

- 2) In orthodox iconography the **halo** is an expression of light radiating from within the saint, as a sign of the holiness he or she merited by striving to live a spiritual life for Christ, supported by the grace of God.
- 3) Contrary to common practice in painting, the iconographer starts by putting down the **dark colors first** and then continues putting more and more light into the icon. In this manner, he follows the same order of "enlightenment" which reminds us of our fallen nature which is in darkness until the light of Christ shines upon it and saves it. Hence, the words of Christ ring true when He said of His Saints "You are the light of the world" (Mt. 5:14).



St. Peter and St. Paul

- 4) Because the saint has already conquered his struggle and has attained victory, he must be depicted **as victorious and joyful**, never as weak or in pain.
- 5) Because the saint is now in the state of glorification, the background behind him must be gilded (**covered with a golden color**). Gold symbolizes heavenly glory.

The Iconographer

The iconographer is not just an artist, but a person who has a deep understanding of the church dogmas and the lives of the saints. The spirituality of the iconographer is an essential element of his ability to translate and express the spiritual depth of the icon.

Icons in the Church and at Home

Just as practices in the orthodox church have order and meaning, icons also have a special placement inside the church. The icons placed around the entrance of the altar (veil) help the faithful focus their thoughts and prayers toward the Holy Sanctuary as well as reminding them that they are truly in the presence of God during the celebration of the Eucharist. Above the icons face the believers as if to urge them to enter into Heaven with them.

Icons should be placed in a designated area in the church, in the corner of a wall, preferably to the east. The faithful should gather to pray in the presence of the ever-praying saints. Additionally, icons can be placed in different areas around the house to enhance the notion that the house should be like a "Church" (i.e., make the home a house of prayer).

Icons in the Coptic Orthodox Church



But as for me, I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy; In fear of You I will worship toward Your holy temple. (Psalm 5: 6-8)

What is an Icon?

An icon may be an image of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saints, or a representation of events from the Scriptures. It is not merely a picture or a drawing but a spiritual and theological expression. Thus, an icon is written and not painted. The icons in the church or at home signify the spiritual presence of Christ and remind us of the lives of the saints.

An icon is a faithful representation of the Holy Scripture or a biography of a saint; nothing may be added by one's own interpretation. Icons in the church remind us of people who are alive, not dead, because their spirits are alive and exist in heaven. If we honor the icon, we honor the saint and honor God Himself who is glorifying this saint in heaven. Icons always reflect or portray peace and serenity.

The Significance of Icons

Just as letters are combined to form words that work together to express ideas and information in the making of a book, lines and colors combine to form images, gestures and symbols that convey the theological concepts and spirit in the making of an icon. For this reason, it is traditional to say that an icon is "written", not painted. Therefore, one must understand the "language" in which the author is writing.



Entry of Christ into Egypt

An icon must have theological content which communicates a message or story to the worshipper simply and clearly and for no other purpose than to lead the observer to a deeper understanding of the church's teaching.

Icons depict saints in their glorified state for two reasons: to honor the saint who is portrayed and to encourage us who are struggling to follow his or her example. When we receive the Divine comfort given to the children of God, we are thereby heartened to persevere in our own struggles for the Lord. There exists a common misconception that the icons are worshiped by the faithful, when in fact they are merely venerated. The icon itself is not worshiped but the spirit of the saint who is represented by the icon. The faithful ask for the prayers of those who have become victorious but this does not mean worship them. The request for prayers is only logical, because they are in heaven standing before God and know more about Him than we on earth do.

General Practices for Writing Icons

The process of writing orthodox icons follows certain methods, incorporating symbolism and characteristics that carry a meaningful message. Some of these symbols and characteristics are discussed here:

- 1) The Savior and the saints must always be depicted **facing the worshipper frontally** and looking directly at them. Figures in Coptic icons often have **large heads**, meaning that these are individuals devoted to contemplation and prayer. **Large and wide eyes** symbolize the

spiritual eye that look beyond the material world. As the Bible says, "the lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6:22).

Large ears in the icons focus on listening to the word of God: "if anyone has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:23). **Gentle lips** symbolize glorification and praise to 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 often be the source of empty or harmful words, is small. The **nose**, which is seen as sensual, is also small. When an **evil character** is portrayed in an icon, he or she is always in profile because it is not desirable to make eye contact with such a person and, thus, to dwell or meditate upon the icon.

