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Ethiopian Crosses

Arnold Lehman: Ethiopia was one of the first nations in the world to adopt Christianity as a state religion. The oldest crosses in this display case—some are at least six hundred years old—are made of iron, brass, and wood. As a result of trade with the West, many of the later crosses are made of silver. The smallest are pendant crosses, worn as a show of Christian faith in the wake of Muslim invasion. The slightly larger crosses with elongated vertical shafts are hand crosses, carried or worn around the neck by priests.

The large crosses with hollow shafts are processional crosses. They would have been mounted on wooden poles and carried by priests during religious ceremonies.

Let's focus on the exquisite silver-plated processional cross to the upper right. Imagine the dramatic effect of sunlight or candles sparkling through all of its voids. It is surrounded by elaborately interwoven designs that themselves incorporate additional crosses. This intricacy is common in Ethiopian art. The horizontal oval form at the top of the shaft is known as the "lower arms" of the cross. This now standardized form may derive from rings through which a ceremonial cloth was once suspended.

The silver used to make this piece was imported to Ethiopia by European traders in the form of silver coins called Maria Theresa thalers. Originally minted in 1782 and named after the Austrian empress, these coins served as the main trade currency throughout much of Africa and the Middle East for over two hundred years.

For more information about these objects, be sure to visit www.brooklynmuseum.org