At the beginning of this year, the Ethiopian Art Conservation Program (EACP) held an engaging online conference titled Community Talks 2024. Two wonderful days were shared amongst Ethiopian and international art conservators to discuss research and art conservation campaigns.

At the end of the conference, a panel discussion was held to address prominent issues in the field such as data management, ethics, and capacity building. This was a successful event which confirmed that the interest in heritage management in Ethiopia is growing at a fast rate. Presenting a platform for the Ethiopian art conservator voice has proven to be of remarkable value.
The need for a strong community to preserve heritage in Ethiopia

Unfortunately, the deterioration and loss of valuable heritage in Ethiopia is still an ongoing problem linked to critical factors such as war, lack of financial structures and the lack of leadership from governmental departments. The Ethiopian Art Conservation Program has been gradually changing the pathway for cultural workers by bridging different entities within the field of heritage management providing sustainable recourses and generating awareness of diverse challenges.

Since 2020 Mrs. Naomi Meulemans and Mr. Belay Haileselassie have been engaged in the care of cultural heritage in Ethiopia. Although born in Jimma, Oromo (Ethiopia), Naomi has been living in Belgium since 1990. Returning to Ethiopia as an adult—and most importantly as an art conservator—has made a significant impact on her, inspiring Naomi to delve into the history of the country and to understand different aspects of the challenges of art conservation and preservation in Ethiopia.

Together with a team of nine professionals, the Ethiopian Art Conservation Program (EACP) was established in Belgium as a non-government organization in 2021 with a sister organization in Ethiopia lead by Mr. Belay Haileselassie, an Ethiopian researcher of Ethiopian history with a specialization in Coptic parchments. EACP, led by Naomi and Belay, is devoted to investing in the education and training of Ethiopian experts in heritage management and specifically in the technical training of Ethiopian art conservators.

Challenges

From the very beginning, EACP has had to learn to adapt to the fast-changing work and social environments in Ethiopia with support from only a small community and occasional private funding. It is important to mention that Ethiopia has been under severe social and economic stress since ties were broken between the political capital of the Northern region of Tigray and the central politics led from Addis Abeba. This split, resulting in an on-going destructive civil war, has impacted over one million civilians throughout the country and has left parts of the regions damaged and communities in famine and desperate conditions.

As an NGO invested in the care of heritage, EACP realized the importance of balancing priorities in light of what the local stakeholders needed most at the time. EACP continued to visit and work together with local and government heritage professionals during such difficult times; it was important to keep track of the heritage workers, address their living conditions, and support them through different activities to bring awareness to their situation. In the delicate debate of ethnic disputes, heritage has proven to be a symbolic remedy to find mutual ground during heated discussions. Cultural heritage, even during war times, makes a significant impact on the mental health of local communities; heritage embodies the spirit—the surviving identity—of the community, and too often historic areas are damaged or completely destroyed and looted throughout battle.
Community Talks

Our main focus, building a university program in art conservation in Ethiopia (and East Africa), was initially supported by the University of Antwerp (Belgium, October 2022) by Prof. Dr. Natalie Ortega-Saez and Prof. Dr. Tim De Kock. In order to bridge the financial gap, a grant was awarded by the Belgian governmental agency VLIR – UOS (Flemish Inter-universities Council and University Development Co-operation) which has provided EACP the opportunity to work closely for five years with Bahir Dar University (Ethiopia) which was assigned as the host university for the future master’s in art conservation program.

Because of the difficult political situation and safety issues in Ethiopia, EACP and the University of Antwerp have joined forces in providing meetings, informal training, and conferences for the universities and scholars online.

In 2021 a first Community Talk under the name The Art Conference was held at the Authority of Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia. Speakers from the international community were invited to attend and speak on the efforts of conservation management in and outside of Ethiopia, and continued and future goals were mapped out for EACP. The ARCCH also expressed their efforts in heritage management and how they will proceed in the future. This conference served as the beginning of the professional development for the current platform EACP is building.

This January 2024, EACP was planning to have its first in-person group visit at Bahir Dary University alongside the University of Antwerp and the EACP board of directors. Unfortunately, the organizations were restricted from visiting the Amhara region in Ethiopia due to unstable conditions caused by the ongoing civil war. Learning from previous engagements, we understood that a positive continuation of projects is incredibly important for the sustainability of the initiatives with our local partners and stakeholders. Therefor the visit was converted to a second edition of the Community Talks and became an international two-day event with participation from Ethiopia, the USA, and Italy. Experts were invited to speak on their results and challenges with conservation projects concerning Ethiopian heritage. Several renowned Ethiopian professionals were given a platform to lecture and inspire the audience with their great knowledge of Ethiopian conservation campaigns, proving that inclusion of Ethiopian heritage experts is crucial for the success of local conservation initiatives.

Both Community Talks were impactful, enabling a great exchange of knowledge and building a relevant community for those seeking further collaboration on specific topics within the field of art conservation of Ethiopian artifacts. For EACP, the Community Talks have created the foundation for working closely together with the Ministry of Culture in Tigray and its represent-ative Dr. Atshba Gebreegziabher Asmelash. Together with the Ministry, EACP will focus on actively participating and contributing to the conservation of heritage in Tigray through capacity building and providing conservation materials.

Education will always be the driving force of the organization, but without a strong platform and sustainable recourses, these efforts will remain limited in the future. With the goal of building capacity throughout the diverse communities in Ethiopia, creating an Ethiopian deontological approach towards art conservation campaigns and supporting local experts that are already
taking care of heritage, EACP is now working to strengthen its platform both in Ethiopia as internationally.

**Strengthening Cultural Heritage Management through Sustainable Partnerships**

The Ethiopian Art Conservation Program is an example of the transformative power of collaborative efforts in preserving and promoting cultural heritage. As an expert in heritage management, the organization has successfully fostered a network of local stakeholders in Ethiopia and Belgium to drive cultural understanding and conservation.

In February 2024, EACP supported the initiative of H.E. Ambassador Hirut Zemene to organize an exhibition on historical Ethiopian painting. This project, which was brought together by the historic Alle School of Fine Arts (Addis Ababa University), EACP and the Ethiopian Embassy in Brussels, showcased a selection of rare objects for the first time in Europe. The exhibition, Ethiopia Land of Origins and Civilizations, not only introduced these cultural treasures to a new audience but also facilitated cross-pollination among conservation professionals, leading to new insights and best practices in the field.

Beyond its work in conservation, EACP has also made significant strides in supporting contemporary Ethiopian artists. For the second year in a row, the program has invited six Ethiopian artists to showcase their work in Belgium. This initiative, The Art Space, provides a platform for these artists to share their talents and also helps to inspire a new generation of art enthusiasts to invest in the care of culture. The exhibition, which opened on May 26th, is a testament to the dynamic cultural landscape of Ethiopia, rooted in centuries-old cultural developments.

The success of EACP's initiatives is a testament to the power of sustainable partnerships in cultural heritage management. By working closely with local stakeholders and fostering a sense of community, the program has been able to achieve far more than any one individual organization could alone. The proceeds from the artworks, which go entirely to the Ethiopian artists and support the EACP fund, demonstrate the tangible impact that such collaborations can have on the cultural sector.

As we progress in our endeavors to preserve and promote cultural heritage, it is crucial to prioritize sustainable partnerships and collaborations. The Ethiopian Art Conservation Program exemplifies what can be accomplished when organizations and individuals unite to uphold a common mission. By drawing insights from their achievements and obstacles, we can construct a more resilient and dynamic cultural landscape for future generations.

*All Community Talks* are still online and available upon request; the list of speakers and abstracts are available on the EACP platform.

The exhibition ART SPACE takes place from May 26th – November 2024 in Leuven- Belgium: www.youartspacegroup.com
Author bios:

Naomi Meulemans studied conservation and restoration at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp and the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna (Austria). She then worked as a junior conservator in New York City, and since 2016 she has been an active conservator and project collaborator with many of the sub-collections of The Phoebus Foundation (Antwerp, Belgium). Since 2020, Naomi has been involved in the establishment and management of the Ethiopian Art Conservation Program.

Belay Haileselassie received his education from Tegabare-id TVET College in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. With an IT background, Belay has dedicated his career to researching and analyzing Ethiopian history and heritage management. Belay has collaborated with Ethiopian musicians and with traditional parchment craftsmen at Hamere Birhan, which led to a workshop at the University of Antwerp in the summer of 2023. Belay is currently the creative director of the Ethiopian Art Conservation Program.

Read the article in the June-July 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 102, p. 50-56

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