

PAINTING, COPTIC MURAL

This article discusses painting on the walls of houses, Roman camps, tombs and funerary chapels, monasteries, and churches in Egypt from the third century to the thirteenth. For painting on panels see **ICONS**; **PORTRAITURE**.

The mural painting had a long tradition in the pharaonic period. It continued in the Coptic period, generally in the same techniques. In subject matter and style, murals in houses and palaces, as far as they are known, followed Greco-Roman traditions. Funerary murals displayed the iconography common to early Christianity everywhere. In the churches and great monastic establishments, the originality of Coptic painting was clearly evident.

Techniques

Twentieth-century excavations at Isna and Kellia have provided a more precise idea of the mural-painting techniques of Coptic artists, professional and non-professional than was hitherto available. In most instances, the paint consisted of pigment mixed in whitewash (lime and water) or with a binder such as egg or casein. It was applied to dry or slightly moistened plaster (a mixture of lime, water, and sand), which partially fused with the paint. In extremely rare instances the paint was applied while the plaster was still wet, in accordance with the true fresco technique described by the Roman architect Vitruvius. With the information available at present, it is not possible to determine whether these paintings were true frescos on intentionally wet plaster or whether they were the result of the painter's impatience for the plaster to dry.

The plaster surface supporting the paint may have been simply brushed on the wall or carefully boffeted in place. It is not known whether these two techniques date from different periods or depend on the dimensions or condition of the wall to be covered. The painters were well acquainted

with the characteristics of their materials, such as their resistance to the acid in lime and the atmosphere and the reaction of compounds with each other. They used brushes and pens of varying thickness and quality: fine brushes and pens for contour lines and sketches, thicker ones for continuous strokes, and dense brushes for filling in stencil designs or large surfaces.

In many nonrepresentational murals, it has been determined that the artist began by drawing vertical, horizontal, and oblique lines with the aid of a string probably dipped in red (or rarely black) dye. Around them, he painted vague yellow, brown, and black shapes to suggest the veins in marble. In other murals, of complex figural subjects, the artist made a sinopia (a preliminary drawing in reddish pigment) indicating the pose of a figure or the placement of the principal elements in the composition. In most cases, the strokes are clear, swift, and sure, with no sign of the artist changing his mind.

In some non-figural murals, the preparatory design was incised with a pointed instrument, as for example at Kellia, where circles were marked by a light groove and a center dot, suggesting the use of a compass. Other murals at Kellia are friezes consisting of simple [motifs](#) repeated along the whole length of the wall, suggesting the use of a stencil.

In the Roman period, murals of important subjects and in important places were carefully finished. According to Pliny they were smoothed with a flat instrument to hide the dividing lines between sections of plaster and to remove all roughness. This technique was no longer used in the Byzantine period, when, for the most part, the plaster was quickly smoothed over and then painted.

Finally, in some instances, painting and relief sculpture were combined. The plaster was worked in relief before it dried in order to create moldings, pilasters, columns, and striking profiles. The color completed the illusions of stone architecture: vertical or oblique lines evoked

flutings and torsades; acanthus leaves decorated the capitals; curved ridges painted in dark colors against a lighter background gave the impression of [carved](#) conch shells. Sometimes the combination is such that the truly sculpted elements supported others that were stuccoed and painted, or vice versa. This technique was especially frequent at Saqqara.

Murals in Secular Buildings

Little is known about the paintings that adorned the private homes in Egyptian cities during the Byzantine era: Tanis, Bubastis, Karanis, Hermopolis Magna, Thebes, Elephantine, and al-Kab, to cite but a few examples. It is likely, however, that there, as at Antinoopolis, the styles and subjects adopted during the Greco-Roman period persisted: friezes of panels painted in imitation of marble or alabaster slabs, geometric motifs, scrolling floral elements.

In the Roman camps, which were still active in the Byzantine period, there existed a Roman provincial art that belonged to the pagan world. A few examples have been discovered at Qasr-Qarun, (ancient Dionysias), which are marked by a strong influence from Palmyra, and Luxor, where the paintings of the "Imperial Temple," long considered to be Christian, have been proven to be portrayals of diverse aspects of the Roman imperial cult and military life.

Funerary Murals

Little more is known about funerary murals. Knowledge of the Christian catacombs and chapels of Alexandria, now destroyed, has been transmitted only through ancient descriptions. In the catacomb of Karmuz, two or three layers of paintings, accumulated through the third to fifth centuries, cover the walls. They depicted episodes from the life of Christ, His miracles such as the wedding at Cana, and the multiplying of the loaves of bread, and diverse saints, apostles, and prophets.

The necropolis of al-Bagawat, containing some 260 tombs, was used by both Christians and pagans. Two chapels are particularly renowned: the Chapel of the Exodus, dating from the fourth century, and the Chapel of Peace, dating from the sixth century, where scenes from the Old and New Testaments predominate, but they are not distinctively Coptic.

Similar subjects decorated certain tombs in Antinoopolis: crosses, symbolic peacocks and doves, women praying (e.g., a famous painting of a deceased woman between Saint Colluthus and [the Virgin](#) Mary), and Christ in Majesty adored by angels; there are also vegetal and geometric [motifs](#) directly influenced by Roman art. The Good Shepherd and praying figures, peacocks, doves, and vines are also found in the tombs of the nearby mountain as well as at Qararah.

This brief survey of necropolis painting permits the generalization that the themes pictured are those that appear in other Christian necropolises of the period such as those in Rome and Naples. Alongside a few subjects from the pagan world, allegories, for example, and geometric and vegetal motifs, scenes drawn from the Old and New Testaments predominate. But, as will be noted subsequently, these biblical scenes became less frequent in monastic necropolises.

Murals in Monasteries

The decoration of monasteries is an entirely different matter. At Kellia, Abu Jirjah 'Alam Shaltut, Wadi al-Natrun, Saqqara, Bawit, and Isna, it may be noted that the monks' oratories were decorated with particular care and housed the greatest number of paintings. In each oratory the vestibule, its walls covered with inscriptions, introduces this avalanche of decoration. Whereas in other monastic buildings the lower level of the walls is uniformly covered with Pompeian red, [occasionally](#) interrupted by a decorated panel, in the oratory the lower level is a succession of panels decorated with geometric and floral [motifs](#) and shapes evoking shafts or pillars of prized stone, such as marble, porphyry, or alabaster. Above this

level there is a succession of monks, local saints, and, more rarely, biblical scenes such as the three children in the furnace, the sacrifice of Isaac, episodes from the lives of [the Virgin](#) and of Christ, and at Bawit, various episodes of the story of David.

The eastern wall of the oratory is the most important from a religious point of view, and as a consequence, its decor is amplified. Two small niches—usually undecorated and meant to hold liturgical objects—frame the large, principal niche, which is enhanced by columns or pillars and an archivolt sculpted in stone, or molded in stucco and painted in imitation of real sculpture. Sculpture and painting are often found closely related, as in Saqqara, wherein some places earthen columns covered with a layer of painted stucco, support a stone arch. In other places, the walls of the niche rest on a base sometimes made of a stone slab without decoration, as at Saqqara and Bawit, or else on a simple geometric area of dark red, as at Kellia. The oratory walls and principal niche are decorated with paintings. At Bawit and Saqqara there are murals of Christ in Majesty, the Virgin, and Child framed by archangels, saints, and apostles; at Isna there are a few saints, but above all, crosses or pecking birds; at Kellia there are crosses of varied forms, or, as an exception, a symbolic boat.

Finally, there are small murals in various monasteries that have all too rarely caught the attention of excavators. Located in one secondary room or another, they portray the monks in their daily activities. Quick sketches, sometimes scribbles, painted in dark red, or graffiti, they have little artistic value, but they are not without interest, for they attest to the life and material preoccupations of those who inhabited the great monasteries.

Murals in Churches

Very little is known today about murals in the most ancient Coptic churches because few examples survive. Many evidences of Egyptian Christianity disappeared in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Information from secondary sources is often uncertain. The Arabic writers al-Maqrizi and Abu Salib the Armenian mention an impressive number of churches and monasteries containing murals and icons, but they do not name the subjects depicted. Likewise, most of the descriptions by [European travelers](#) from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century are brief and give little useful information. Doubtless, as in other Christian areas, there were scenes illustrating the life of Christ and representations of local saints, but whether they were on walls or apses is unknown. The most that can be said is that the iconography followed the plans of the murals in oratories of the monks' cells and prepared the way for the vast iconographic programs of the churches in the Middle Ages.

Murals in Early Churches

Only a few murals of saints remain in the churches at Philae built in the temples of Imhotep, Isis, and Hathor, where they overlaid pharaonic decoration. There are also a few such murals in the churches constructed in the temples of Seti I at Abydos, Hatshepsut at Dayr al-Bahri, and Hathor in Dandarah and in the rough brick sanctuaries erected at Hermopolis Magna, Thebes, Luxor, and Karnak, and the monastery installed in a pagan temple at Dayr al-Madinah. Their context remains unknown.

The paintings of certain structures in the environs of Alexandria

and [Antinoopolis](#) in the region of Lake Mareotis are somewhat better known. At Abu Jirjah, 'Alam Shaltut, and the monastic complex of Abu Mina, geometric and floral [motifs](#) decorate the lower walls of rooms. Christ, the Virgin, a great number of saints, including Saint Menas the Miracle Maker between his camels, and a few New Testament scenes, such as an Annunciation at Abu Jirjah, appear in other areas.

Biblical scenes are also depicted at Dayr Abu Hinnis, which houses the oldest portrayal known in Egypt of the Christological cycle. It attests

great care for historical grouping, for here are united the massacre of the innocents, the appearance of Gabriel to Joseph, the Flight into Egypt, plus the miracles of Christ (such as the wedding at Cana and the resurrection of Lazarus), and scenes from the life of Zacharias. Similar subjects are also depicted in the Church of Saint Colluthus near Antinoopolis.

Among other extant murals that date before the tenth century, those of Dayr Anba Hadra at Aswan must be mentioned. In the monastery church, rows of [stiff](#) hieratic saints are portrayed on the walls. In the narthex, there is a Virgin and Child, before whom the archangels Michael and Gabriel are prostrate. The demi-cupola of the main concha (curved recess) of the apse is occupied by a Christ in Majesty giving benediction with one hand and holding the Holy Book in the other. His throne is surrounded by a mandorla (almond-shaped aureole), and he is worshiped by archangels and saints. Christ Triumphant is also pictured in the central apse of the Church of Shenute in Cairo, with a more unusual scene depicted in the right apse: a draped cross within a mandorla, between saints on foot. A similar motif is found in Dayr Anba Bishoi at Suhaj.

Murals from the Tenth Century or Later

Where the churches have been continuously occupied, only the most recent paintings are visible. Therefore, the churches of Cairo have kept but meager traces of any decoration preceding the tenth century. It is known, for example, that paintings of saints adorned the columns and pillars of the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus (Church of the Nativity) dating from the fourth and fifth centuries, but the paintings were destroyed when the church was pillaged in the twelfth century. It was subsequently covered with a new series of paintings that were also destroyed in turn, and then later redone.

The same may be said for the churches in the monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun, Dayr Anba Antunius and Dayr Anba Bula in the desert by the

Red Sea, as well as Dayr Anba Shinudah and Dayr Anba Bishoi at Suhaj, and Dayr al-Shuhada' and Dayr al-Fakhuri at Isna. Most of the murals preserved scarcely date before the tenth century. They present a vast iconographical array that unfolds all along the walls, apses, and columns. Scenes from the Old Testament such as Daniel in the lions' den, the sacrifice of Isaac, and the three children in the furnace decorate the walls. The walls also show scenes from the life of Mary, such as the Annunciation, Nativity, Dormition, and Assumption, and of Christ, in the Adoration of the Magi and miracles, notably the wedding at Cana. Prophets, saints, especially mounted ones, monks, and founders of monasteries appear on the walls, and male and female saints decorate the columns. The cross is less frequent and is always triumphant, carried or venerated by angels. Archangels mount guard on the [triumphal arch](#) leading to the apse.

Christ is usually portrayed in the principal apse as the Pantocrator (ruler of the universe), Christ triumphant, Christ in Glory, or Christ in Majesty seated on a throne, holding the Holy Bible in one hand and giving benediction with the other. He is surrounded by a mandorla and is generally supported by the Tetramorph (four apocalyptic creatures symbolizing the evangelists) for which the Copts have a particular devotion. This is also the iconography of the Middle Ages in Egypt. One apse varied from another according to the presence or absence of the moon and the sun, the archangels Gabriel and Michael, and [occasionally](#) one saint or another. All of them included the tetramorph placed around the mandorla. At Dayr Anba Shinudah the four evangelists are depicted seated and writing, each one beside his symbolic animal. The unusual portrayal of these animals must also be noted at Dayr Anba Antunius in the Chapel of the Four Animals, where the *zodia* (small animals) have the bodies of cherubim.

Often in monastic churches [the Virgin](#) is pictured beneath the Christ in Majesty, where she is framed by Michael and Gabriel, at Dayr al-Shuhada', or the apostles, at Dayr Abu Sayfayn. The association of these

two themes of Mary and the apostles was already found in the oratory niches of the monastic cells, for example, at Dayr Apa Apollo and Dayr Apa Jeremiah. Mary is pictured as the *Theotokos* with her child on her lap in the monasteries, for example in Chapel 28 of Dayr Apa Apollo and Cells D and 1723 of Dayr Apa Jeremiah, and in the later churches of Dayr al-Abyad and Dayr Anba Antunius. The picture of [the Virgin](#) praying in the midst of the apostles, as at Dayr Abu Sayfayn, also finds its origins in the apses of the monasteries, such as Chapels 17 and 20 of Dayr Apa Apollo. At Kellia, no true painting has yet been found in the basilicas, though there may perhaps be remains of an image of Christ at al-Ruba'iyat.

At Dayr Apa [Jeremiah](#) at Saqqara, in the main church, the cupola was covered with mosaics; on the columns, there were saints afoot, draperies, and friezes, but no painted wall decoration has yet been discovered, the other great structures being ornamented with slabs of marble. The paintings of the two churches at Dayr Apa Apollo are somewhat better known. In the northern church, there were numerous personages portrayed on the columns, among whom were Saint George as a warrior, the archangels Michael and Gabriel, King David, plus a Virgin and Child, as well as Christ. The walls were covered with panels of personages, but their identities are unknown. In the southern church, at the back of the sanctuary there is a Christ enthroned in the midst of the apostles; elsewhere there are a cross carried by angels, a Virgin and Child, and numerous unidentifiable fragments.

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