

Medieval North and East African art

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When you imagine medieval art, what is the first thing that comes to mind? You might think of paintings or tapestries of kings and knights, or maybe scrawlings of dragons and demons on the margins of manuscripts.

Many of us were taught, both in formal education settings and in popular culture, that Europe was the central site of culture and civilization in the medieval world. It's no surprise that dragons and knights come to mind first, because these are the historical narratives that have been prioritized by art historians in the Western world for centuries. This story falsely implies that art and culture developed in Europe and was subsequently spread to the rest of the world.

My work seeks to reframe medieval history by focusing on the rich artistic traditions of North and East Africa. Throughout late antiquity and medieval periods, the cultures and civilizations of North and East Africa had a central role in international networks of trade and cultural exchange. Africa was not merely a recipient of European ideas—these regions produced meaning, style, and theology that influenced the rest of the medieval world.

These regions were deeply connected to but not defined by Byzantium, the continuation of the Roman Empire further east. From what is now Istanbul, the empire grew across the Mediterranean and into Northern Africa. These regions contained vibrant

centers of Late Antique and medieval art, which testify to the centuries of exchange, not only with Byzantium, but throughout the Mediterranean.

The term "Byzantine" might conjure images of Constantinople and its dazzling mosaics. But to truly understand the breadth of Byzantium's impact, and the creative agency of those beyond its imperial boundaries, we must look to its southern borders.

Let's begin with Egypt, where the Coptic Christian tradition thrived in Late Antiquity. Egypt was one of the wealthiest provinces in early Byzantium. For thousands of years, Coptic artisans have produced high-quality jewelry, ivories, icons, textiles, wall paintings, and manuscripts. These materials circulated around the Byzantine world. Thousands of Coptic textiles are extant today, many of which are here at the Met.

Further south, Nubia was home to a series of powerful Christian kingdoms between the sixth and fifteenth centuries. These kingdoms were key political allies for the Byzantines. Nubian churches were filled with wall paintings that are astonishing in their vibrancy and color. These frescoes, particularly those in the Faras Cathedral, show a world of kings and bishops and angels and saints. What's remarkable is how these images reflect both local aesthetic choices and broader Christian iconographic traditions. One frequently finds scenes of the Virgin Mary or Christ Pantocrator that echo Byzantine prototypes, yet the figures often wear Nubian regalia or bear inscriptions in Greek or Old Nubian.

Ethiopia, a nation state that became Christian before Rome, has a Christian artistic tradition that dates back to the fourth century and reaches astonishing heights in the medieval period. Ethiopian scribes produced illuminated manuscripts on parchment, their pages filled with colorful miniatures and ornate Ge'ez script (Ethiopia's indigenous language). Their ornate detail shows that Ethiopian artists utilized both imported pigments and pigments from their own highland landscapes.

Fragments of Coptic textiles found in the Holy Land, manuscripts that traveled with monks across the Red Sea, and architectural parallels between Nubian and Byzantine churches point to a networked world in which Africa was not peripheral but integral to the medieval Christian experience.

I curated an exhibit at the Met in 2023 called *Africa and Byzantium*, which brought together a range of masterworks to shed light on the artistic influence of medieval Africa. The exhibit displayed works from North Africa, Egypt, Nubia, Ethiopia, and other powerful African kingdoms across 2000 years of artistic contribution.

Medieval African art demands to be understood, not in relation to Europe alone, but as a part of a wider Afro-Eurasian world. The art of Medieval Northern and Eastern Africa are not remnants of a forgotten past; they are active voices in an ongoing story about the power of art to cross boundaries and influence culture.