

MONASTERY PAINTINGS, COPTIC

The [Egyptian desert](#) was a nurturing ground for monasteries, some of which have been occupied almost continuously since their founding. Others, abandoned and buried in sand through the centuries, have been uncovered only in recent years. Still, others, mentioned in Arabic texts or in accounts of European travelers, await excavation.

Those monasteries occupied at present are those in Wadi al- Natrun, in the Western Desert, the Monastery of Upper Sa'id, and DAYR ANBA BULA in the Eastern Desert. They actually reveal very little information concerning their primitive decor. The monastery churches, extensively decorated, have undergone many alterations and repairs. Their paintings are juxtaposed or superimposed, and often only the most recent stages are now visible. The cells and common buildings have conserved but few painted items, which are barely perceptible to the naked eye.

In those compounds abandoned between the ninth and twelfth centuries, the situation is reversed; there is little information about the churches but an abundance of data about the other buildings (e.g., see KELLIA, ABU MINA, DAYR APA JEREMIAH, BAWIT, and ISNA). A few general observations may be made. The paintings are placed in the same edifices: churches, common rooms such as the refectory at the Monastery of [Saint Jeremiah](#) at Saqqara, and the monks' cells. In the beginning, a cell comprised at least a vestibule, an oratory, and a dwelling room. Most often the floor was covered only with plaster, but in rare instances, a carpet design was painted in dark red (there are numerous examples at Kellia). The majority of the paintings were to be found in the vestibule and, above all, in the oratory.

Everywhere the wall decoration is distributed in two registers. The lower register (approximately 3 feet [1 m] high) may simply be painted with a uniform layer of dark red, occasionally topped with a band of geometric and/or floral motifs. In other cases, the lower register consists of a

succession of [frames](#) painted with lines or dots, whose design is reminiscent of stone, marble, or porphyry, such as those at Abu Jirja in MAREOTIS and at Kellia. Or they are composed of skillful arrangements of geometric forms imitating intarsia (inlaid work) as in Saqqara and Bawit. The subjects are thereby related to those that decorate mosaic pavings in North Africa and Syria: birds within squares and/or segments of circles (Abu Jirja, Kellia), mattings (Kellia, '[ALAM SHALTUT](#)'), plaited crowns ('Alam Shaltut), or sets of intertwined geometric designs (Saqqara, Bawit).

The upper register portrays human figures: monks, hermits, and founders of monasteries; saints (mainly local); and occasionally biblical scenes. It is the choice of motifs that gives each site its originality.

The composition in two registers is directly descended from the Greco-Roman world. In Egypt such examples are to be found at Tunah al-Jabal and Luxor, where above the base, which evokes intarsia, scenes from pharaonic or Greek mythology (at Tunah) or from Roman life (at Luxor) are depicted.

The eastern wall of the cell is pierced with niches, often three in number. The smaller, or secondary, niches contained liturgical objects and were most often left undecorated. The larger, principal niche was emphasized by pillars or columns that supported an archivolt that was sculpted, or stuccoed and painted. Inside this niche were depicted special themes, objects of devotion, and cult objects of the cell's inhabitant.

Isna

In the hermitages of Isna, the ornamentation is simple, homogeneous, and very limited in the choice of subjects. At times a dark red stripe outlines the angles of the rooms and the contours of the doors, windows, stairs, and niches. These niches may be emphasized by motifs, either floral or geometric (torsades mainly). On the walls and inside the niches,

numerous crosses were painted—Greek, Latin, straight, or potent enclosed in circles. The arms of these crosses were occasionally ornamented with garlands or torsades. Classical subjects were also depicted in the paleo-Christian art: birds face-to-face (peacocks and doves mostly) and, more rarely, boats. Personages also adorn the walls: pagan figures (dancing girls, soldiers, desert animals sometimes grappling with a man); founders of monasteries (Paul, Saint MACARIUS THE GREAT, JEREMIAH, Abu Mina); famous monks (Paphnutius, Moses); illustrious saints (Victor, Phoibamon, George); as well as the Virgin and seraphim. The eastern niches basically contain crosses and birds facing each other.

Kellia

At Kellia, extremely varied and abundant flora and fauna fill the walls. There are also cavaliers, boats, and most frequently, crosses of all types: simple, with torsades, studded with precious stones, bearing garlands, unadorned or framed by birds, and even occasionally accompanied by a boat. Note that all these crosses have one point in common—the staff upon which they rise; they are all processional crosses. The personages derive most often from Christian iconography (Pantokrator, saints, monks) and sometimes from the pagan world (a god, river, warrior).

[Dayr Apa Jeremiah](#)

At [Dayr Apa Jeremiah](#) at Saqqara, monks and local saints, among whom are the founders of the monastery (Paphnutius, ONOPHRIOS, Saint Macarius, Alexandrinus, APOLLO OF BAWIT), constitute the basic mural decoration. However, one should also note the presence of a boat, the virtues of the spirit, crosses, and the theme of the three Hebrews in the furnace. Biblical themes are extremely rare at Saqqara. Along with the three Hebrews, however, the sacrifice of Abraham, painted on one of the refectory walls, should be mentioned.

The motifs decorating the oratory niches are repeated: Virgin and Child framed by the archangels Michael and Gabriel, and occasionally by the founders; [Christ in Majesty](#) adored by angels and/or carried by bodiless beasts. These two subjects are sometimes associated, in which case [Mary](#) and Jesus are then pictured on the walls, and the [Christ in Majesty](#) in the conch of the apse.

Monastery of Apollo

At the Monastery of Apollo at Bawit, contrary to what is seen in the great monasteries described above, there are frequent scenes from the Old and New Testaments: the story of the Three Hebrews in the Furnace, the grand exploits of David, events in the life of Mary (the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity) and the life of Christ ([massacre](#) of the innocents, baptism by John the Baptist, various miracles, the Last Supper). Elsewhere in this monastery at Bawit, as at Kellia and Saqqara, various monks and saints adorn the walls, with a predilection shown for the cavalier saints (Claudius, Sisinnios, Mercury, Phoibamon).

It must also be noted that among these Christian scenes there are allegories (virtues of the spirit, seasons) as well as secular subjects (gazelle and hippopotamus hunts, and Orpheus taming the wild beasts). The oratory niches, exactly like those at Saqqara, contain the Virgin and Child and Christ in Majesty. But here at [Bawit](#) the two themes are almost always found together. Moreover, Christ is very often depicted according to the apocalyptic vision, enthroned in a chariot with fiery wheels drawn by the tetramorph (a winged figure), and the Virgin is occasionally surrounded by the Twelve Apostles. These never appear at Saqqara.

This brief survey of a few monastic institutions indicates a certain homogeneity as to the location of the paintings but also a great individuality in the choice of themes, such as the adoration of the Cross at Isna and Kellia, the [Christ in Majesty](#) and the Virgin at Saqqara and Bawit, and the numerous evocations of the Old and New Testaments at

Bawit.

As for style, monastic painting is sometimes lively, as in the hunting scenes from [Bawit](#) or the animals devoured alive from Kellia sometimes static, as in the long lines of hieratic saints. It may sometimes be elegant and sure, as with plants and clothing; sometimes rapid and schematic, as evidenced in certain boats or figures reduced to their simplest expression.

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