



Coptic Art 2

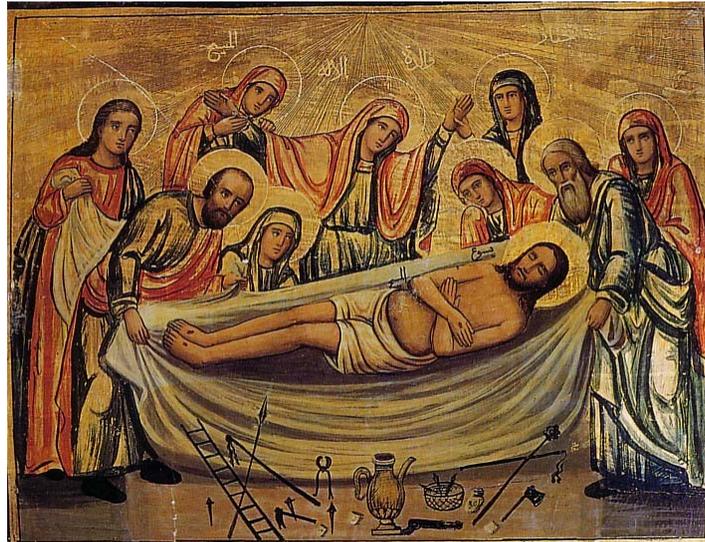
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Characters of Coptic Art:

Coptic art is divided into six phases, the most important of which was the third phase. At the peak of its glory, Coptic art took a religious form and was dedicated to the services of the Christian faith. The influence of Coptic art was widespread in the Christian world, and Coptic interlacing patterns may have been the source for the designs of Irish and Northumbrian illuminated gospels.

Among the most important aspects of Coptic art were its folkloric and symbolic representation and its tendency to use geometrical lines and miniatures. Coptic art reached its mature phase in the late 5th and 6th centuries. Coptic spirituality and culture flourished during this time, especially in the almost legendary monasteries of the Nitrian and Red Sea Deserts, as well as in Upper Egypt, at Bawit and Saqqara in particular, where wonderful examples of Coptic painting were retrieved, dating from the 4th – 6th centuries.

The development of Coptic art was interrupted by the Arab invasion of Egypt between 640 and 642. Its subsequent course was marked by the influence of Islamic art and a repetition of earlier forms. Coptic artists and craftsmen were also quite prolific during the Fatimid period, 10th – 12th centuries; a period of renewal in Coptic art.



Coptic art is characterized by a high degree of stylization verging on abstraction. Forms are flattened out, and individual motifs acquire simplicity and decorative character. Subject matter represents

both Christian and Roman sources. Typical features of Coptic art are also found in Byzantine and late Roman art in general. Human figures are very often depicted frontal. Eyes are drawn wide, as if expressionist rather than realist. Each gesture has a precise significance. Colors carry symbolic meaning. Designs are uncluttered, free of unnecessary elements and decorations, presenting the viewer with the essential information to understand and experience the icon. In Coptic art, Christ was almost always depicted as triumphant, reborn, benevolent and righteous and this is one of the most significant and continuous characteristics of Coptic art. In fact, the early Egyptian Christians did not delight in painting scenes of torture, death or sinners in hell.

Coptic Icons characterized by large eyes and ears, gentle lips, and small mouth and nose. The large and wide eyes symbolize the spiritual eye that look beyond the material world “the light of the body is the eye” [Matthew 6:22]. The large ears listen to the word of God; “if any man have ears to hear, let them hear” [Mark 4:23]. The gentle lips are used to glorify and



praise the Lord “My mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips” [Psalm 63:5]. The eyes and ears on a figure in an icon are disproportionately large, because a spiritual person spends more time listening to God’s word and seeking to do God’s will. On the other hand, the mouth, which can also be often, be the source of empty or harmful words is small. The nose, which is seen a sensual is also small. Figures in Coptic icons often have large heads, meaning that these are individuals devoted to contemplation and prayer.

Some icons portray saints who suffered and were tortured for their faith with peaceful and smiling faces, showing that their inner peace was not disturbed, even by the hardships they endured, and suffered willingly and joyfully for the Lord. Also, when an evil character is portrayed on an icon, it is always in profile because it is not desirable to make eye contact with such a person and thus to dwell or meditate upon it.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the Coptic icons’ artists did not sign their names. They were not looking for self-glorification and fame, even the few who signed their names, did so in the form of a prayer; such as “Remember O Lord your servant (name)”.

Coptic art in the 4th – 6th centuries has a wide range of quality. Some works seem to have been produced by Byzantine workshops and can be hard to distinguish from contemporary works in Constantinople or other metropolitan centers of the Byzantine Empire. Other works seem to have been produced by local workshops and carry the pure Coptic influence. The motifs in Coptic art are often Christian, as might be expected, but pagan motifs also continued in use; as Christian art regularly adapted pagan classical motifs to the message of the new faith.

Remains of wall paintings reveal scenes from the Old and New Testaments and images of the Holy Mother, the Child Jesus, Sainly Apostles and Martyrs. Some of the archaeological sites are El-Bagawat, Oxyrhynchus, Sakkara, Bawit, and Antinoë. Prominent categories in Coptic art are relief, painting, textiles,

ivory, illumination and architecture. Free standing sculpture is not common. The most noted examples of which are in the Coptic Museum, Cairo. The Coptic architecture, as shown in the 5th-century White and Red monasteries near Sohag, showed traces of local Egyptian traditions.

Although the artistic style of iconography varies a little from one culture to another, all Orthodox icons have the same meaning, usage and symbolism (this includes the Eastern Orthodox Churches; Greek, Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian, ... etc, as well a the Oriental Orthodox Churches; Coptic, Armenian, Syrian, Ethiopian,... etc).

Techniques of Coptic Iconography:

The techniques employed in the making of Coptic icons on wooden panels have not changed over the centuries. There are two, namely encaustic and egg tempera. The first, encaustic on gesso, disappeared around the time of the iconoclastic period, 8th century. It consisted of molten bee’s wax, made into an emulsion soluble in water. It was developed to a very high standard during the Greco-Roman period (2 BC – 4 AD) as can be seen in the beautiful funerary portraits from the Fayoum Oasis, Southwest of Cairo, which can be considered the immediate predecessors of the Christian icon.

The second, egg tempera on gesso, survived the iconoclastic period and remains the only technique used to this day, although unfortunately threatened by the use of modern media like oil or acrylic which cannot compare with the brilliance and subtlety of hue of tempera. Gesso is the name of the white background upon which the icon is written. Its soundness is of paramount importance to the overall success of the work. Gesso is made up of white lime and glue, and spread on the panel in thin layers to achieve a hard smooth surface. After a design is applied to it, gilding takes place. Tempera comes from the Latin word “temper”, which means mixing in due measure. Egg



tempera requires a process of illumination from dark to light, symbolizing the passage of the soul from the darkness of the world to the light of Christ.

Examples of Famous Coptic Art:

Some of the oldest extant Christian art in Egypt can be found in the area of Bagawat in the al-Kharga Oasis in the Western Desert. The paintings in the various chapels and tombs of this region display a notable change from the earlier work in Alexandria, as well as an expansion of the iconographic repertory.

There, the famous Chapel of the Exodus, dating to the fourth century AD, is so called because of its graphic representations of the Hebrew Exodus to the Promised Land under Moses' leadership. Within the center of the copula ceiling of the chapel birds weave amongst networks of vine branches, a motif originating in the east but adopted by the Roman world and used extensively in Christian monuments. Other scenes in the chapel, most often rapidly sketched, include Old Testament themes such as the sacrifice of Abraham, Daniel in the lions' den and Noah's ark, among others.

Another building in the region (Bagawat), known as the Chapel of Peace and dating to the 5th century depicts large, hieratic figures arranged in perfect order. In this chapel, Old Testament scenes are predominate. For example, among these works are portrayals of Adam and Eve after their sin, the sacrifice of Abraham, Daniel in the lions' den, Jacob, Noah's ark and the annunciation symbolizing the new covenant between God and his people.

As Christianity spread south along the Nile River, the oldest places of worship were often established in what was once pharaonic temples, though only occasional remains of the paintings on their wall may still be observed. These places of pagan worship that were converted to Christian use included temples at Philae, Abydos, Deir al-Bahri, Dandara, Luxor, Karnak, Madinat Habu as well as Wadi al-Sebua further south in Nubia, among others.

The use of panels also became a common fashion among monastic complexes, as seen particularly at Bawit and Saqqara, which flourished between the sixth and eighth centuries AD. In the oratories of the cells and in churches, the walls could present up to three tiers of adornment. The lowest tier of large panels would include a geometrical or floral motif, while the upper tiers show tall figures of standing monks and saints, or perhaps scenes narrating a story.

The scenes at Bawit and Saqqara show variety of images and the superior workmanship of their artists. Among those scenes are some from the Old and New Testaments, such as the story of David, the cycle of the nativity and annunciation, the baptism of Christ and others mingle with depictions of equestrian saints and rows of saints and monks. Some niches are adorned with depictions of the Holy Virgin seated on a throne holding the Baby Jesus in front of her or nursing Him, which are references to the divine motherhood of the Holy Virgin defined by the council of Ephesus in 431 AD.

However, the most amazing images are those of the apocalyptic visions drawn from the biblical texts of Ezekiel, Isaiah, Daniel and John; Christ is seated on a fiery chariot and surrounded by the figures of the four living creatures flying on seraphim wings strewn with eyes, while two angels bow as a sign of veneration. In the background is a starry sky, with the sun and moon personified by busts as was the convention in antiquity. They symbolize eternity. On a lower tier, the Virgin Mary stands among the apostles as an orant (a praying or kneeling figure), or seated on a throne with the baby Jesus, who she nurses.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Coptic art, in general and Coptic icons in particular, in the Orthodox tradition is not to be taken as art for art per se but rather, it is to be used as windows into spiritual world, designed to help us achieve a prayerful mind set and lead us into a life of prayer and contemplation.