

ST MARY THROUGH AN ICONOGRAPHERS EYE



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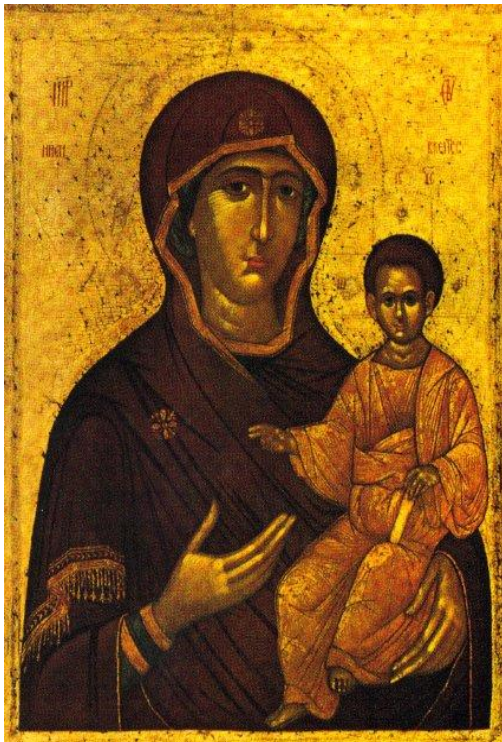
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HISTORY & BACKGROUND OF ICONOGRAPHY

Christian iconography did not begin a few centuries ago, but it began way back in the 1st century AD when the cloth was put on the face of Christ by Nicodimus and Joseph of Arimathea when they were burying him in the new tomb. This cloth without a doubt would have left on it an imprint of at least the blood of our savior who was scourged and whipped severely – a divine- human image.

However iconography never took off until the early church faced a great predicament in that many of the pagan believers who were coming new into the Christian faith were illiterate and at best not able to comprehend the deep theology of the early church.

To combat this, the early church took up iconography as a way of teaching believers about the faith in order to help pagans understand biblical teachings and spiritual meanings as well as historical events that took place in the history of the church.



So in essence the use of icons was allowed by the church leaders to help the assimilation of the pagans to Christianity.

The most notable iconographer of the 1st century AD was by far St Luke the evangelist who by profession was a doctor and artist. This is very visible in his works as he often describes the scene very well adding minute details that the other gospel writers do not include.

His prominent works include the following

1. Icon of St Mary Mother of God
2. Icon of St Peter & St Paul
3. Icon of Archangel Michael found in the cathedral of Alexandria

However this early era of iconography did not last long as the persecution of Christians intensified dramatically. It is documented that St Luke was hung from the neck on an olive tree at the age of 84. This shows the ferocious nature of persecution.

As a result Christianity went underground for a period, however iconography was not forgotten and covert symbols began to come into being amongst believers.



The Symbol of the fish well known today had its origins in the creed of the early church. The creed in Greek was “Isos Christos Theo Ios Sotir”, translated, “Jesus

Christ Son of God our Savior". However if we take the 1st letter of each of these words we end up with ICTIS, this is the Greek word for Fish. As a result the fish had a deep meaning and anyone drawing it declared the creed of faith.

As persecution continued, icons were destroyed or hidden. It wasn't until King Constantine converted to Christianity after the defeat of the great Emperor Maxentius, that iconography came into its own form. Icons would be written and placed in worshippers of homes and it wasn't until the decree issued by Pope Cyril the 24th (404-430AD) also known as the "Pillar of Faith" that icons were allowed into the patriarchate and churches of Egypt.

Before we continue we need to understand what an icon is as this will allow us to explore the iconoclastic controversy that would arise in the 8th century.

An icon is an image which leads the believer to become a Holy, God Pleasing person; it raises us up to heaven. It evokes a feeling of repentance, compunction and prayer - A feeling that one must bow down before the icon in reverence. It is simply a glimpse into heaven.

Icons remind us of the spiritual aspect of the person rather than the pain they endured. It is very true indeed that in Coptic iconography struggle or war is never portrayed. However what is portrayed is how the Saint attained a state of saintliness on Earth.

To venerate icons one must understand the following crucial points;

1. We do not venerate the icon or artwork itself, but rather the event or person it portrays.
2. Icons are a spiritual window, used to communicate difficult spiritual matters.
3. Their aim is to put us into a prayerful and repentant frame of mind.
4. They may portray events in the bible or history, again the aim is to give Glory to God.
5. We do not worship the saint, but rather the Holy Spirit in them.

This is a sound understanding that is required by believers who bow down and kiss the icons that surround the church.

However as the 8th century approach a great debate arose among Christians who wanted icons abolished based on the command found in Exodus 20:4-5;

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me."

This movement led by the likes of people such as "Lawon el Safry" and his followers began to destroy many icons of the churches.

However it wasn't until the 7th ecumenical council in Nicea where discussions took place about the controversy.

Two prominent theologians,

- St John of Damascus (675-749AD)
- St Theodore of Studios (759-826AD)

Vigorously defended the use and placement of icons in the churches, and if understood correctly did not constitute worshipping idols. As a result of their defense the council decreed in the year 787AD the validity of icons.

It is interesting to draw parallels with this controversy and the invasion of many of the Christian Holy Places by Muslims. It is without a doubt that the island idea that worshipping images is forbidden affected and swayed some of the Christians of the time, who rose against the use of icons in their own churches.

COPTIC Vs BYZANTINE ART

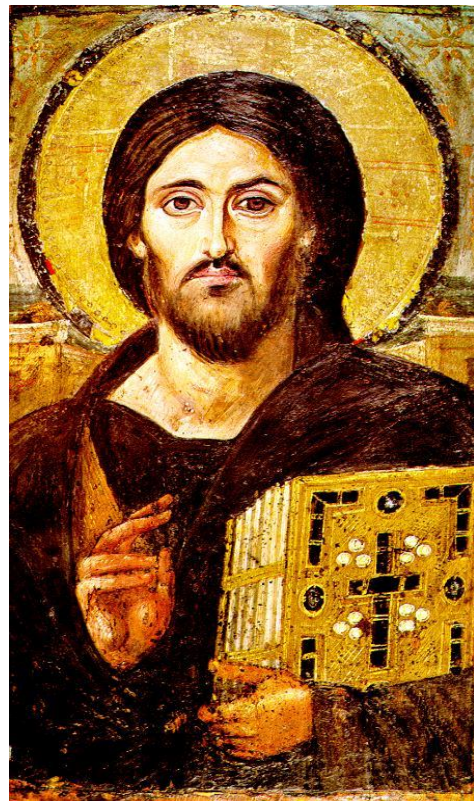
Coptic art refers to art that came out of Egypt.

Byzantine art refers to art that came out of the Byzantine Empire from about the 4th century until the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. The empire covered countries such as Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Serbia & Russia.

A Major difference between Coptic & Byzantine art, is that Coptic art never depicts hell but always focuses on heaven



Coptic



Byzantine

THE USE OF COLOUR IN COPTIC ICONOGRAPHY

Gold

Enables the feeling of the radiant light of God and the splendor of the celestial kingdom where there is never any night. Gold symbolized the divine nature of God himself.

Purple

Purple, or crimson, was a color very important in Byzantine culture and not so much in Coptic icons; however some icons do use purple. This is the color of the Celestial King and the Byzantine emperor. Only the Byzantine emperor could sign edicts in purple ink and sit in glory upon a purple throne, and it was only he who wore purple clothing and boots - for all others it was strictly forbidden. The leather or wood bindings of the Gospel in churches were sometimes covered with purple cloth. This color is sometimes present in icons on the clothing of the Mother of God - the Celestial Queen.

Further purple was the colour of the robe put on Christ during the Passion.

Red

Red is one of the most frequently used colors in icons. This is the color of heat, passion, love, life and life-giving energy, and for this very reason red became the symbol of the resurrection - the victory of life over death. But at the same time it is the color of blood and torments, and the color of Christ's sacrifice.

Martyrs are depicted in red clothing on icons. Sometimes icons were painted with a red background as a symbol of the celebration of eternal life.

White

White is the symbol of the heavenly realm and God's divine light. This is the color of cleanliness, purity, holiness and simplicity. On icons and frescoes, saints and righteous people are usually depicted clothed in white as righteous ones - people who were good, honest, and lived by "the Truth." In the same manner, white was used in the swaddling bands of babies, and the robes of angels. Only righteous souls were depicted as wearing white

Dark-Blue and Blue

Dark-blue and blue indicate the infiniteness of the sky and is the symbol of another everlasting world. Dark blue was considered the color of the Mother of God who combines in herself both the terrestrial and celestial. The backgrounds of icons dedicated to the Mother of God are filled with a celestial dark blue.

Green

Green is the color of natural, living things. It is the color of grass and leaves, youth, flowering, hope, and eternal renovation. Ancient iconographers often painted the earth green to denote where life began - such as in scenes of the Annunciation and the Nativity. Also green is symbolic of evil as Satan is the prince of this world. Refer to adjacent icon

Brown

Brown is the color of the bare earth, dust, and all that is transient and perishable. Used in combination with the royal purple clothing of the Mother of God, this color reminds one of her human nature, which was subject to death. This again is common in Byzantine art and not so in Coptic art.

Black

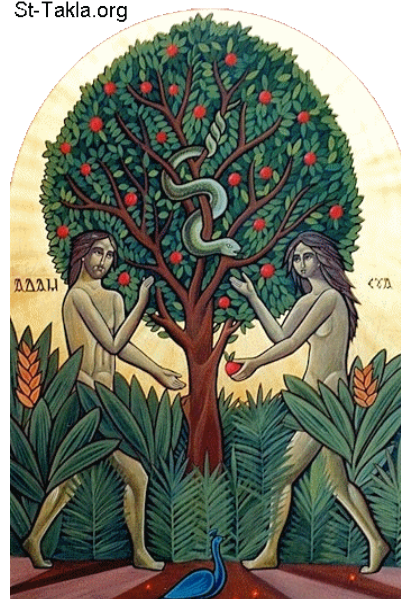
Black is the color of evil and death. In iconography, caves were painted with the color black as a symbol of humankind's grave and the gaping infernal abyss. In some subjects this was also the color of mystery. The black robes of monks, who have left the path of worldly life, are a symbol of their eschewing the pleasures and habits they formerly kept, and dying a death toward this way of life.

Colours Not Used in Iconography

Grey

A color that was never used in iconography is grey. When mixing black and white together, iniquity and righteousness, it becomes the color of vagueness, the color of the void and nonexistence. There was no place for this color in the radiant world of the icon. Simply no Luke warmth.

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COPTIC ICONS OF ST MARY



ICON 1



ICON 2

ICON 3



SYMBOLISM IN THE ICONS OF ST MARY – “MOTHER OF GOD”

LARGE WIDE EYES

- Not anatomically symmetrical – Symbolic of a spiritual eye that looks behind the material world.
- Mat 6:22 "The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light."

LARGE EARS

- Symbolises attentive listening to the word of God.
- Mark 4:23 *"If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."*

GENTLE LIPS

- Symbolises glorification and praise to the lord.
- Psalm 63:5 *"My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips"*.

SMALL MOUTH

- Symbolises how the saint controlled his mouth, which is often the source of empty and harmful words.
- James 1:19 *"So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath"*

SMALL NOSE

- Symbolic of sensuality, represents desire.

LARGE HEADS

- Symbolic of the person having devoted his life to prayer and contemplation

NO WOUNDS

- All will be raised spiritual and glorified bodies. This is visible in the icon of St Samuel the confessor, who on earth was blind in one eye, but in heaven he had both his eyes. The pope will not consecrate an icon which shows a body deformed.

CHILD JESUS IN LEFT HAND

- Reminds us of the verse Psalm 45:9 *"Kings' daughters are among Your honorable women; At Your right hand stands the queen in gold from Ophir"*.

ST MARY RIGHT HAND ON CHRIST

- St Mary is showing us the way to salvation, it can only occur through her son.

SHAPE OF ST MARY'S HAND

- Further the way her hand is shaped, tells us that she is interceding for all of creation, for in her hands she contains the uncontained GOD, master of Heaven and Earth.

THE SCROLL

- Jesus was the only one that was worthy to loose the scrolls in the book of Revelation
- Symbolic of the universe Job 9:8 *"He alone spreads out the heavens, And treads on the waves of the sea"*
- The Book of Life,
- The true teacher, the way the truth and the life.

ONE FINGER ON JESUS LEFT HAND

- Symbolises the unity of the trinity as one God.
- Blessing the people

ICON 1: ANGELS HOLDING INSTRUMENTS OF PASSION

- Spear, Wine & Cross
- Michael & Gabriel
- In Byzantine art they hold these instruments using veils, as a sign of reverence in handling sacred objects.

JESUS HAS AN ADULT FACE and HIGH EYEBROW

- Demonstrates Jesus' Divine mind with infinite Intelligence

ST MARY'S FACE IS YOUTHFUL

- Unspeakable Majesty
- Calm

EYES ARE PARTLY CLOSED ON ST MARY

- Expresses ineffable sorrow and sympathy

ST MARY LOOKS AWAY FROM JESUS - IN ICON 1 & 2

- She is pondering on the events that are happening in her heart
- She may also be looking at us her adopted children as if to express compassion for us in our own fears and sorrows.

ST MARY HAS 3 STARS

- Symbolise her Virginity, Before, during and After the birth of Christ
- The stars have 8 points, and were used by Vikings to refract light and became a source of navigation, so it's as if St Mary is showing us the way, navigating us to Salvation through Her Son.

BLUE SEAT - ICON 3

- This icon became popular after the Council of Nicea which affirmed that St Mary was the Mother of God.
- The blue seat is symbolic of the 2nd heaven.

ST MARY WEARS A RED UNDERCOAT and DARK BLUE OVERCOAT

- The red undercoat symbolises her royalty -> Psalm 45:13 *"The royal daughter is all glorious within the palace; Her clothing is woven with gold"*.
- Further the red symbolises the divinity that was inside her, and the blue symbolises the humanity.
- Moreover if you mix the red and blue, you get the colour of purple which is the colour of royalty.

JESUS IS WEARING WHITE WITH A RED ROBE

- The white resembles his divinity and purity
- The red is symbolic of his blood that was shed
- Appears like a lamb

JESUS LOOKS AWAY FROM US - ICONS 1 & 2

- Shows the world that his kingdom is not of this world.
- John 18:36 *"Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.'"*

THE HALOS

- All the saints have a golden halo, whereas Jesus has a cross in his. Reflects the light that is radiating from within

GROOVE AROUND THE HALO

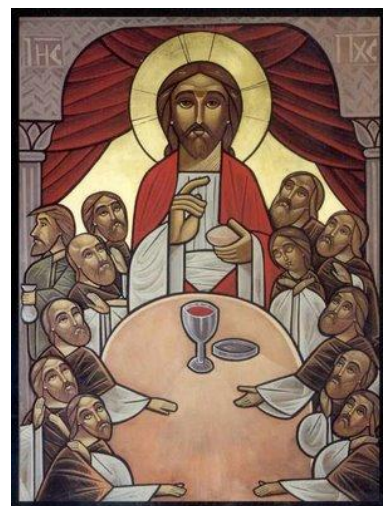
- The Gap between Earth and Heaven shows that the Saints have made heaven, earth and earth, heaven.

TWO EYES

- In these icons, the depicted have two eyes, which symbolises purity and holiness. Shows that the depicted is not embarrassed or ashamed from anything. The one who is ashamed of his sins, faults and mistakes always hides his face and his eyes. This is seen in the icon of the last supper where Judas is always drawn with one eye.

DRAWN IN PROFILE

- The depicted are looking straight ahead. This is not the same when evil is being drawn as shown in the last supper with Judas, who is drawn side on because it is not worthwhile to focus or make eye contact with such a person.



DARK TO LIGHT PAINTING

- The artist always lays the dark colours 1st, followed by the lighter colours. This is symbolic of the enlightenment that took place in the depicted event. The spiritual life, start small grow big.

JESUS IS DRAWN NOT THE FATHER

- God the Father is never represented in any icon, but Jesus is represented because He came to us in the form of a man in His incarnation,

The following verses indicate why this is the case.

- *“To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him” (Isaiah 40:18)*
- *“No one has beheld God at any time” (1 John 4:12)*
- *“No man has seen God at any time, the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 1:18)*
- *“Who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, Whom no man has seen or can see”(1 Timothy 6:16)*
- *“you can’t see My face, for no man can see Me and live”(Exodus 33:20)*
- *“Not that any man has seen the Father, except the One Who is from God, He has seen the Father”(John 6:46)*

BYZANTINE ART – Icon of the MOTHER OF GOD



In the byzantine icon a few additions are made

SANDLE IS LOOSED

- Symbolises the prophecy of ST John the Baptist
 - Mark 1:7 *"And he preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose."*
- Some iconographers also attempt to show the humanity of Jesus, by showing him with ankles around each other symbolizing nervousness in that he has just run to his mother after being frightened, and in the process he has lost his sandal. This is heightened by the clasping of hands and the touching of cheeks

Conclusion

Let us not forget that icons are there to enrich our spiritual lives, they encompass deep and spiritual meanings, they provide valuable lessons in theology and of more importance they are glimpse of what awaits the true believers in heaven.

When you see an icon, try and meditate on the various aspects we have discussed above mainly the following,

1. What it means to worship the icon.
2. What colours represent and mean.
3. The story or event that is depicted and how it relates to our spiritual lives.
4. The symbols that are used and what they mean, what is the icon trying to teach me.

Never forget an icon is supposed to make you feel repentant and put you in a state of readiness for prayer.

Finally as is tradition in our Coptic Orthodox Church, they are consecrated with the Holy Myron, which sanctifies the icon with the Holy Spirit.

This is an extreme honour that we often take lightly, the Holy Spirit, brings life to the icon. The events, biblical teachings and spiritual meanings are all brought to life.

As a result when we pray to the icon, we indeed are asking for the Holy Spirit, to work through the saints to perform our intercessions.

To kiss an icon does not mean to worship the saint, far from it, we are taking the blessings of the Holy Spirit who has sanctified the Icon.

With correct understanding, icons truly are indeed a glimpse of Heaven on Earth.