken from the palace of Theodorus”.²²

Having summarised the publication history about the picture illustrated in 1905 and 1993, we are nevertheless left with a number of questions. Even though the only written piece of documentation confirming the identity of the illustrated painting formerly owned by Holmes and later in Portugal with the historically confirmed *Kwer’ata re’esu* that played such an important part in Ethiopian history is the inscription on the back of the picture, the identification has been universally accepted, based on the strength of the Holmes provenance. While it is strong evidence, there is an anecdotal element to it.

Securing, looting, or both?

When we look closely at the quotation by Richard Holmes from a letter written shortly after the punitive expedition to Maqdala, he states that he paid the soldiers for some of the items they looted and he “secured”, which suggests that he had an official budget for the purpose, also amply corroborated by other sources. Had he not done so, the objects of Maqdala would have been dispersed in the same way as those of the Yuangmingyu-an Palace. At the same time, he could well have engaged in some personal looting of his own. Furthermore, the article in the *Burlington Magazine* states that “few pictures

19 Quoted, with the year given as 1968, presumably erroneously, in Richard Pankhurst, *The History of the Kwer’ata Re’esu: an Ethiopian Icon*, in *African Affairs* 81 (322), 1982, pp. 117-125, 122. Pankhurst mentions that Wauters published his article in the magazine *Le Congo illustré*.

20 Stephen Bell, *As the Ethiopian art show opens in the US, we ask, where is this painting now?*, in *The Art Newspaper*, no 32, November 1993, 12.

21 *Ibid.*, fn.6.

22 *Daily Telegraph*, 27 March 1998,

have a more remarkable history than the portrait of Christ which we are permitted to reproduce by the courtesy of the owner, Sir Richard Holmes. It was discovered by him hanging over the bed of the dead King Theodore when Magdala was captured by the British forces under Lord Napier in April 1868.”²³ According to a communication from his nephew Martin, quoted by Pankhurst, he seems to have referred to the picture as a “private venture”.²⁴

This poses the question what it was that intrigued him about this particular object, and made him feel that it should not be handed to the trustees. Could it have been its “Europeanness”? Was he conducting a one-man restitution of an Old Master picture to the European cultural context from where its subject matter had originated? Was he taking a souvenir? Or hoping for an attribution which might bring untold financial benefits? We only know about Sir Richard Rivington Holmes is that he “secured” a large body of objects taken during the British expedition to Abyssinia for the British Museum, and is still referenced in this role on the museum website.²⁵

Pankhurst and the above-mentioned web page state that Richard Holmes “did not disclose his acquisition during his lifetime”.²⁶ However, this is to some extent contradicted by other references. Holmes showed the painting to various experts in Old Master painting and exchanged expert opinions with these. The *Burlington Magazine* article refers to a discussion with at least two Old Master experts. After Holmes’s death, the painting was sold at a public auction with a catalogue reference to its Abyssinian provenance. There was no attempt to hide the picture’s history, and it follows that the ownership of the picture was well known, at least in specialist circles in Britain. Holmes did not keep the picture out of view, as he must have felt entirely confident in his claim to ownership. Such an approach would also provide a likely source of how Reis Santos heard about the existence of the picture in the first place. For example, Pankhurst writes that it was the Dutch Ambassador in London who alerted the Memling specialist A.J. Wauters to the existence of a potential Memling in the collection of Sir Richard Holmes, which brings us to another question.

23 A Flemish Picture from Abyssinia, in *Burlington Magazine* vol. 7, August 1905, 394.

24 Pankhurst, 122.

25 The website states that Holmes “acquired a number of objects for the British Museum, including around 300 manuscripts which are now housed in the British Library” (for example, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=607037&partId=1&searchText=richard+holmes&people=120788&page=1, accessed on 19 March 2018). There has been renewed press interest in the ownership and provenance of Ethiopian items held by the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum recently in the context of the opening of a new display of items from Maqdala opening on 5 April 2018 at the V&A, cf. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/ethiopia-calls-on-uk-museums-to-return-maqdala-treasures-on-long-term-loan>; <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/v-and-a-opens-dialogue-on-looted-ethiopian-treasures> (accessed both on 11 April 2018).

26 Afromet, see fn. 1.

The market

Just how valuable was this picture in financial terms? As the Memling expert had not chosen to attribute it to this master, it seems that its 1917 price was in the lower range. A top price for a Memling in 1910, albeit at retail level rather than at auction, would be the equivalent of £6,9 million today (US\$ 426,500).²⁷ The “Head of Christ” made £420, which is equivalent to approximately £30,000 today, indicating an Old Master picture at low to mid-level quality.²⁸ Furthermore, the price did not change much, even going down a little in 1950 before it passed to Reis Santos. As a buyer, his incentive may have been twofold: a desire for academic acclaim through reattribution and the possible gains to be made in selling the work to the Portuguese government as a “gift” to the Ethiopian ruler. On the basis of these facts, we can conclude that the painting would probably not have been considered very valuable in financial terms, unless its attribution could have increased its market value. Its financial value as a historical document, however, has as yet not been established by the market. As an object with a potential claim for title by Ethiopia, in today’s political and legal framework it has arguably no saleability.

A shift in perspective

In the 1980s, the picture is featured in secondary literature by Richard Pankhurst and Stanislaw Chojnacki.²⁹ Richard Pankhurst (1927-2017) was a scholar of Ethiopian studies and former professor at the University of Addis Ababa, who published widely on his subject and was a supporter of returning cultural assets to Ethiopia.³⁰ His family had long-standing connections to Ethiopia. Chojnacki was the author of an authoritative volume on Ethiopian art published in 1983. Polish by birth, he spent over twenty-five years in Ethiopia.³¹ Finally, the writer of the *Art Newspaper* article, Stephen Bell, had also lived in Ethiopia and campaigned for the painting’s return.³² In their publications, there is a sense of a growing shift in perspective which ultimately led to today’s debate about provenance and ownership. The terminology gradually moves from “secured” to “secretly acquired” (Pankhurst)

27 Cf. Maryan Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen, eds., *From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum* (New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1998), 74. We used the historical currency converter Historicalstatistics.org, and we are grateful to Felicity Bodenstein and Christine Howald for this reference.

28 Based on the historical currency converter Historicalstatistics.org.

29 Chojnacki essentially accepts Pankhurst’s findings, cf. Stanislaw Chojnacki, *The ‘Kwer’ata re’esu’: its Iconography and Significance. An Essay in Cultural History of Ethiopia*, (Napoli: Istituto universitario Orientale, 1985); Richard Pankhurst, ‘The History of the Kwer’ata re’esu: An Ethiopian Icon’, in *African Affairs*, 81/322 (1982), 117–125.

30 Cf. his obituary in *The Daily Telegraph* published on 17 February 2017.

31 Review of his book by David Buxton in the *SOAS Bulletin* Vol. XLVIII, part 2 (1985), 363f. (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S0041977X00033620>, accessed on 22 March 2018).

32 Cf. an article in a local newspaper published on 13 November 2010 (<http://legacy.newarkadvertiser.co.uk/articles/news/Historians-mission-to-return-long-lost-icon>, accessed on 20 March 2018).

to “stolen” (*Daily Telegraph*). We can trace the unease with violent circumstances of ownership changes in the nineteenth and twentieth century which also led to the Washington Principles of 1998.

Conclusion

In its history, its provenance and its reception the picture in question has been imbued with relevance above and beyond the factual. Yet in its various guises, it offers an almost perfectly formed conjugation of translocation themes. It may have started out as a work of art in Northern Europe, probably brought to Ethiopia either during the 1520s by the Portuguese Mission to Ethiopia or later by the Jesuits and then became a religious symbol, a political icon, an artistic exemplar for many Ethiopian artists, a token of royalty, a coveted war trophy, a subject of scholarly debate, a basic commodity for trade, and, finally, a potential object of contention and a symbol of a lost culture. As such, it exemplifies almost any possible aspect of translocating cultural assets. It has become loaded with meaning, which is however entirely externally attributed. As such, it offers a case study in artefacts and their almost infinite potential as projection screens for meaning in historiography. It is to be hoped that further research may be able to explore its history further and answer some of the questions it raises.

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Correction (23 May 2022): Though the highly relevant article by Martin Bailey in *The Art Newspaper* (April 1998) was included in the research for this article, the reference was omitted due to an editorial oversight.