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**A Monument's Many Lives:  
Constructing Meanings in Theo Eshetu's *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* (2009)**

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An abstract of  
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## Abstract

### A Monument's Many Lives: Constructing Meanings in Theo Eshetu's *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* (2009)

By Margaret Nagawa

In 2009, video artist Theo Eshetu completed a fifteen-monitor installation. Eshetu draws from art history, religion, and colonial archival records to explore human and territorial relations across time and space. He uses multiplication, juxtaposition, and mirroring of images to advance his argument that the past of the Axum obelisk as a funerary marker and religious symbol in Ethiopia, a victory monument in Italy, and its future as an example of restitution are inextricably interconnected. I examine the footage, soundscape, and TV sets upon which the images play to pursue how Eshetu combines these materials as his medium in conceptualizing the obelisk's history. To do this, I analyze the formal elements of the work's construction: its sculptural form, visual texture, and composition, whose qualities of commanding mass and space Eshetu uses in creating an installation of monumental proportions. I argue that *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* intermixes legend, colonial, and postcolonial representations to challenge assumptions behind any single historical narrative constructed at any historical moment in the monument's epic journey.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2010, visitors to the *GEO-graphics* exhibition at the Bozar Center for Fine Arts in Brussels saw *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* (2009), a multi-screen video installation by Berlin-based artist Theo Eshetu (**Fig. 1**). The Axum obelisk, a monumental twenty-four-meter-tall architectural funerary stele, returned to Ethiopia from Italy after sixty-six years in Rome, where Benito Mussolini installed it as a triumphal stele. Eshetu assembled the video installation from archival and new footage overlaid with a soundtrack ranging from classical music and ambient compositions to live recordings of chants and construction site noises. Enticed by the sounds, visitors encountered twenty-six minutes and forty-five seconds of high-definition video collage in MP4 format. A kaleidoscope of color and black-and-white footage plays on a loop across fifteen 28-inch TV screens gathered from four sources. Viewers watching from the beginning of the video see a colorful narrative painting portraying fifteen scenes from the Queen of Sheba legend, the Axum Empire's foundational story. The video cuts to documentary footage of Eshetu's grandfather, Tekle-Tsadik Mekouria (1913-2000) taken from *Blood Is Not Fresh Water* (1997) that Eshetu shot in Ethiopia. At an increased rhythm, Eshetu interlaces selections from the film with fascist Italian black-and-white archival footage of the obelisk's removal in 1937 that he retrieved from the Istituto Luce at the Cinecittà in Rome. For three-quarters of the screen time, images of crowds and construction site workers saturate the video footage he filmed in Rome and Axum during the five-year repatriation process. Eshetu combines the four varied footage by simultaneously playing mirrored or contrasting images across multiple screens. As a result, viewers' eyes dart across the screens, unable to rest upon any one image for long or perceive an individual storyline among the many created by the obelisk's part-historical, part-mythological journey.

*The Return of the Axum Obelisk* exemplifies Eshetu's artistic practice that engages with the passage of time in its exploration of human relations and draws from "anthropology,

art history, scientific research, and religion” as theorized by art historians Karen Milbourne, Mary Nooter Roberts, and Allen F. Roberts.<sup>1</sup> Milbourne et al. describe the similar film techniques Eshetu employs in his *Brave New World II* (1999) as “fractal repetition, kaleidoscopic mirroring, multiscreen projections, mosaic-like patterning of images and mood-sensitive soundscapes.”<sup>2</sup> The extent to which Eshetu applies the same artistic techniques to go beyond simple storytelling in *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* in presenting multiple and sometimes conflicting historical representations of a single physical object over time and space remains to be fully explored.

In Eshetu’s own words, the subject of “even a very factual work” that “shows the real-life event of a looted object” is discussed “through the lens of its symbolic significance.”<sup>3</sup> In the 2014 interview with Selene Wendt, Eshetu explained the obelisk’s symbolic significance,

Ultimately, in treating a delicate subject such as the Axum Obelisk my aim was to place its significance within the greater framework of intercultural relations. Obviously, the return of war loot from Italy to Ethiopia is interesting on many levels, but there is a lot more at play that gives the work added depth. For instance, I am fascinated by how the monument itself has changed in significance over time. It was born as a phallic symbol of power and became a symbol of religious presence in Ethiopia. It then became a symbol of colonial aggression when it was brought to Rome, and subsequently a symbol of postcolonial aid to Africa, placed as it was in front of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Finally, its dismantling and return to Ethiopia becomes yet another symbol. Maybe this signals the end of a postcolony or the beginning of something else.<sup>4</sup>

One cannot understand the repatriation apart from the foundational legend and the colonial intrusion. We should study this work more closely in its probing of the monument’s

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1. Karen E. Milbourne, Mary Nooter Roberts, and Allen F. Roberts. “Senses of Time: Video and Film-Based Arts of Africa.” *African Arts* 48, no. 4 (October 29, 2015): 81. [https://doi.org/10.1162/AFAR\\_r\\_00255](https://doi.org/10.1162/AFAR_r_00255).

2. Karen E. Milbourne, Mary Nooter Roberts, and Allen F. Roberts. “Senses of Time,” 81.

3. Okwui Enwezor in conversation with Theo Eshetu, “Semantics of the Moving Image” in *Theo Eshetu: The Body Electric*. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 91.

4. Selene Wendt. “Theo Eshetu in Conversation with Selene Wendt.” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 35, no. 1 (2014): 110-111.



entangled symbolism because it can teach us how postcolonial artists approach the subjective complexity of reconstructing colonial histories. Actors in Africa and Europe have constructed divergent meanings around the monument to suit different political, religious, and historical narratives. How does Eshetu approach the Axum obelisk's historical journeys, and in what ways does he show the past as it bears upon the restitution events as experienced by Italians and Ethiopians? I examine the pre-existing archival footage, his newly shot video footage, and the TV sets upon which the images play to pursue the question of how Eshetu combines these materials as his medium in conceptualizing the obelisk's history. To do this, I analyze the formal elements of the work's construction: its sculptural form, visual texture, and composition, whose qualities of commanding mass and space the artist uses to create an installation of monumental proportions, and that remain as a disconcerting force constantly contradicting itself from within. I argue that *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* intermixes legend, colonial, and postcolonial representations to challenge assumptions behind any single historical narrative constructed at any stage of the monument's epic journey. I contend that the work argues for the Axum obelisk and the multiple meanings it stands for, as inseparable from the meaning superimposed by each viewer.

### **Eshetu Constructs a "Vision of the Restoration of the Obelisk"**

During the filming of *Blood Is Not Fresh Water* (1997), Eshetu traveled with his grandfather, Tekle-Tsadik, the subject of the documentary, to the Axum site from which Italian soldiers had taken the Axum obelisk in 1937. Tekle-Tsadik, a historian, diplomat, and early member of the civilian activist group, the Aksum Obelisk Return Committee since its inception in 1992, impressed upon Eshetu the gravity of the demands for returning the Axum obelisk. Italy was in violation of the Peace Treaty she signed in Paris on February 10, 1947,

with the Allied Powers under the auspices of the United Nations.<sup>5</sup> The Aksum Obelisk Return Committee based their demands upon this blatant flouting of international law. On that filming trip to Ethiopia, Eshetu also met Richard Pankhurst, a founding member of the Committee. Pankhurst recounted the group's activities, including a peaceful demonstration on May 28, 1992, during the interval of the Ethiopia-Nigeria football match at the Addis Ababa Stadium that inspired popular support and calls for the Axum obelisk's restitution.<sup>6</sup> Eshetu was enthralled by the experience of the stelae site and the stories his grandfather and Pankhurst recounted that he began to envision a work about the Axum obelisk.

In 2003, when the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) invited him and four other artists from Ethiopia, Italy, and Belgium "to visit Axum and express their vision of the restoration of the obelisk," Eshetu had already been thinking about making a work for seven years.<sup>7</sup> UNESCO's invitation was based on two important facts: Eshetu was the most celebrated video artist of Ethiopian origin living in Italy at the time, and the client, UNESCO, was, and still is, the most influential agency for promoting peace around the world. While in Axum, the five UNESCO-invited artists visited the site to the north side of the ancient city where rulers erected the Axum obelisk between

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5. Tullio Scovazzi. "Legal Aspects of the Axum Obelisk Case." *Museum International* 61, no. 1–2 (May 2009): 53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0033.2009.01658.x>.

6. Eshetu recounted his meeting with Richard Pankhurst during his Heath Lecture hosted by the Art History Department at Emory University. *The Art Newspaper* reported the demonstration at the Addis Ababa Stadium. See, "Ethiopian Football Fans Demand Return of Axum Obelisk Looted by Mussolini." September 30, 1992. Accessed June 24, 2021. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/archive/football-fans-demand-return-of-axum-obelisk-looted-by-mussolini>. See also Richard Pankhurst's serialization about the range of people involved and their roles in agitating for the Axum obelisk's return, "The Unfinished History of the Aksum Obelisk Return Struggle. 3." Accessed July 14, 2021. <http://ethiopiaonline.net/obelisk/tribune/27-06-97.html>.

7. The other artists are photographer Michael Tsegaye, his young student, Hiwot Gebre Geziabeher from Ethiopia; Paola Viesi, a photographer from Italy; and Tito Dupret, a photographer and media artist from Belgium. "UNESCO presents exhibition on reconstruction of Axum obelisk." Monday, April 20, 2009. Accessed May 13, 2021, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/502>.

the third and fourth centuries C.E. Other monumental funerary stelae and royal tombs still stand on the site attracting worshippers, archeologists, and tourists alike.<sup>8</sup>

A note on proper nouns is appropriate here. I refer to Theo Eshetu by the name in the last position, as is the practice in European countries where he lives and works. However, I refer to his Ethiopian grandfather Tekle-Tsadik Mekouria by the name in the first position, as is the practice in Ethiopia. I also use Ethiopia to refer to the country before the Italian invasion, even though it was known as Abyssinia. Moreover, the territory of Abyssinia includes portions of present-day northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. Additionally, the kingdom of Axum in the Tigray region, northern Ethiopia, is sometimes spelled as Aksum and referred to as the Aksumite empire. In this essay, I use the spelling Axum following the spelling in Eshetu's installation title.

Initially carved out of one solid block of granite in the fourth century CE, the Axum obelisk fell and broke into five fragments in the seventh century CE, long before fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia, then called Abyssinia, in 1935. Italy expropriated the broken fragments from Axum, northern Ethiopia, in 1937, and reassembled them in Rome the same year. In Rome, the Axum obelisk functioned as a symbol of conquest for the fascist regime. Moreover, it also served as revenge for Italy's humiliating defeat to Ethiopian forces at the 1896 Battle of Adwa when the European power attempted to colonize Abyssinia. However, for some Ethiopian diaspora, the Axum obelisk served as a link to the country and religion of their forebearers. Overtime, some Italians saw the obelisk as part of their heritage. After visiting Axum in 2001 as part of the process to fulfil an agreement signed between Italy and Ethiopia in March 1997, Vittorio Sgarbi, an official in the Italian Ministry of Culture denigrated Ethiopians as unconcerned about the obelisk. He argued that a "cultured

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8. Harold G. Marcus. *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xvii.

Ethiopian” for whom the Axum obelisk held “symbolic, political, or ethical significance” did not exist. Instead, the obelisk “by now has acquired a symbolic significance” for Italians.<sup>9</sup> Despite such maligning talk, the Ethiopian government remained steadfast in its diplomatic negotiations from Emperor Haile Selassie’s when he ousted Italy in 1941 to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi under whose regime the obelisk returned to Axum. In 2003, the Italian government took down the Axum obelisk in preparation for its repatriation to Ethiopia.<sup>10</sup> Under the supervision of preservation expert Giorgio Croci, Italian engineers separated the 167-ton obelisk into three blocks at two of the main joints that had been sealed with bronze joints and cement in 1937.<sup>11</sup> The sections were stored at the Ciampino B.G. Pastine International Airport in Rome before each fragment was transported individually to Axum in April 2005 aboard an Antonov An-124 aircraft due to the substantial weight. A combined team of Ethiopian and Italian engineers began re-erecting the obelisk in 2007. On September 4, 2008, the monument was unveiled to political, national, and religious jubilation (24:37; **Fig. 2**).

Eshetu’s conceptualization of the video installation came at a critical and highly contentious moment in Ethiopia and Italy’s transnational history when the rising tide of demands for the obelisk’s return to Ethiopia by groups such as the Aksum Obelisk Return

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9. See, Tom Hundley. “Ethiopia Again Demands Italy Return Obelisk.” *Chicago Tribune*. March 10, 2002. Accessed November 2019. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2002-03-10-0203100403-story.html>.

10. Pankhurst, a leading member of the Aksum Obelisk Return Committee in Ethiopia, uses the terms “return,” “repatriation,” and “restitution” interchangeably in this article. See Richard Pankhurst, “Ethiopia, the Aksum Obelisk, and the Return of Africa’s Cultural Heritage.” *African Affairs* 98, no. 391 (1999): 229–39.

However, in her recent First Word, Amanda Maples elucidates the subtle differences between repatriation and restitution. She writes, “Repatriation is the process by which objects are returned to a state or nation, while restitution constitutes a return to an individual or community, and reparations involve these processes but also implies a philosophical component of repair and healing, including the official acknowledgment, apology, and atonement for past wrongs.” See Amanda M. Maples. “African Restitution in a North American Context: A Debate, A Summary, and a Challenge.” *African Arts* 53, no. 4 (2020): 12.

11. Giorgio Croci, “From Italy to Ethiopia: The Dismantling, Transportation and Re-erection of the Axum Obelisk,” *Museum International*, 61, 1-2, (2009): 61-67.

Committee and the Ethiopian central government created significant tensions across Africa and Europe. A year after dismantling, the fragments were still in storage at the Ciampino Airport. On November 18, 2014, Ethiopia and Italy signed a memorandum of understanding reiterating obligations to return the obelisk from previous agreements.<sup>12</sup> The vision Eshetu shares in *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* draws on vacillating relations between Ethiopia and Italy that struggle to attain the peace that UNESCO fervently promotes. Eshetu does not promote a singular triumphant peace but instead deploys the fifteen screens to remind viewers of the long historical interconnectedness of Axum with other areas of the world.

In a 2017 conversation, Okwui Enwezor posed a question to Eshetu about the “rules of the game that the artist invents” for artmaking.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the interviewer asked about Eshetu’s guiding principles when constructing video installations. Eshetu, responded that he begins with the supposition that images are “simply representations, and that, as such, they are malleable.”<sup>14</sup> In his collage approach Eshetu cuts, pastes, and layers images. Noisy construction work in Axum flicker on screens next to scenes of serene worship inside an Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, images playing in multiplicity across fifteen screens allow us to analyze Eshetu’s composition strategies for combining the four storylines in *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*. Examining the process he once called his “cut-up approach” illuminates the range of meanings attached to the Axum obelisk across Africa and Europe.<sup>15</sup>

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12. Tullio Scovazzi. “Legal Aspects of the Axum Obelisk Case.” *Museum International* 61, no. 1–2 (May 2009): 55.

13. Okwui Enwezor in conversation with Theo Eshetu, “Semantics of the Moving Image” in *Theo Eshetu: The Body Electric*. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 89.

14. Okwui Enwezor in conversation with Theo Eshetu. “Semantics of the Moving Image,” 89.

15. Okwui Enwezor in conversation with Theo Eshetu, “Semantics of the Moving Image,” 89.

## The Purpose and Power of Fifteen Screens

Why does Eshetu use fifteen screens? Besides anchoring the subsequent flow of images in the painted foundational narrative across the opening sequences, the array of fifteen screens allows for contrapuntal interplay and exchange between multiple storylines and images (01:53; **Fig. 3**). Six years after creating the work, Eshetu discussed his conceptualization of *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* with art historian Selene Wendt. He said,

I was interested in a traditional Ethiopian narrative painting, which tells the story of the Queen of Sheba and the founding of the Axumite Empire, and I was interested in transforming this painting into a video installation by using its visual structure to bring the narrative into the present day through this transformation.<sup>16</sup>

In the genre of the “traditional narrative painting” of the Queen of Sheba legend in which Eshetu anchors the video installation, the surface is divided into forty-four squares, each portraying figures engaged in a milestone event of the legend at a specific place and time. The imperial and personal liaison between the Queen of Sheba, her son Menelik I, and King Solomon of Israel is retold with varying inflections in northern Ethiopia and the Middle East. Scribes writing the Ethiopian epic, the *Kebra Negast*, The Glory of Kings, in the fourteenth century drew from oral retellings of the legend to establish a divine lineage for Axum's rulers as inscribed in the Old Testament.<sup>17</sup> In the paintings, time and movement advance in a clockwise flow from the top-left section to the bottom-right. However, this genre is not timeless, as the term “traditional” might denote. Instead, artists in 1920s Addis Ababa developed the genre in their efforts to create a movable art to serve an increasing interest in

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16. See “Theo Eshetu in Conversation with Selene Wendt.” in Selene Wendt, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 35, no. 1 (2014): 109.

17. See Sara Marzagora, “Refashioning the Ethiopian Monarchy in the Twentieth Century: An Intellectual History.” *Global Intellectual History* (Abington, England ) July 29, 2020: 1-25. DOI: [10.1080/23801883.2020.1796237](https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2020.1796237)

Ethiopian art and themes from foreign travelers.<sup>18</sup> The artists, experienced church painters, drew from the aesthetic of church wall paintings and illuminated manuscripts to create the grided painting mode. This serial representation of the narrative grants Eshetu the possibility to tell the same story from multiple vantage points and “visual time.”

In his 2013 book, *Visual Time: The Image in History*, Keith Moxey describes a work of art as existing in at least two forms of “visual time” - the time in which the work was produced and that in which it is experienced. The viewer experiences the work in the present while also having a view of the past through the context of the work's production. Eshetu exercises artistic liberty in reducing the painted scenes to fifteen when refashioning the legend of the Queen of Sheba thereby unsettling the viewer's sense of time. The painting genre is from a recent past while video technology is even more recent both drawing on a textual and oral referent older than the fourteenth century. *The Return of the Axum Obelisk's* interplay of differing, and often conflicting visual representations of the Axum obelisk establish and blur the boundaries between time, as well as the visual, textual, and oral modes of representation.

Eshetu's use of multiple different representations of the stele modifies a characteristic practice of video art, a practice that dates to the 1970s. In her *Installation Art: A Critical History*, art historian Claire Bishop characterizes video art as a combination of video technology and installation art practice that dates to the 1970s, a decade before Eshetu started working with the medium.<sup>19</sup> Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, pioneers in using video as an artistic medium, combined live performance and TV monitors in their three-screen installation, *TV Cello* (1971), to produce multiple images and sounds. Eshetu diverges from

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18. Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis. *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*. New African Histories. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2019), 41-46.

19. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*. London: Tate, 2005.

this early work in that he choreographs and films the live enactment of the Queen of Sheba legend, weaving that footage with fragments of different stories to contextualize the Axum obelisk in the city of Axum, and leaving the installation free of human mediation. In his multiple-screen installation, Eshetu provides a layer of visual harmonies and dissonances that fluctuate throughout the video much as the soundtrack fluctuates beneath it. Eshetu's choreography of a theatrical enactment modifies 1970s uses of performance art, and applies techniques of multiplication, repetition, juxtaposition, and mirroring of images across fifteen screens to advance his argument that the past and future of the obelisk are inextricably interconnected.

Eshetu orchestrates images and source materials across multiple screens to trace the monument's passage through time and space in the exhibition setting. The pace of time slows from the painted foundational narrative of the Queen of Sheba through historical footage of seventeenth-century Gondar palaces. We see fleeting images of the monument's relatively brief relocation to Italy as a symbol of fascist conquest, finally decelerating into the contemporary period as the obelisk arrives back in Axum to its original site surrounded by curtains of scaffolding and spontaneous celebration. As the pace of time slows in the video installation, the pace of sonic and visual display intensifies at the night concert in Axum (25:20; **Fig. 4**). However, time in the video is distinct from the lived experience of viewing within the exhibition space of the anteroom. Eshetu manipulates the two layers of time to engage viewers in meditating on the triumphant climax in the relations between two countries that sparred over the Axum obelisk for decades.

By sequencing and juxtaposing fragments of footage from different sources, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* creates montages of related images while also inserting a sometimes playful, and at other times somber sense of unpredictability. Eshetu rearranges images and shots from the Axum obelisk's journeys. His simultaneous showing of sequences



of the unveiling in 1937 Rome and 2008 Axum makes the intervening seven decades appear on the screen for less than a minute. This moment is foreshadowed two minutes into the video when Eshetu abuts shots of the Rome unveiling with sequences of obelisks in Axum and other sites in northern Ethiopia shot in 1996 in the same fifteen-screen frame (02:27; **Fig. 5**). In excluding those years, the video de-legitimizes the importance Italy attached to the monument. Juxtaposition invites viewers to hold those two moments together in their minds and visually connect rituals of conquest and repatriation as they play out on multiple screens. The montage of fragmented footage calls attention to the video installation itself as an act of reconstructing meaning that contracts iconic moments in the obelisk's journey and perhaps creates the next chapter in its saga.

Eshetu also uses the fifteen screens to interweave multiple storylines and present different viewpoints at the same time. In doing so, he intensifies the potential for conflicting representations of the obelisk and the context of its display setting across time. For example, the tightly controlled tempo of colonial-era newsreel communicates a regimented orderliness. At the same time, the slower pacing of Eshetu's personally shot recent footage that rises to an exuberant climax of crowd celebrations suggests organic gatherings among revelers in Axum. Iterations of the central theme of the Axum obelisk range from the static to the dramatic, calling attention to the differences in interpretation of the central political and social relationships around the obelisk.

The video sequences alternate between a rich array of film images and mesmerizing patterns of wire fences and scaffolding which serve as a kind of interlude to create pauses in the obelisk narrative. Eshetu composes the video installation by isolating, doubling, or trebling clips of footage across multiple screens. He blacks out some screens, leaving a row of screens or a single screen that demands concentrated attention and reflection. For instance, on a single screen, priests carrying a tabot, a replica of the Ark of the Covenant, under a

shimmering gold covering protected by brightly colored umbrellas ritualize the painted scene of Menelik I returning from Israel with the Ark of the Covenant (16:22; **Fig. 6**). In one instance of doubling, the work simultaneously shows airborne planes and interiors of the aircraft in which the obelisk returns to Axum. The airborne plane is doubled on two screens and flipped on the other three screens in the central row to produce the illusion that each is flying in a different direction (03:00; **Fig. 7**). In the top and bottom rows, Eshetu doubles and mirrors the cabin and cockpit interior scenes. In the following sequence, Eshetu visually replaces the interior scenes with the plane arriving at Axum airport and sonically overlays the images with synchronous clips of a brass band playing on the tarmac.

To watch the doubling and trebling of shots intensifies the emotional charge of the installation. Shifting from multiple airborne and interior scenes that evoke sensations of anticipation and the landing that communicates a sense of achievement is to arrive at the intensified awareness of a long-awaited moment for Ethiopians. The repetition of identical scenes across the work marks points of significance in the installation. Additionally, the replication creates memorable motifs that ease the tension in an otherwise frenetic endeavor of repatriation.

Eshetu not only anchors the form of the installation within the painted format of the foundational story of the Queen of Sheba, but he also uses the fifteen-screen structure to multiply images, arrange them side by side, scatter them across the screens, or isolate them. Eshetu's flickering array of images shapes the obelisk as progressing from hegemonic possession by rulers in Axum and Rome to a shared ownership by masses in impromptu gatherings, encouraging reflection on the imperial and colonial systems of domination as possibly outmoded systems of government.

## Engaging the Euro Modernist Grid and Collage

Eshetu uses the grid and collage techniques often associated with European modernism, and apparent in art in Ethiopia. The grid format of the Queen of Sheba painting, commonly used in Ethiopian Orthodox church frescoes and manuscripts, parallels the modernist European adoption of the grid as a method for creating order through separation and repetition. Piet Mondrian's horizontal and vertical lines defining planes of color on canvas exemplify the Euro modernist grid. In his conversation with Enwezor, Eshetu invokes William Burroughs' formal experimentation with the "cut-up method" of mixing textures and printed text when making his *Questa è Vita* (1989).<sup>20</sup> When playing with the double meaning of the title: "this is life" or "avoid this," Eshetu explored ideas of belonging by interlacing hip-hop music and visual representations with images of the civil rights movement from the 1960s. The cut-up technique for Burroughs is visible in *The Prison Scribe* (1990). He combines unrelated images superimposing a photograph and cut-out magazine images of wide-eyed feline creatures over a heavily textured surface made by layering spray paint and ink. In Eshetu's installation, the multiple screen format and mix of older and more recent film footage provide abundant opportunities for collage compositions which he manipulates during shooting, editing, and placement to pull together different components and evoke three-dimensionality on the TV screens. In *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, a spotlight in the center screen appears out of place amidst fragments of obelisks filmed at night. Nevertheless, the night sky unifies all the moving images made visible by bright artificial light. Eshetu and Burroughs take fragments of unlikely and seemingly unrelated source materials to create art and challenge viewers' expectations of what constitutes art.

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20. Okwui Enwezor and Theo Eshetu, "Semantics of the Moving Image" in *Theo Eshetu: The Body Electric*, eds. Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD, Ariane Beyn, and Theo Eshetu (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 87.

New juxtapositions arise in Eshetu's work in a context art historian Salah Hassan referred to as "the reciprocal flow of influence that has existed between Africa and the West."<sup>21</sup> The historical context relates to an earlier period of artistic influence between Western Africa, Europe, the East coast of the United States in the 1920s and 1930s that art historian Joshua I. Cohen characterizes as "transcontinental and cross-cultural."<sup>22</sup> Eshetu's work distinctly shows the "reciprocal flow" of compositional ideas and the material sources he gathers from Ethiopia and Italy that meld into one another. Video art historian Wulf Herzogenrath notes that Eshetu uses "African motifs, which he combines with a European perspective on Africa, as well as his own contemporary perspective of Ethiopia and his grandfather's historiography of the country."<sup>23</sup> Herzogenrath's observation appears to encapsulate Eshetu's artistic process of using varied motifs, locales, and perspectives. However, the more intriguing idea he advances is the combining of images. Using repetition and rhythmic flow movements, Eshetu shows the inventive potential of video to bring together seemingly jarring components to appear simultaneously. He transforms his experience between Europe and Africa into a formal and intellectual probing of the crimes of colonialism together with the potential for redemption and postcolonial unity.

Eshetu draws on the European grid as a structuring principle to further intertwine content and form in his work. In an essay discussing uses of the grid by modernist artists in the 1960s, Rosalind Krauss suggests that the grid can function independently as an objective attribute of a work's material surface. At the same time, the grid invites or perhaps demands the viewer to exercise subjective visual perceptions to create their own narrative

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21. Salah Hassan. "The Modernist Experience in African Art." In Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor. *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*. (London: Cambridge, Mass.: Institute of International Visual Arts & MIT Press, 1999), 232.

22. Joshua I. Cohen. *The "Black Art" Renaissance: African Sculpture and Modernism Across Continents*. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020), 11.

23. Wulf Herzogenrath. "TV Eye," *Theo Eshetu: The Body Electric*. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 29.

interpretation from the rapid flow of contrasting images and sequences. She writes, “For the grid to operate as a structure, it must put into play both these aspects – the subjective and objective.”<sup>24</sup> Krauss illustrates her point with Agnes Martin’s painting *The Tree* (1964), in which thin line drawings on square canvases pulsate at close range but become subsumed by grid shapes when viewed from a distance. Similarly, with Eshetu’s work, the viewer has the choice to try to process the rapid play of images across fifteen individual screens or surrender to the visual force of the wall of sound and light to absorb the grid structure as a dynamic whole. In this manner, Eshetu has combined an artistic expression format from Ethiopia with a modernist aesthetic from Europe to narrate nested stories of expropriation, reunification, and identity that link two continents together in the fate of a single monument.

While optimizing the attribute of multiplicity that the fifteen screens permit, Eshetu tests the boundaries imposed by the grid outlines on the internal composition of the work. Church interior images of fervent white-clad cantors, debtera, singing liturgical chants, dancing, and playing the percussion sounds of long-handled sistrums play on separate screens but appear as one large orchestra when mirrored and repeated (19:55; **Fig. 8**). The debtera performing on fourteen screens contrasts sharply with one screen in the center playing outdoor footage of three Italian engineers riding camels into the gate of the reinstallation site. The camel riders allude to the three wise men traveling in search of the newborn Christ. Eshetu filmed and edited this Biblical allusion to connect contemporary church rituals and biblical themes, and push against the precise characteristics of multiplicity that the grid affords him. Through such replicating and mirroring, Eshetu focuses attention on the rhythm and dynamism of the combined images overshadowing the grid.

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24. Rosalind E. Krauss. “The Grid, the True Cross, the Abstract Structure.” *Studies in the History of Art* 48 (1995): 308.

### ***The Return of the Axum Obelisk as a Sculpture***

For more than thirty years beginning in the early 1980s, Eshetu lived and worked in Rome producing some of his most formidable sculptural works, such as his first large-scale installation, the twenty-screen *Till Death Us Do Part* (1982-1987). His installations have appeared in international biennials like Sharjah Biennial (2011), where curator Ugochukwu-Smith C. Nzewi exhibited *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*. Eshetu's move to Berlin, Germany, is more recent. He was attracted to the "highly stimulating town" during his artist residency in the 2014 Artist-in-Berlin Program of the German Academic Service (DAAD).<sup>25</sup> While in residency, Eshetu made the eighteen-screen installation *Kiss the Moment* (2015). It combines images of the canopy view from Eshetu's studio's window with shots of impromptu interactions overlaid with a Richard Wagner overture, discordant improvisations, and selections from Franz Schubert's lyrical *Winterreise*.<sup>26</sup> Eshetu boldly builds his video installations from a range of aural and visual sources while retaining a sensibility local to the place he represents. He saw the Axum obelisk in his childhood when his father worked across the road from the monument at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Returning to Rome as an adult, Eshetu followed the news about demands for the obelisk's return to Axum, not only in Ethiopia but also in Italy and elsewhere around the world. This prior experience served him well in making the video installation. Viewers watching *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, make connections for themselves among images of the painted Axum legend, colonial footage, or recent video of the postcolonial repatriation as conclusive depictions of the obelisk's trajectory.

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25. Selene Wendt. "Theo Eshetu in Conversation with Selene Wendt." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 35, no. 1 (2014): 112.

26. Okwui Enwezor in conversation with Theo Eshetu, "Semantics of the Moving Image" in *Theo Eshetu: The Body Electric*. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 90.

Although Eshetu disrupts the grid in the imagery, he also reinforces it in constructing the work as a three-dimensional installation. The iteration of *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* at the Bozar Center for Fine Arts in Brussels showcased the fifteen screens through a black wooden panel that obstructed the roundness of the work. In later editions of the installation, fifteen hefty TV monitors are mounted on a pedestal as a stand-alone sculptural work rather than hidden behind a gallery wall. I will discuss the work's sculptural qualities evident in its initial public showing at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, followed by its display at the American Academy in Rome.

In 2009, UNESCO hosted *Aksum Rediscovered: the reinstallation of the Obelisk*, an exhibition of works by the five artists invited to respond to the repatriation at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.<sup>27</sup> The moving images of *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* played on rust-colored Samsung flat-screen monitors installed against an open scaffolding structure constructed from what appear to be four-by-six lumber planks (**Fig. 9**). The timbers stacked below and behind the monitors raise the monitors into space while also structurally supporting the flat screens upright. This early presentation exhibited a three-dimensional sculpture, a quality previously obscured by the vertical wooden panel through which the screens emerged in the *GEO-graphics* exhibition at Bozar Center of Fine Arts in Brussels. In sculptural form, the work's three-dimensional presentation visibly undermined the unspoken authority of television screens to convey an objective and unbiased version of events.

Unlike the flat-screen TV sets used in the initial video installations in Paris and Brussels, Eshetu has since opted to use robust 28-inch Cathode-Ray Tube (CRT) monitors installed on a pedestal. Each monitor is substantial in weight and visual appearance. Together, the quantity and scale of fifteen monitors as one imposing wall of choreographed

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27. The exhibition traveled from the UNESCO headquarters in Paris to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) headquarters in Rome, where it ran from November 25 to December 4, 2009. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/502> and <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/567>

sound and images lend a monumental sculptural presence to the work. An installation view from the May 26 to July 19, 2015 *Nero su Bianco* exhibition at the American Academy in Rome shows the 80-inch tall, 100-inch-wide sculptural work standing approximately one foot in front of the wall and facing outwards.<sup>28</sup> Light emanates from moving images on the screens, while black TV sets contrast sharply against the white pedestal. The pedestal tethers the work to conventional museum display conventions often reserved for sculpture or ceramics.

I first encountered Eshetu's work in a flat two-dimensional form on a computer screen through Vimeo, the internet video-sharing site.<sup>29</sup> Travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that I have continued to engage with the work in virtual space rather than arrange to see it in sculptural form in the Tate collection storage.<sup>30</sup> The computer screen version recalls the flat painted depiction of the Queen of Sheba story, whose sequential narrative informs the installation's left-to-right and top-to-bottom flow and endows it with the three-by-five grid structure. As a two-dimensional work, its sculptural form vanishes, but Eshetu's dynamic composition of visual images and sound sustain the work as a powerful piece of artistic expression.

To experience the sculptural dimension and sense of scale, I went to see Eshetu's twenty-monitor installation, *Till Death Us Do Part* (1982-1987), at the Museum of Modern

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28. Lyle Ashton Harris, Robert Storr, and Peter Benson Miller, *Nero su Bianco*, Rome: NERO, 2015, 73, accessed July 26, 2021. <https://www.aarome.org/sites/default/files/files/press-releases/american-academy-rome-explores-black-identity-nero-su-bianco.pdf> The video installation was shown as a sculpture at daadgalerie, Berlin (2014) and in the Shanghai Biennale (2016/17) in an exhibition curated by Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi.

29. As of March 2021, the video ceased to exist on Vimeo, and one requires permission to view. However, the work is available as a single-channel version by signing up for an account on daata.art <https://daata.art/art/the-return-of-the-axum-obelisk>

30. Eshetu's installation is not on display, but one can arrange to view the work. The Tate acquired *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, (Ref. No. T14758) in 2016 with funds provided by the Africa Acquisitions Committee. See Tate. "'The Return of the Axum Obelisk', Theo Eshetu, 2009." Tate. Accessed May 13, 2021. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/eshetu-the-return-of-the-axum-obelisk-t14758>.



Art (MoMA) in New York on July 8, 2021. The work is monumental and mesmerizing at approximately 10 ft in height. It diagonally occupies a corner of an exhibition room, its flickering moving images overlaid with a varied soundscape filling the room. The nuanced interplay of flickering ethnographic film footage, alongside televised images that Eshetu shot by pointing a camera at a television, mixed with Eshetu's personally shot footage, overlaid with intertitles and a varied soundtrack, filled the exhibition space, providing me with an embodied experience. Within this setting, the installation exists as a three-dimensional sculpture displayed in an architectural space. In contrast, seeing *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* in a much-reduced form online and in isolation from other art diminishes the installation's visual and spatial impact yet never reduces it to a mere record of an event.

Eshetu centers architectural elements and multiple screens in *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, to create the illusion of expanded space while offering a meditation upon the monument as a work of architecture. In a 2017 conversation with Enwezor, Eshetu reflected, "My first installations were attempts to expand beyond the boxed confines of the TV set."<sup>31</sup> The fifteen screens show the installation's sculptural, architectural, and surface qualities as a freestanding work that occupies space. These characteristics enable the coexistence of diverse footage and expose the limitations of mere registration. The footage Eshetu shows in the video installation is not of a single, linear, and rare journey but one of several historical episodes that preceded the obelisk's return to Axum. Eshetu's marshaling of sculptural and architectural qualities undergirds the symbolic significance of the Axum obelisk in the process of assembling and combining footage along politically and culturally valuable lines of interest.

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31. Okwui Enwezor and Theo Eshetu, "Semantics of the Moving Image," in *Theo Eshetu: The Body Electric*, eds. Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD, Ariane Beyn, and Theo Eshetu (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 89.

### Reviews of *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*

What Eshetu achieves with this installation remains a subject of debate. With its multiple screens and diverse footage, reviewers have focused on discreet elements of the work. After seeing Eshetu's video installation that 2010 summer, art historian Jelle Bouwhuis published an exhibition review stating that the work "is basically a registration, which is unnecessarily presented on multiple screens for exhibition purposes."<sup>32</sup> By calling the installation a "registration," Bouwhuis suggests that *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* essentially provides a factual record of a historical event, which could be done just as well on a single screen. Opposing this view, curator Bonaventura Soh Bejeng Ndikung writes in the *Art Review Magazine* that Eshetu's video installation portrays the hostilities and eventual reconciliation between Italy and Ethiopia "in a nondocumentary manner."<sup>33</sup> Ndikung concludes that Eshetu's work represents an allegory for the evolution of Ethiopia's political entanglements with Italy. Art historian and curator Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi selected Eshetu's video installation for his exhibition in the Shanghai Biennale of 2016/17 as part of an examination of the political uses of history and "how we might recuperate, refute, frame or contextualize the resulting debris from historical narratives."<sup>34</sup> In a subsequent public debate, Nzewi argued that Eshetu's depiction of the Axum obelisk's return to Ethiopia functioned as a generative example of African art restitution.<sup>35</sup> Ndikung and Nzewi who both acknowledge

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32. Jelle Bouwhuis, "The Many Ambitions of GEO-graphics: A Map of Art Practices in Africa, Past and Present. Critical review of the show at Bozar, Brussels." *Nafas Art Magazine*, Universes in Universe. Berlin: Binder & Haupt. Aug 2010. Accessed July 22, 2021, <https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2010/geo-graphics>

33. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, "Art in Context Africa, Part II: Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung on Theo Eshetu," in *The Art Review*, last modified January 09, 2015, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://artreview.com/october-2014-feature-art-in-context-ii-bonaventure-bejeng-ndikung/>.

34. Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, Email communication with author, March 29, 2021. Discussing Nzewi's selection of Eshetu's work for the Sharjah Biennale 2016/17.

35. Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, panel presentation during "The Restitution Debate: African Art in a Global Society" conference at The Italian Academy, Columbia University, New York, on October 18, 2019, accessed August 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNarYrf2VQ>

Eshetu's construction of relationships between images and politics. I build upon their observations to highlight the array of screens upon which Eshetu constructs the conceptual and formal problem that the work poses in referencing the Queen of Sheba painting that establishes the visual form for the entire work.

Eshetu constructs a capacious video in a complex interaction among media that Zimbabwean scholar and poet Tsitsi Jaji has theorized as "sheen reading."<sup>36</sup> Writing about the coexistence of "magazines, films, and musical recordings," Jaji contends that "the set of interpretive practices these media demanded blurred textual, visual, and other forms of literacy."<sup>37</sup> Flipping the pages of glossy magazines and going to the cinema in apartheid South Africa on which Jaji focuses provided an imaginary horizon and "became a crucial way to manage the everyday humiliations of living under domination."<sup>38</sup> Across the glowing fifteen screens, Eshetu facilitates sheen reading. He "expand[s] beyond the boxed confines of the TV set" in depicting painting, sounds, film, and high-definition video.<sup>39</sup> Jaji's conceptualization of sheen reading suggests that one need not possess textual literacy to read a magazine. Instead, the layout of images and typefaces in a magazine offers opportunities for the textually literate to linger and read a text, while non-readers can linger over images. *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* does not presuppose viewers' knowledge of the textually recorded and painted legend of the Queen of Sheba. By combining painting, film, and music Eshetu he provides a point of departure in any media, and continuation, for audiences

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36. Tsitsi Jaji. *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 116.

37. Tsitsi Jaji. *Africa in Stereo*, 116.

38. Tsitsi Jaji. *Africa in Stereo*, 119.

39. Okwui Enwezor and Theo Eshetu, "Semantics of the Moving Image," in *Theo Eshetu: The Body Electric*, eds. Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD, Ariane Beyn, and Theo Eshetu (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 89.

familiar and those unacquainted with Ethiopia's art history and Italy's preservation of her colonial history.

### The "Traditional Narrative Painting" of the Queen of Sheba

Eshetu's starting point for constructing the installation work is the genre of narrative paintings portraying the story of the Queen of Sheba spanning religion and legend, history, and literature (00:21; **Fig. 10**). The story unfolds in consecutive images with textual inscriptions placed against the top margin of each tableau. The legend embodies hegemonic power while appealing to popular attention. The Queen of Sheba's narrative spans dates from around 970 B.C.E., when King Solomon ruled Israel, and ending around 350 C.E. when King Ezana's reign of Axum ended. The legend of the Queen of Sheba, known to many viewers in Axum, derives from a written record, the *Kebra Negast*, translated as The Glory of Kings. An Ethiopian manuscript of 122 chapters, the book was written by Ethiopian scribes in the Ge'ez language around 1314 to 1322.<sup>40</sup> The book relates the birth of Menelik I and the Solomonic dynasty, and it ends with a prophecy that Ethiopia would dominate Rome.<sup>41</sup> The fifteenth and final scene of the painting showing two monarchs and two obelisks indicates King Ezana's conversion to Christianity and the Christianization of Axum. When the painted image switches to a moving image, we see there is only one obelisk. The story of the video then becomes about how the two obelisks existing in the original painting are reunited in real life.

To bring the painting to life, Eshetu stages select scenes from the Queen of Sheba legend as theatrical productions that he directed and filmed himself.<sup>42</sup> He conveys the royal

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40. Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge, trans. *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek (Kebra Nagast)*. (In Parenthesis Publications Ethiopian Series, Cambridge, Ontario, 2000).

41. Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis. *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*. New African Histories. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2019), 305.

42. Theo Eshetu, Email communication, July 22, 2021.

status and dramatic emotions of characters in each scene through rich costumes, gestures, and facial expressions of actors that disrupt the stasis of the painted scenes to life while also functioning as a layer arranged in a collage of diverse footage. However, Eshetu dramatizes the final painted scene of the two obelisks with a location shot of the stelae in Axum. The obelisks appear powerful as they dominate the landscape when filmed from a low-angle camera position. By integrating contemporary live shots within the legend, Eshetu demonstrates how the political salience of the past is enshrined in the monuments that residents and visitors in Axum see regularly.

In Eshetu's conversation with Wendt (cited earlier), he says, "I was interested in a traditional Ethiopian narrative painting, which tells the story of the Queen of Sheba and the founding of the Axumite Empire."<sup>43</sup> This genre of painting is made and sold predominantly in the capital, Addis Ababa, and other urban centers across northern Ethiopia. Artistic production varies among the country's population of over one hundred million people. Anthropologist Leah Niederstadt and art historian Peri Klemm highlight a range of ethnic identities and creative production in Ethiopia. Niederstadt and Klemm critique the attribution of so-called traditional paintings as representative of all art made in Ethiopia.<sup>44</sup> Eshetu works with the legend of the Queen of Sheba in the full awareness of its ties to the place, Axum, and to the religion, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. He is also fully aware of how rulers such as Emperor Haile Selassie have put this foundational legend to political use as a unifying identity for the vast and varied country. In the footage Eshetu combines, the settings he selects are unequivocally situated in northern Ethiopia among the landscapes pertaining to the legend of the Queen of Sheba and the sites of Italian colonial invasion.

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43. See "Theo Eshetu in Conversation with Selene Wendt." In Selene Wendt, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 35, no. 1 (2014): 109.

44. Peri M. Klemm and Leah Niederstadt. "Beyond Wide-Eyed Angels: Contemporary Expressive Culture in Ethiopia." *African Arts* 42, no. 1 (2009): 9.

The term “traditional” bears connotations to timelessness that pervade art historical and marketplace approaches to African art.<sup>45</sup> The sequentially painted “traditional Ethiopian narrative painting” on canvas that Eshetu transforms into video is not timeless, but rather a recent aesthetic expression developed by innovative and highly trained church painters in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Art historian Elizabeth Biasio coined the designation, “contemporary painting in traditional style” to refer to such paintings as an alternative to “traditional painting.”<sup>46</sup> She argues that the genre developed as an urban art form after the city of Addis Ababa’s founding in 1886. Biasio continues that during Emperor Menelik II’s reign (r.1889 – 1913), foreign visitors increased, and diplomats settled in the city to serve the emperor’s modernizing agenda of improving infrastructure and expanding diplomatic relations with Europe. Ethiopia’s epic legend of the Queen of Sheba and the country’s victory over Italy in the Battle of Adwa of 1896 were the common themes that foreign patrons desired, representing for them “an idyllic, heroic past, untouched by Western civilization.”<sup>47</sup> By representing the painted legend in video, Eshetu is critiquing the foreign fantasy of an idyllic, untouched Ethiopian past, urging viewers to ponder the implications of “traditional” and “modern” as categories in discussing the arts of Africa.

Furthermore, scholars such as Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Constantine Petridis discuss scholarly and connoisseur use of the term *Senufo* as a reference to so-called traditional African arts, showing the social and artistic networks the category omits from historical records.<sup>48</sup> In a 1984 article, art historian Sidney Kasfir cautions against attributions

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45. See Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 211-262.

46. Elisabeth Biasio. “Contemporary Ethiopian Painting in Traditional Style: From Church-Based to Tourist Art.” *African Arts* 42, no. 1 (2009): 15.

47. Elisabeth Biasio. “Contemporary Ethiopian Painting in Traditional Style: From Church-Based to Tourist Art.” *African Arts* 42, no. 1 (2009): 16.

48. See Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Constantine Petridis. “*Mapping Senufo*: Reframing Questions, Reevaluating Sources, and Reimagining a Digital Monograph.” In *History in Africa* (2021): 3-4.

of the “one tribe, one style” conceptual model that flatten distinct variations in art production under the assumption that iconographic elements in the work of a given group remain fixed and untouched by outside influences for centuries. More recently, in 2020, art historians Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Yaëlle Biro have argued for the recognition of dynamism even within frames considered “traditional” in order to preserve individual makers within historical contexts.<sup>49</sup> Eshetu transforms the “traditional” painting in layers that amplify one another: a performance that brings the flatly rendered painting to life, archival footage that opens a window to how Italians removed the Axum obelisk, and recently shot footage that captures the restitution process. In doing so Eshetu troubles the categories of traditional and modern while highlighting the historical connections among art forms.

In *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*, an important book charting the history of Ethiopian modern art, art historian Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis advances the view that tradition is not a fixed timeless truth. Instead, tradition encompasses a multiplicity of events and serves as a method for examining how the past influences the historical present in the ways it “is selected, affirmed, modified, abandoned, or reproduced.”<sup>50</sup> Giorgis notes that Ethiopia’s federalist government melded the Orthodox Christian identity with modern political forms during Haile Selassie’s reign up to 1974 and again during Meles Zenawi’s rule from 1991 by locating political legitimacy in the foundational narrative of the Queen of Sheba. She argues that some of the aesthetic conceptualization of modernism in Ethiopia also arises from the Orthodox church structures that artists selectively use in shaping modernism with intellectual and spatial connotations. Giorgis establishes a time and place when multi-scene paintings

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49. See Sidney Littlefield Kasfir. “One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art.” *History in Africa* 11 (1984): 163–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3171633>. See also Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Yaëlle Biro. “Beyond Single Stories: Addressing Dynamism, Specificity, and Agency in Arts of Africa.” *African Arts* 52, no. 4 (October 2019): 1–6. [https://doi.org/10.1162/afar\\_a\\_00495](https://doi.org/10.1162/afar_a_00495).

50. Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis. *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*. New African Histories. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2019), 20.

developed: 1920s Arada neighborhood in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.<sup>51</sup> According to Giorgis, artists, such as Belachew Yimer (1895-1957), who trained with church painters in Gondar, lived and worked among the sophisticated intellectual milieu in Arada. This milieu included poets, writers, and musicians. Belachew, continues Giorgis, was well known for his paintings of the Queen of Sheba legend and the Battle of Adwa, themes illustrating a national consciousness emerging after Ethiopia defeated Italy in the Battle of Adwa. Belachew and his contemporaries, painters, and writers in Arada, mark the transition to modernist art in Ethiopia.

Historian Neal Sobania and art historian Raymond Silverman focus on a different history attributing the “traditional” genre to Emperor Menelik II’s gifting of paintings to important guests and diplomats in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>52</sup> For Sobania and Silverman, the most significant moment in establishing the “traditional Ethiopian painting” genre came in the 1960s, when Addis Ababa headquartered the Organization of African Unity (OAU) founded in 1963, as well as the Ethiopian Historic Route set by the Ethiopian Airlines and the Ethiopian Tourist Organization. Diplomats to the OAU from across Africa and tourists from further afield constituted new clientele for the painting genre. Sobania and Silverman also refer to the loyal local patronage of Ethiopian Orthodox Church congregants and clergy who continued to buy paintings for their homes, as gifts, or as church ornaments. Sobania and Silverman conclude that both designations of “contemporary” and “traditional” define the painting genre.

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51. Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis. *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*. New African Histories. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2019), 36-46.

52. Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman. “Icons of Devotion/Icons of Trade: Creativity and Entrepreneurship in Contemporary ‘Traditional’ Ethiopian Painting.” *African Arts* 42, no. 1 (2009): 28.



### **Eshetu's Personal Film and Italian Archival Footage**

Eshetu introduces personal footage from his documentary film *Blood is Not Fresh Water* (1997) by cutting from the vibrantly painted legend to historical black-and-white footage whose gray tones suggest the past. Uneven shots captured from a handheld camera in a moving vehicle invite viewers close to architectural ruins in the seventeenth-century city of Gondar. Melancholic music plays as Eshetu interjects long shots of roughhewn stelae in open fields on several screens, perhaps reflecting historical relics from any number of regions in northern Ethiopia.

A brief yet key sequence in the video suggests patient observation: Eshetu's paternal grandfather, the historian Tekle-Tsadik Mekouria strolls in the town of Adwa. Tekle-Tsadik, hands clasped behind his torso, stands by a roadside that snakes into the distance. He chats with two young men who stand across the road in a calm contrapposto. On another screen, Tekle-Tsadik waits outside a building among a group of young men and boys. This wandering figure resembles one whom Charles Baudelaire characterizes as the flaneur, an ardent urban observer, in his 1863 essay, "The Painter of Modern Life." A haunting soundscape of flutes and string instruments plays as vehicles pass in a thick fog, bulls lock horns, and birds peck and fly away interspersed between pedestrians and shop signage in the town of Adwa. In *The Return of the Axum obelisk*, Tekle-Tsadik thus lives and observes his surroundings while writing Ethiopia's history and advocating for the return of the Axum obelisk from Italy.

In black-and-white grainy archival footage, Eshetu introduces a third footage source in *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*: The Istituto Luce at Cinecittà in Rome, where didactic fascist footage is stored.<sup>53</sup> The images show looting and transportation of the obelisk from

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53. Theo Eshetu, Email communication, April 29, 2021.

Axum to Rome in 1937.<sup>54</sup> Viewers of the video installation see a group of men in dark overcoats offloading the obelisk from a ship onto truck beds with the aid of a construction crane. Loaded trucks advance slowly on streets in Italy, delivering a spectacle of triumph for Italians. At an inauguration event in the Piazza di Porta Capena, Rome, Benito Mussolini, dressed in a military uniform, is identifiable by his large physique as well as his powerful jawline and jutting chin stands beside the upright obelisk. Uniformed soldiers flank Mussolini, arms fully extended with palms facing forward in the fascist salute. Eshetu selects footage of that gesture, one imbued with symbolism of fascist conquest, to illustrate the dramatic power of the obelisk in its new location.

Fragments of archival films that Eshetu recuperates from concerted search in archives constitute a considerable part of his video installations. In “An Archival Impulse,” Hal Foster writes that artists using archival sources “seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present.”<sup>55</sup> Foster continues that those artists working with materials found in archives “elaborate on the found image, object, and text, and favor the installation format as they do so.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, on Eshetu’s screens, the footage he gathers from the Istituto Luce archive forms part of the visual texture on the fifteen screens adroitly combined with 1997 footage to blur the passage of time and make it hard for viewers to distinguish the colonial images from his personally-shot footage.

In his essay, “The Artist as Historian,” Mark Godfrey surveys several contemporary artists working in film, photography, and video who have made archival research and historical representation a central task of their practice, as Eshetu does. Godfrey claims that

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54. For the full extent of the looting in Ethiopia, see Richard Pankhurst, “Ethiopia and The Loot of the Italian Invasion: 1935-1936.” *Présence Africaine*, no. 72 (1969): 85-95. While for the technical specifics of the removal and return, see Giorgio Croci, “From Italy to Ethiopia: The Dismantling, Transportation, and Re-erection of the Axum Obelisk.” *Museum International* 61, no. 1-2 (2009): 61-67.

55. Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (2004): 4.

56. Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 4.

in some ways, artists' aesthetic work corresponds to the professional processes of historians, which include research and conceiving a language to communicate findings. In this essay, Godfrey relies on the theory of history advanced by Walter Benjamin and Hayden White. Both thinkers share a distrust for histories that lay claim to objectivity and truth. Instead, they committed themselves to revealing the relationship between historical narratives and ideology. Godfrey remarks that artists also recognize "the fallibility of the archive and the inscrutability of the discovered images."<sup>57</sup> To counter the official story about the Axum obelisk recorded from the fascist perspective, Eshetu gathers a diverse set of images that he deploys across a wall of fifteen videos, a sculptural mode he has engaged since the early 1980s. As a temporal art, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* deploys rhythm and sound to illuminate the repatriation of the obelisk through reappraising the painted fable and filmed colonial pasts. Eshetu's video installation is an embodiment of a transnationality that seeks to erase hierarchies in narratives and artistic media.

### **High-Definition Video of the Obelisk's Return**

Eshetu filmed the fourth and most extensive temporal moment in *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* between 2003 and 2008, the period that corresponds to the repatriation of the Axum obelisk to present-day Ethiopia. Eshetu devotes the most screen time to this period, suggesting its importance for the "transformation" of the Queen of Sheba painting into the "present day" video medium. However, one sees none of the painted scenes. Instead, Eshetu gives particular attention to fragments of the obelisk and, more than that, to the shiny steel scaffolding that conceals the monument. Frequently, all fifteen screens show images of crisscrossing scaffolding tubes and swivel clamps. The segments form an opulent pattern that

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57. Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," *October* 120 (April 2007): 144.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40368473>

arrests the eye in its kaleidoscopic exquisiteness (07:04; **Fig. 11**). Because the obelisk appears in the images almost always from behind webs of steel bars, the scaffolding seems to function as a meditation on the evolving web of constructed meanings attached to the obelisk. This scaffolding, a maze from which the obelisk seems unable to escape, suggests the complex and contradictory situation suffused in angst and longing in which Italy and Ethiopia find themselves during the years of the Axum obelisk's repatriation.

However, when Eshetu offers some depth of field, we see crowds watching the re-installation process day and night in Axum. Congregants gather in prayer around a tabot, repeating a ritual that commemorates Menelik I's return from Israel. Eshetu charges the crowds at the night concert celebrating the Axum obelisk's reinstallation with a vivacious power directing more of the viewers' attention toward the celebrating crowds than toward the obelisk's removal. Eshetu weaves this footage from the 2000s with images of the painting as well as film footage to create contrasts of movement and color while at the same time highlighting the continuity of the legend in religious and secular rituals.

Another common motif across the video collage appears in the groups of people going about their everyday lives or gathering in urban and rural areas. In 1937 Rome, crowds watch the obelisk pass by on truck beds and gather at its unveiling, while in 1996 Adwa, people in busy streets walk to their various destinations. In 2005 Axum, a brass band, a few horn players, and numerous onlookers dressed in white await the obelisk's return. Eshetu demonstrates his ideological stance regarding the transition of power from rulers to citizens by portraying images of ecstatic gatherings. During the months of the re-installation process in Axum, children play on the grass area around the obelisk. In their curiosity, they perform somersaults for the camera and bring their faces so close to the lens in seemingly spontaneous closeup shots and interaction with Eshetu who is behind the camera. Crowds also gather to celebrate with singing, hugging, and dancing together at the obelisk's unveiling. Among the

cheering crowd, we see a young man wearing a white-on-blue ITALIA baseball cap. Eshetu combines scenes of everyday life images to highlight the Axum obelisk's presence among quotidian activities, as well as at officially mandated gatherings. His portrayal of lived experiences and personal meaning for Italians is minimal, making the work even more ideological. Eshetu reminds viewers that political and lived experiences both draw meaning from the monument, but not all of them are considered equal in this work.

Eshetu's approach is also intensely global, leading to my interpretation of the work as questioning national narratives of heroism. In the Queen of Sheba legend, Axum forges blood and religious relationships with Israel to create the Solomonic dynasty that lasted until 1974, when a military coup ousted Emperor Haile Selassie. Equally, in the "present day" transformation of the legend, Eshetu underlines Italy and Ethiopia's entangled history through events of conquest and victory in each country which climax when engineers in Axum install the top part of the obelisk. Italians and Ethiopian hug and dance with the camera focusing on the lady in red in her unrestrained joy. The history that *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* narrates is neither Eurocentric nor Afrocentric; rather, the imagery interweaving geography, ideas, and rituals implies some hope for unity and good relations between Italy and Ethiopia.

## Conclusion

At the time of the exhibition of Eshetu's video installation, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* at the Bozar Center for Fine Arts in 2010, the Belgian art historian Bouwhuis described the work in a brief dismissive review as a 'registration' of the monument's repatriation, which I understand to mean a factual recording of the event. Art historians Ndikung and Nzewi both show more significant appreciation of the work's artistic merits, such as its exemplary engagement with history and politics and its visual treatment of the

significance of repatriating African art. In this analysis, I have examined each layer of meaning that gives the object its unmistakable resonance even if the object itself rarely comes into view. The real point Eshetu makes is not the repatriation of the Axum obelisk as a physical monument. Instead, Eshetu portrays what the monument represents today, what it has represented in the past, and how different actors have constructed different meanings around the monument for different reasons. The act of construction inspired by the fragments of the monument itself is the real focus of the work, much as the scaffolding around the monument receives more attention than the monument itself. We see the monument anchoring the foundational story of the Solomonic dynasty and embedded in the enthusiastic embrace of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity which continues today. We see how the monument carries personal resonance for Eshetu in footage of his reunion with his paternal grandfather, who himself was a window on Ethiopia's rich history. The trajectory of the monument captures the political resonance of the original expropriation as a symbol of conquest and revenge and later as a catalyst for the ecstatic celebration between Ethiopians and Italians, exemplifying wrongs righted as Italy apologizes by returning and reinstalling the Axum obelisk. Eshetu shows the newly established harmony and artistic resonance between Ethiopia and Europe through the grid, a prevalent artistic method in Euro-modernist art which Eshetu combines with the Ethiopian format for painted narratives through the fifteen-screen format.

As the video ends, and fragments of the obelisk contrast sharply with the night sky, Eshetu juxtaposes the monument surrounded by a silvery web of scaffolding with the King Ezana stele. Eshetu may not have returned the Queen of Sheba directly on the screens, but he highlights the significance of that last scene in the painting: the two stelae stand side by side again in Axum as they appeared in the last painting in the opening sequence. In this sense, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk* installation ends with a symbolic return in a historical cycle

of mythological, religious, and political significance thereby elevating and affirming the continued legacy of the Queen of Sheba story. Eshetu ends the video with one scene: a bright lamp light surrounded by darkness. Moths flicker in its light. The obelisk, the video installation, and light as the primary medium of video art itself, are enmeshed in a complex web of artistic creation and meaning.

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Source: Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/theoeshetu/axum>. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image created by the author in 2021.



Figure 2. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009. A checkerboard pattern showing the unveiling of the Axum obelisk on September 4, 2008, juxtaposed with the unveiling of the same obelisk in Rome on October 31, 1937.

Source: Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/theoeshetu/axum>. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image created by the author in 2021.



Figure 3. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009. Multiple images of the Fasilides Castle in Gondar captured from different camera angles play across the fifteen screens.  
Source: Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/theoeshetu/axum>. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image created by the author in 2021.

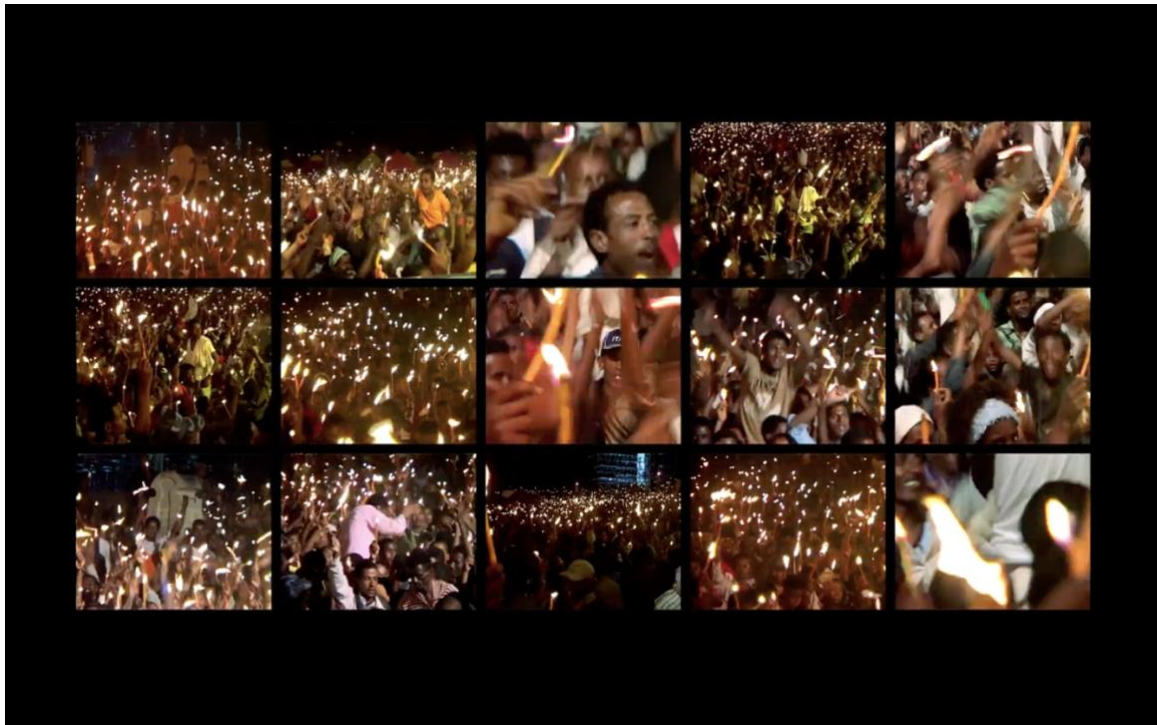


Figure 4. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009. Crowds dancing at the quickened tempo in the video installation during the night concert celebrating the Axum obelisk's reinstallation in Axum.

Source: Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/theoeshetu/axum>. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image created by the author in 2021.





Figure 5. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009. Images of landscapes dotted with freeform obelisks that Eshetu shot in 1996 play on screens adjacent to fragments of a rectangular carved obelisks in the top row of screens, and the unveiling of the Axum obelisk in Rome in 1937 in the middle row.

Source: Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/theoeshetu/axum>. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image created by the author in 2021.

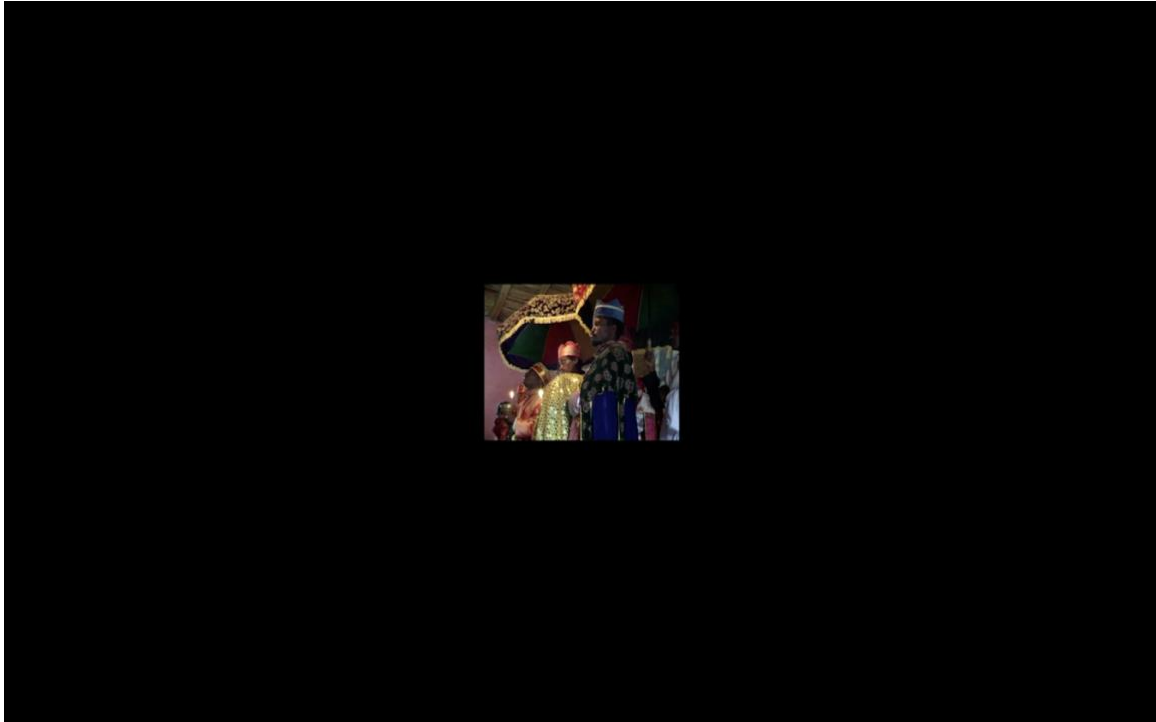


Figure 6. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009. Images playing on a single screen in the middle of the installation while others are blacked out offers a moment of pause and contemplation.

Source: Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/theoeshetu/axum>. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image created by the author in 2021.





Figure 7. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009. Eshetu creates an illusion of multiple airborne planes by using doubling techniques.

Source: Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/theoeshetu/axum>. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image created by the author in 2021.

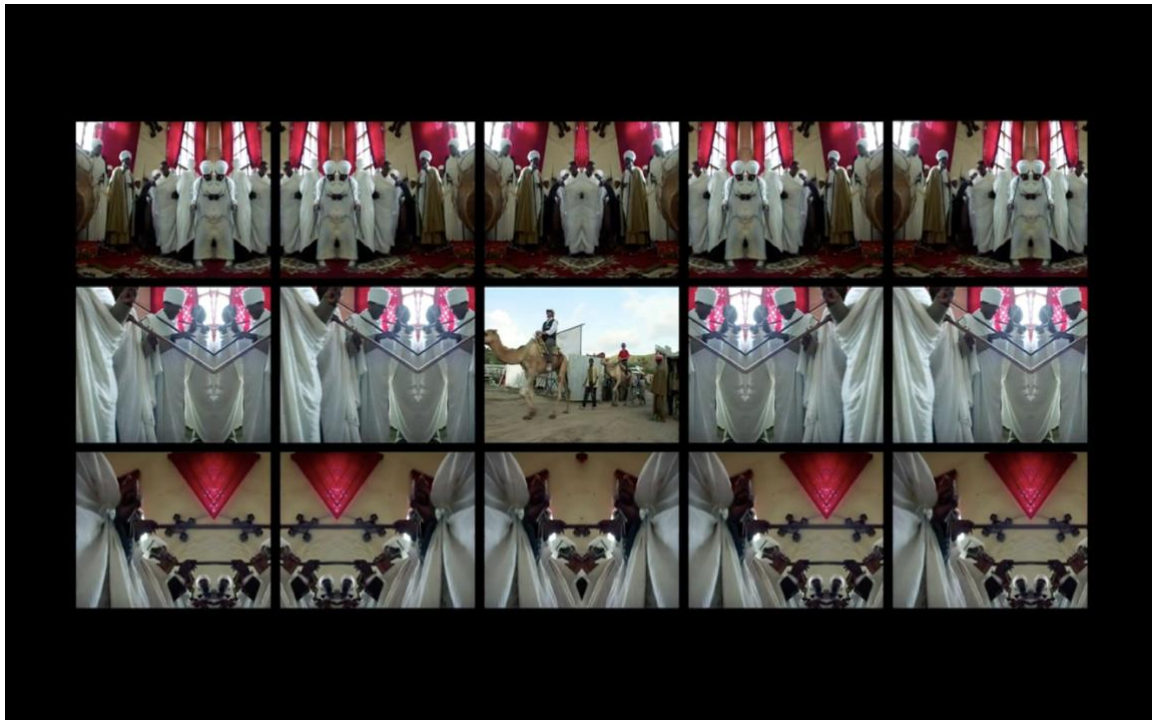


Figure 8. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009. Through mirroring and repetition, Eshetu assembles a group of debtera into a large orchestra.

Source: Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/theoeshetu/axum>. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image created by the author in 2021.



Figure 9. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009. Eshetu's installation on display at the far end of the room during the opening event on November 25, 2009, at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris.

Source: Axum Obelisk Documentary at UNESCO. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image captured by the author in 2021.

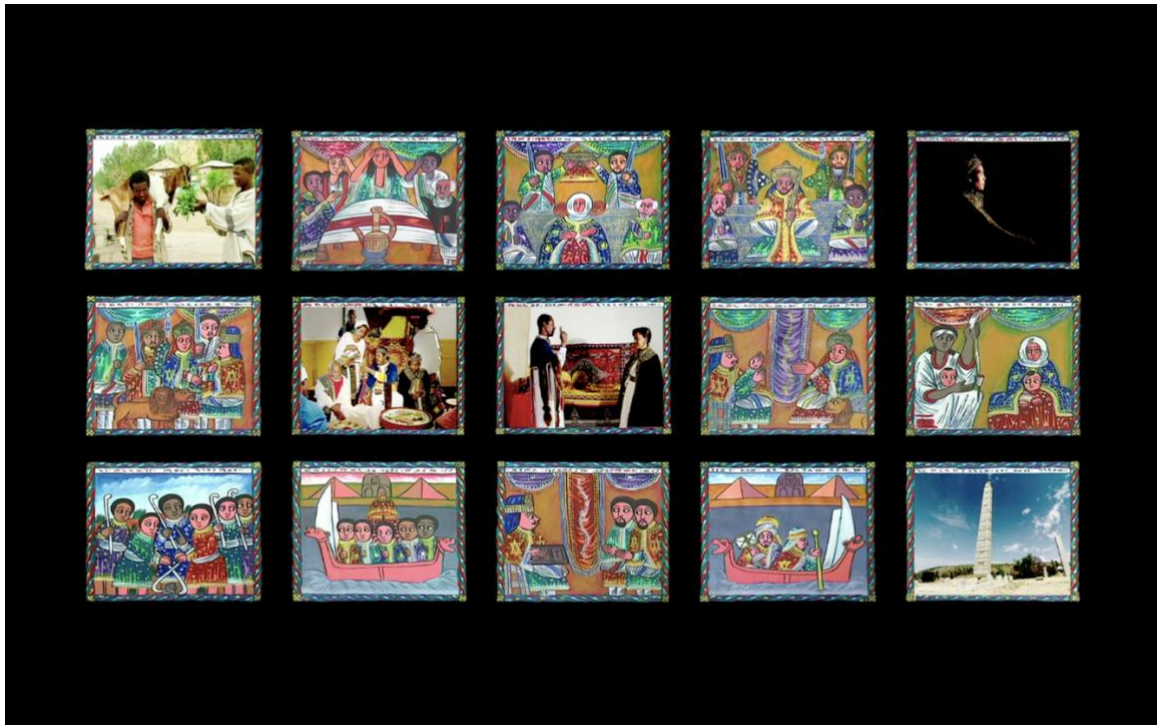


Figure 10. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009. Painting, performance, and video footage sit side by side as a narrative of the legend of the Queen of Sheba playing on the fifteen screens. Eshetu created this painting based on the genre of narrative paintings practiced by some artists in Ethiopia. Source: Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/theoeshetu/axum>. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image created by the author in 2021.

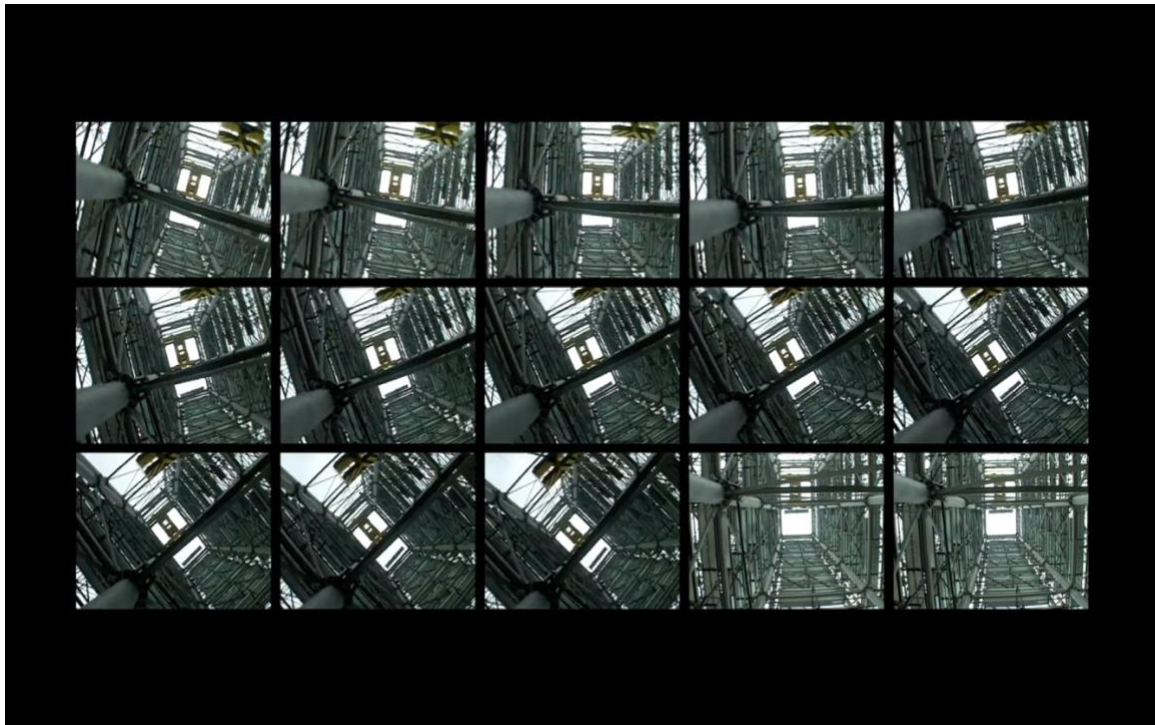


Figure 11. Theo Eshetu, *The Return of the Axum Obelisk*, 2009. Crisscrossing steel tubes and segments of the scaffolding form arresting patterns.  
Source: Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/theoeshetu/axum>. Courtesy of Theo Eshetu. Screenshot image created by the author in 2021.