



YOUSSEF NASSIF & BEDOUR LATIF FIVE DECADES OF SPIRITUALITY THROUGH IMAGES

The thirty-eight icons and the fresco in the Niche in St. Mark's Church were all written⁽¹⁾ by Bedour Latif and Youssef Nassif. When the icons were completed in our church in 1988, a member of the congregation spontaneously expressed that as she entered the Church she felt a beautiful sense of warmth. This perhaps best describes Youssef and Bedour's iconography. The facial features of our Lord and the saints reflect a deep expression of serenity and contemplation and the colours resonate with a spiritual joy. The miraculous apparitions from the niche fresco in 1988 and 2002 have been special blessings to our Church and community. St. Mark's Museum is privileged to have two of Youssef and Bedour's icons: St. Tadros that was originally in our Church, as well as a recent and very special donation of the "Burial of Christ" from the iconographers themselves. (image below).

Youssef Nassif and Bedour Latif received diplomas from the Institute of Coptic Studies in 1961: Youssef in Antiquities and ancient Egyptian languages and Bedour in Art and Architecture. Since 1963 they have been teaching at the Institute where Youssef is also serving as the Deputy Director. They met as students and have been married and writing icons together for over 50 years! Asked how they work it out to write icons together, their response was Bedour: "We met in art and live and work in that spiritual harmony." Youssef: "Four eyes can see more than two!" More seriously, he explained that they constantly search for how to communicate spiritual expression while improving on each other's efforts. It is truly a partnership!

As deeply spiritual people, Youssef and Bedour pray and research about the saint's life or the biblical story to capture the spiritual

message in the form of art: Bedour: "It is not just art that is created but a spiritual message that is communicated." No image is drawn until the details have been thoroughly researched. The symbols and imagery become a way of re-telling a story without resorting to words. They see themselves as "missionaries" who are making the Word of God known through images rather than as preachers. One of the particularities of Youssef and Bedour's iconography is their "decorative" style which always has a spiritual meaning. Next time you are in St. Mark's Church note for example, the icon of Last Supper with the sheaths of wheat on each side and the grapevine to symbolize the "source" of the bread and the wine on the Eucharist table. Asked about the significance of flowers at the feet of Our Lord Jesus Christ and saints, they commented: "God created the earth and it was beautiful. At the feet of Our Lord and the saints we must also express the beauty of God's creation." Another unique characteristic of their iconography is the details of the disciples' faces as seen on the iconostasis that reflect a serious study of each disciple's age. Also note that the icon of St. Mary and the Divine Child, St. Mary's braids are shown – "...because she was a young girl and also in Hebrew culture virgins could show their hair."

Bedour and Youssef are contemporaries of Dr. Isaac Fanous (see summer 2007 Newsletter), and together with him, they have taken the lead in the renaissance of Coptic art since the late 1950s. They are constantly searching to create a genuine Coptic style of iconography in form, essence and imagery. They have written icons for many churches,

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The Burial of Jesus Christ (1988)

Icon written by Bedour Latif and Youssef Nassif for Virgin Mary and Ava Reweis Church, Anba Reweis Land, Cairo, Egypt. It was consecrated by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III and displayed on Good Fridays when His Holiness officiated this service at which time, a bed of flowers surrounded the icon, and worshippers touched it at the end of the service. The paint eventually wore off and the icon was returned to Youssef and Bedour. Rather than restore the icon they generously gave it to our Museum! Note that Our Lord's eyes are open to symbolize His immortality and continual Providence.

⁽¹⁾ According to Orthodox tradition, we say that icons are "written" because they have to authentically express the dogmas of the Church, the Orthodox tradition and Biblical stories and events. Painting, in contrast, is the artistic techniques and skill to render the images, just as the alphabet and grammar are the "tools" by which we write a story or document.

DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS

The Museum received a large collection of coins dating from Biblical times to 18th century Egypt. As with all the artifacts we receive a great deal of research is required to interpret the history, artistic representation, art technique(s) and material used. We even need to research and document the donor and how the artifact got to our Museum! All of this research is very specialized. We were fortunate that Sandy Saad joined the Museum's team of volunteers as an Interpreter last spring. Sandy is in the fourth year student in Arts Management with a double major in Studio and Art History at U of T Scarborough Campus. Sandy's enthusiasm for research led her to set up an Independent Research Course to study the science of coins, otherwise known as Numismatics. Our plan is to have Sandy work full time in the Museum the summer of 2008 to begin cataloguing the coin collection. After two month into her research course this is what **Sandy** has to say:

"I'm learning a lot of really interesting stuff. The study of coins is called Numismatics; it focuses on the mint of the coin, the ruler who was responsible for it, and historic significance behind it. The art history focus of my research looks on the aspects and characteristics of the images of the ruler; what about it makes them look so powerful and appealing for it to become such an effective representation for those in power. I learned that many of the rulers follow the portrait of Alexander the Great because every aspect of his features means something: upward looking eyes as if he is seeing something beyond human vision, focused eyebrows for thought,



horns of Zeus which portray him as the son of Zeus. Alexander was revered as a god because of his conquests. All of these characteristics add to his ethos's which are expressed in action. I learn funny terminology every week: try saying this out loud Metaposkopal – Meta means



Silver coin dating Ptolemaic period (3rd century) depicting the head of Alexander the Great framed in a lady's brooch. The head is covered with elephant skin with an elephant's trunk on top.

between, Pos means face and scopal means scoping. Together, this Greek word refers to people who can look at someone's face and determine their future. Any one who had any of Alexander's characteristics was considered to have a great future. This is one of the reasons many rulers after him followed his style of portraiture adding his features to their portraits on coins. But the coolest thing about study the coin is using the magnified glass to read the name on each coin and researching on the ruler and its history. It's like Forensics!"

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some which are in Egypt and include St Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in El Abasseya, Cairo; in Canada, in the US, in the UK and in Australia. In addition to icons written on wood, their works include frescos and stained glass windows. St. Mark's Coptic Museum's Library has a CD of over 450 icons they have written. With their permission the Museum has reproduced some of their icons on plaques, on Christmas cards and a T-Shirt! All benefits go to the future Museum!

Youssef and Bedour are artists with many talents. St. Mark's Coptic Museum displays several of their creations: hand carved copper crosses, icons in enamel on copper, fresco models, an intricate reproduction of a fifth century hand carved brass church chandelier with hand blown glass containers for the oil and a wick, and amulets using ancient Egyptian "secret" techniques and materials.

Activities Highlights

International

∂ February 6-11, 2008 "Christianity and Monasticism in Upper Egypt: the Region from Nag Hammadi to Esna". The symposium is the fourth in a series of symposia about the history of monasticism in Egypt organised by St. Mark Foundation for Coptic History and St. Shenouda the Archimandrite Society. These symposia are planned to document the history of and disseminate the most up to date information about monasticism in Egypt.

Scarborough

∂ On ten consecutive Mondays starting January 14 until March 17, 2008, St. Mark's Coptic Museum is sponsoring a course on "Neo-Coptic Icon Writing". The instructor is Iconographer, Mrs. Seham Guirguis. Information about the course and registration forms are available by email from alice_hanna@hotmail.com, in the Church lobby and from the Church Secretary's Office and the Museum. Participants are required to pre-register. Enrolment numbers are limited.