

Coptic Religious Heritage: Is There a Future for the Past?

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Whether we look at political, economic, or military capital, one thing is clear. Heritage is a top-down idea—it is defined and used by the most powerful members of society, rather than by society as a whole. Cultural heritage tells people—it does not ask them—what they should care about. How can we change this?¹

The position of material heritage of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt is in a critical phase and at certain points even under threat. This is not a matter of deliberate vandalism or lack of means to maintain it, but a problem of a more complex character. The following contribution is an attempt to analyze the problem and, where possible, suggest solutions.

1 Coptic Architecture before the Twentieth Century

Although the Coptic Church did not emerge as an autonomous institution until the early sixth century, it can boast its origins in the first century of our era, when Christianity was established in Egypt. Its ancient roots and relatively isolated position after the Arab conquest have given it a reputation of being traditional and conservative.² Before passing on to the subject of Coptic material heritage, however, these two qualifications need a closer examination.

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, “conservative” is defined as, “tending or disposed to maintain existing views, conditions, or institutions.”³

1 Michael Press, “Who really owns the past?” at https://aeon.co/essays/why-cultural-heritage-benefits-the-rich-and-powerful-above-all?fbclid=IwARoFXgOTyxpPLopoNBdJex7rhoHcjyaGiPR8_MveDoKCj9tdUQSPvNtHXeI (accessed 28 February 2020).

2 This is not only an opinion of “outsiders”. The website of the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of London for instance states: “A conservative Church, it has carefully preserved the Orthodox Christian faith in its earliest form, handing it down through generations, remaining true to the Apostolic doctrines and patterns of worship.” See <http://www.copticcentre.com/the-coptic-orthodox-church/> (accessed 28 February 2020).

3 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld (accessed 28 February 2020).

The Latin origin of the word, *conservare*, means “to preserve”. In other words, a conservative Church maintains views and traditions as they are and is opposed to changes. “Traditional” at first sight seems a synonym and when we read Merriam Webster’s description, the two terms have indeed a similarity: “following or conforming to tradition, and adhering to past practices or established conventions.”⁴ The Latin etymology of the word, however, shows that there is a difference. The verb *tradere* is composed of *trans* and *dare* and means “to hand over” or “to transmit”.⁵

Where *conservare* is more static and focused on a status quo, *tradere* implies a dynamic process, in our case, of handing down material and/or immaterial heritage from one generation to another. The two concepts are related in the sense that, in order to hand down something, this object or custom has to be respected, taken care of, conserved. An heirloom can only be handed down from grandparents to grandchildren if each generation takes good care of it. This is the case for both material and immaterial heritage, and it counts for families, but also for larger collectives, such as tribes, nations, and Churches. Tradition and collective memory define a cultural and/or religious identity, and an interruption of tradition poses a threat to this. In the recent past we have seen how the destruction of cultural heritage is used consciously as a weapon to destroy the identity of opponents. Such opposition and aggression from outside are often met with resilience and an even more reinforced tendency to maintain the identity that is under threat. A threat to cultural and religious identity that may be more dangerous than aggression from outside is the one that comes from within. This can be the case when the collective memory is weakened and the means for maintaining material heritage are lacking, for instance, due to economic factors, or shifting of priorities. Whereas the first threat is often violent, recognizable, and confined to certain limitations in time and place, the second one is often more gradual and therefore less visible. To speak in a metaphor: it is the burglar coming for grandma’s jewelry versus the woodworm that slowly eats grandpa’s cabinet.

The history of Christian culture in Egypt has seen ups and downs over a span of two thousand years, and in the line along which its heritage has been handed down has a number of weak points. Under Mamluk rule (1260–1517) the Coptic Church and its culture suffered decline, and the following cen-

4 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/traditional?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld (accessed 28 February 2020).

5 T. Chartlton, T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, (online edition): <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/resolveform?type=exact&lookup=trado&lang=la> (accessed 28 February 2020).

turies under the Ottoman Empire certainly did not give an opportunity for recovery. By the eighteenth century the Copts were a minority with a high level of illiteracy, while the monasteries—once strongholds of knowledge and spirituality—were depopulated. The travelogue of Sonnini de Manoncourt, who visited Egypt in 1777/78, for instance, leaves no doubt about this.⁶ The nineteenth century brought a revival in many respects. After the French conquest of 1798 and during the rule of Mohamed Ali, Egypt entered modernity and the Coptic Church had the opportunity to revive. It was only under Mohamed Ali that the printing press was introduced as an effective means for the proliferation of knowledge, and the Coptic Church has profited from this as well. During the short patriarchate of Cyril IV (1854–1861) the Coptic revival reached a certain peak, but it did not stop there. Meanwhile, the Coptic Church was confronted with western missionaries, who were keen on converting Muslims, but, being confronted with resistance, also turned their attention to the Coptic Orthodox believers, forcing the Coptic Church to take active measures to keep its members. The so-called “Sabbath Schools” of Protestant missionaries attracted Coptic children in large numbers, adding to their level of (religious) education, but also forcing the Coptic Orthodox Church to come up with alternatives. This took shape in the form of the Coptic Sunday School movement, which received great impetus by Habib Girgis around the turn of the twentieth century.⁷ Egypt had now irreversibly come into contact with the West, and this had its effect on the total Egyptian society, not only on Copts.

Renaissance and reform of the Coptic Church was not only a matter of the clergy. For about a century, from its institution in 1854 till the time of Nasser, the *majlis al-milli*, a council of lay people, played an important role in this, although not always in harmonious cooperation with the patriarch. Cyril V (1874–1927) was in a difficult relationship with the *majlis* and tried to abolish it on a number of occasions.⁸ A theological seminary, opened by the *majlis* in 1875, was closed by the patriarch a few months later, only to be re-opened again in 1893. Reform and progress were like a pendulum, swinging to and fro.

6 Sonnini de Manoncourt sketches a depressing image of the monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun, with few monks left and in a state of isolation and neglect. See Sonnini de Manoncourt, C.N.S., (H. Hunter, trans.), *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*, Vol. II, London 1799, 143, 160–186.

7 Bishop Suriel, *Habib Girgis: Coptic Orthodox Educator and Light in the Darkness* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 2017), 61–88.

8 Theodore H. Partrick, *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: A History of the Coptic Orthodox Church* (Greensboro NC: Fisher Park Press, 1996), 132, 140–141.

One may wonder what the relevance of this historical overview is for the present subject. Material culture is an expression of identity and if we examine the architecture of Coptic churches that were built in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they tell us something about how the ones who commissioned these buildings saw the religious and cultural identity of the Coptic Church in their times. The period from the middle of the nineteenth till the middle of the twentieth century can be called turbulent in several respects; the Coptic Church being subject to reform and differences of opinion concerning how to proceed. Under these circumstances, tradition in the literal sense of the word is a problematic matter. The renaissance of the Coptic Church was meant to be a move forward, adopting modernism, inspired by the western world, more than a revival of a remote past. The times of a flourishing Coptic culture were long past in the early nineteenth century, and in a sense one could say that the period of decline since the second half of the thirteenth century brought with it a break in collective memory. A renaissance can mean a return to a past era of glory, but in the case of the Coptic renaissance of the nineteenth century, no such attempt was made. The newly built churches do not imitate the architecture of the famous churches of Old Cairo or the basilicas of the monasteries near Sohag, which were either in a state of neglect or totally in ruins, but contain elements that are strongly reminiscent of European neo-classical architecture. Also, in the style and iconography of nineteenth century Coptic icons, characteristics of western painting became influential; until the present-day reproductions of the Last Supper of Leonardo da Vinci can be found in countless Coptic Churches.

Here we see an interesting parallel with nineteenth century Greek Orthodox architecture and icon painting where western elements also made their way. Until the period 1952–1963, when thousands of Greeks left Egypt, there was a not too numerous, but influential community of Greeks in Egypt and their churches and icons show a great deal of similarity with Coptic churches and their decoration. After a revolt, starting in 1821, Greece gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1832. A state that had never existed as such had been born, but in the eyes of many it was a rebirth of a Greek Orthodox state, part of the Byzantine Empire and that meant a new liberty to exercise the Christian faith and build churches. The Greek revolt was inspired by revolutions in the West, the French Revolution in particular, and received support from philhellenic groups and individuals, not only in Western Europe, but also in the USA. It is not surprising, therefore, that nineteenth century Greece was oriented on the West, rather than on the East, which was still dominated by the Ottoman Empire.

Although the Copts in Egypt were in an entirely different position, and an upsurge against the Ottoman authority has always been out of the question,

there must have been an awareness in Egypt, both among Greeks and Copts, of the progressive developments in Greece, and it can be no coincidence that by the middle of the nineteenth century, when Greece was building its newly founded state and the Copts were working on a revival, both groups looked westward for inspiration.

This common source of inspiration is visible in the churches and their interiors built in Egypt in the nineteenth century. Meanwhile many Greek Orthodox churches in Egypt from that period have disappeared, but a good example of a striking similarity is shown by the iconostases of St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox cathedral and St. Saba's Greek Orthodox church, both in Alexandria. Other examples of Coptic altar screens that look more like Greek iconostases are the ones in St. Anthony's Coptic church in Jerusalem and St. Mark's Coptic cathedral in Clot Bey (Cairo).

Of nineteenth century monumental Coptic church architecture, unfortunately little remains nowadays. Many of these churches have been demolished and replaced by modern structures. This was not only a matter of a practical need for larger buildings, as the Coptic community gradually grew, but it also illustrates how a change in taste took place. The cathedral of St. Mark in Alexandria has a complicated history of demolishing, rebuilding and modification, and in its present form shows characteristics of two centuries and the gradual development in taste in Coptic architecture. This in itself is remarkable: few patriarchal cathedrals of other Churches have gone through a similar process. Of the fifteenth century St. Mark's cathedral, which must have stood on the spot of the present-day church, little is known, and no traces of the building survive. It was destroyed during the conquest of Napoleon in 1798 and it took almost twenty years before a new church was built in its place. Not long afterwards, in 1870, this church was thoroughly renovated and remodeled. It was completely rebuilt in 1950–1952 and of the nineteenth century cathedral, only the iconostasis remained. Its style was in fact a forerunner of what would become a standard for Coptic churches in the second half of the twentieth century: simple, round shapes, constructed in concrete. This building, with its characteristic vaults, was enlarged to almost double its size in the years 1985–'90 under Pope Shenouda III and received a western extension in a style that reproduced more or less the architecture of the then existing building.⁹

9 For views of interior and exterior see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Mark%27s_Coptic_Orthodox_Cathedral_\(Alexandria\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Mark%27s_Coptic_Orthodox_Cathedral_(Alexandria)) (accessed 28 February 2020).



FIGURE 16.1 The Botrossiya church, interior
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

The cathedral, especially on its inside, thus presents both an amalgam of styles, but also a cross-section through the development of Coptic architecture in the past 150 years. “A cross-section,” because the past one-and-a-half centuries of Coptic architecture shows a multiplicity of styles, apparently the expression of a multiplicity of tastes. In the case of profane architecture a client can commission from his architect whatever he likes, but in the case of public, especially religious architecture, the “iconography of architecture” is meant to convey a message to the outside world, and although we have in most cases no longer the opportunity to interview the architect concerning this message, it is worthwhile to compare and analyze a number of religious buildings from the twentieth century.

A well-known church in Cairo that shows a clear example of foreign inspiration is the church of Saints Peter and Paul, better known as the “Botrossiya” church, located on the south side of St. Mark’s cathedral in Abbasiya (Cairo). It was built in 1910 as a family memorial church of the Boutros Ghali family, in the first place as a last resting place for the remains of Boutros Ghali Pasha (1846–1910), Prime Minister of Egypt from 1908 till 1910. The church was designed by the Slovenian born Italian architect Anton Laščak (1856–1946), and it shows a



FIGURE 16.2 Facade of the Coptic Museum
PHOTO COURTESY OF GERTRUD VAN
LOON



FIGURE 16.3 Facade of al-Aqmar mosque
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

clear inspiration by sixth century Byzantine architecture.¹⁰ There are no real parallels to this church in Egypt and we can only speculate about the reasons behind the decision to build a neo-Byzantine church, but it may have been the wish to be reminded of the glory days of Orthodox Christianity before the advent of Islam.

Whatever the reason, it stands in sharp contrast to the source of inspiration for the façade of the Coptic Museum, built in the same year: here the facade contains almost literal quotations of that of the Fatimid mosque in the historical center of Cairo called *al-Aqmar*. Were elements from a Christian architectural vocabulary avoided on purpose to show that Coptic heritage was accessible to all Egyptians? The history behind the design of this building may deserve a closer study.

2 The Twentieth Century: Innovation and Modernity in Search of an Own Identity

The second half of the twentieth century is characterized by a quest for a reformulation of the identity of the Church. Unlike the Second Vatican Council, this was not a reform in terms of a reorientation on the outside world, a reform of ritual, but in the first place a modernization of the way that the Coptic Church manifested itself in the visual arts. This started under the patriarchate of Cyril VI and continued under the patriarchate of Shenouda III. For the first time, radical changes took place in the way the backdrop of the liturgy was given shape. This backdrop consists of the church building and its interior decoration.

Isaac Fanous (1919–2007) was the most influential personality in the reform of religious painting. In 1954 he was one of the first students at the newly founded Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo and during his stay in France in the 1960's, he studied icon painting under Léonid Ouspensky. This experience convinced him that Coptic icon painting had to shake off its western influence. His school of painting, which has since then become mainstream in the Coptic Church, is not a return to the stylistic vocabulary of Bawit or the eighteenth century icons of Ibrahim al-Nasikh and Yuhanna al-Armani, but rather

¹⁰ The exact source of inspiration is difficult to establish, but there is a great deal of similarity with the Basilica Euphrasiana in Poreč, a building that the architect must have known, considering the region of his origin.



FIGURE 16.4 Church al-Mar'ashali
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

a re-invention of icon-painting, based on simplified outlines and a return to an outspoken two-dimensionality.

Although he created a school and this style has become a certain standard in Coptic icon painting, it meant by no means an end to the taste for western painting. In some churches the wall-paintings and icons follow the style of western baroque realism, with three-dimensional illusionism, chiaroscuro-effects and dramatic expressions, so that, strictly speaking, they cannot even be called icons in the eastern Orthodox sense of the word.

The developments in architecture are comparable to those in painting. In the second half of the twentieth century a preference for simplified, basic forms has become predominant, and the preferred building material became rein-

forced concrete. These basic shapes include semi-circular domes, round and pointed arches and vaults. One of the early landmarks of this style is the church in the Cairo suburb of Zamalek, known as the *Kanisa al-Mar'ashali*, built in 1959 by Ramses Wissa Wassef (1911–1974).

The most monumental of churches in this style is St. Mark's cathedral in Anba Ruweis (Abassiya, Cairo), built in 1968–1969 and designed by the civil engineer Michel Bakhoun (1913–1981). Only recently the church was adorned, both inside and outside, with paintings, mosaics, and stuccowork, but prior to the decoration, the emphasis was on the simplified, linear forms and the *beton brut* appearance.¹¹ Seen from a distance, the contrast with the *Botrossiya* church is evident and illustrative for two entirely different approaches to Coptic church architecture. The style of St. Mark's cathedral in Anba Ruweis has prevailed until the present day worldwide, such as the new cathedral of the Archangel Michael in Aswan, Egypt, and the cathedral of St. Mark in Toronto, Canada; examples that follow the same 'new international style' in its bold contours and plain concrete surfaces.

However, there are also some interesting exceptions. A recent example of modern Coptic architecture is the Eporo¹² Tower in Melbourne Australia, which, apart from containing numerous apartments,¹³ and lecture halls for St. Athanasius Theological College,¹⁴ the building also contains a Coptic church.¹⁵ The outside hardly shows traces of any religious architecture. The inside of the church, with its dark wooden paneling and iconostasis, however, stands in stark contrast with the modernistic outside. Stained glass windows, a phenomenon that is characteristic for western church architecture, have been integrated with an interior that contains quotations of the church architecture of Bawit, such as the basket-capitals and decorative woodcarvings. Again, it is difficult to say exactly what the decision-making factors were behind the design. The outside of Eporo Tower, with its multi-purpose character, is neutral in appearance, while the interior of the church creates an atmosphere of a past era, without a specific reference to a place or date.

11 For a view of the church see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Mark%27s_Coptic_Orthodox_Cathedral#/media/File:CairoAbbasiyaMarkEntrance.jpg (accessed 28 February 2020).

12 Coptic word meaning "King".

13 The residential apartments are located on levels 4 to 43.

14 St. Athanasius College campus and dining hall are located on levels 2 and 3.

15 The Coptic church of St. Verena and St. Bishoy is located on level 1.



FIGURE 16.5 Exterior view of Eporo Tower, Melbourne
PHOTO COURTESY OF BASSEM MORGAN



FIGURE 16.6 Interior view of the Coptic church in Eporo Tower
PHOTO COURTESY OF BASSEM MORGAN

An entirely different approach to contemporary Coptic architecture is that of Bishop Thomas of Qosseya, the driving force behind the Anafora resort (Bohaira province in Egypt) that was founded in 1998. Here the appearance and building materials have been inspired by the monastic architecture of ancient Scetis¹⁶ and Kellia. As in the case of the architecture of Hassan Fathy,¹⁷ a remote past is the source of inspiration, and the guests and visitors who come for a retreat or a short visit get the impression of being remote in time and space from the noisy, industrialized world in which most of them live.

The concept of Anafora is not only inspired by the past but contains innovative elements as well. This becomes clear in the interior of the churches where the painted decoration is based on a combination of Byzantine, Coptic, and contemporary iconography. Wooden furniture is scarce and when not standing, the worshippers sit on rugs. An innovation, and at the same time a return to the period of long before the tenth century, is the omission of an altar screen in the main church. Not even a low chancel screen, as in many sixth century churches,

¹⁶ Now known as Wadi al-Natrun.

¹⁷ Hassan Fathy (1900–1989) is also well-known as the author of *Architecture for the Poor* (1976) in which he advocates a return to traditional and affordable housing for masses, buildings constructed in mudbrick, wood and stone.



FIGURE 16.7 Exterior of main church in Anafora
PHOTO COURTESY OF JOS STRENGHOLT



FIGURE 16.8 Interior of main church in Anafora
PHOTO COURTESY OF JOS STRENGHOLT



FIGURE 16.9 Church of Gesù, Rome
PHOTO IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

separates nave from sanctuary. Here tradition and modernity are combined in a remarkable way.

Contemporary with Anafora, but standing in stark contrast with it, is the new cathedral of Sharm al-Sheikh. The outside fits in the line of modern Coptic architecture, but the interior is of a completely different approach. The vaults and walls are covered in a decoration that is partly of a three-dimensional *trompe l'oeuil* character. The clouds that surround the several scenes seem to deny the presence of the walls and vaults, and give the illusion that we look right into heaven.¹⁸ This kind of interaction between architecture and illusionistic painting is not new and in the way it has been applied in Sharm al-Sheikh, dates back to the Baroque, when after the Council of Trent (1545–1563), in the framework of the counter-reformation, the visual arts, in combination with ecclesiastical music, were employed to propagate the Roman Catholic faith. The cathedral seems to be inspired by the church of Gesù in Rome, consecrated in 1584 as the main church of the order of the Jesuits.¹⁹

18 https://web.500px.com/photo/75462583/Sharm-el-sheikh-coptic-church-by-Benny-Stoor/?utm_medium=pinterest&utm_campaign=nativeshare&utm_content=web&utm_source=500px (accessed 28 February 2020).

19 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dome_of_Church_of_the_Ges%C3%B9_\(Rome\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dome_of_Church_of_the_Ges%C3%B9_(Rome).jpg) (accessed 28 February 2020).

The varieties in twentieth century Coptic religious architecture and church decoration, of which only a handful have been briefly described here, are remarkable. On one hand one could explain them simply by differences in taste, but there are reasons to believe that also ideological motifs play a role. The building style of Anafora is clearly different from urban architecture and is meant to evoke an atmosphere of (monastic) contemplation and retreat from everyday life. On the outside a church is a landmark that proclaims the presence of a Christian community, on the inside it is a space that serves the purpose of celebrating liturgies and offers a place and silence for private devotion and contemplation. Both in- and outside of a church convey a message, be it to the world in general or to the members of the congregation. With this knowledge in mind, the architect and painters should be aware of the associations that their works evoke.

When it comes to the ideological backgrounds of Christian painting—both wall painting and paintings on panel or canvas—there is a major difference between Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Although the Coptic Orthodox Church was not represented at the Second Council of Nicaea (787), where the major principles of eastern Christian iconography were formulated, Coptic religious painting follows the same principles.²⁰ Contemporary Coptic painting that is based on western Baroque art suggests to the art-historically educated viewer an affinity with counter-reformation art and the Council of Trent, something that can hardly be considered to be the intention of the painters or the ones who commissioned the paintings. Modern Coptic art and architecture are pluriform in their appearance and apparently this is not always a matter of ideological considerations. Mapping out a road to the future requires knowledge about where one comes from and where one wants to go. The Coptic Orthodox Church has been on a crossroad since the time of a growing diaspora that started in the 1960's.²¹ The Coptic community abroad is generally higher educated than the Egyptian and here the focus is on the future and how to integrate in a mostly western society without losing its own cultural and religious identity. A view on the past is less important, since the history of the Church in the diaspora is young and the question of the care for material heritage is not a current one. The community in Egypt is

20 As mentioned above, Isaac Fanous was a pupil of the school of Leonid Ouspensky, author of *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), a summary of the orthodox principles of iconography.

21 An estimated 1–2 million Copts live outside of Egypt; the Coptic population in Egypt is estimated at 10 million. See A. Boháč, "Middle Eastern Christians in Diaspora and their Political Activism towards their Countries of Origin," *Politické vedy*. Vol. 22/4 (2019): 72.

occupied with different matters and apparently does not want to be seen as a Church living in the past. Although hundreds of monuments require maintenance, priorities are in the field of the social position of its people, in a society dealing with unemployment and confrontations with fundamentalist Islam. Under these circumstances the Church and its architecture apparently must show an image of progress and prosperity. But is this view on the future also an underlying reason for a lack of interest or respect for cultural heritage in Egypt?

3 Restoration, Renovation, or Demolition?

What are the factors that play a role when it comes to the functioning, preservation, or demolition of religious architecture? Religious architecture has two aspects: the purely practical one of providing a space for the performance of rituals, while the second one is more of a symbolical or spiritual nature. The building (temple or church) can be a sacred relic from a remote past that reminds us of the generation before us, or of the founding fathers and saints who established a cult. The building can be a model of the universe, a dwelling place for a god or the place where he manifests himself. In many cases age is a criterion for the sacredness and respectability of a sanctuary and its maintenance and preservation are a consequence of this. Nothing lasts forever, and in practice and at a certain moment, decisions have to be made concerning repair, restoration, or total renewal. Various cultures and times have seen as many different approaches to this matter. A decision concerning restoration or demolition of a sanctuary can be the consequence of ideology in certain cases, sometimes of practical considerations, while in other cases disinterest and ignorance can play a role.

Different religions deal with this matter in different ways. Examples of deliberate demolition and reconstruction can be found in the Shinto religion, for instance. The Ise Grand Shrine in Japan, dedicated to the sun-goddess Amaterasu, was established at the end of the seventh century and is replaced every twenty years with an exact replica of the old one. The wooden structure is subject to wear, tear, and decay, and only an impeccable temple is deemed worthy to the goddess.²²

A completely different approach, resulting in demolition and partial rebuilding of sacred architecture, can be found in Saudi Arabia. In the early nineteenth

22 Felicia G. Bock, "The Rites of Renewal at Ise," *Monumenta Nipponica* 29-1 (Spring, 1974): 55-68.

century the Saud family, under influence of the Wahabist approach to Islam, started demolishing shrines, especially funerary monuments of members of the family and companions of the prophet Mohamed, in the Arab peninsula and what is now Iraq. After the Ottoman Empire gained control over the Arab Peninsula, many destroyed monuments were rebuilt, but destroyed again in the course of the twentieth century. Of the complex of both religious and secular buildings surrounding the Kaaba in Mecca, nothing survives. The official reason for this is that such ancient relics, especially tombs and mosques attached to them, can become an object of veneration, a violation of the strictest monotheistic character of Wahabist Islam.²³ Even the Kaaba, the most sacred shrine of Islam, has been renovated so often that probably nothing of its original structure survives. Destruction and renovation, therefore, are used deliberately in order to avoid the monument becoming an object of veneration.

Demolition and renewal or rebuilding of old or ancient religious buildings are not uncommon in Coptic Egypt. Here the situation is more complicated, since there is no ideological directive concerning demolition or preservation. A recent example of demolition of a Coptic church in Egypt is that of the small but tasteful cathedral of Matai, which was pulled down in 2018 to be replaced by a larger church. The cathedral was built in 1929, less than one hundred years old, and therefore, strictly speaking, not a monument protected by law. Here we can only wonder the reason behind the decision: a purely practical approach towards a building that was considered too small seems to be the main reason. Apparently, the spiritual significance of a building of less than a hundred years old was not considered as an argument. Age is not an absolute criterion. In a country like Egypt one century counts less than in Australia or the New World, but also in the case of older churches decisions can be taken that seem puzzling.

During the restoration of churches in Old Cairo many of the old, plastered walls were torn down and replaced with walls constructed of modern bricks that were left unplastered, thus re-creating a building according to contemporary aesthetics. This was done in the church of Sergios and Bacchus (Abu Sarga), while in the church of St. Mercurius (Abu Sefein) a hypothetical situation from the past was created by adding semi-domes in the northern and southern sides of the nave. We could call this a “re-imagination of the past”,

23 Ziauddin Sardar, “The Destruction of Mecca,” *The New York Times* (September 30, 2014): https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/01/opinion/the-destruction-of-mecca.html?_r=0 (accessed 28 February 2020). Trinidad Rico and Rim Lababidi, “Extremism in Contemporary Cultural Heritage Debates about the Muslim World,” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 14,1 (2017): 95–105.

not based on historical sources or evidence, but modern taste. This approach to restoration is not unique and not characteristic for our times. The French restoration architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879) had outspoken opinions about this matter, and formulated it as follows:

To restore a building is not to maintain it, repair it or remake it: it is to re-establish it in a complete state which may never have existed at any given moment.²⁴

Concerning the authenticity of the structure he wrote:

Monuments of stone or wood perish, it would be madness to want to keep all and try to extend their existence despite the conditions of the material, but what cannot and should not die is the spirit that has raised these monuments, for that spirit is ours, it is the soul of the country.²⁵

In other words, the material aspects of historical architecture and their authenticity were considered subordinate to the “spirit” behind it, resulting in a liberty for the restorer to rebuild or to reconstruct. Viollet-le-Duc was not the only one who used this guideline in his work. Followers in other countries followed these principles well into the twentieth century. Nowadays this attitude is frowned upon by western art historians, architects, and restorers, but in a country like Egypt, and in our case more specifically in the Coptic Church, the nineteenth century principles apparently still apply. The fact that we are dealing with monuments that have a practical function for worship is an additional and complicating factor.

All in all, we see that, generally speaking, there is a clash of cultures when it comes to principles of conservation of (religious) cultural heritage in East and West and this conflict can be summarized in the following points.

In Western culture the “work of art” or the “monument” is highly appreciated and respected, and that implies that it is considered an object to be admired and protected in the first place. The most precious pieces are kept in museums, and behind glass to avoid any damage, or wear and tear. In the case of restoration, interference is limited to a minimum since the authenticity of the original object is at stake. “Do not touch” is a sign frequently seen in museums

24 Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XI au XVI siècle*, vol. 8. Paris, 1858, 14.

25 Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XI au XVI siècle*, vol. 1. Paris 1854, vii–viii.

and monumental buildings. The formulation of these principles, however, is just a bit more than half a century old. The so-called Venice Charter is a manifest of principles for conservation and restoration of monuments, formulated at the Second International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments in Venice in 1964.²⁶ A year later it was adopted by ICOMOS, the authoritative International Council on Monuments and Sites. Article 3 of the charter says:

The intention in conserving and restoring monuments is to safeguard them no less as works of art than as historical evidence,

while article 5 says:

The conservation of monuments is always facilitated by making use of them for some socially useful purpose. Such use is therefore desirable, but it must not change the lay-out or decoration of the building. It is within these limits only that modifications demanded by a change of function should be envisaged and may be permitted.

It is clear that these two basic articles illustrate the wide gap between the approach of ICOMOS and what is common practice in Coptic Egypt, mainly that a church or a monastery—even if the monument dates back to the fifth century—serves a practical purpose in the first place. That counts as well for its furnishings. As a result, wear and tear are accepted, and, if necessary, the object is to be repaired with contemporary materials and techniques. Authenticity in the sense of limiting interference and, if restorations are necessary, using materials that are identical to the original, is not a priority. A copy of an original is appreciated almost as much as the original, as long as it looks identical. However, the Venice Charter says the following about restoration:²⁷

Article 6. The conservation of a monument implies preserving a setting which is not out of scale. Wherever the traditional setting exists, it must be kept. No new construction, demolition or modification which would alter the relations of mass and color must be allowed.

26 The text is accessible at https://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf (accessed 28 February 2020).

27 The text is accessible at https://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf (accessed 28 February 2020).

Article 9. The process of restoration is a highly specialized operation. Its aim is to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monument and is based on respect for original material and authentic documents. It must stop at the point where conjecture begins, and in this case moreover any extra work that is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp. The restoration in any case must be preceded and followed by an archaeological and historical study of the monument.

It is clear that these guidelines have not been followed in countless cases. As mentioned above, the churches in Old Cairo have been partly demolished and reconstructed with modern materials. ICOMOS is an international organization and the Venice Charter is internationally recognized, but that offers no guarantee that such guidelines are indeed followed.

The situation discussed above raises a number of questions. First, we should ask ourselves in all honesty whether the differences in approach in East and West are a reason to try and change the attitude towards Coptic cultural heritage. Egypt is not the only country in which guidelines of international organizations are ignored. In countries such as Saudi Arabia the destruction of monuments has been carried out without any interference from western authorities, simply because it is the right of any sovereign state to deal with its cultural heritage in a way it considers best. Only in the case of monuments that are on the UNESCO list of world heritage, international monitoring can take place, but even then, it requires the cooperation of the state involved. The only possible sanction in the case of endangering, neglect or damage is taking monuments off the list, as UNESCO threatened to do when a main road was planned too close to the pyramids of Giza.

In the case that the answer to the question is “yes”, the next question would be to decide how and in what respect the attitude of the Egyptian authorities involved in the management and preservation of Coptic heritage should be changed. In one respect the answer is simple: ICCROM, UNESCO, and ICOMOS have published a handbook with guidelines concerning the preservation, restoration, and management of monuments.²⁸ The more difficult question is how to implement these guidelines. The Coptic monuments in Egypt may be the property of the Church for a great deal, but protection and supervision

28 Bernard M. Feilden, Jukka Jokilehto, *Management Guidelines for World Cultural Heritage sites*. Rome: ICCROM, 1998. Accessible as pdf at <https://www.iccrom.org/publication/management-guidelines-world-cultural-heritage-sites> (accessed 28 February 2020).

is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Antiquities and the two institutions are not always on perfect terms when it comes to conflicting interests concerning the use, maintenance and restoration of churches and monasteries. Where the ministry is dealing with monuments as national heritage, and in certain cases as touristic attractions, for the Church they are in the first-place buildings with a function of worship or monastic retreat. There are reasons to believe that, in order to avoid conflicts that might lead to intercommunal tension, local inspectorates are condoning violations of the antiquities law by monasteries, bishoprics or parishes. Another reason for the loss and damage of Coptic monuments is that antiquities-inspectors generally have poor knowledge of Christian archaeology and antiquities, since this subject receives little attention in Egyptian higher education.

Apart from loss and damage that is due to ignorance, one could say that the conflict of interests amounts to a difference of opinion about the value and primary function of the monument. The ecclesiastical view is usually that the monument has a practical function and that limitations in its use, due to considerations of monument care, are unwelcomed restrictions.

In the meantime, this lack of unity in the policy of the protection of cultural heritage can have a negative backlash on the status of the monument in question. As an example, we can mention the monuments of Wadi al-Natrun. In 2003 the Egyptian government submitted a request to put the monasteries of this region, together with the monasteries near the Red Sea, on the World Heritage List. Since that moment they are on the tentative list, as is the usual procedure.²⁹ One of the conditions for a monument to be admitted to the World Heritage List is that it is properly protected and taken care of. In the past fifteen years, however, the landscape and the condition of the monasteries of Wadi al-Natrun have changed drastically. What used to be desert has been turned into cultivated land and most of the hundreds of remains of hermitages, hidden under the sand had to make way for agricultural land.³⁰ This has happened not only in areas given out by the government to local farmers, but also within the territories of monasteries, especially Deir al-Surian and Deir Anba Bishoi. During renovation works in Deir al-Baramus and Deir al-Surian, eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings have been demolished and replaced by modern structures. All these changes and renovations served practical purposes but have severely diminished the chances for the monasteries ever to

29 <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1827/> (accessed 28 February 2020).

30 This information is based on surveys by the author that have yet to be published. The only one of the four monasteries in Wadi al-Natrun that has a prudent policy concerning monument preservation is Deir Abu Maqar.



FIGURE 16.10 Aerial photo in 2018 of the western part of the territory of Deir Anba Bishoi. Contours of archaeological remains
PHOTO FROM GOOGLE EARTH



FIGURE 16.11 Aerial view of the same area in 2019. Archaeological remains obliterated by building activities
PHOTO FROM GOOGLE EARTH



FIGURE 16.12 Monks visiting a hermitage excavated by the late Bishop Samuel, south of the residence of Pope Shenouda in Deir Anba Bishoi. Photo taken in 1992
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 16.13 Aerial view of the same area in 2020
PHOTO FROM GOOGLE EARTH



FIGURE 16.14 St. Antony's Monastery, paintings in the nave of the church
PHOTO COURTESY OF LISA AGAIBY

be admitted to the World Heritage List. It seems the bishops in charge of the monasteries did not make these considerations and that priority was given, rather, to the modern use of the monasteries.

The preservation of monuments in their original state, and the modern functioning of a monastery are two matters that are not always easy to conciliate. In recent years three major conservation programs have been carried out in monastic churches that are still in use in one way or another, and a closer look at these case studies shows that conservation of an ancient building and keeping it accessible or in function are not incompatible with each other. An important aspect in these projects is that non-Egyptian partners were/are involved in the conservation work; partners who were or are working with a western attitude towards conservation ethics. The dialogue in the course of the work has led to compromises on both sides and in each of the three cases the outcome is slightly different.

The thirteenth century mural paintings in the old church of St. Antony's Monastery near the Red Sea were cleaned and restored by an Italian team under the responsibility of the American Research Center in Cairo (ARCE). After the project was finished the decision was taken not to use the church any longer for



FIGURE 16.15 The Red Monastery, detail of the paintings in the sanctuary
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

daily prayers and liturgies, but to use the adjacent eighteenth-century church for services. The old church is only used for special occasions and visitors for guided tours are welcomed after making an appointment. Since these visits take place under the supervision of a monk, no special measures, such as glass paneling, are necessary to protect the paintings. In this case we can say that the building has become a kind of museum object, and, in light of the fact that another church is available for daily use, this may be the best solution under the given circumstances.

The *haikal* (sanctuary) of the church of the Red Monastery was restored by the same team, again under auspices of ARCE. The church is no longer in use as a monastic church but serves the local parish of the village that has developed there (Nag el-Deir). The nave of the church, with its galleries and wooden roofing, had collapsed centuries ago and as a result of this the sanctuary with its triconch plan, had been turned into a church, with the eastern conch serving as the *haikal*. If congregations would be larger than usual, or when the crowds visiting the church for special occasions would need protection from the sun, a tent would be temporarily suspended to cover the nave. The ARCE campaign left the *haikal* in a perfectly restored state, but without solving the question



FIGURE 16.16 The Red Monastery, former nave of the church

PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

of how the practical use of the building should continue. After cleaning and restoration work the nave was left as an open space, where only the remains of broken columns were put back into position. This means that there was no reconstruction of roof and galleries to make the building fit for practical use again, just *anastylosis*; putting back into place the fallen remains without adding anything. The *haikal* is still in use, but in contrast to the situation before the restoration, is only accessible for the clergy. In the other parts of the church, low cancelli-like barriers have been installed to prevent visitors and the worshippers from touching the paintings.³¹

In the church of the Holy Virgin in Deir al-Surian³² the situation is again different: the church is in daily use, not only by the monks, but is visited by hundreds and sometimes thousands of visitors per day. The church, which has been in use continually since the seventh century, is in fact treated as an object for daily use, not as an antiquity. Since the late 1990's numerous mural paintings have come to light and have changed the interior of the church. A side effect of these discoveries was that a number of problems had to be solved: the

31 Michael Jones, "Preface," in E. Bolman (ed.) *The Red Monastery Church, Beauty and Asceticism in Upper Egypt* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), xiii–xv.

32 Monastery of the Syrians in Wadi al-Natrun.



FIGURE 16.17 Deir al-Surian, paintings in the *khurus* of the church
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

formerly blank walls up to two meters high had to be protected from the hands of visitors, that do not only touch, but also inscribed their names on the walls. The wires for lighting, ventilators, and sound amplification were nailed to the walls with hundreds of nails, leaving as many holes in the paintings that were once invisible underneath the blank plaster. The monks were confronted with paintings from five different periods and insisted constantly that the restorers would make full reconstructions, even when only less than half of a painting survived. Unlike in the case of St. Antony's Monastery and the Red Monastery, there is no possibility to limit or control the access of visitors into the church, and so the only solution to protect the wall paintings is to install glass screens up to two meters high. Electricity and sound amplification could not be omitted, but fortunately there was the opportunity to open floors and put wiring underneath. The general question that remains is whether we should equip a seventh century church with twenty-first century technology and make it accessible to increasing numbers of visitors.

The *haikal* of the church was always closed to visitors and damage inside is limited to the wear and tear due to regular liturgical use. The *haikal* is separated from the *khurus* (transept) by a set of precious folding doors, made of



FIGURE 16.18 Deir al-Surian, glass protection over paintings in the *khurus*
PHOTO COURTESY OF CRISTOBAL CALAFORRA

cedar wood, inlaid with ivory and dating back to 914AD, and these had suffered heavily. After more than one thousand years of opening and closing, some of the hinges were at the point of breaking, but more serious was the damage inflicted in recent decades. The monks had nailed and screwed sockets and wires on the wooden doorjambs. Pious collectors of religious souvenirs (a source of *baraka*, religious blessing) had gradually taken out many pieces of ivory inlay and on the basis of photographic documentation, it could be shown that the disappearance of ivory was increasing rapidly. Restoration of the door was completed in 2014, and the surface of the doors is now so smooth that removing ivory inlay requires a sharp tool; hopefully, this will be a deterrent for any visitor with ideas! But only the future will tell.

Monastic churches were built for monks, not for thousands of visitors and pilgrims. The reforms of Pope Shenouda III, making monasteries accessible for the crowds, had major implications, not only for the spirit of monasticism, but also for the preservation of monastic monuments. Until the 1980's, many monasteries were accessible only by dirt tracks that were unfit for tourist buses and as a consequence, the numbers of visitors were limited. Nowadays asphalt roads lead to massive parking lots, surrounded by tourist shops selling everything from soft drinks to pets.



FIGURE 16.19 Deir al-Surian, *haikal*-doors before restoration

PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

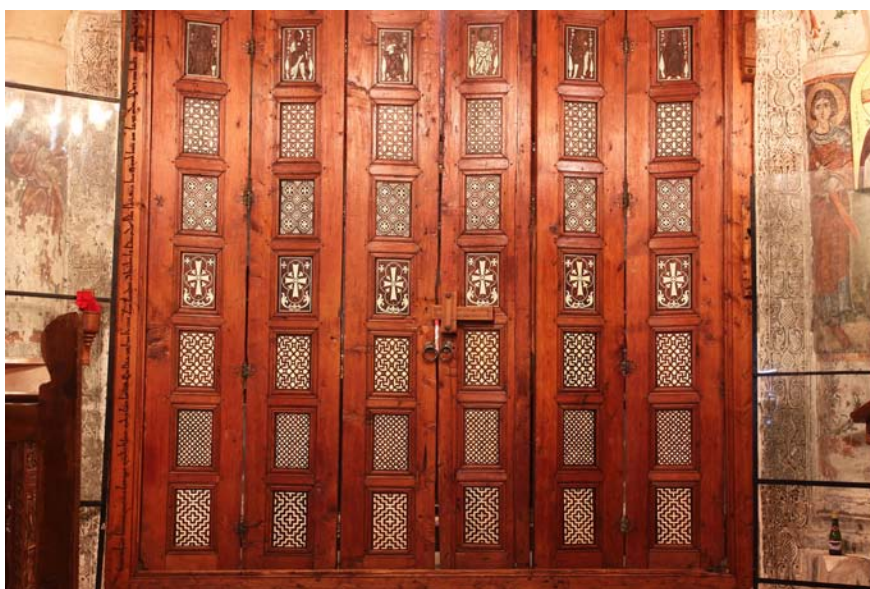


FIGURE 16.20 Deir al-Surian, *haikal*-doors after restoration

PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 16.21
Deir al-Surian, panel of the *khurus*-door
before restoration
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR



FIGURE 16.22
Deir al-Surian, panel of the *khurus*-door
after restoration
PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

The consequences of such a change are comparable to the problems that are created worldwide by increasing tourism. One could summarize the situation by saying that massive numbers of visitors destroy what they are coming to visit: the authenticity and cultural or spiritual character of a monument or a place. This destruction is not just a matter of irreversibly changing the atmosphere of a place; it partly means physical damage and destruction as well. This then raises the question how important is authenticity? After visitors have worn out or used up the monument, can we replace it with a replica? Or should preventive measures be taken to avoid damage and deterioration? The restoration of churches in Coptic Old Cairo has shown that in Egypt, and not only among Copts, there is still a tendency to make appearance prevail and keep authenticity subordinate to this, at least when it concerns monuments that are still in use. Recent restoration projects in Coptic churches and monasteries in Egypt where large parts of ancient fabric were replaced by new have shown this. Seen through the eyes of ICOMOS and western restorers this equals destruction and should be avoided at all costs.

4 Concluding Remarks

Religious art and architecture express identity (among other things). Coptic identity and its place in Egyptian society have been subject to changes and changing attitudes since the early nineteenth century. The Coptic revival has resulted in a number of positive developments, such as the recognition of the importance of education, and has also led to a wave of modernism that meant an orientation towards the West, which finds its expression in religious art and architecture. In Coptic architecture of the middle of the nineteenth century and later, there seems to be no tendency to imitate the church architecture of a remote Coptic past.

Neo-styles, such as neo-gothic or neo-classicism in western architecture, reflect a longing to a glorious past or are meant to remind the public that the basic values that certain buildings represent are located in that glorious past. A neo-gothic cathedral directs the thoughts to the late Middle Ages, when the Roman Catholic Church was the main factor of influence in western society, while a law court, built in neo-classic style, reminds us of Roman law as the foundation of the western juridical system. The Coptic Church of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could not look back on a glorious past in its history of the previous one thousand years, at least not when it comes to its position and authority in society, and that may explain the absence of neo-Coptic architecture. Instead, examples for inspiration were taken from

other regions. Finally, a modernistic style was developed that represents a look towards the future. This period, from the middle of the nineteenth till the middle of the twentieth century, may be illustrative for an interruption in collective memory when it comes to cultural heritage, especially architecture and archaeological monuments.

Identity is part of tradition and connects past and future. The period of the Coptic revival also meant a breach with a past that was considered a period of decline and backwardness. The interruption in collective memory that has occurred has resulted in a neglect or disinterest for the past and its heritage. The foundation of the Coptic Museum illustrates a turn in this tendency, but a complete re-validation of the past has not yet been achieved by far. The quote of Michael Press at the beginning of this contribution states that heritage (and awareness of it) is the result of a top-down idea. If we apply this to the Coptic Church, we must conclude that even among the higher clergy there is just very little awareness of the importance of cultural heritage and how to preserve it for future generations. The gap in knowledge of the past, which is a result of centuries of decline, has not been filled in yet, in spite of a revival movement of more than a century. The great pluriformity in contemporary Coptic architecture and art illustrates that there are diverting attitudes towards a cultural identity, in which a focus on traditional forms and awareness of traditions are often absent. Education, especially at an academic level, is indispensable to create awareness of a historically based cultural and religious awareness. The preservation of material heritage is indispensable for a lasting cultural identity. The standards for this preservation must be updated. The attitude that material heritage is to be used as objects that can be replaced by modern substitutes or replicas is no longer tenable. Without going to the other extreme, putting everything of a hundred years or older behind glass with a sign "do not touch", reasonable solutions can result in practical compromises. Recent conservation projects in cooperation with foreign experts have shown this. Heritage protection and management has not yet reached the level of a top-down idea within the Coptic Orthodox Church. Westerners are still trying to impose this idea on Coptic society, which is an undesirable situation. The process of education in which Habib Girgis was one of the front men, has still not been accomplished when it comes to awareness of the importance of tradition, passing on both immaterial and material heritage to a next generation.

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