

## Coptic art style (Its features and developments through the presented artistic models)

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### Abstract:

Many spoke about Coptic art like Zaki Hassan who defined the coptic art as "the combination between the Greek and Ancient Egyptian artistic traditions. It gave rise to the industry of folk art in Alexandria. This art was in turn the nucleus of the Coptic Art that assimilated many artistic techniques that were known in the Ancient East". In addition, Souad Maher said that the Coptic Art had "two distinct forms in the city of Alexandria, i.e, the art of the aristocratic and the art of the folks. These two forms emerged as a result of the inter-connection between the ancient Hellenistic techniques. This Alexandrine Art in turn formed the rules and principles of the Coptic Art. It was apparent that it favored depicting the men to women as one can find many depictions of male saints compared to those of female saints with the exception of the depictions of the Virgin Mary and Eve.

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## الملخص العربي

تحدث كثيرون عن الفن القبطي مثل زكي حسن والذي عرف الفن القبطي بأنه "مزيج بين التقاليد الفنية اليونانية والمصر القديمة مما أدى إلى ظهور صناعة الفن الشعبي في الإسكندرية وكان هذا الفن بدوره نواة الفن القبطي الذي إستوعب العديد من التقنيات الفنية التي كانت معروفة في الشرق القديم بالإضافة إلى ذلك قالت سعاد ماهر إن الفن القبطي كان له "شكلان متميزان في مدينة الإسكندرية، وهما فن الأرستقراطية وفن الطبقة الشعبية، وقد ظهر هذان الشكلان نتيجة للتداخل بين الفن القبطي والترابط بين التقنيات القديمة الهلنستية، وقد شكل هذا الفن السكندري بدوره قواعد ومبادئ الفن القبطي، وكان من الواضح أنه فضل تصوير الرجال على النساء حيث يمكن للمرء أن يجد العديد من صور القديسين الذكور مقارنة بتلك الخاصة بالقديسات الإناث بإستثناء صور العذراء مريم وحواء. "

## المصطلحات الواردة بالبحث

التمبرا- الراعى- الصمغ- الباليوم- مونوجرام

## Essence of Coptic Art

the Coptic Art influenced by some features of other countries, but it had its deeply rooted Egyptian origins as it divided into two parts, the period of the Greek, Roman and Byzantine empires which appeared in it the influence of the Greek, Roman and Christianity civilization<sup>2</sup>. the second includes the Arab rule since the 7th century. This era witnessed the persistence of this art and its impact on the Islamic Art<sup>3</sup>. The

Coptic Art had distinctive features, qualities and properties that appeared clearly in the following:-

-Painted Fabrics: They were fabrics painted by the Coptic artist, which included certain depictions and forms.

-Relief sculpture: is holographic forming to a form on a surface.

-Column capitals: they were the tops of columns and their decorations by various forms and shapes.

-Frescoes: These were the scenes depicted on the wall when the yolk is still fresh, in which colors are mixed with lime. These frescoes express certain features of the Coptic scenes and

<sup>2</sup> - سمير فوزى، القديس مرقس وتأسيس كنيسة الإسكندرية، ترجمة نسيم مجلى، القاهرة، 1999، ص 57.

<sup>3</sup> - حسن الباشا، فنون التصوير الإسلامى في مصر، القاهرة، 1973، ص 42.

decorations namely, simplicity, flatness, attention to the clear idea<sup>4</sup>.

## **The Phases of Coptic Art**

### The phase of emergence:

The Church of Alexandria in the first era of Christianity had a leading role that distinguished it from the other Egyptian churches for two reasons. The first was the martyrs whose blood was still irrigating their firm belief and its saints who assumed the responsibility of defending their true faith against the whole world. The second reason, the artistic side represented by the Library of Alexandria, which was the beacon of knowledge in the Ancient World and the Theological School of Alexandria.

### The phase of awakening:

the Copts managed to destroy many pagan relics, which dated back, in particular, to the Greco-Roman period. However, this did not hinder the artists from being influenced by the Pagan Art in most of their artifacts as they were often imitating most of the themes they saw in the arts of Pagan Age, particularly at the dawn of the Coptic Era For example, the statue of the good shepherd who carries a ram on his shoulders or standing in the midst of his

<sup>4</sup> - هدى زكى، سرية صدقي، مصطفى الرزاز، عبدالمعظم طبل، التذوق الفني والجمالي وتاريخ الفن، مطابع مؤسسة دار الشعب للطباعة والنشر، القاهرة، 1991-1992، ص 61:62.

flock was common in Pagan and Roman Art as a symbol of loving the good. This idea was adopted by the Coptic artist and used as a Christian symbol as the shepherd became the symbol of Christ (Good Shepherd) (Fig.1)<sup>5</sup>.



(Fig.1)  
The symbol of Christ Good Shepherd,  
جمال هرمينا، مدخل إلى تاريخ الفن القبطي، ص 20.

<sup>5</sup> -McManners, J., The Oxford illustrated history of Christianity, Oxford, New York, 1992, P.37.

The phase of Completion:

This artistic mixture of the artists remained until the middle of the 5th century AD, as one can see the Christian symbols alongside the Pagan relics. Then these depictions began to evolve till the Pagan images disappeared completely to be replaced with the Christian inscriptions which spread between the all. This stage became afterwards the basis for this art as the Coptic artist after a period of overlapping information and ideas, he became interested in the artistic minute details more than the beauty and elegance. He did not take the proportions into account if he saw that they may keep him away from the goal he aspired to in his artistic form. At this stage, the Coptic artist used also the sign of ankh that symbolized life for the Ancient Egyptians with the addition of a clear Christian cross in the middle of the upper loop, or a hexagonal decorative form to refer to the monogram of Christ, or the abbreviation for Christos<sup>6</sup>.

The phase of spreading:

<sup>6</sup> - بولس باسيم، موسوعة المعرفة المسيحية/ أسفار الشريعة أو التوراة، طبعة أولى، دار المشرق، بيروت، 1990، ص 19.

- القمص يوساب السرياني، الفن القبطي ودوره الرائد بين فنون العالم المسيحي، مراجعة الأنبا صموئيل، الطبعة الأولى، مطبعة الأنبا رويس، القاهرة، 1995، ص 22.

At this stage, the Coptic Art prevailed among the people and attained its distinct style and personality. It remained on this case until the 12th century. Though some said that the Coptic Art was similar to the Byzantine, it soon proved it was distinct and independent with its severe inclination to modulation. Thus, it was able to achieve great works that stemmed from the inner self of the artist which seemed to be ideal<sup>7</sup>.

### **Historical periods in Coptic art**

The Coptic Art was divided into some important historical periods as follows:

The First Period: It extended from the 3th century BC to the first century AD and was marked by a combination of the Ancient Egyptian art and the Greek Art to provide a new artistic pattern. This was apparent in the cemetery of Pet Osiris where one can see the individuals with enface instead of profile depictions.

The Second Period: It extended from the 1st century to the 4th century AD when Christianity spread and the Coptic artist resorted symbolism because of fear of persecution. He drove it from the Egyptian and Greek beliefs and the gravestones that carried the impressions of the Ancient Egyptian Art such as the

<sup>7</sup> - عبدالفتاح مصطفى غنيمه، المتاحف والمعارض والقصور، القاهرة، 1990، ص 48.

ankh sign as well as the gravestones found in Apollo area, or some deities as Horus and Anubis.

The Third Period: It extended from the 4th century AD until the 9th century AD. Scholars classified this period as the most flourishing periods of the Coptic Art, especially the first period in which monasteries and churches spread all over Egypt.

The Fourth Period: It extended from the 9th century to the middle of the 10th century when Islam began to spread and the principles of the previous rules of art changed because Islam forbids pictures.

The Fifth Period: It extended from the middle of the 11th century until the end of 16th century. This was the period after the advent of Ayyubids to Egypt. These included ceasing to depict people, animals, scenes of dances or singing<sup>8</sup>.

The Sixth Period: It was the period that started from the end of 16th century until the 19th century. a few number of unskillful artists only remained in Egypt and this led to the deterioration of the Coptic Art as it did not improve until the end of this period in the era of Muhammad Ali when the country began to enjoy stability and with the advent of the Armenian artists to Egypt. In

<sup>8</sup> - سمير فوزى جرجس، حشمت مسيحة، مورييس أسعد، الآثار والفنون والعمارة القبطية، الطبعة الأولى، المجلد الثالث، دار القديس يوحنا الحبيب للنشر، القاهرة، 1995، ص 18:17.



addition, there were an active movement in copying books bearing Islamic decorations and phrases. For example, one of the Gospels of that period (Fig.2) found having the word "Mushaf ". In addition, some gospels started with the phrase (BesmIllah Al-Raouf Al-Rahim)<sup>9</sup>.



**Fig.2**  
A Manuscript of a Gospel, Coptic Museum,  
جمال هرمينا، مدخل إلى تاريخ الفن القبطي، ص 19.

<sup>9</sup> - صليب جمال رمزي، كنيسة أبي سيفين الأثرية، مطبعة الأنبا رويس، القاهرة، 2002، ص 38.

- جمال هرمينا، مدخل إلى تاريخ الفن القبطي، تقديم عبدالحليم نور الدين، الجزء الأول، دار الكتب، القاهرة، 2011، ص 14:13.

## Style of drawing in Coptic Art

The Coptic Art affected by the Ancient Egyptian Art, and it appeared in the style of the drawing in the use of some styles like tempera technique, it is about to add the egg yolk to color, and that in several Coptic pictures and painting. Also drawing with wax and on wood that used in the Fayum Portraits (Fig.3)<sup>10</sup>. This is clearly shown in this drawing as it is carried out on wood using wax and there is a difference between men and women as the woman is depicted with black short fine hair hanging down on both sides. She has light eyebrow and wide black eyes looking deeply forward.

As for the man, he was depicted with short black curly hair, heavy eyebrows and wide brown eyes looking also deeply forward. However, the artist depicted man slightly larger size than the size of woman may be to show man's strength side over woman.

<sup>10</sup> -Wessel , K., Coptic Art , Mcg Raw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1965, P.171. -Lorelei, H., Portrait mummies from Roman Egypt, Chicago,1995, PP. 35-36.



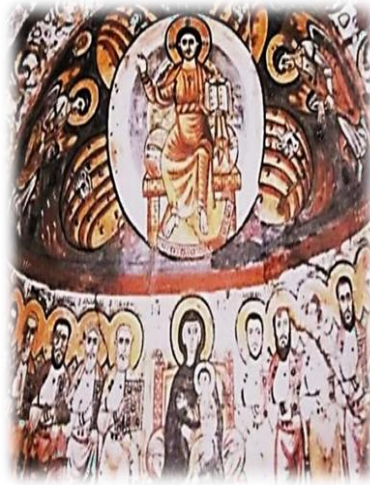
(Fig.3)  
Male and female portrait,  
ناصر الأنصارى، محسنة عطية، الفن القبطى فى مصر، ص 150.

There were two methods used in wall paintings before the Coptic period and that was in the Greco Roman Era remained until the 12th century using by the Copts, the first one is tempera method, and the second method is fresco<sup>11</sup>.

Wall paintings appeared in two basic forms as follows:-

- A- The first was painting on apses (niches), like as which was found in Baweit Church and was later transported to the Coptic Museum (Fig.4).

<sup>11</sup> - عزت قادوس، تاريخ عام الفنون، الإسكندرية، 2002، ص 369.



(Fig.4)  
A Niche, Baweit, Coptic  
Museum,  
جلا أبو بكر، الفنون القبطية، ص 82.

It is colorful, made of clay and painted with lime. The upper part depicts Christ surrounded by four creatures, i.e., the symbols of the four evangelists. They are the man who symbolizes the Apostle Matthew, the lion which symbolizes St. Mark, the eagle that symbolizes St. John and the calf which symbolizes the Apostle Luke. To the right and left, one can see heads of the Archangel Michael and Gabriel bending in reverence and respect in front of Christ who appears on his fire wheel in his heavenly journey, in which the Coptic artist adopted the Ancient Egyptian belief of the god Ra in his journey in the sun boats. All the apostles hold in their hands the Holy Bible and their names are

inscribed over them in Coptic. In the lower part, one can see the Virgin Mary carrying the Child Jesus surrounding from both sides with twelve Disciples of Jesus Christ. The Coptic artist depicted in this apse the Jesus Christ in his young age with black hair, eyes, chin and mustache. One can see the holy golden halo around his head. He puts on a golden long robe and golden pallium over it as well<sup>12</sup>. Jesus Christ appears giving wisdom with his right hand and carrying the Bible in his left. The four apostles appear around him in white robes and golden palliums. The artist depicted their hair in black and their heads were surrounded with the holy golden haloes as well. The Virgin appears sitting on a throne with a golden footstool and above it a white pillow. She looks forward and around her head the holy golden halo. She puts on a long brown robe and a shawl covering from her head until her feet. She carries on her left thigh the Child Christ, which appears with black hair and the holy golden halo around his head. He wears a long golden robe and a gray pallium over it. In addition, he holds in his right hand the shawl of the Virgin Mary. To the left and right of the Virgin, the Disciples surrounded by the golden halo outlined with external black frame. The artist depicted some of them with

Braun, J., The Catholic encyclopedia, Vol 11, Robert Appleton company, <sup>12</sup> New York, 2016, P. 432.

black eyes, chin and mustache while others with gray beard and mustache to show their old age. All put on long gray robe and white or golden palliums over it. Moreover, they all appear looking forward<sup>13</sup>.

B - The second shape referred to the wall paintings, such as the narrative of Adam and Eve transmitted from Umm Al-Buraighat Church in Fayoum that can be watched currently in the Coptic Museum (Fig.5)<sup>14</sup>.

One can see Adam and Eve represented twice in the same depiction, which combines both scenes.

<sup>13</sup> - باهور لبيب، الفن القبطي، دار المعارف، القاهرة، ص 17.

<sup>14</sup> Habib, H., Al Syriany, S., Guide to ancient Coptic churches & Monasteries in Upper Egypt, Anba Roués, Cairo, 1999, p. 27.



(Fig.5)

A Wall painting, Adam and Eve before and after sin, 11 th century, Umm Al -  
Buraighat Church, Fayoum, Coptic Museum  
جلال أبو بكر، الفنون القبطية، ص 80.

To the right, we can see them in paradise, the artist depicted them naked and eating with their right hands and holding the fruits with their left. The artist drew them also with orange outer outlines and their bodies in white, and between them and to the right of Eve, the apple tree with its orange-brownish color, the same color of the body of Adam and Eve. Its leaves colored in green and bearing the fruits of apples in orange. To the left, he depicted Adam and Eve outside the Paradise hiding their private parts with leaves. Thus, in this scene, both depicted with outer brown outlines and the color of their body was bluish-white. One can see the serpent

to the right of Eve whispering in her ear. The artist depicted it with black and its eyes in orange<sup>15</sup>. He depicted Eve concealing her private parts with her right hand while putting her left on the tree which appeared in the middle between her and Adam. He also put his left hand on his private parts and his right on Eve's hand on the tree as if he wanted to stop her from eating from such a tree. As for the tree itself, it depicted in the same details like the other two trees.

Coptic paintings gone through several artistic stages formed its own character as follows:

#### The first stage:

It includes the 1st century until the 4th century that characterized by some features as follows:

A- The Egyptian effect: It is appearing clear in the Coptic works, it is the idea of resurrection and the existence of another world after death, and the funeral similarity between the Ancient Egyptian and the Christian is the existence of saint's Image with the deceased like the existence of god Anubis with the ancient Egyptian<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> - باهور لبيب، المرجع السابق، ص 20.

<sup>16</sup> - عزت قادوس، المرجع السابق، ص 327.



B- The Hellenistic element: where the Hellenistic element met in using agility and movement with realism of the Ancient Egyptian.

C- The Christian symbols: it appeared in the use of some symbols in paintings and drawings, which have certain connotations<sup>17</sup>.

#### The second stage:

It stretches from the end of the 4th century until the end of the 5th century, its important features as follows:

A- Fear of space: it led the artist cares with ornamentations in general and especially floral elements, but that was of course at the expense of the topic of the drawing itself.

B- The educational attitude: It was demonstrated in educational topics that were depicted after the spread of Christianity as an official religion and that such as the idea of the good fight the evil at the hands of the Saints.

C- The determination: it indicates that the Coptic artist is organized in depicting his topics which seemed to the audience that these ideas have been prepared before.

#### The third stage:

It includes the 6th and 7th centuries and it extends to the 8th century which Coptic Art distinguished as follows:

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Bingen, J., Hellenistic Egypt/ Monarchy/ Society/ Economy/ Culture, <sup>17</sup> Edinburgh University Press, 2002, P.247.

A- More of motifs: by using geometric ornamentations with Egyptian palms and the halo with reduction the finding of the human nature in the portrait.

B- Head not the body: the artist interested in the blessing character by demonstrating its features without the rest of body<sup>18</sup>.

C- "Theotokos" The virgin the mother: It is one of the most important subjects that were depicted by the Coptic artist. This idea dates back to Ancient Egyptian goddess Isis (Fig.6) when she was suckling her baby Horus like the virgin when she was suckling the child Christ<sup>19</sup>. The Coptic artist influenced by the Ancient Egyptian and the Christian Art, this was apparent in the presence of some of symbols, themes and shapes in the Coptic Art. The symbol in the Coptic language means gesture or mark as it is one of the verbal and non-verbal forms of expression, through which the human mind can accept or use to hide specific meanings, or extract the concepts that may be difficult to explain. Thus, it is a means of understanding and expression as well<sup>20</sup>.

Wahba, Z., Icons/ Their history and spiritual significance, The Orchard, <sup>18</sup>  
Washington DC, 1993, P.3.

Clayton, A., P., The Complete Pharaohs/ The Reign- By- Reign Record of <sup>19</sup>  
The Rulers and Dynasties of Ancient Egypt, Thames and Hudson Ltd,  
London, 2006, P.217.

<sup>20</sup> - جرجس داود، الرموز ورمزية في الفن القبطي، جريدة وطني، 2008، عدد 2425.

Symbols were used in the Christian Art in order to conceal the Roman hostile political situation in the period in which it was a must to follow the emperor's religion. They were used also to find an accepted symbol within a particular group. Thus, symbols became well-known and that was the purpose that allowed the symbols of paganism to express the content of the then new doctrine and go with them hand in hand throughout history, regardless of the novelty or oldness of the symbol<sup>21</sup>.



(Fig.6)

**The Reliefs on the Roman Mammisi (Birth House) Dendra, "Isis suckles her son Horus", Clayton, A., The Complete Pharaohs, P.217.**

<sup>21</sup>- جرجس داود، المرجع السابق.

Christians were treated a long their history with many persecutions which enforced them in the early Christian days to hold their meetings secretly as many of these meetings were held in basements, caves and even among the graves. Therefore, the Christians were in need to get to know what is known nowadays as the (password) and they preferred it to be a painted form not an uttered word. Many of these depictions were found on the walls of the catacombs and basements where they used to meet as the individual used to paint it as an indication that he was a member of the group. Therefore, these symbols and signs were integral parts of Christianity<sup>22</sup>.

Monks and non-monks of the artists used to depict scenes representing the Bible incidents. The monasteries libraries had much of these symbols that adorn the ancient manuscripts. It was natural to find these artists depicting these incidents from various points of view. However, some were realistic as they were restricted to depict the main characters of the narrative. On the contrary, some were imaginative and added of his imagination to the narrative, some used symbols of (plants, animals and birds) to

<sup>22</sup> - لبيب يعقوب صليب، الفن القبطي المصري في العصر اليوناني والروماني، الجزء الأول، القاهرة، 1964، ص 26.

express their ideas, and others mixed the past with the present reality<sup>23</sup>.

### conclusion

Egypt suffered, in the past, the invasions of foreign kings such as the Hyksos, Persians, Ptolemies, Romans and Byzantines. So, it was natural for Egypt to be influenced by the civilization of any of these invading Peoples as the case of any occupied country. However, the Egyptian civilization did not fade away or weaken in front of the civilizations of these Peoples but it influenced them and added to them its inherent features and unique character.

For example, the Temple of Karnak had many signs and traces of what the kings of foreign rulers established to adopt the manifestations of the Pharaohs in an imitation of the Pharaonic actions and manifestations. After the advent of Christianity to Egypt, the Egyptians used these temples as places of worship by adding some buildings and wall murals depicting their own religion. Another evidence of the consolidation and deep-rooting of the Coptic Art was that the art itself was influenced by the Egyptian environment where it emerged as it inspired from the land of Egypt and its people its ideas and methods. It was the folk art of the Egyptian peoples to the extent that it became the best

<sup>23</sup> - سعاد لطفى ، الرمزية فى الفن القبطى، مجلة إبداع، 2013، عدد 3236.

expressive means of the Egyptian life at that time Finally, after the Coptic art adopted many themes from the Ancient Egyptian and influenced by him, it added new impressions to be an art of its own. It remained as such until the 10th century until the features of the Islamic Art emerged.

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