

## Educator Guide

### FEATURED WORK OF ART



#### [Processional Cross](#)

Unidentified artist

Ethiopia, 15th Century

Copper alloy

Museum purchase

with funds provided by the W. Alton Jones

Foundation Acquisition Fund, 1996, acc. no. 54.2892

#### HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource includes factual information, cultural context, glossary of terms, as well as prompts and discussion questions related to the *Processional Cross*, 54.2892.

This resource is recommended for Middle School audiences and Social Studies subjects. Students will learn about the historical and religious context of this object to be able to relate and compare it to their own culture and identity. These suggestions were informed by the Maryland State Department of Education 2024 standards.

## BACKGROUND CONTEXT

### Facts About the Work of Art

- In Christian practices in Ethiopia, processional crosses feature in elaborate parades through the streets on holy days.
- This cross uses its central panel to represent sacred figures, which is typical of processional crosses from the 15th century.
- The central panel features an image of the Virgin Mary and infant Christ on one side and the figures of two archangels on the other.
- The central panel of this cross is surrounded by an interlacing design that creates a web of small crosses.
- The large loops at the bottom are used to hang swaths of fabric from the crosses.
- This processional cross is made of a copper alloy, the same material that many processional crosses from the time were made.

### Cultural Context

- The cross, a symbol of Christ's victory over death, appears in a variety of shapes in Ethiopia, some of which are particular to a specific region of Ethiopia or time period.
- Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia in the 4th century by the rulers of the **Aksumite Kingdom**.
- In the **Ethiopian Orthodox Church**, processional crosses were originally mounted on poles and held by **priests** during **processions**.
- The Church has had a dominant role in the culture and politics of Ethiopia, having served as the official religion of the **monarchy**, which was in power until 1974.
- Processional crosses are one of three common types of crosses in Ethiopia. The others are hand-held crosses and pendant crosses worn around the neck. Each type of cross serves a different purpose in daily life and worship.

## GLOSSARY

**Aksumite Kingdom:** An empire that came into power in the first century CE and was located in what is now northern Ethiopia. This kingdom is attributed with introducing Christianity to Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Ethiopian Orthodox Church:** The official state church of Ethiopia until 1974. Many members of the Ethiopian diaspora are still part of this church, although Ethiopia is home to many different religions, including Judaism, Islam, and more.

**Monarchy:** A form of government with one person as the ruler, usually determined by being born into a royal family.

**Priest:** A person who leads religious ceremonies and directs the followers of a faith.

**Procession:** A group of people moving together, typically as part of a religious practice or ceremony.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: Ethiopia's Enduring Cultural Heritage](#)

[National Geographic Mapmaker](#)

[Smart History: Christian Ethiopian Art](#)

[Church Unearthed in Ethiopia Rewrites the History of Christianity in Africa](#)

## PROMPTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Describe what you notice and identify any patterns you see.
2. By zooming into the image on [our website](#), closely examine the center of the cross. In one to two sentences, describe what you think is happening in the image.
3. Look closely at the whole object. Identify which parts of the object you think have a functional purpose and explain what you think the function of those parts is.
4. Compare this cross to objects in other religious ceremonies or important events that you have seen. What is similar and what is different?
5. What is a ceremonial object or object of importance in your life? What does it represent and why is it important?