The rich tradition of Ethiopian painting is explored in an exhibition at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. “From Monastery to Marketplace: Tradition Inspires Modern Ethiopian Painting” is now on display in the Focus Gallery of the African Voices Hall, the largest cultural hall in the Smithsonian Institution. The exhibition continues through October 2002.

“‘From Monastery to Marketplace’ provides a rare glimpse into the centuries old tradition of Ethiopian painting, and demonstrates that this art form still endures today,” said Mary Jo Arnoldi, Museum curator. “Visitors will be captivated by the history of Ethiopia through the tremendous beauty of the pieces on view.”

The exhibition features 12 works of art dating from the 18th to the 21st centuries. Included are religious paintings extolling Orthodox Christian icons and saints, and historical paintings of memorable battles and celebrations, such as a dramatic piece on the 1930 coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie I. Some of the more contemporary paintings in “From Monastery to Marketplace” use vivid color and detail to showcase scenes of daily Ethiopian life. The exhibition presents works by three generations from one family of church-trained artists from Aksum, Ethiopia: Yohannis Teklu (1900-1978); his grandson, Berhanemeskel Fisseha (b.1947), and Fisseha’s son, Daniel Fisseha (b.1980).
After Christianity gained in popularity in Ethiopia in the 4th century, monasteries grew into flourishing cultural centers where generations of monks passed down traditional artistic approaches to honoring religious subjects. In the late 19th century, the Ethiopian imperial court commissioned church-trained artists to commemorate historical events. Many of these works were given to visiting ambassadors and other dignitaries, generating a strong interest in Ethiopian art among foreigners. By the 1930s, painters were adapting traditional styles of art to depict scenes from everyday life. Today, church-trained artists in Ethiopia still follow many of the conventions that guided painters centuries ago.

The paintings in “From Monastery to Marketplace” are characterized by two-dimensional planes of brilliant color without light or shadow. The faces of the subjects are expressionless and idealized, and a sense of perspective is created through V-shaped arrangements of the elements. Significant objects, careful positioning and text within the pieces further help identify the theme. A painting of Emperor Menelik II and Empress Taytu shows them encircled by a band of saints and angels in a stylized demonstration of their importance.

The African Voices Hall is a permanent exhibition exploring the people, culture and dynamic history of the continent. The exhibition tells the story of Africa through more than 400 objects from the Museum’s collection, as well as photographs, film, video interactives and sound stations. The voices of African people are central to the exhibition and each story comes to life through cultural proverbs and adages with actual commentary from historical and living persons. African Voices opened at the National Museum of Natural History in 1999. Visitors can access the African Voices website at www.mnh.si.edu/africanvoices/.

The National Museum of Natural History, located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W., welcomed more than 8.4 million people during 2001, making it the most visited natural history museum in the world. Opened in 1910, the Museum is dedicated to maintaining and preserving the world’s most extensive collection of natural history specimens and human artifacts. It also fosters critical scientific research as well as educational programs and exhibitions that present the work of its scientists and curators to the public. The museum is part of the Smithsonian Institution, the world’s largest museum and research complex. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History is open for special summer hours from 10 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. every day through Labor Day. Admission is free.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Images are available upon request. SI-141-2002