



ART IN HEAVEN

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• ISAAC MEGALLI • EDWARD REFILA

EVERY GIFTED ARTISAN
IN WHOM THE LORD
HAS PUT WISDOM AND
UNDERSTANDING, TO
KNOW HOW TO DO ALL
MANNER OF WORK FOR
THE SERVICE OF THE
SANCTUARY, SHALL
DO ACCORDING TO ALL
THAT THE LORD HAS
COMMANDED.

EXODUS 36:1



AS ITS NAME IMPLIES, ART IN HEAVEN IS A CHRIST-CENTERED ART GALLERY. THE IDEA WAS TO GIVE A FORUM FOR ARTISTS TO GLORIFY GOD WITH THEIR GOD-GIVEN TALENT.

ART IN HEAVEN BEGAN IN 2009, WHEN A GROUP OF SERVANTS FROM ST. GEORGE AND ST. SHENOUDA COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH IN JERSEY CITY, NEW JERSEY WANTED TO ORGANIZE AN ART GALLERY TO DISPLAY THE TALENT OF ARTISTS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY. BOTH THE ARTISTS AND COMMUNITY EMBRACED THE IDEA AND THE EVENT HAS TAKEN A LIFE OF ITS OWN SINCE THEN.

EACH YEAR THE LIST OF ARTISTS HAS GROWN AND SO HAS THE NUMBER OF ATTENDEES. THIS YEAR, ARTISTS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD ARE PARTICIPATING. PIECES HAVE COME FROM NEW JERSEY, NEW YORK, VIRGINIA, TEXAS, CALIFORNIA, CANADA, ENGLAND AND EGYPT.

WE PRAY THAT THIS EVENT ALLOWS US TO SHARE WITH ONE ANOTHER IN CHRISTIAN LOVE AND UNITY, AS WE GLORIFY GOD.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE EVENT AND OUR ARTISTS PLEASE VISIT WWW.AIHGALLERY.ORG



Coptic art, the distinctive Christian art of Egypt, includes works of a diverse character because there was no separation between “art” and “craft” in the early Christian era; the capital of a column or an illustrated manuscript were as much forms of creative expression as paintings and sculpture. From burial grounds, there are objects like funerary stelae, or tombstones, cartonnage sarcophagi and fragments of woven textiles from clothing in which the deceased were laid to rest. Monastic centers, churches and shrines provide stone and wood-carvings, metalwork, wall and panel-paintings, as well as a wealth of utilitarian objects like ivory combs, wooden seals for impressing sacred bread, pottery and glassware.

EARLY SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

Coptic art – like any other form of artistic expression – was influenced by two main sources: the classical (Hellenic) world and the ancient Egyptian world. Objects made in Greek style, or under the direct influence of classical art, include stone carvings of winged victories or cupids bearing garlands, the vine branches of Bacchus, Aphrodite, Leda, and Hercules. Monuments of mixed Greek-Egyptian character were relief slabs that were probably used as wall decorations in churches; they frequently feature pilasters surmounted by stylized Corinthian capitals, sphinxes or fish – the earliest symbol of Christianity. Ancient Egyptian influence is best seen in funerary stelae, which have survived in large number throughout Egypt. They are either square or rectangular in shape and are sometimes curved at the top, or have a triangular pediment. Many have a tiny square cavity, which penetrated to the back of the stele. Such cavities were common in ancient Egyptian cemeteries (incense was burned in them in the belief that the spirit of the dead would enjoy its perfume). In the early Christian era, stelae came from pagan and Christian burial grounds and were usually inscribed with the name of the deceased, details of his/her life or titles, and the day of his/her death, written in the Greek language or the Coptic language (the last stage of the Egyptian language). The carvings on them included Greek-Egyptian motifs: a figure, often robed like an aristocratic Greek reclining on a bed and holding a drinking vessel or grapes, for example, might be flanked by the jackal-god Anubis and the hawk-headed Horus.

The persistence of ancient Egyptian symbolism in early Christian art is pretty much accepted among biblical historians. It is both easy and natural to recognize evidence of that influence in early Christian art. For example, it is accepted that the ansate cross, the “ankh” or Hieroglyphic sign for the word “life”, was intentionally adopted by early Christians.

In fact, many relief slabs show both the “ankh” and the Christian “cross” together, frequently flanked by the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the Alpha (Α) and the Omega (Ω), in an early form of what was to



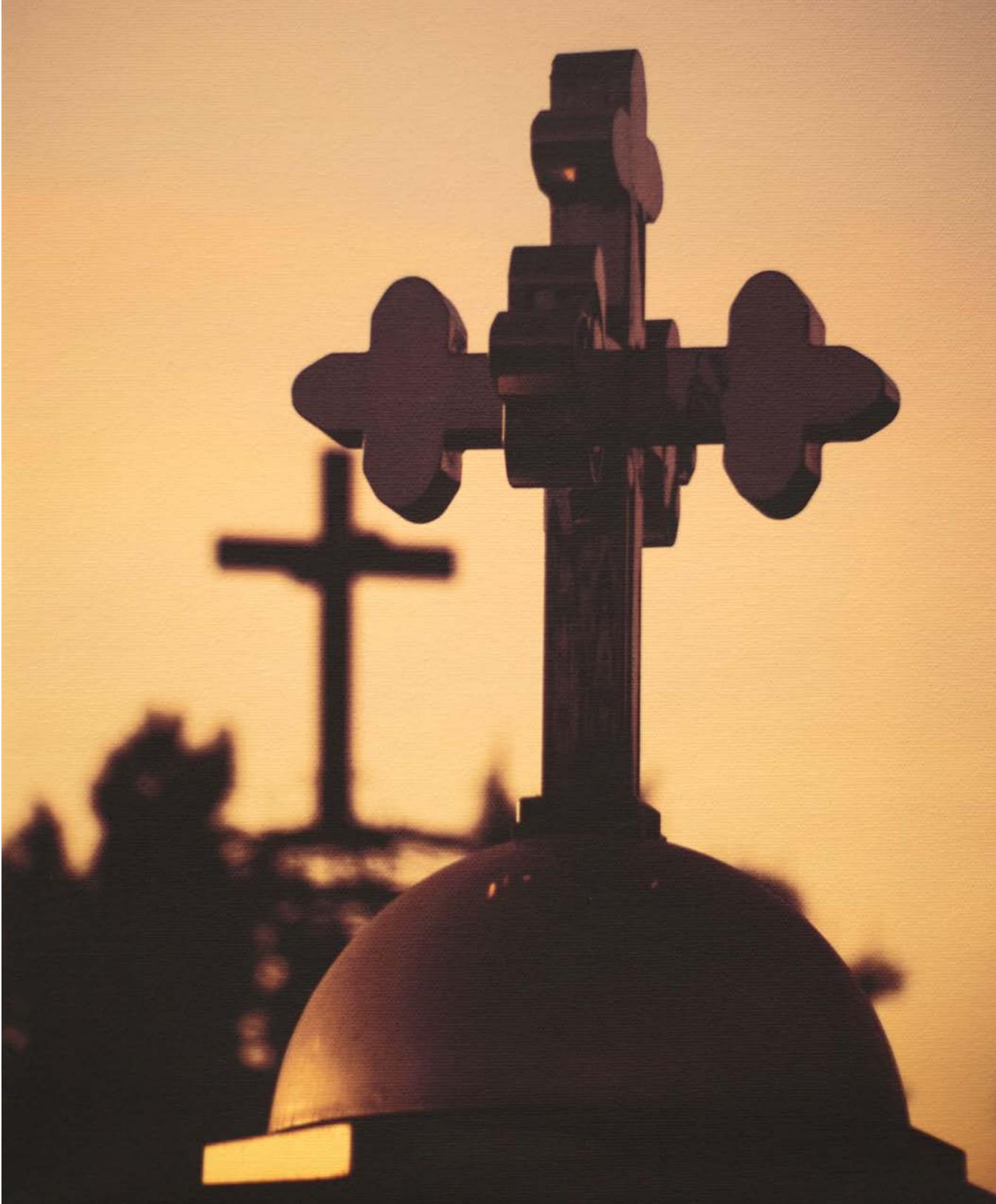
become the monogram of Jesus Christ the Lord for, in Revelation 1:8, He said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,” says the Lord, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

Other examples of Egyptian symbolism in early Christian art are the Holy Spirit in the early church shown descending in the form of a winged bird, like the soul of the deceased, the “ba”, in ancient Egypt; the archangel Michael weighing souls in the balance, which is akin to the ancient Egyptian god of wisdom, Thoth, weighing the heart of the deceased in the scales of justice; the portrayal of Christ triumphant over noxious beasts is evidently derived from that of Horus upon the crocodiles, as shown on the famous Metternich stele. And Saint George and the dragon also call to mind the god Horus depicted spearing Set, often portrayed as an evil serpent.

In addition to the classical, Egyptian and Greek–Egyptian heritages in Coptic art, there are also Persian, Byzantine and Syrian influences. Egyptian master weavers and artists were attracted to Persia in the third century with the rise of the Sassanian kingdom before the founding of Constantinople. When they returned to Egypt, a new Persian repertory of themes like opposing horsemen or two facing peacocks drinking out of the same vessel was introduced to Egypt. Borrowing from one culture to another is a natural process of cultural growth. In the fourth century, when Christianity made a triumphal entry into the Roman world the art forms of ascendant Byzantium spread to Egypt, and continued even after the Coptic Church broke away from the Eastern Roman Church because Egypt remained, politically, a part of the Roman Empire. The Copts, however, began to turn increasingly towards the Holy Land, the birthplace of the Lord Jesus Christ; Syrian influence on Coptic art became apparent in the fifth century. And, rigidity came with it. Some motifs that made their way to Egypt from Syria were ultimately of Persian origin, including animals and birds in roundels, and griffins.

The integration of contrasting configurations – classical, Egyptian, Greek–Egyptian and Persian pagan motifs, as well as Byzantine and Syrian Christian influence – led to a trend in Coptic art that is difficult to define, because a unity of style is not possible to trace. Unfortunately, early collections of Christian art were made without recording details of the sites from which they came, making it virtually impossible to trace artistic development through time.

There is no way to tell, for example, how long classical and Greek–Egyptian motifs continued after the adoption of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire. All that can be said is that Coptic art is a distinctive art, and that it differed from that of Antioch, Constantinople and Rome.



EVOLUTION OF COPTIC ART

Efforts have been made to classify Coptic art into epochs but this is somewhat artificial. While every culture has phases of cultural production, this is visible only when seen from an historical vantage. E.R. Dodds in his book *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* comments on this by saying, "The practice of chopping history into convenient lengths and calling them 'periods' or 'ages' has [...] drawbacks. Strictly speaking, there are no periods in history, only in historians' analyses; actual history is a smoothly flowing continuum, a day following a day."

This is true of art in general and Coptic art in particular. Day by day, through the centuries of Ptolemaic rule, while the Greek culture became inextricable from the ancient Egyptian, a national heritage still remained. This apparent contradiction is best exemplified by referring to the literature of the Late Period, in which such syncretistic compilations as the Hermetic texts developed alongside a more or less consistent pattern of thought and behavior, as exemplified in the Instruction literature. In art, the diverse influences resulted in an admixture of motifs. Yet, despite this, distinctive 'Egyptian' traits set Coptic art apart from any other.

The influence of the different powers on the development of Coptic art can be clearly seen by examining the famous monasteries of Natron Valley. During the fourth and fifth centuries, these monasteries were affected by factional disputes between the Melkites and Coptic monks. The Melkites remained in control until the Arab conquest when the Copts took over the area again. Then, in the eighth century one of the monasteries was purchased and restored by a Syrian.

There were serious Bedouin raids from the eighth to the eleventh centuries. An essential part of any monastery is a large stone 'fortress', where monks would hide in the event of a Bedouin raid. While 'portable' precious artwork was easy to hide in these fortresses, a great deal of damage was done to the ancient churches and buildings of the monasteries. In these raids, the Bedouins would rob the monasteries of treasures and staples, often killing any monks who would not have made it to the fortresses, and sometime burning most of the churches and buildings, along with whatever artwork, books, and records in there.

The Coptic monasteries in Natron Valley were restored in Fatimid times, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the Fatimids themselves used local craftsmen, who were mostly Copts, for enlarging and embellishing the city of Cairo; when Copts executed designs and motifs that were acceptable to their Arab patrons, they did this as competently as they had, in classical times, produced classical themes for their Greek patrons. In each case they adopted some of the motifs or designs for their own use. Therefore, when one visits the monasteries of Natron Valley, it must be borne in mind that some wall-paintings were produced under the instructions of Melkite monks, others under the instructions of Coptic monks. Also, Alexandrian, Byzantine and Syrian-inspired



Sami 2014

art were produced there, as well as non-figurative metalwork, wooden sanctuary screens, cabinets and furniture, inspired by Persian art.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

In studying the objects in the Coptic Museum of Cairo and in various Coptic Museums all over the world, as well as in the various monastic centers, it becomes clear that some sophisticated work must have been produced by highly talented craftsmen. At the same time, though, other work is characterized by folk simplicity. This can be seen in ivory work, tapestries, paintings and architectural decorations. There is a convincing explanation for this discrepancy in sophistication.

Egypt had a long tradition of master craftsmen of different trades who, throughout ancient history, worked under the direction of a supervisor who was a highly professional man: sometimes a High Priest (as in the Old Kingdom) or an Overseer of All the Works of the King (New Kingdom).

The supervisor could recognize inferior workmanship, correct drawings and generally maintain the required standard, whatever that happened to be during different periods. If there were changes in the theme or style, this could only be brought about by the master craftsman who was empowered to execute the change. Naturally such a man had an experience in handling large groups of men. Throughout the period of Roman rule of Egypt there was a tendency for such master craftsmen to move around the Roman Empire, gravitating towards the centers that could pay for their professional services. They worked in Alexandria and summoned by the emperors to Rome and Constantinople. There they sculpted classically draped forms as competently as they had the stylized Egyptian, and they carved languid reclining figures with no less devotion.

Scholars are not in agreement over which works of art can be safely regarded as Alexandrian – that is to say, executed by Egyptian craftsmen in Alexandria. Many such works, however, can be safely attributed to Egypt through consideration of subject matter and/or style. Examples of such works include a casket now in the museum in Wiesbaden that is sculpted with a sphinx and the allegory of Father Nile, a small box in the British Museum showing the squat, typically Coptic figure of Saint Mena in a niche, and three plaques from the side of Maximianus' throne at Ravenna Museum that have been attributed by art historians to Egyptian carvers. Also, when the Copts separated from the Eastern Church, master craftsmen who had mastered the technique of deeper drill carving and supervised the execution of works of great sophistication, (vide the stucco wall decorations to be found in the Monastery of the Syrians at Natron Valley and the friezes from Bawit in the Coptic Museum of Cairo).



Meanwhile, however, monasteries and churches that were built in Upper Egypt, especially in the fifth and sixth centuries, were adorned with carvings and paintings that show an expression of faith that was highly personal and authentic, executed by craftsmen who were not controlled by either the rulings of “religious authorities” (as was the case in ancient Egypt), or by a supervisor who maintained standards. There are stone and wood friezes, painted panels and ivory work that is crude and that depends for its appeal largely on qualities of design. This is especially apparent in the representations of the human figure, which are of strange proportion, being somewhat squat with large heads. Several explanations for this have been made. The most convincing of these explanations suggests that Coptic artists were producing work in reaction to the realism of ancient Egyptian and Greek paganism and that this, too, is the reason why early Christians did not encourage the production of statuary in the round. While the tendency seems, indeed, to have been a departure from Hellenistic–Alexandrian tradition, towards an abstract two–dimensional style, this may not necessarily have been calculated. Rather, it may be an example of free artistic expression: naive, unsophisticated, yet forceful. It is the simplicity of Coptic Art that gives it its unique flavor.

There are two art forms in which continuity of craftsmanship can be traced, namely the techniques of weaving and illustration, that is to say, Coptic textiles and manuscripts. While the motifs in the former and the calligraphy in the latter changed from age to age, the artistic execution of the work, as well as the techniques and the materials used, was of longstanding tradition.

WEAVING

Weaving in the early Christian era was, as in earlier times, mainly on linen although there is also some evidence of silk–weaving. The techniques – the so–called tapestry–weave and loom weaving – were inherited from the ancient Egyptians. The width of the loom used in Coptic tapestries is the same as that in the time of the pharaohs, and the special “Egyptian knot” was used as well. In the fourth century, wool was introduced and a variant was loop–weaving, in which the waft was not pulled tight. Silk became popular in the sixth century and by the eighth century full clerical tunics were woven in linen and silk. The weaving of some are so fine as to appear more like embroidery.

Coptic textiles, which developed into one of the finest of all Coptic arts, included wall hangings, blankets and curtains in addition to garment trimmings. The motifs show great diversity and include classical and Greek–Egyptian themes: lively cupids, dancing girls riding marine monsters, or birds and animals woven into foliage. Fish and grapes were popular Christian motifs as well as biblical scenes such as the Virgin on a donkey holding the Child Jesus in front of her.



After Constantinople became the capital of the empire, the weavers' repertoire was increased and enriched with Byzantine and Persian themes. All the textiles show a great sense of liveliness in the stylized figures, and there was an eager market throughout the Roman world in late antiquity, especially for trimmings for clerical robes; the most commonly woven were tunics of undyed linen onto which decorative woven bands were worked. In the tenth century, after the Arab conquest, Copts wove textiles for Muslim patrons and the Arab "Kufic" script was introduced into their own designs, especially after Arabic started to replace the Coptic language one century later.

ILLUSTRATION

Coptic manuscripts fall into five main groups: in Greek, Greek and Coptic, in Coptic, Coptic and Arabic and, finally in Arabic and transliterated Coptic. The art of illustrating texts dates to pharaonic times when prayers and liturgies were written on papyrus paper with reed pens and deposited in the tomb of the deceased. The mortuary texts were traced in black outline with catchwords written in red. They were illustrated with figures of Egyptian deities and protective symbols. These vignettes were frequently painted in bright colors with border designs at the top and bottom.

In the Christian era, religious writings were also written on papyrus paper and parchment. The texts were written in black, with red used for titles and the beginnings of the chapters. Many were decorated with designs in bright colors including figures of Martyrs, Saints, Apostles, and Angels, as well as birds, animals, foliage and geometrical designs. A medieval Arab writer, Omar Tussun, wrote about a group of copyists at the Monastery of Saint Macarius in Natron Valley, who were capable of drawing Coptic letters in the form of birds and figures. This is still an art form in Egypt, and Arabic calligraphers still use the reed pen – an art that they inherited from their Coptic ancestors. Copts started to translate their religious literature into Arabic late in the twelfth century and decorated the opening page with lavish pictures and with border designs. It was not until the nineteenth century that Coptic texts transliterated using Arabic started to appear.

PORTRAITS

No other early Christian movement has such an abundance of paintings of persons who received honor in their own country. Egypt's martyrs, saints, patriarchs, hermits and ascetics, some of whom were honored throughout the Christian world, received special distinction in Egypt. Their heroic deeds, sufferings or miracles were worded in songs and pictured on the walls of ancient temples that were converted to chapels or churches.



The human figures, whether in paintings, carvings or tapestries, are in frontal position with serene faces and a depth of idealized expression. The outlined, almond-shaped eyes are strongly reminiscent of the painted wooden panels from Bawit and the Fayoum, dating back to the first and second centuries, which were placed over the head of the deceased and bound into the mummy wrappings. These panels themselves resemble cartonnage and sarcophagi of the late pharaonic period. In fact, the Fayoum portraits, with the full face and large obsessive eyes – a feature of Roman medallions and much early Christian art – are now regarded by art historians as the prototypes for the Byzantine icons.

The Lord Jesus Christ was usually shown enthroned, surrounded by triumphant saints and angels, or blessing a figure beside Him. He was always depicted as King, never the suffering servant. Egypt was a land where leadership was idealized and kingship, both on earth and in the afterlife, was something the people understood. A triumphant Jesus – reborn, benevolent and righteous – is one of the most significant and continuous characteristics of Coptic art. Another is that Egyptians did not delight in painting scenes of torture, death, or sinners in hell; in the few exceptions where a holy figure is painted undergoing torture, it is implied rather than graphically depicted.

This is in tune with ancient Egyptian artistic tradition which, in the words of Cyril Aldred in his book *Egyptian Art in the Days of the Pharaohs*, he writes “Magnify only the heroic and beneficent qualities of divinities and kings, and not the horrific power of tyrants and demons.”

PAINTINGS

It is fitting to conclude this list of art forms with Coptic paintings, which is true art as against what we today call the crafts. The wall paintings reveal an unsophisticated, almost crude style, and a refined, highly developed one. The former may have emerged in the early years of Christianity when ancient temples were converted into churches. Pharaonic reliefs were covered with layers of plaster and Christian themes were painted on the stucco base. These wall-paintings survive “in situ” in some places in Egypt including Bagawat in the Kharga Oasis, Saint Simeon’s Monastery at Aswan, in the temple of Luxor, the White Monastery at Sohag, the Monastery of Saint Macarius in Natron Valley, and the sanctuary of the Ethiopian Saint Takla Hemanout in the “Suspended Church” in Old Cairo. Early wall-paintings that have been transferred to the Coptic Museum include niches from the Monasteries of Bawit and Sakkara. The Copts loved bright, clear color and were extremely talented in mixing different dyes and powdered rock, often using the white of an egg to combine them.

Icons, or images of sacred personalities painted on wooden panels, that are themselves regarded as sacred, were a later development. When it was realized



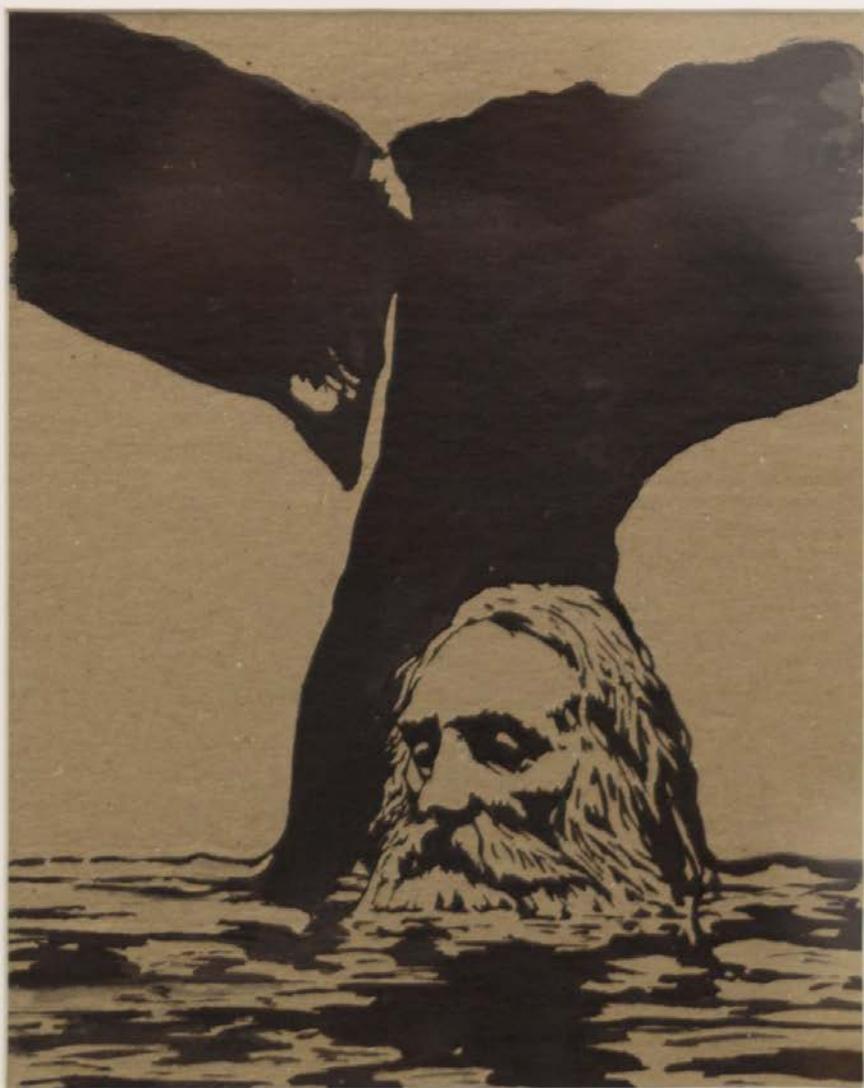
that the war on paganism launched by the emperor Theodosius had not stopped pious people from sanctifying holy relics, the church authorized the painting of religious themes that would aid the faithful in an understanding of Christianity, especially scenes depicting the Nativity, the Virgin and Child, the apostles and the lives of the saints. According to the Arab historian AlMakrizi, Pope Cyril I hung icons in all the churches of Alexandria in the year 420 A.D. and then decreed that they should be hung in the other churches of Egypt as well.

In the earliest development of icon painting the artists worked directly on the wooden panel but later they began to cover the surface with a soft layer of gypsum onto which lines could be chiseled to control the flow of liquid gold. There is indication that more than one artist was involved in the production of a single work but the face was painted by the master. Such division of labor resulted in greater production, but it also brought an end to any personal expression of piety such as had characterized the wall paintings. When Egypt turned increasingly towards Syria and Palestine after the schism in the fifth century, her saints and martyrs began to take on the stiff, majestic look of Syrian art. There began to be an expression of spirituality rather than naivety on the faces of the subjects, more elegance in the drawing of the figures, more use of gold backgrounds and richly adorned clerical garments.

Painters were not, at first, constrained by a rigid code. They were free to experiment with their themes. Consequently, there is a variety of interpretations in the treatment of a single subject that is quite striking. By the fifth and sixth centuries the angel Gabriel, for example, was sometimes painted with a sword, another time with a cross, and on occasion, with a trumpet; he either wore a flowing robe or was clad in richly embroidered vestments. Such variations are especially notable in scenes of the Annunciation and the Nativity, which are seldom rendered twice with the same details.

Paintings produced in Egypt under Byzantine rule did not resemble the opulent frescoes and mosaics of the eastern Roman Empire, which was state-sponsored art between 550 A.D. and the conquest of the Turks in the fifteenth century. Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, however, a stronghold of the Melkite faction, was rebuilt in the Golden Age of Justinian and adorned with some of the finest Byzantine icons to be found in the world. Some were painted on site, and others were imported from the provinces of the empire and from Constantinople itself.

Few centuries after the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century paintings became successively less "Coptic" in character. This became even more apparent in the thirteenth century when the art of copying panels and miniatures started and Anba Gabriel produced exquisite and brilliantly adorned work. He set a standard for copyists. Little original work was produced. By the 17th and 18th centuries, painters like John EINassikh, Baghdady Abu EISaad, and John the Armenian – who are among the greatest painters of icons in Egypt – turned to



Syrian and Byzantine models for inspiration. Finally, Anastasy, a Greek artist, was commissioned by the Copts to paint many of the icons that today hang in the churches of Old Cairo.

COPTIC ART HISTORY

The study of Coptic art and architecture was for too long a sadly neglected field. One of the reasons for this is that early archaeologists showed no interest in Christian antiquities. They focused their attention on Ancient Egypt. For example, it is astonishing to us today to note that Champollion, the French scholar who deciphered Hieroglyphics from the famous Rosetta Stone, carried out excavations at Medinet Habu on the Theban necropolis, discovered a fine fifth century church there and did not even mention it in his official report. In places where ancient Egyptian temples had been converted into churches and the walls plastered and painted with Christian themes, these were removed as just so much debris obscuring the ancient Egyptian reliefs below. No effort was made to photograph the wall-paintings before removal, or record any architectural features. Vital evidence was consequently lost from numerous temples including Deir el Bahri, Medinet Habu and Karnak temples at Luxor, and those of Dendera and Edfu.

The first person to realize the value of the Coptic art and make an effort to preserve it was the French scholar Gaston Maspero. In 1881, in his capacity as director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service (now Antiquities Organization) he set aside one of the halls of the Museum of Antiquities, then in the suburb of Boulac, for the first collection of Coptic art. He encouraged Egyptologists to undertake serious excavation, resulting in the preservation of the remains of the Monastery of Saint Apollo in Bawit, about 10 miles south-west of Asyut in Upper Egypt, and the Monastery of Saint Jeremias on the Sakkara plateau. Several scholars published descriptions of Coptic churches, carvings and crafts.

In 1910 the Coptic Museum was founded and in 1937 a new wing was added. The exhibits, which represent the richest collection of Coptic art in the world, have been separated according to media: stonework, woodwork, metalwork, ivory carvings, tapestries, pottery, glassware and manuscripts. It is extremely difficult to visualize them in context when one visits the museum. For example, patriarchal chairs in woodwork in the old wing are separated from patriarchal crowns and ecclesiastical vestments that are in the new. Wooden doors of ancient churches and monasteries are separated from their metal bolts and keys. Similar themes in different mediums, like the portrayal of the Virgin and Child, or the use of vine as a decorative motif in stone carvings, wooden panels and tapestries, cannot be compared. And wide variations in style that developed in different localities cannot be observed. Compounding the problem is the fact that the objects span fifteen hundred years, from the fourth to the nineteenth centuries!



Nor do the monastic centers and old churches of Egypt facilitate an understanding of artistic development because of the continuous stages of construction and renovation of the churches. This is mainly attributed to the fact that these sites are still used heavily by Copts for religious functions as a result of a 20-year Governmental policy of not granting Copts permits to build new churches or Coptic centers. Today, within the limited resources available to them, Coptic Christians are trying their best to preserve their treasures. A good example is the Monastery of Saint Macarius in Natron Valley, which (unlike other poorly and unprofessionally restored monasteries) was miraculously dug out of the sand of the Western Desert! Thanks to the efforts and hard work of its monks, the monastery of Saint Macarius still possesses the largest dome in Egypt, built completely using self-supporting woven small red bricks.

RESTORATION OF COPTIC HERITAGE

Only a decade ago, French and Dutch archaeologists were among the few foreign experts who began restoring and preserving Coptic monuments. Before this, in view of the inaction and limited resources of Governmental agencies, Coptic monks alone used to fix haphazardly crumbling parts of their churches and monasteries. Many medieval Coptic churches are still in a miserable state of repair. Their facades are crumbling to dust and richly decorated walls inside have been damaged by incense-burning rituals over the centuries that required closed doors and windows. In addition, vacant monasteries have often been inhabited by nomads, shepherds and their herds.

Several international organizations have recently extended a helping hand to the Copts in order to self-preserve and record their heritage. For example, in August of 1991, the Dutch Ministry of Education has proposed a program whereby Dutch scholars will train Coptic monks in such fields as art history, scientific methods of preservation and care of Coptic monuments, usage of index systems and collecting data. In the summer of 1990, a group of three Coptic monks spent six months last year in the Netherlands for training in the history of Christian art and its preservation, and traveled to other European countries where they became acquainted with different Christian congregations.

The history of Coptic art and culture is not taught at any Egyptian University. In order to provide those responsible for the preservation of Coptic art, in and outside museums in Egypt, with courses concerning this subject, Professor Paul van Moorsel (Professor of Coptic Art at Leiden University, The Netherlands) has taken the initiative of offering such courses in Egypt. The project is called the Egyptian-Netherlands Cooperation in Coptic Art Preservation (ENCCAP) and is executed by staff-members of Leiden University, sponsored by the Netherlands Ministry for Development Cooperation. In October of 1991, the first courses were



given at the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies at the Patriarchate in Abassiya, Cairo. In December of the same year, courses commenced at the Monastery of Saint Bishoy in Natron Valley. In Cairo, the lessons are given to students professionally involved with Coptic art and to all who are interested in these subjects. The lectures in the monastery, however, are given to monks from all over Egypt.

So far, six monasteries have been represented by almost 30 monks. Apart from the lectures which deal with Christian art in general and Coptic art in particular, the monks are given practical lessons. This has so far meant excursions to the monasteries in Natron Valley to see the churches with their wall-paintings and icons and to discuss the problems concerning the preservation of this heritage for the future. The training aims at teaching the monks to do research in the field of iconography, history of architecture and other fields of history art.

There are many other efforts to record and learn about Coptic art. In the Cairo-based Higher Institute of Coptic Studies, for example, students learn about Coptic Icons by painting their own reproductions using authentic dyes mixed with special oils and egg white. Even outside Egypt, in the United States, two Coptic artists in residence in the Church of St. Mary and St. Mena in Rhode Island, produce dozens of Coptic icons to embellish churches and homes of Emigrant Copts.

Much more work remains to be done to save an integral part of Egypt's history, culture, and art. This can be only done through a concerted effort by the Egyptian people with the help of national and international agencies. The first step is, perhaps, a better education, understanding, and appreciation of Coptic art among the public.

Taken from: An Introduction to the Coptic Art of Egypt. Sep. 2009. <https://www.coptic.net/articles/copticartofegypt.txt>



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