

COPTIC ICONS

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ARTS AND THE COPTS

Art has been correlated with religion from the beginning of history, so that a strong belief has arisen that arts such as, painting, graving, music, songs, dancing etc., have come into existence as a result of religious beliefs.

In early Christian times, Eastern societies, especially the Egyptian were very religious, so many thousands preferred to live in the wilderness longing for the angelic life, while those who remained in the cities and countries were occupied by religious discussions.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus explained this state by saying that if you went into a shop to buy a loaf of bread, “the baker, instead of telling you the price, would argue that the Father is greater than the Son. The money-changer would talk about the Begotten and the Unbegotten, instead of giving you your money; and if you wanted a bath, the bath-keeper assured you that the Son surely proceeds from nothing.”¹

It is evident from the above how the Christian faith penetrated into the Copts’ daily lives, even in their eating, drinking, literature and arts. There is evidence that Christian symbols and images were inscribed on their rings, painted on their walls, doors, cups, plates, chairs, etc. . . .

For instance, in the Coptic Museum at Cairo, there is a Coptic ivory comb from the fifth century. On one side, Lazarus appears in the shape of an Egyptian mummy while Christ bearing a cross instead of a wand, appears beside it. Beside it also is a representation of the Healing of the Blind Man. On the other side of the comb, there is a mounted Coptic Saint enclosed within a wreath supported by angels.

THE COPTIC ART

No art has been subject to so much dispute as the Coptic Art.

The archeologist Strzugowski² hypothesizes that it is just a local continuation of the Hellenistic art. Maspero and Gaet look on the Coptic Art as an offshoot of Byzantine Art, and Elbera knows it as an authentic national Egyptian art. . . .

This confusion is a natural result of many factors:

1. Egyptian soil was ruled successively by Greeks, Romans, Byzantines etc. . . ., who had cultures and arts of their own. These rulers had their own districts inside the great cities of Egypt, where they left monuments, which are now mixed with the national ones.³

2. The present Coptic monuments do not represent the true quality of Coptic Art, for the most prized and valuable pieces were ruined in unceasing waves of persecutions⁴ as the Arab historian Al-Macrizi describes. To this effect Klaus Wessels says, "At the height of the medieval period, Arab writers describe magnificent paintings: those of the shrine of St. Mena, for example, were especially famed, but little survives. . . . However, to quote S. Der Nersessian, 'But even in important centers like Bawit in Upper Egypt or Saqqara in Lower Egypt, the large churches are completely destroyed and the from the inferior examples.' We can therefore only get a rough picture of what once was found in abundance, in the Churches and Monasteries."⁵

DEVELOPMENT OF THE COPTIC ART

Scholars give special interest to Coptic textiles more than Icons, for the latter were more exposed to destruction than the first; and until recently, Coptic textiles were exported to many foreign countries.

1. COPTIC ICONS AND HELLENISM

When Alexandria received Christianity through St. Mark the Apostle, it was ruled by the Roman Empire, and at the same time it was a leading center of the Hellenistic culture in the East. For this reason some scholars hypothesized that the Alexandrian Christians embraced the Hellenistic culture in expressing their feelings towards the new faith. They have proved this opinion by some monuments found in the Hellenistic centers at Alexandria, Fayoum Oasis and parts of the Delta. . . .

Nevertheless, other scholars explain that these monuments do not represent the authentic Egyptian art, and state that the Copts refused the Hellenistic culture. To this point Pierre du Bourguet says: "In the pre-Byzantine period, Coptic work appears to have been carried along in the general reaction against Hellenism".⁶

The same idea is mentioned in "Pagan and Christian Egypt", where it is said, "Greek art was always foreign to Egyptian taste, and it is doubtful if many of the pieces in the Greek style surviving from the Ptolemaic period were made of native use."⁷

Nevertheless, we can say that Coptic art, like Coptic Architecture, has its own type, independent from the Hellenistic or other style, although it was affected by these foreign styles.

It was not by chance that the Coptic art bears authentic national feelings from its commencement. Modern scholars mention the following reasons which created this attitude:

A. In the first century Alexandria was divided into three groups: the native, the Greek and the Jewish. Every group was proud of its own culture, arts and religion, despising those of the other two groups. The native group found in the new faith, that is Christianity, the essential elements of their ancient Egyptian religion, such as the Trinity and the life to come. Naturally the Egyptians earnestly embraced Christianity, while many of the Greeks in Egypt persisted for the most part in their paganism, so that until the fourth century one could with good reason call the Greeks in Egypt pagans and the Copts Christians.⁸

B. In Egypt, the Greeks' cultural, social and political standing contrasted sharply with that of the Egyptians. In essence a gulf existed between two parts of the population in Egypt.⁹

C. Although Christianity offered to the whole world a new positive attitude, it had its effect on all the various cultures and arts. At the same time it arose and heightened trends of independence in classes and races that had been hitherto forced by Rome to embrace Hellenism as the only recognized creed.¹⁰

The Egyptians were proud of the Pharaohs' culture after its christianization. To this effect, Herbert Read says, "But though it (Coptic Art) is a Christian art, part of an attitude toward life that was spreading far and wide in the East and West, the Christian art of Egypt is still Egyptian. . . ."¹¹

We can now say that as a result of the above mentioned factors, various types of art have run parallel to each other for several centuries. They were:

A. *The Popular art*, which bears the true national feelings, and is largely free from the influence of foreign attitudes. This type is called "Coptic Art," and has been referred to as "The Pre-Coptic Art."

B. *The Hellenistic Art*, represents works made in the Hellenistic centers, and a Hellenistic style. However it is not completely isolated from the Egyptian or the local culture.

C. *The Official Art*, commissioned by the State, and bears many characteristics of the Roman art.

Because of the existence of these three kinds of art in Egypt, some scholars think that Coptic Art does not have characteristics of its own, nor can it be classified under any one style.

2. COPTIC ART AND MONASTICISM

Stephen Gaselee draws attention to the Egyptian movement of Monasticism, as a form that had its effect on Coptic Art.¹² In fact, monasteries were not a form that made demands on art, but they were pure Egyptian institutions where Copts developed their media, language, religious ideas and their art.¹³

It is worth noting that in the fourth century the rapid appearance of these Coptic institutions co-incided with the disappearance of the Greek institutions, such as, the gymnasium, public baths and others. This meant the rapid de-Hellenization of Egypt.

3. *COPTIC ART AND BYZANTINE ART*

The establishment of Byzantium (Constantinople) as the capital of the Eastern Empire had its simultaneous effect upon Coptic and Byzantine arts. Undoubtedly, the best craftsmen of Alexandria were drawn to the new royal city.¹⁴ They transferred some Egyptian characteristics of art to Byzantium and at the same time some Byzantine characteristics were transferred to Egypt. This is shown in the Monastery of St. Mena near Alexandria and the paintings of Deir Bawit at Upper Egypt. For this reason some scholars looked upon the Coptic art as an off-shoot of the Byzantine Art, while others took the reverse position, saying that the Coptic art was anti-Byzantine.

Pierre du Bourguet states an adequate suggestion when he says, "The supposed hatred of the Copts for everything Byzantine calls for reservations, and cannot be presented . . . without substantial evidence. To do so is to forget the patronage of St. Helena, revered as she was throughout the whole of Coptic Egypt; the cult of Constantine—considered as a saint by the Copts, even before his canonization in Byzantium, the relations which existed between well-known Copts and particular Byzantine functionaries, and even certain emperors. . . ."

Pierre du Bourguet gives many instances for the influence of the Byzantine art on the Coptic art, although the Coptic art did not lose its feelings. One of these instances is the well-known icon of 'Christ the Protector of St. Mena the Monk', in which St. Mena stands on the right hand of Christ, while the Lord places His arm on his shoulders to protect him. Pierre du Bourguet recognized in this icon of the sixth century the following points:

A. It has some Byzantine elements like the nimbus, and the book which Christ holds, with its embellishment of simulated precious stones.

B. The icon relates an Egyptian story, for St. Mena was an Egyptian martyr.

C. The features of Christ are purely Egyptian.

D. The horizon is an Egyptian view; the color of the flaming sunset sky is typically Egyptian, and the two heads are portrayed into the horizon as though the Lord with His arm encircling the saint's shoulder, would enter with Him to that which is beyond earth's horizon. It is important to note here, that painting the sunset in a red color is a Pharaonic tradition, in which the divine sun reigns in splendor.

E. The two heads are very large and the proportion of the two bodies is very small in comparison. This is the attitude of a Coptic artist who appears to have shown little interest in proportions.

12. The Art of Egypt through Ages, by various writers, London, the Studio, 193.
13. St. Mark, p. 146.
14. Brooklyn Museum, p. 10.
15. Dr. Waheeb A. Girgis (Bishop Gregorius) : Christological Teaching of the Non-Chalcedonian Churches.