

## ***NUBIAN CHURCH ART***

Decoration in the earliest Nubian churches seems to have been confined to the use of sculptured capitals, lintels, and cornices of stone and of wood. Very few of these have survived intact, for after the eighth century such features were generally discarded. The specimens that have been preserved are fairly typical of early Christian church decoration. They are wrought into elaborate floral patterns of Hellenistic derivation, with only an occasional decorative cross or bird of peace to signify Christian influence.

The sculptured capitals and lintels of the early Nubian churches were probably painted as well, but there is no suggestion of [mural](#) decoration as such. At the beginning of the eighth century, however, a new and purely Christian artistic canon made its appearance in the form of brightly colored wall paintings similar to those found in early churches in Egypt. These soon became, and remained throughout the Middle Ages, the highest artistic expression of Christian Nubian civilization. After their appearance, carved decoration declined rapidly in popularity.

The earliest significant discoveries of Nubian [mural](#) art were made by F. L. GRIFFITH at FARAS and 'Abd al-Qadir. Subsequently, many more fragmentary remnants of paintings were discovered by U. MONNERET DE VILLARD in the course of his comprehensive survey of Nubian churches in the 1930s. However, it was the finding of the spectacular [murals](#) in the buried Faras cathedral (see FARAS MURALS) that ultimately drew world attention to the high development of medieval Nubian religious art. Not long afterward, additional well-preserved murals were found in the buried churches of 'ABDALLAH NIRQI in Egyptian Nubia, and at Sonqi Tino in the Sudan.

The discoveries at Faras, 'Abdallah Nirqi, and Sonqi have made it possible to reconstruct the painted designs in a great many other churches, of which only small fragments were actually preserved. All of

them corresponded closely in style and iconography, although the paintings in the smaller churches seldom matched the quality or the elaborateness of those at Faras. As a result, it is now possible to speak in general terms of a Nubian school of medieval church art.

The Nubian church does not seem to have had a rigidly prescribed program of [mural](#) decoration. However, the same or similar figures occurred in the same location in a large number of churches. The lower apse walls were generally occupied by a central figure of the Madonna and Child flanked on either side by the apostles, while the half-dome that crowned the apse in earlier Nubian churches was occupied by the colossal head and shoulders of Christ Pantocrator. There was often a nativity scene in the north aisle, a standing figure of the archangel Michael at the end of the south aisle, and a head of Christ flanked by the [symbols](#) of the four evangelists somewhere along the south wall. Cavalier saints, including the familiar figure of Saint George spearing the dragon, were another popular motif.

At least four periods of stylistic development were recognized in the painting at Faras. They were designated by Kazimierz MICHALOWSKI as the violet style (early eighth to mid-ninth century), the white style (mid-ninth to early tenth century), the red- yellow style (tenth century), and the multicolored style (eleventh and twelfth centuries). These designations reflect changing color preferences, but there were also important changes in style and iconography. The two earlier styles were characterized by rather muted colors and a sparing use of decorative detail.

The human figures were described by Weitzmann as having “straight outlines which tend to flatten the figures while at the same time their somewhat thickset proportions suggest the massive structure of their bodies, underlined by their large, almost clumsy feet and their heavy, square heads. Their faces are designed with thick and almost geometric lines and with enormously large eyes with a blank gaze” (1970, p. 327).

The later periods are characterized by brilliant colors and lavishly ornate detail in the treatment of robes, wings, and other features. The facial features are considerably more humanized and animated than in the earlier styles.

The same sequence of stylistic development was apparently characteristic of all the Nubian churches, though the multicolored style seems to have been fully developed only at Faras. Elsewhere the red-yellow style continued in vogue until the end of the Christian period, late in the fifteenth century. Some of the very late Nubian churches, such as the one at 'Abd al-Qadir, exhibited a highly simplified and somewhat degenerate style that was not represented at Faras; apparently it developed after the Faras Cathedral had already been abandoned.

Coptic influence in the Nubian paintings is very evident. It is also noticeable that most of the inscriptions accompanying the paintings are in the Coptic language, suggesting the possibility that the painters were Egyptian artisans brought in for the purpose of decorating the Nubian churches. Presumably they worked from a copy book, since there is a close and detailed, though never exact, similarity among the paintings in different parts of the country. Even so, the [mural](#) art of Nubia is not purely an imitation of the contemporary Christian art of Egypt; it also betrays influences from Palestine, Syria, and Byzantium.

A purely indigenous and realistic touch is added by the portrayal of native rulers and bishops with dark features, in contrast with the white faces of the Holy Family, saints, and archangels. In church art, as in church architecture, it appears that the Nubians assimilated and combined influences from a variety of sources, as well as adding touches of their own.

[*See also:* Nubian Christian Architecture; Nubian Archaeology, Medieval.]

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