

**TREATMENT OF THE VIRGIN MARY ICON OF THE PAINTER  
ANASTASI AL QUDSI AL RUMI DATING BACK TO 19TH CENTURY IN  
EGYPT**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The present paper is intended to be a first part of a study on the restoration of the Virgin Mary icon in the Mary Church at the Menoufia Governorate in Egyptian Delta. This icon dating to 19<sup>th</sup> century and painted by famous painter in this period, Anastasi Al Qudsi Al Rumi who was responsible for the greater part of icons production in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Egypt. Very valuable information is obtained both about the damage of the varnish layer in the paint surface due to the surrounding environment (Church wax, soot and tar, in place where icon lamps and candles are lit close by) and about the state of preservation of the icon. Finally, this paper is devoted to describing the Conservation process of this icon through different steps such as (Consolidation, Cleaning, Filling, Retouching, Varnishing).*

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**KEYWORDS:** Coptic icon, Tempera, Pigments, Rabbit glue, Retouching, Dammar Varnish.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Art historians classify the Coptic period as a Coptic art produced by Egyptian Christians in the late Roman, early Byzantine, and early Arab eras. Icon [ἱκονα] is a word that refers to a picture or a portrait<sup>1</sup>.

Those who regularly visit a Coptic Church or hear Coptic liturgy will be familiar with the ceremonies surrounding icons and will not be surprised when they see believers praying Infront of the icons, kissing or touching them, or burning candles or incense in front of them.

The veneration is directed towards the saint who is depicted on the saint. In this way the icon is an intermediary between the believer and the saint who can assist him in this problems or act as an intermediary between him and Christ. This icon makes the saint, invisible in heaven, visible to believers on earth<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> - Fahim, N., Abdelaal, S., & Henin, E. Physiochemical characterization of Coptic Jesus Christ icon, church of Saint Mercurius, Egypt. Journal of the General Union of Arab Archaeologists, 8(1), (2023). pp 207-222.

<sup>2</sup> - Hondelink, H., Coptic Art and Culture. The Netherlands Institute for Archaeology and Arabic Studies in Cairo, (1990), pp 55.

Egyptian convert to Christianity must have been particularly receptive to belief in miraculous powers. Magic had been an integral part of their daily lives since time immemorial and it survives in popular faith to this day. "Relics", the bodily remains of holy men and woman, become one of the officially recognized objects of devotion. The cult of relics is first seen in the veneration paid by early Christians to the remains of their martyrs, which become precious patrimony.

The so-called touch relics, wood and nails from the cross or the Virgin Mary's girdle, were even more cherished, because of their rarity and sanctity. The Mandylion, the holy cloth on which Christ miraculously imprinted his true likeness, became at once a relic and a sacred image. The veneration of relics and other sanctified memorabilia extended to icons, and both forms of worship continued concurrently. Pilgrims to the Holy Land, or to the tombs of local martyrs, often took home sacred souvenirs, usually decorated flasks containing holy substances such as dust, lamp, oil or blessed water, obtained from holy sites. In the household or Cell of a humble believer these clay eulogiae would be the poor man's equivalent of an expensive painting<sup>3</sup>.

The most icons in Egypt are directly painted on wooden panels. These icons decorated the interiors of the domes above the altars. In the center of the dome was the icon of Christ enthroned. The dome symbolized heaven and the four columns symbolized the four Evangelists. Sometimes the dome was decorated outside where several panels bore representations of the Apostles, Saints and Martyrs. Until then, icons had been hung on the interior walls of churches in the sanctuaries and on the iconostases. The most remarkable group of these icons exist in the church of 'Abu Seifen' in Old Cairo. Among these pictures is an icon that dates from the 13th century and is thought to be probably the most ancient.

The exactitude of drawing, fineness and beauty of colour, and the perfection of its workmanship distinguish it. The art of painting on these panels began to decline gradually; it lost much of its ability and originality between the 16th and 18th centuries. The idea of using canvas to cover the panels before drawing on them became common. From this usage Coptic painting fell into decline. S. Skalova noticed that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Coptic icons reflect the confusion of this general decline [10]. The westernization of Egypt resulted in the production of Holy pictures on canvas, which gradually lost the local subjects and iconography, spirituality, style, technology and finally beauty<sup>4</sup>.

In speaking about the icon painters, we note that Painters employed the colours (Inorganic oxides) and dyes (From plants and animals ), which had been adopted by the Pharaohs artists. The Coptic artists have considerable skills in the formation of different dyes and colours that remain unique and unmatched in mastery. The painters used egg yolk as a binder instead of oil in drawing the icon. They started to paint directly on wooden panels, but in later periods, they covered them with a soft layer of gypsum. Then they poured gold-water upon which they drew the elements of the subject, which were frequently delineated<sup>5</sup>.

The icons were carved on the gypsum by means of a pointed chisel; this certifies that the icons were transferred from models drawn on paper. Undoubtedly, the artist should have taken care in depicting the face of the person and its expressive features, following the methods of his ancient ancestors; it seems that the icons were often the work of more than one person. The student assistant gilded the background and painted the cloth but the features and hands were invariably the work of the master

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<sup>3</sup> - Skalova, Z., & Gabra, G., *Icons of the Nile Valley Egyptian*. International Publishing Company-Longman, Cairo, Egypt, (2003), pp 54.

<sup>4</sup> - Puică, I. M., *Biblical Elements in Coptic Icon*. European Journal of Science and Theology, 2(2), (2006), pp 41.

<sup>5</sup> -Henin, E., Abdelaal, S., Fahim, N., Abed El malak, W., *Conservation and Preservation of Jesus Christ Icon dating back to 19th Century at Saint Mercurius Monastery at Tamouh, Giza, Egypt*. International Journal of Advanced Studies in World Archaeology, 5(1), (2022), pp 128-143.

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craftsman. The artist's name and date of the picture are often inscribed in Coptic and Arabic at the bottom of the icon<sup>6</sup>

### HISTORY AND SUBJECT OF THE ICON

The present icon belongs to the Saint Virgin Mary parish church in Egypt. it is a 19<sup>th</sup> painting in tempera with a preparation layer on a wooden support. it represents the Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus. The painting was carried by Anastasi Al Qudsi Al Rumi, who worked for Copts in Cairo between 1836 and 1871 and always signed and dated his work in Arabic (**Fig.1,2**).



**Fig. 1.** The icon of the virgin Mary carrying the child dating back to 19<sup>th</sup> century.



**Fig. 2.** The icon of the Saints Cyriacus and his mother Julietta, martyrs- dating back to 19<sup>th</sup> century.

“The title muqaddis or holy person was given at that time to any Christian who had been to Jerusalem, as an equivalent to the Muslim title hajj given to those who make the pilgrimage to Mecca”.

This icon painter was also close to the Coptic patriarchate, in the ancient Church of St Menas, near old Cairo he restored Yohanna Al Armani’s work: the curved wall of the main sanctuary is paneled and depicts the Enthroned Christ the high priest flanked by Aaron and Moses attesting to a revival of Coptic clergy’s interest in the Old Testament roots<sup>7</sup>.

Maqaddis Astasi Copticied his post Byzantine models in the Levantine Melchite fashion popular in the Holy Land. On hundreds of icons, he recorded details of daily life in a sample, recognizable style. In Upper Egypt, almost every Coptic Church still has at least one icon from his workshop. Some of his icons are unique, commemorating little know Upper Egyptian saints like Anba Hadra, bishop of Aswan (Figure). Astasi’s death truly left a void. Although his icons were sent from Cairo, Upper Egyptian needed more sacred pictures. Therefore, pious but untrained Coptic Priests and Monks themselves

<sup>6</sup> - Puică, I. M., op.cit. pp. 42.

<sup>7</sup> - Skalova, Z., & Gabra, G., op cit., pp 144-145

Painted icons of local saints such as “Anba poste, bishop of Ibshai” and “Anba Bidaba, bishop of Qift”, still preserved in churches in Akhmim and Nag’ Hammadi.

Also, this painter painted many icons in Cairo, Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt, one of his most famous icons, the icon of St. Joseph the Carpenter, which is displayed in the Virgin Mary Church in Haret Zuwaila (Fig. 3,4).



Fig. 3. The icon of St. Hedra and his disciple



Fig. 4. The icon of St. Joseph

### THE CONSERVATION OF THE ICON BEFORE THE INTERVENTION

After examining the icon (Fig. 5), I concluded that it is a tempera icon on a wooden support. As regards the preservation state of the painting, one of its main problems is a thick layer of dark varnish that hides the features of the icon and the accurate details of the Virgin Mary Saint. Another important problem related to the proper preservation of the painting, was the thick layer of adherent dirt covering the entire area of the painting. In addition to a presence of weak parts in the paint layer.

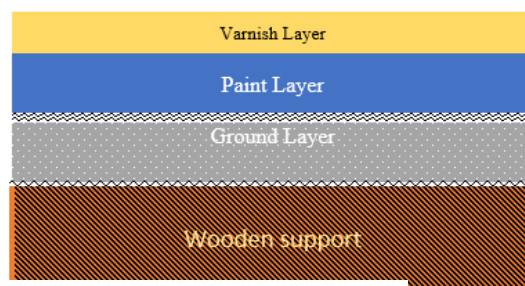


Fig. 5. The Verigin Mary icon and drawing of the painting's structure



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### THE TREATMENT OF THE ICON

After closely studying the degradation phenomena and evaluating the preservation state of the icon I started the conservation procedure of the object. The first option I took under consideration was non-intervention much. In view of the fact that the icon was in a relatively stable state of conservation, I could have chosen to leave the wooden support untouched for the moment.

Therefore, initially I considered the possibility of applying a consolidation procedure to the weak areas of paint layer, by locally injecting an adhesive and then flattening the areas by weighting, in this case The process was carried out using Japanese tissue and rabbit glue 10%, applied with a brush and covering by bags of sand on the top of the Japanese paper to ensure that the pigment fragments are installed in the original place (**Fig. 6,8**).

As the name suggests, rabbit skin glues should be produced purely from rabbit skins (**Fig. 7**). though collagenous waste from various small mammals may also be used. Some suppliers sell rabbit skin glue that is mixed with bovine hide glue to alter its properties. The information on the source, pre-treatment, or additives provided by suppliers may not always be reliable, as they may not have been given accurate information by the manufacturers<sup>8</sup>



**Fig. 6.** After the consolidation process



**Fig. 7.** Showing the rabbit glue



**Fig. 8.** Showing the covering by bags of sand

After carefully removing the Japanese paper which used in the consolidation step. I continued with the cleaning operation. The cleaning was necessary for two important reasons. First, to remove the dark varnish and the thick layer of adherent dirt, which covered the whole painted area, so as to Conserve the original chromatic intensity of the icon. Second, to be able to varnish the icon afterwards thus offering it protection against mechanical and atmospheric stresses in the surrounding environment. Third, Cleaning operations aim at restoring the readability of the artwork by bringing it closer to what is considered to be the artist's original intention<sup>9</sup>. With a view to performing surface cleaning, and given the characteristics of the surface to be cleaned, I turned my attention to the possibility of using a cleaning methodology based on chemical solutions. So, in this object I used different solutions such as 3A 2:1:2

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<sup>8</sup> - Schellmann, N. C., Animal glues: a review of their key properties relevant to conservation. *Studies in conservation*, 52(sup1), (2007), pp 55-66.

<sup>9</sup> - Lopez, M., Bai, X., Wilkie-Chancellor, N., & Detalle, V., Contribution to Controlled Method of Varnish Removal from Easel Paintings by ns Pulsed Nd: YAG Laser. *Heritage*, 6(3) (2023), pp 3307-3323.

(Aqua, Ammonia, Acetone) for remove the dark varnish, and dimethyl Sulfoxide (DMSO) for removal the dust and soot (Fig. 9. A, B, C, D, E)



Fig. 9. A, B, C, D, E showing the cleaning process

Following the cleaning operation, I proceeded to filling the small missing areas of the proration layer which had appeared in different parts in the icon. In this case, a Calcium Carbonate paste mixed with gelatin glue 8% was used to fill these missing parts and left for 24 hours to dry, as Gesso, historically used to prepare a smooth, paintable surface on wood or canvas<sup>10</sup>. The next operation consisted in retouching the small missing areas of the panit layer. For this I employed retouch using a water color (Winsor & Netwon) based on “Rigatino” method.

The previous techniques with lines made its appearance in 1920. Max Doerner performed his first experiments with hatching lines and started to promote this new technique in Germany. Around the same time in America, Edward Waldo Forbes and R. Arcadius Lyon also worked with a hatching technique. Cesare Brandi, director of Instituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome, developed this further with his colleagues Laura Mora and Paolo Mora. Inspired by his “Teoria del Restauro” (1963), they developed a technique with hatching, Tratteggio, also known as Rigatini. This technique, executed in

<sup>10</sup> - Rachwał, B., Bratasz, Ł., Krzemień, L., Łukomski, M., & Kozłowski, R. (2012). Fatigue damage of the gesso layer in panel paintings subjected to changing climate conditions. *Strain*, 48(6), 474-481.

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watercolour, was developed between 1945-50. The technique was meant as visible compensation done with a paint system of superimposed vertical brush strokes like hatchings that transpose the modelling and drawing<sup>11</sup>.

As it's known that the Color is the most important element in a painting but also the most sensitive to degradation. Whether fading, darkening or yellowing, colour changes can alter the entire appearance and perception of a painting<sup>12</sup>. So, after retouching the missing areas, I varnished the paint layer. Even though old varnish had been removed, I deemed this necessary for a better preservation of the painting. From a visual point of view the varnish layer imparts deepness and lightness to the painting and, as desired, a matt or glossy appearance. The application of the varnish was also supported by the idea of offering the rough, uneven surface of the color layer a more uniform light reflection. Thus, I have opted for a glossy 20% dammar varnish, which was applied by brush (**Fig. 10**).



**Fig. 10.** The icon after conservation

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have shown the technique of conservation of the wooden icon of Virgin Mary, painted by famous painter Anastasi Al Qudsi Al Rumi, So the restoration was carried out respecting all the component elements and the structural integrity of the object, As I mentioned before that the object was covered out of dark varnish and some fragment in the paint layer, in addition to presence of soot. Different steps was carried out to Conserve it (Consolidation of paint fragments, Varnish removal, Filling, Retouching, Varnishing).

<sup>11</sup> - Jasmijn, K., Wall painting retouching techniques in the Netherlands - Master thesis, Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage, Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam. (2020).

<sup>12</sup> - Kubik, M. E., Preserving the painted image: the art and science of conservation. JAIC-Journal of the International Colour Association, 5. (2010).

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