



Churches of Ethiopia: The Monastery of Narga Sellase

Mario Di Salvo

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Narga Sellase's monastery sits on a tiny islet in the middle of Lake Tana, the great body of water in the centre of the Ethiopian plateau near to the imperial city of Gondar. Founded in 1748, Narga Sellase is one of the constellation of monasteries on the lake. They are the expression of a civilization which since the 4th century has known the Christianity on which its identity is founded.

The extraordinary beauty of the natural surroundings and the concentric space of the monastic complex enclose the holiness of the sanctuary, making Narga Sellase a strikingly suggestive place. The church is one of the masterpieces in the multi-millenial Ethiopian civilization-- an ancient but extant Christian enclave in Africa--, and is noted not only for the superb quality of the paintings which completely cover the walls of the *maqdas*, the *sancta sanctorum*, but also as a testimony to imperial devotion, as expressed by the prostrate figure of Queen Mentewwab, the foundress, depicted at the feet of the Majesty.

Narga Sellase plays an important part in the history of 18th century Ethiopian art, when European, Islamic, and Indian influences gathered into an artistic form which maintained its fundamental Ethiopian features, not only in the magnificent paintings but also in the decoration, well-integrated into the architecture, and the architecture itself.

Stanislaw Chojnacki introduces the historical and background references which characterize and distinguish Gondar's imperial court in the 18th century and its effect on art.

Mario Di Salvo fits the Lake Tana region into the story of Ethiopia's civilization, describes the architecture of Ethiopian churches in their rich topographical variety, and leads on to illustrate the monastic complex of Narga Sellase, its structure, its architectural, decorative and pictorial components.

Osvaldo Raineri presents, finally in a systematic way, the sources of the paintings, derived both from canonical texts and from Ethiopian tradition, and the new translation of an 18th century manuscript, written in *ge'ez* (Classical Ethiopian) of the *Story of Narga*.



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