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Connected At Crossroads, Toledo Museum Of Art Brings Ethiopia To Northwest Ohio

By [Chadd Scott](#), Contributor. © Chadd Scott covers the intersection of art an... [Follow Author](#)

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"Ethiopia at the Crossroads" at the Toledo Museum of Art exhibition installation image. TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART

Deep thinking. Given the luxury of time to think—surrounded by the world’s greatest artwork—museum curators find linkages between people and places not readily apparent. Ways of seeing the world connecting us over here with people way over there. Common ground. Less “foreign,” “exotic,” “other,” more “familiar,” “neighbor,” “brother.”

Such is the case with Sophie Ong, Assistant Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Toledo Museum of Art, and her thinking about connections between Toledo and Ethiopia.

Say what?

“Toledo is a city that, much like Ethiopia, has been shaped by its position at a crossroads—a place where diverse cultures, histories, and ideas have converged,” Ong told Forbes.com. “Positioned at the intersection of America’s longest north-south and east-west highways, Toledo is a modern-day junction, making it a fitting venue for this extraordinary exhibition that celebrates Ethiopian art in a global context.”

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Reading it, I was absolutely captivated where I realized

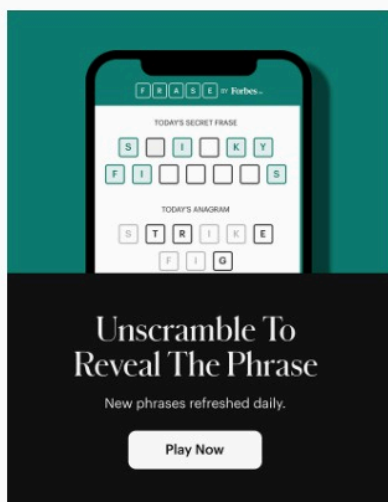
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The exhibition, “Ethiopia at the Crossroads,” traverses 1,750 years of that nation’s artistic traditions, emphasizing its influence as the bridge between Africa, Europe, and Asia via the Arabian Sea, Red Sea, Nile River, and Mediterranean Sea. The highways are Interstate 90 running from Boston to Seattle and Interstate 75 running from Miami to the U.S.-Canadian border in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Toledo further sits at the crossroads of its region and the world as the place where the Maumee River flows into the Great Lakes.

Toledo isn’t generally thought of as a major global shipping port, but it has been, same as Ethiopia tends to be overlooked these days for its influence on the evolution of global cultures and religions. Their unique geographies made them so.

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“Ethiopia at the Crossroads” additionally supports an emphasis being made at the Toledo Museum of Art.

“Our engagement with Ethiopian art is relatively recent, but it has quickly become a vital part of our mission to broaden the narrative of art history,” Ong, who curated the exhibition, said.

“Broadening the narrative of art history.” That’s a big goal to set in a city the size of Toledo, population 270,000. Discount its art museum’s capacity to do so at your own risk.

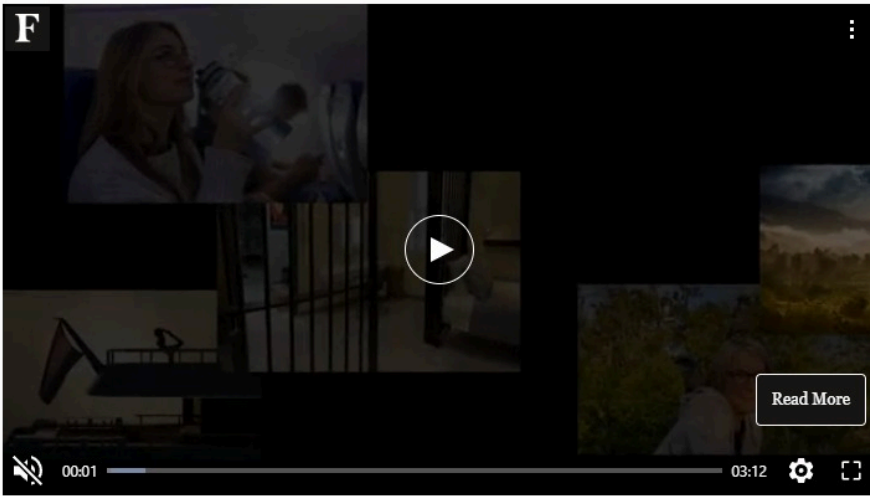
Toledo was once one of the wealthiest and most prominent cities in America—thanks again to its crossroads location. In 1880, it had [more rail traffic](#) than any city not named Chicago. Grain and coal in inconceivable volumes were sent there and then off to the world. It was a national industrial center, most notably for glass, but also bicycles and cars, car parts, and scales. Big boy, Gilded Age wealth. The kind of wealth that collected the best of the best artwork from around the world and created [a museum whose excellence](#) is out of all proportion to its home city’s size. The museum’s holdings of artworks from the Middle Ages on display [in its Cloister Gallery](#) are particularly esteemed.

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Highlights of “Ethiopia at the Crossroads”



“Ethiopia at the Crossroads” at the Toledo Museum of Art exhibition installation image.
TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART



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Among items on view in “Ethiopia at the Crossroads” is a recent museum acquisition of an important Ethiopian icon dating to about 1500. The object’s exterior features a vibrant painting of Saints Anne and Joachim, the Virgin Mary’s parents. Inside, a posthumous royal portrait of Ethiopian King Lalibela and his wife Masqal Kibra appears opposite a depiction of Saint Mercurius on horseback. Such icons were integral parts of the Christian liturgy in Ethiopia.

Other religious works reveal the influences that flowed between Ethiopian artists and Italian artists who arrived to the Ethiopian court in the 15th century. The groups shared painting styles, color palettes and materials. *Our Lady Mary with Her Beloved Son and Archangels Michael and Gabriel* by Fre Seyon (active 1445-1480) features the Virgin and Christ in a traditional Italian pose flanked by Archangels Michael and Gabriel, who often appear together in Ethiopian paintings. The figures also wear garments with patterns that are found in Ethiopia.

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Niccolò Brancaleon (Italian, active 1480-1521) worked in the Ethiopian imperial court during the same time as Fre Seyon and combines Italian artistic practices with Ethiopian techniques in *Right Half of a Diptych with the Virgin and Child* (ca. 1500). The Venetian monk employs the four-color palette common in Ethiopian icon paintings with the shaded layers that are characteristic of Italian Renaissance works.

While three-quarters of the exhibition’s artworks come from Ethiopia, the remainder relate to the neighboring cultures to which it historically was connected, including the Roman Empire, Coptic Egypt and Byzantium, to name just a few.

TMA will showcase for the first time two extraordinary recent acquisitions that complement and provide context for the Ethiopian artworks in the exhibition—a 4th-century BCE alabaster ‘Figure of a Man’ from South Arabia (modern day Yemen) and one of the most outstanding Armenian manuscripts known today, a 16th-century Gospel Book illuminated by Hakob Jughayets’i.

Another highlight is the cloak of Haile Selassie I (1892-1975), the last Ethiopian emperor (1903-1974), revered as a deity in Rastafarianism. Many consider him the Second Coming of Jesus and Jah in human form, and the religion is named for Selassie’s pre-regnal title “Ras Tafari Makonnen.” Gold and sequins adorn the black velvet garment and honor the emperor who made strides to modernize the country with political and social reform. Just one year into his reign, he introduced the country’s first written constitution. “Ethiopia at the Crossroads” marks the cloak’s museum debut.

Over 200 objects in all—devotional painted icons, paintings, manuscripts, coins, textiles, metalwork and carved wood crosses—situate Ethiopian art in a global context. A contemporary context as well as an historic context. Contemporary art from Ethiopia can also be seen in the show.

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“Ethiopia boasts a vibrant contemporary art scene, supported by institutions like Addis Ababa University’s Alle School of Fine Art and Design, and internationally recognized spaces such as Addis Fine Art, Zoma Museum, and the soon-to-open Zoma Village Entoto,” Ong said. “For TMA’s ‘Ethiopia at the Crossroads’ presentation, we’ve integrated our Digital Artist in Residence Program, collaborating with the visionary blockchain-based Ethiopian art collective, Yatreda.”

‘House of Yatreda’

“House of Yatreda” is an immersive, multi-sensory exhibition by Yatreda ያጥራዳ, a digital artist collective based between Ethiopia, Kenya, and the United States. The presentation appears alongside “Ethiopia at the Crossroads,” both free to visit and on view through November 10, 2024.

Kiya Tadele leads Yatreda with assistance from her partner, Joey Lawrence. Tadele describes Yatreda as a family of artists in Ethiopia making art in the style of tizita—nostalgia and longing for the past.

“The House of Yatreda” blends ancient traditions and legends of Ethiopian culture with 21st century blockchain technology. The immersive digital art experience premieres Yatreda’s latest series, “Abyssinian Queen,” animating the life and travels of an imagined Ethiopian queen and her loyal followers into four black-and-white slow-motion digital artworks (NFTs).

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Yatreda : ቃጥሬቆ, an Ethiopian family art collective, performed a coffee ceremony that showcases the cultural significance and community-building aspects of coffee in Ethiopian society, at the Toledo Museum of Art (TMA). "House of Yatreda," Yr ... [More](#)
THE BLADE/KURT STEISS

An integral, not to be missed accompaniment to the "House of Yatreda" is a coffee ceremony performed live during the run of the exhibition. The public is welcomed to experience it September 14 at 1:00 PM and 3:30 PM.

Ethiopia is the birthplace of coffee, and the rituals surrounding coffee are a core facet of community-building and conversation-starting in Ethiopian culture. Being invited to share coffee in Ethiopia is considered a symbol of friendship, respect, and great hospitality. Accompanied by a masinko player and coffee muse, Tadele will play the role of the storyteller and narrate various customs and steps of the Ethiopian coffee ceremony in relationship to Yatreda's art.

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