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Telling the Story of Covid-19 100 years from now was one of this past summer's activities. The CMC solicited one digital image (a photograph, of a collage, or a creation by the contributor) that would tell future generations how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted social, political, cultural life. Selection was based on three existing CMC collections criteria:

- 1) Image best tells the story how this worldwide pandemic affects individuals, communities, &/or institutions today.
- 2) Its artistic and cultural merit.
- 3) Its relevance to the Museum's collection.

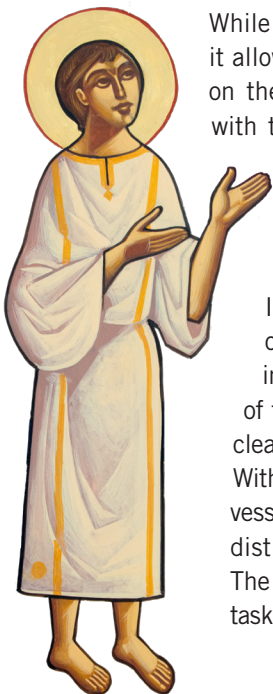
Responses were fascinating and several submissions went beyond an image to tell their story. Selection was narrowed down to three "themes":

- **Telling the story of Coptic artists during the pandemic.** In this issue of the Newsletter we are featuring the story submitted by iconographer George Makary. All images are of icons George Makary wrote in this period. We have also started to feature the story of Coptic artists on Facebook.
- **Telling the story of a town** (Newmarket) under Covid-19.
- **Covid-19 and liturgical practices & traditions.** We received a range of images from different responders which challenged us to turn this "story" into an academic research project and maybe an eventual conference.

With the indefinite continuity of the pandemic, this project has become an ongoing activity. We take this opportunity to thank all responders.

COPTIC ART IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

by george makary



While the effect of COVID-19 is truly striking, it allowed iconographers to gain some insights on the engagement of the Coptic community with the arts as a whole - particularly Coptic iconography. How have icons changed the church at home?

sanctuaries at home

Immediately noticeable was the importance of the physical church in the lives of those in the Coptic community. The significance of the physical church was made abundantly clear in its sudden and unexpected absence. With the unavailability of the structure, liturgy, vessels, and clergy, Copts set out to designate distinct spaces in their homes for worship. The development of at-home worship corners tasked quarantined Copts with replicating the

five senses - or as many senses as possible - that the Orthodox Church implements into its liturgical climate: Seeing the icons, hearing the chants, smelling the aroma of incense, touching in greeting one another and the icons, and tasting the Eucharist. Of these, the easiest to replicate (thanks to technology) are the icons and chants.

As an iconographer, my colleagues and I (Kirolos Kilada and Fadi Mikhail) received a dramatic surge in the request for hand painted icons and prints within a very short time span. Copts found icons to be a vocabulary of Divine communion, one that was personal, intimate, and perfect for private use. The subject matter varied, but most requested icons of the Christ, the Virgin, and the patron saints of the family - icons that were arranged in a manner that would replicate the iconostasis. An instagram page entitled "Orthodox Corners" (@orthodoxcorners) documented 55 of these prayer corners in 20 days. Within 48 hours, I received 74 requests for high quality icons to be used for prayer spaces. Kirolos and Fadi witnessed an increased demand for file usage as well. During Pascha week, Mekhail Mattias Rezkalla launched a series of free prints of Coptic icons for at home usage distributed by the Monastery of St Shenouda in Australia. Once these prayer spaces were curated, their users were met with another interest.

iconographers at home

Confronted by the surplus of icons in their homes, many of the individuals setting up prayer corners returned to me and my colleagues looking for preliminary education and training in Coptic iconography. A week after I released my print files, I received around 30 requests for online courses. Fadi Mikhail launched an online video course of 8 instructional videos teaching the drawing, meaning and history of icons. Ashraf Fayek also released an instructional course through SAC in Melbourne. The trend of developing a “quarantine hobby” facilitated the popularity of art-making at home. Many iconographers in the field also localized their studios to their domestic spheres - operating on prioritizing private commissions over those for churches. Quarantine also allowed for me to engage in research and base aspects of my practice on that research. In terms of my own work, my studio occupied my entire apartment and consumed most parts of my day - the icons that filled homes of those I was making them for filled mine as well.

“The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the end of my Bachelor of Design and the beginning of my professional life. It was natural that I would begin spending more time on my practice as an iconographer and naturally would begin to collect more commissions. I did not, however, expect the overflow of work which I experienced during these last few months. The amount of requests I was receiving increased dramatically, both for commissioned icons and for printed reproductions. I believe

this can be easily explained by the increased time people were spending at home during the period of self isolation. Those people, who were used to going to church to attend all the customary feasts, now found themselves alone at home, celebrating and praying at the dinner table or in front of the screen of their parish livestream. This forced people to begin replicating many of the aspects of their church in their homes. Every home suddenly felt the need to build their altar, their place of worship at home which they could no longer depend on their church to supply. This naturally led to the commissioning of icons, which is becoming increasingly common in the Coptic diaspora. I myself was also spending more time at home, naturally enabling me to spend more time concentrating on my practice.”

Kirollos Kilada

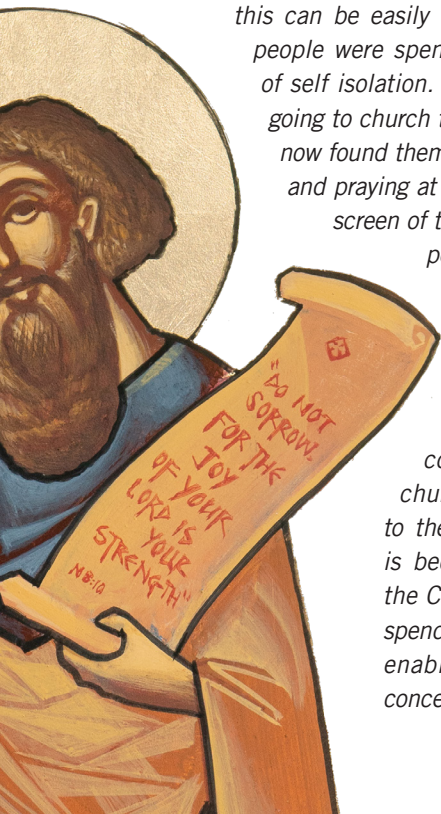


we're back at church now what?

As social distancing protocols eased, we witnessed consistency in the demand and appreciation for icons. Worth consideration is the question - how has physical distancing enhanced the physical relationship to icons? What is the role of the icon at home and at church? Does one supersede the other? How do icons carry the icon beyond the liturgy?

It is clear that liturgical associations to iconographic images exist subconsciously in the mind of a Copt, as a primary component in a Copt's attempt at bringing the church home is bringing icons home. For the duration of quarantine, Kirollos, Fadi, and I were asked to give lectures to 5-6 different churches about the meaning, use and importance of iconography in the church. Personally, I was confronted with many sentimentalities of, “we miss the icons, but we don't know why.”

The icons provide worship with another dimension, conducive for turning the church into a landscape beyond itself. We don't notice that until icons are missing. It is important that the functionality of the icons brought into the home both continue and swell into the usage of icons in the church. Sometimes called “windows into heaven,” it's important to recognize that icons are in fact more of mirrors into the self - and the heaven that lies within the individual. We are all called to be icons of Christ, being created in His image and likeness. So standing before the icon of Christ is a call to imitate Him, both inside and outside the home and the church. The icon, a liturgical instrument, is a call for the Christian to turn their lives into liturgies (Greek, “Public workings”, work of the people). The people are called to publicly live the life of Christ, and those callings are reinvigorated by the visual reminders the Church provides for us.



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