

**Conservation and Preservation of Jesus Christ Icon dating  
back to 19<sup>th</sup> Century at Saint Mercurius Monastery at  
Tamouh, Giza, Egypt.**

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**Abstract:**

This paper presents a case study of the conservation of Coptic icon painted by the Jerusalem painter‘ Hafez Shamndi and dating back to 19th at Saint Mercurius Monastery at Tamouh. One of the main problems of the icon which I had to conserve it, was the yellowish varnish and over panting. Another important issue in the conservation process was the cleaning of the icon. Its entire surface was covered by a thick layer of adherent dirt. The conservation work undertaken entailed other interventions as well, all aimed at bringing the painting in a stable state of conservation and at the same time restoring its intended, aesthetically appropriate form [1].

This article will discuss the conservation process of the icon, in addition to research into its historical background, treatment and conclusion.

**Keywords:** Coptic Icons – Egypt – Christianity – Paintings Conservation – Retouching

## **Introduction**

The “Coptic” word refers to the Egyptian Christians artworks and the “Icon” word describes a religious image and it is associated with the painting of the Orthodox Churches [2].

Egypt’s Coptic Church is one of the oldest in the world, with a cultural tradition dating back two millennia, during which time churches have been built and a variety of distinctive art forms have flourished such as paintings [3].

The Christianity that spread to Egypt in 3rd century in A.D. is called Copt. Coptic Church built a lot of monasteries along the lower stream of Nile River, which produced thousands of texts and painting. Copt was referred to as Christians in ancient Egypt. The Emperor Constantine of Roman Empire converted to Christianity in 313AD and Christianity became only state religion of the Roman Empire in flourished [4].

Icons are an aid to worship. Wherever an icon is set, that place more easily becomes an area of prayer. The icon is not an end in itself, but assists the believer in going beyond what can be seen with our physical eyes, into the realm of mystical experience. Icons help to focus prayer, for example, if one becomes distracted during the liturgy, it may be helpful to gaze at the icon of the Pantocrator, which in orthodox churches is located just to the right of the royal doors of the iconostases. The icon brings to mind that one is standing before Christ, and helps to bring one back to reality, back to the present moment, and back to the awareness that one is always in the presence of God [5].

## **The Importance of Early Icons**

The veneration of the icons, closely related to the cult of martyrs, had already begun in the Early church despite theological conflicts, for it took some time for the church to finally accept the image as an essential component of the new faith. By the 6th century the icons were established and, above all, icons not made by human hands had been accepted.

soon religious and political reasons and conflicts of nationalities brought about the well-known iconoclastic controversy which opened in 726 and lasted nearly 120 years [6].

### **The classification of Egyptian icon**

The classification of Egyptian icon patrimony according to technique and support (wood, paper or canvas) is based on a decade of practical experience in conservation in the country. Traditional local techniques and materials make the icons created in Egypt, and consequently the difficulties inherent in their conservation, more akin to pharaonic, Graeco-Roman and Egyptian Islamic wooden art works than to Greek, Italian or Russian icons.

In Egypt within a period of two thousand years – between late Antiquity and the present day – icons on wooden supports continued to be created according to local customs. The amply researched had tested methods for conservation and cleaning of gilded pharaonic coffins and the fayoum portraits appear to be eminently suitable for Coptic icons painted on panels. Yet each icon needs to be studied and treated individually [7].

The icon can take many forms. some of the earliest icons have sliding lids, for protection when they were taken along on their owners travels. Another form the diptych, was invented as a writing tablet. It preserved this function in the well-known ivory consular diptychs of the fifth and sixth centuries, and the practical usage still survives today in the Eastern church, when the deacon reads the prayer of intercession from a diptych.

After the diptych ceased to be used primarily as a writing tablet, the relief decoration was moved from the outside to the inside, which provided protection for the holy images [8].

### **Painting on wooden panels**

For centuries wood was used as a common material for a variety of artworks, ranging from Egyptian Fayum coffin portraits to Old Master paintings. Unique masterpieces are painted on wooden panels [9].

According to Raouf, the painting on wooden panels spread after the 12th century, but that does not mean that there were icons painted before that date. This change of procedure is probably to be attributed to the damage to which the icons on frescoes were exposed during the periods of revolution and persecution. “The riotous crowds profited by these disorders to plunder the churches filled with precious materials, vases, painted chalices and silk curtains. They destroyed and even burned the pictures in fresco on the walls,” that led the painters to paint icons on wooden panels that were easier to transport and hide. The most ancient of these icons are those, which 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 El-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 19th century, Coptic icons reflect the confusion of this general decline. 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 [10].

### **Evolution of coloured icons painting**

Painters employed the colours and dyes, 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 white 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.

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 Melniciuc Puică/European Journal of Science and Theology 2 (2006), 2, 37-50 42 background and painted the cloth but the features and hands were invariably the work of the master craftsman. The artist's name and date of the picture are often inscribed in Coptic and Arabic at the bottom of the icon [11].

### **Jesus Christ Icon at Saint Mercurius Monastery at Tamouh**

The saint Mercurius Monastery at Tamouh dating back to fourth century, but the Monastery was destroyed in the past and reconstruction in 18<sup>th</sup> century, in addition to all icons inside the old church dating back to 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Technique and Materials of Jesus Christ Icon

The technique of the object is tempera on wood and the icon is composed of:

- Wooden Support
- Preparation layer (Gesso)
- Paint layer (Inorganic pigment with binder)
- Varnish layer.



Figure 1 The main entrance of the Monastery



Figure 2 The Saint Mercurius Church (The old Church)

## State of conservation of Jesus Christ icon

The icon is composed of four layers (wooden support layer, ground layer, paint layer, and varnish layer). The surface of the icon was covered with the layers of the varnish mixed with dust. we could see traces of unprofessional restoration (Over painting). Also, there are many losses in the preparation layer and paint layer. in addition to missing parts in golden layer. The frame was covered by brown addition.

First, and most obviously, we have to consider the effects of time and ageing: on the one hand, there are changes and damage to the original painting itself and, on the other, there is the gradual build-up of dirt, darkened varnishes, and repaints on the surface. The latter conceals the former, and so any cleaning process both recovers original paint and exposes its altered state [12].



**Figure 3** The Church from inside and in the middle of the iconostasis there is the icon of Jesus Christ

After close studying the degradation phenomena and evaluating the preservation state of the icon I started the conservation procedure, but before starting cleaning process, the following should be kept in mind:

- Before addressing these issues in detail, we must remind ourselves of a few of the basic truths about picture cleaning. The oldest truth of all is that the restoration of paintings has been going on for a very long time. Ever since paintings have been made, they have been cleaned and repaired. Today's restorers are at the end of a chain of intervention that stretches back over centuries and that has left many paintings much changed from their original appearance.
- Cleaning' a painting refers to the removal of any non-original material from the original paint surface created by the artist. Cleaning is most often undertaken to bring the appearance of the painting to a state visually appropriate and comparable to its appearance and effect when first created.

This is often not fully possible due to irreversible changes in the paint itself on ageing and the nature of the interaction between soils, varnishes, or over paints and the original paint surface. Cleaning is usually further complicated by the close solubilities of the materials used to create the painting with those used later in restoration campaigns. Cleaning often involves finding a means of dissolving or suspending one material without affecting the other by exploiting very subtle differences in chemistry, age, or arrangements within the materials.

- If the additions were applied soon after the original painting was created, they may be more difficult to identify. The conservator must consider the reasons for the alterations: are they changes in the historical context of the painting, additions to update the image, or attempts to disguise damages? Who carried out the alterations: the original artist, another artist, a member of the artist's family, an owner, or a restorer, etc.?



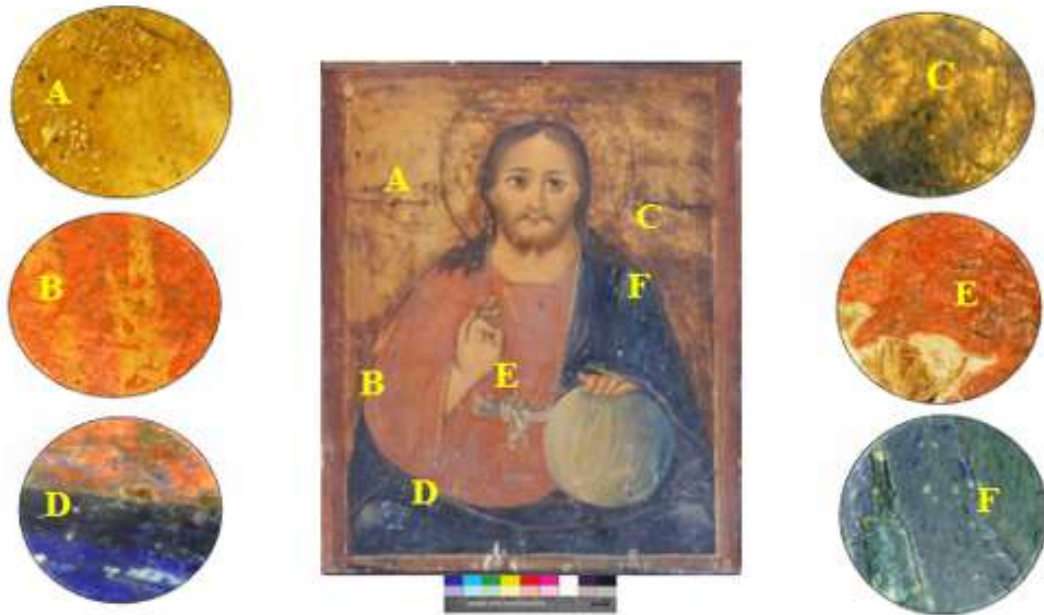
Alterations may have historical values in themselves, and there is always the possibility that changes may have been made by the original artist. In those cases, they should of course be treated with special consideration.

- Removal of overpaint It is generally agreed that any overpaint covering original artist's paint should be removed in order to bring the appearance of the painting closer to a presumed original state. Overpaint should be removed if it physically endangers the original paint (e.g. the binding medium of the overpaint is withering or shrinking) or if it might hinder further conservation treatment. If the overpaint is not covering or harming the original, but is considered aesthetically inappropriate [12].

### **Documentation and Examination process**

The main goal of this step is to identify the deterioration aspects of the icon, examination by a 1000 Digital USB Microscope showed;

- Loses in the gilding layer with yellow color under this layer [A].
- Loses in paint layer (Yellow and red color) [B].
- Much of Soot covering the gilding layer [ C].
- Wax covering large parts of the paint layer[D].
- Missing parts in preparation layer, in addition to abrasion in wooden support [E].
- Over painting in the blue color area [F]



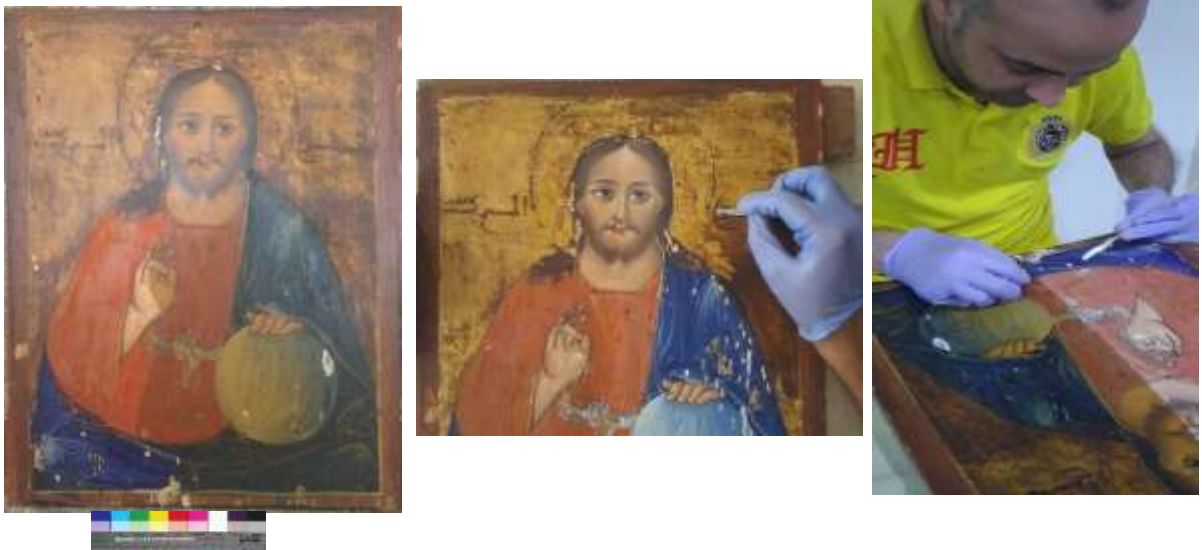
**Figure 4** The painting before the conservation procedure.



**Figure 5** The reverse of the painting

### Methodology of Conservation

- Cleaning the paint surface by of ND 3:1 (Thinner and Dimethyl formamide) to remove the overpainting and the Yellowish Varnish.
- Application of DAN 2 for cleaning the outer frame.
- Xylene and Tri-chloroethylene have been used to remove the wax.
- Mechanical cleaning to remove yellowish varnish from golden layer.
- The lacunae were filled with gesso (Chalk) mixed with gelatin glue 10%.
- Retouching with water colors (Trattoggio method) .
- Varnishing with Dammar varnish (Matt Varnish)



**Figure 6** During the mechanical cleaning

The removal of the dust and various non-original materials of the on the painting and of those found under the rizas was done carefully with Scalpel and soft brushes in addition to mechanical cleaning under microscope to remove the sticky spots of dirt. First the old overpainting on the filling lacunae were removed with ND.

The upper modern layer of varnish was removed with compresses of Japanese paper moistened by the mixture of ND, which were left for 2 :3 minutes covered with silver paper .



**Figure 7** The damaged areas refilled with Gesso

following the cleaning operation, I proceeded to filling the small missing areas of the icon ground layer. The filling I used, one based on 10% gelatin glue and Gesso, was chosen to be compatible with the original ground.



**Figure 8** Showing the retouching method ( Tratteggio )

In general, Certain methods of retouching call more attention to themselves than to the painting. Many of these were developed in Italy. The so-called neutro method (retouching in watercolors using only sepia, with a little ocher, burnt sienna, and natural umber) was used to cover larger areas of loss. The tratteggio technique, employing very small vertical and color-matching brushstrokes, is still being used today in Rome [13].

So, the next operation consisted in retouching the small defective areas of the painting. For this I employed retouch using a tratteggio technique based on resinous retouching paints by Winsor & Newton water colour.



**Figure 9** Varnishing process

At the end of the intervention, I have applied a last thin coating of aerosol type matt varnish (Dammar varnish) because Dammar and Mastic are commonly classed as “soft “natural resins when compared with others [14].



**Figure 10** The Icon after Conservation

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## **Conclusion**

The primary aim of the conservation intervention was that of bringing the object back to a stable preservation state to keep it for future generations. Furthermore, I consider that the operation also fulfilled the additional purpose of conserving the icon to its intended, aesthetically appropriate form.

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