

Coptic Iconography

Introduction:

The art of iconography started with the intention of educating the converts to the church, with the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine (307-337AD) to Christianity, as many Christian converts had difficulty in understanding the biblical teachings and their spiritual meanings, so the early church leaders permitted the use of icons to help them to understand Christianity and its doctrines aided by visual means.

Icons are an integral part of the Coptic worship for inspiring and teaching the faithful the mysteries of the Christian church.

In brief we can say that Iconography is not merely an art *but it is a visual theology- as we'll see further on.*

Coptic Iconography reached its peak during the period between the 4th and 7th centuries, coinciding with Constantine's official recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire

It is important to be noted that:

Icons are not meant to be worshipped or venerated as something holy in themselves or for the artwork.

The reverence shown to the icons is shown to the person or the event which it portrays. **As we venerate and respect the holy books and the bibles through which we receive and know the words of God. Similarly, through the icon we contemplate the physical appearance of Christ, his miracles, his passion and the life of saints.**

The icon is meant to help the believer to contemplate on spiritual matters and to put him into a prayerful frame of mind as a reminder of events in the bible and of the life of Christ and the Saints.

The art of Orthodox iconography follows specific symbolism which carries meaningful messages as we'll explain soon.

† **Icon sometimes are not only used in the churches, but some of the believers use the icons to decorate their homes. E.g. they hang the icon of the last supper in the dining room, the icon of Lord Jesus, the Virgin Mary and the saints in the sitting room and in the bedrooms.**

Sometimes they dedicate the eastern corner in a certain room to the display of icons and it is called the “icon corner” and sometimes they adore the main icon with a vigil lamp. **And usually this corner is dedicated for prayers both of the individuals and of the whole family all together.**

† **In the church, the icons are arranged in a certain order**

① In the church nave, the icons are put all around the walls for the community of saints who pray for the people enclosed by the church building and waiting for them to complete their way with God, **ending with the dome of the church which always bears a classical painting of *Christ the Pantocrator Who looks down from heaven to His creation as He is above all.***

② The iconostasis and the alter, decorated by the icon of the last supper, the cross, 12 apostles, the Virgin Mary, Christ Himself and the baptism, **in the eastern side of the alter also the icon of Christ the Pantocrator is put opening His arms to embrace all the congregation.**

† Coptic icons represent either a character or an occasion and sometimes, they tell a certain story. **Also they reflect certain dogmas and beliefs.** As poetry and religious songs were used in a certain age to express and confirm the correct belief of the church against some of the heresies (against Arianism), also the iconography was used also to express the belief of the church in certain aspects.

† As when the believers see the icon representing something or a certain dogma, this dogma gets fixed and clear in their minds, as the vision confirms the thoughts.

e.g.

I **The Coptic Orthodox Church, as all other orthodox churches, believes that baptism should be by complete immersing in water.**

Based on:

① The baptism of Lord Jesus Himself “ and after being baptised, Jesus went up immediately from the water and behold – John - saw the Spirit of God descending as dove, and coming upon Him” (Mat3:16).

② St Paul wrote in his epistle to the Romans: “or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were

baptised into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death” (Rom 6:3,4).

Confirming the same meaning, he said also in his epistle to the Colossians “having been buried with Him in baptism” (Col 2:12)

So expressing this dogma and confirming it in the thoughts and minds of the believers, all the Coptic icons for the baptism of Jesus and even any icon for His baptism SHOWS Him totally immersed in water as you see on the iconostasis.

II The Orthodox church, represents Lord Jesus in its icons because He came to us in the form of a human being BUT it never represents God the Father.

This is because :

The term FATHER is given for the essence of God .

The term SON is given for the speech and wisdom of God, His logos.

The term HOLY SPIRIT is the spirit of God.

Of course, the essence of God and His divinity can't be represented or seen as written:

- 1 “To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him” (Isaiah 40:18)
- 2 “No one has beheld God at any time” (1 John4:12)
- 3 “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)
- 4 “Who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, Whom no man has seen or can see”(1Timothy 6:16)
- 5 “you can't see My face, for no man can see Me and live”(Exodus 33:20)
- 6 “Not that any man has seen the Father, except the One Who is from God, He has seen the Father”(John 6:46)

For these reasons 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, and it is written:-

“He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Hebrews 1:3)

In the baptism of Jesus, only the voice of the Father was heard (Mat 3:17) and the Holy Spirit was seen in the form of a dove.

In (John 12:28) when Jesus was speaking to the multitude, it is written” there came therefore a voice out of heaven, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again”.

So always the Father is represented by a voice and is never seen as illustrated in the former verses.

When Philip said to Jesus “Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us” (John 14:8)à Jesus answered him and said” have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John14:9), this means that we can see the Father through Jesus.

THIS IS WHY:

We reject and do not accept the icons which represent God the Father as an old man with white hair and Jesus as a young man with black hair.

BECAUSE:

Beside what we said that the Father cannot be represented, such icons show that the Father is older that the Son and that there is a time difference between them, which is completely wrong and against the belief of the church, and lead to some theological misunderstanding.

† In the Coptic icons, the Holy Virgin Mary is always represented on the right hand side of Jesus and she is represented as a crowned queen and Jesus as a king with a crown also as written in the prophecy in the psalms of David:

“At Thy right hand stands the queen in gold from Ophir” (Psalm 45:9).

† In the Coptic iconography, Lord Jesus, the Virgin Mary, all the angels, Saints and martyrs are drawn facing the plane of the icon, and the two eyes are clear and very wide.

BECAUSE:

† The open wide eyes are a symbol of purity and holiness, because the one with open eyes shows that he is not embarrassed or ashamed from anything, but the one who is ashamed of his sins, faults and mistakes always hides his face and eyes.

- † The eyes in general are a symbol for the knowledge and that is why the Cherubim who are full of eyes are full of knowledge.
- † Even if the icon shows the side profile of a certain angel or saint, it still also shows his two eyes. Because one eye represents the normal external sight, and the other represents the inner sight and vision of the heart and the soul. One is a sign of the normal knowledge and the other is a sign of the spiritual knowledge and this shows that they have open heart eyes.
- † The only case in which there is a character represented with one eye is that of Judas who betrayed Jesus because this shows that he did not have inner heart sight and he was blind hearted that he delivered Jesus and betrayed him.
- † The ears are also drawn relatively large, because the spiritual person spends much time listening to God's word and seeking to do God's will, and also the bible says "if anyone has ears to hear, let him hear"(Mark 4:23)
- † The lips are represented as gentle lips smaller than their actual size in the human being, because their main work is to praise God and glorify Him and they are not opened to all kinds of speech. "my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips" (Psalm 63:5) and also because the bible says "let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger (James 1:19).

Generally, the figures in Coptic icons often have large heads proportional to the size of the whole body, meaning that they are individuals devoted to contemplation and prayer.

Icons portraying saints who suffered and were tortured for their faith, show them with peaceful and smiling faces, illustrating that their inner peace was not disturbed even by the sever hardship they endured and suffered willingly and joyfully for the Lord.