



# Coptic Art 1

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## Introduction:

The Coptic Church owes its existence to the evangelization of Egypt by St. Mark the Apostle, and thus it is one of the Churches most faithful to the biblical message of the beginnings of Christianity.



The paintings on ceilings and walls served to picture famous biblical events. Though they are almost 2000 years old, many of those paintings are still vibrant and colorful.

## Coptic Culture and Legacy:

The Coptic culture was born in the Hellenic city of Alexandria which thrived from its founding in 332 B.C., by Alexander the Great, until 643 A.D. It was then that great ancient city fell from the heights of Western and Near-Eastern culture into a hidden darkness of the Islamic world.

The Copts regard themselves as the true descendants of the ancient people of pharaonic Egypt. The word Copt is derived from the Greek word Aigyptos, which was, in turn, derived from “Hikaptah”, one of the names for Memphis, the first capital of Ancient Egypt and became “qibt” in Arabic. The modern use of the term “Coptic” describes Egyptian Christians who remained faithful to Christianity in spite of the expansion of Islam, as well as the last stage of the ancient Egyptian language script. Also, it describes the distinctive art and architecture that developed as an early expression of the new faith.

For centuries amidst the paroxysms of the Greek and Roman worlds, even with the rise of Constantinople, Alexandria with its great clerics, theologians and teachers was at the heart of the emerging Christian world. In Alexandria, it was the amidst currents of pagan philosophy, Arianism, Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, Mithraism, Judaism, and the enduring presence of Egyptian, Greek and Roman pantheons that Christianity first thrived.

The survival of the Coptic Church and even more its visual culture is a marvel of history and a testament of faith. The most visible legacy left in Egypt today from the ancient Copts are the paintings, sculptures and art.

Christians themselves were an integral part of the intellectual mix. As Synesius tells us after a



disappointing trip to Athens, “it is in Egypt now that philosophy flourishes.” It was a ripe field for evangelism”.

## *It Is Not Just an Art but Doctrine:*

Iconography is the sacred art of the Orthodox Church. Unlike Judaism and Islam, Christianity holds the human figure as the focus of its visual expression. This is mainly due to her belief in the incarnation of the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinitarian God, as expressed in the first lines of St. John’s Gospel: “... and the Word was made flesh...”

The main function of iconography in our Coptic Orthodox Church is liturgical. Icons are an integral part of Orthodox worship inspiring and teaching the faithful mysteries of the Christian faith through the medium of color. Iconography is above all visual theology. Icons stand on the threshold between the material and spiritual realms.

## *It Is Deep in the Heart of the Age:*

From the early centuries of our era, monks and anchorites established monasteries and hermitages in regions that were often arid and difficult to reach, well suited to their ascetical ideal. At times, they reused monuments going back to the time of the pharaohs, turning them into churches or anchorites’ cells, and built true fortress-monasteries in the desert. They decorated these buildings with wall paintings, many of which have been only recently rediscovered. Their libraries contained literary and artistic treasures still in existence. Their fabrics, which are of an admirable beauty, are the pride of great museums and collectors. The oldest frescoes were painted in Alexandria, and extended southwards along the Nile as the religion spread. The styles also changed from very basic early scenes to more elaborate depictions of plants and animal forms,

including, for examples, events in the lives of Adam and Eve and the Lord Jesus Christ.

## *It Reflects Interaction of Civilizations:*

Though some might argue about degree, there is no doubt that Coptic art emerged from the Egyptian and Egypto-Hellenic visual culture that surrounded the first Christian artists of Egypt. In some instances we can see this expressed explicitly in content. In most cases the correspondence is less explicit and more a matter of form and affect. This is only natural in that the actual content being depicted was different. The most often noted evidence of pure Egyptian influence is the similarity between the Coptic depiction of the Cross and the symbol of life, the ‘Ankh’. In fact, in early relief slabs one can see joined together the Christian Cross, the Ankh and the Greek letters, Alpha (á) and Omega (ù). Greek and Persian art also influenced the style, particularly the sculptures and carvings.

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