

ICONS, COPTIC

Holy panel paintings of Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints, or subjects from the Old and New Testaments. The word icon is derived from the Greek word *eikon*, meaning “image” or “portrait.” Icons are [symbols](#) of the invisible presence of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. They are the connection between the church on earth and the church in heaven. There is a direct contact between the believer and the saint, who is visible through the conventional style in which the icon is painted. Icon painters avoided realism and three-dimensionality in order to create a metaphysical reality. The veneration shown by believers in touching and kissing icons and kneeling before them is directed to the saint depicted on the icon. The believer asks the saint to exercise his beneficent power or act as an intermediary between the believer and God.

In Coptic churches, icons are placed on top of or hung on the iconostasis, the wall that separates the nave from the sanctuary. They play an important role during the service, especially on festal days.

Icons are generally painted on flat pieces of wood covered by a layer of gesso. The first icons were painted in either encaustic (hot wax) or egg tempera, but later tempera became customary.

Early History

Although it has often been suggested that the mummy portraits of Egypt, also painted in encaustic and tempera, influenced icon painting, other objects are more likely to have influenced icon painting, for example, painted panels of the pagan [gods](#) Isis and Sarapis or soldier-deities, dating to the second and third centuries A.D. Other possible influences are ancestor portraits belonging to rich citizens and images of famous mortals honored by religious sects. The second-century church father Irenaeus described a custom of the Carpocratians, a [Gnostic](#) sect: they venerated the portraits of Christ, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Simon

Magus (Irenaeus *Adversus omnes Haereses* 1. 25. 6; 123, 4). In the Roman Empire, portraits of the emperor were hung in public buildings and were, even in Christian times, a legal object of veneration. Consuls obtained the right to have their portraits made at their inauguration; newly appointed abbots and bishops also had this right. The bishops' portraits were hung in their diocese and at the end of their episcopate were destroyed. *Eulogia* (loaves of bread that are blessed but not consecrated), with a representation of a saint depicted on them, were taken home by returning pilgrims; these also might have influenced icon painting.

No written sources about icons are known from the [apostolic](#) period. The first source, dated to the middle of the second century, is an [apocryphal](#) story about the life of John the Evangelist (*Acts of John* 26-29).

Early sources speaking about the veneration of images condemn this custom. The Synod of Elvira in Spain in 306 issued a prohibition against placing icons in churches. During the third and fourth centuries the arguments for and against the use of icons were more accurately formulated, which gave rise to heated controversy. Two [parties](#) can be distinguished: The adversaries of icons feared that icons themselves would be venerated instead of the saints depicted on them; they thought that only the Lamb and the cross were permissible symbols. The advocates of icons denied that people venerated the icons themselves; they venerated only the person. They emphasized the didactic value of the icons for those who were unable to read.

From the sixth century onward, references to icons become more frequent. Sources mention that icons hung in the houses of believers and in churches and that they were taken on journeys for protection. *Akheiropoieta*, icons said not to have been made by human hands, appeared in the Byzantine world, and believers maintained that their divine origin made their existence legitimate. The debates between the adversaries (iconoclasts) and the advocates (iconodules) about the use of

icons became more violent and resulted in Emperor [Leo III](#) issuing an edict in 726 that caused all images to be destroyed. Two periods of iconoclasm (726-787 and 815-843) in the Byzantine empire followed. As Egypt and the [Sinai](#) peninsula were not under the jurisdiction of the Byzantine emperor, they escaped the devastating consequences of this edict. After the iconoclastic period, a strict system of icon painting was introduced in the Byzantine world; icons were to be painted according to certain stylistic rules. Countries outside the borders of the empire, like Egypt, however, maintained their freedom in icon painting. Their iconography was not bound to certain rules.

Icons of the Fifth to Seventh Centuries

No icons from the [apostolic](#) period or the immediately succeeding centuries are preserved. The oldest icons are from the Monastery of Saint [Catherine](#) in Sinai, from Egypt, and from Rome. A number of icons exist from the fifth to seventh centuries. They are all on small panels and are painted in encaustic or tempera, sometimes on a stucco ground. The figures are in a more or less frontal position and are heavily outlined, avoiding realism. Several, notably Bishop Abraham in the State Museum of Berlin and Christ and the abbot Saint Menas the Miracle Maker in the Louvre, Paris, show Coptic characteristics: the figures are squat with large heads in proportion to the body and wide open, staring eyes. They resemble figures in murals of the period in Dayr Apa Jeremiah, Saqqara, and Dayr Apa Apollo, Bawit.

There are two icons of Christ, one on a small tondo (a circular medallion) and a Christ Emmanuel on a fragment, probably from the Fayyum (Strzygowski, 1901, pp. 195-97, pl. 34).

Icons of archangels are in the National Library, Paris, in the Froehner Collection; on a tondo in the Coptic Museum; on part of a two-sided panel probably from Bawit in the Coptic Museum; and on a fragment from Antinoopolis (Roberts, 1938, pp. 188-91, pl. 2). An angel, probably part of

a triptych, is in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and a flying angel holding part of a garland is in the Coptic Museum.

An icon of Saint Theodorus and a female saint, probably from the Fayyum, was in the State Museum of Berlin but is now lost. Saint Theodorus the Oriental, part of a two-sided panel, probably from Bawit, is in the Coptic Museum. A saint from a church near Wadi Halfa is in the National Museum, Khartoum. Seven saints from a necropolis near [Antinoopolis](#) are in the Coptic Museum, Cairo, and in the Archaeological Museum, Florence. Dayr Apa Apollo has yielded a fragment showing Apa Hor.

A panel of the abbot and bishop Abraham of Luxor, in the State Museum of Berlin, can be accurately dated 590-600. Christ and Saint Menas in the Louvre is the largest icon at about 26 x 26 inches (57 x 57 cm). A scene of the birth and baptism of Christ is in the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

Later History

Although no icons from the period between the seventh and the seventeenth centuries have withstood the ravages of time, the HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS makes reference to the existence of icons in this period. Most stories refer to appearances of the saints depicted on the icons to the benefit of the believers. Apart from the deliberate destruction of churches and their contents, there are other reasons for the lack of icons in this period. Icons, when they were old and broken and therefore valueless, were used as fuel in the fire to prepare the holy chrism. Also, there might have been occasional outbreaks of iconoclasm during which icons were destroyed. (In a relatively recent case, in 1854, Patriarch CYRIL IV gathered many icons and publicly burned them because too much veneration was given to them.)

Few icons from the seventeenth century remain. The eighteenth century,

by contrast, witnessed an enormous production of icon painting. Large quantities of eighteenth-century icons can be found in the churches throughout Egypt. The majority are signed by Ibrahim al-Nasikh and Yuhanna al-Armani al-Qudsi, and many painters were influenced by their style. The figures depicted on the icons are heavily outlined and have oval faces with large, almond-shaped eyes. Because of some differences in style and quality among the icons signed by these two painters and because of the enormous production, it is likely that Ibrahim and Yuhanna were the [leading](#) painters of an icon workshop. Inscriptions in Arabic and Coptic give information about the theme depicted or the identity of the saint and occasionally reveal the place of origin of the icon and the name of the person who commissioned it. A formula of intercession is often present: "Lord recompense in Your Kingdom of Heaven him who toiled." The Coptic and [Islamic](#) dates on the icons correspond with the second half of the eighteenth century.

The painter ASTASI AL-[RUMI](#) al-Qudsi was responsible for the larger part of the icon production in the middle of the nineteenth century. Characteristic of his work are vivid colors and round faces with features resembling those painted by Ibrahim and Yuhanna. The inscriptions are limited to Arabic but give the same information as earlier. Favorite subjects are the Virgin Mary with Child, *hodigitria* (guides), and soldier-saints, as well as biblical themes and local saints. Although the icons were probably painted in Egypt and were meant for Coptic churches, the question arises if these icons can be called Coptic, since many of them show similarities with Melchite icon painting. Others were brought from the Levant or painted by Levantine artists in Egypt. Yuhanna al-Armani al-Qudsi was probably an Armenian from Jerusalem, as his name suggests. Icon painting in Egypt has to be studied in relation with Levantine painting.

Nowadays icon painting is widely practiced. Well known painters are Isaac Fanous, Yusuf Nasif, and his wife, Budur Latif. Many monks paint icons for Coptic churches.

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