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FATHER MARCOS' CULTURAL LEGACY LIVES ON

The year's first acquisition in the Museum's artefact collection is a painting of Father Marcos A. Marcos (1929-2020) by Coptic artist Kirolos Kilada. In his own words, the artist tells us what inspired him to create this painting and his decision to offer it to the Museum.

CMC: Thank you for offering this beautiful painting of Father Marcos to our Museum. Can you tell us what led you to create it? What was your relationship to Father Marcos?

KIROLLOS KILADA: I didn't expect I'd be thinking about Father Marcos as much as I did, in the days after his passing. I can't say that I had the blessing of a close personal relationship with him. He may have found out my name once from my parents, while giving me one of his trademark hugs at St Mark's in 1st grade. He probably smiled at me as I held up a picture I had drawn of Pope Kyrillos in pencil crayons. And that probably meant something to me — because I knew he had met the Pope. That was pretty much all I knew about him. Pope Kyrillos had sent him here. And he gave great hugs.

My family moved to Mississauga when I was 8, but my growing love for history, Coptic art and culture always gave me a certain pride that I had spent my early childhood at that very first Coptic church in North America, "Mother church" — the church of Fr. Marcos.

That time at St Mark's, as a young noisy kid under his watchful eye, formed in me a burning desire to paint icons, as a quintessential intersection of art, culture, and spirituality. The icons he commissioned by iconographers Bedour Latief and Youssef Nassief surrounded me with a beauty every Sunday that I was not old enough to understand. A few times I would go to upstairs to the museum he founded, and stare at the artefacts in awe, if I was tall enough to see them.



The Flying Priest, 2020
Kirolos Kilada
Oil on board 50cm by 40.6cm

The year we were leaving St Mark's, I was pushing my mom to ask one of the priests if they would please offer an iconography class for kids my age. That burning desire, that love for both the Coptic church and its culture, indirectly planted by Fr. Marcos, was something I took with me when we moved and has stayed with me until now.

Today, I am an emerging artist, illustrator, and Coptic Iconographer, a most unlikely occurrence in our community. It slowly became clear to me that it was none other than Fr. Marcos who created the atmosphere and the place that could produce, not only generations of servants, priests and deacons, but the next generation of Coptic artists.

Copts are slowly putting down roots

An ancient religion fights for survival

By PETER MOSHER

The Golden Age of the Coptic Church of Egypt is long past. In the first centuries of the Christian era, when Alexandria was the centre of learning of the Western world, church fathers—Augustine, Origen, Pontius—gathered there, founded the famous library, and defined by their writings the philosophical basis of Christianity for the ages to come.

Since the first schism in 451 when the Coptic Church separated from Rome over complex matters of dogma, it has had to struggle to survive.

One of the few Egyptian Coptic Orthodox churches outside North Africa is located in Toronto. Since last April Prospect Park United Church has been rented for \$1 a year to a congregation of 250 Egyptian Christian families and their priest.

Rev. Marcos Marcos is a short, plump man whose face seems never to relax. He's always either smiling broadly or frowning intensely. He speaks English with an Arabic accent, but fluently.

"We've moved a lot since we came to Toronto. Other churches have been good to us," Father Marcos says. "We held services in Anglican churches—Holy Trinity, St. Matthias, the Church of the Messiah—and now we're in a United Church. I guess we're ecumenical."

Father Marcos studied in Egypt, then at Hartford Theological Foundation in Connecticut. He came to Canada after his ordination in 1964, and now lives with his wife and 6-year-old

son in the manse beside the church on Innes Avenue.

Inside the church there are a few icons, some candles borrowed from the Anglican Church, and around the altar a wrought-iron railing made by one of the parishioners. Compared with other Orthodox churches, this interior is pretty bleak.

"We want to do many things more, but only when we can get a matching set of icons and candles—all the same size and style," Father Marcos says. "Maybe in a few years we can afford our own church."

The Coptic Christians in Toronto are not a wealthy group, Father Marcos says, although many are professional men.

"Mostly doctors and lawyers and engineers are allowed to come to Canada, but there is no work without special examinations and Canadian experience. Now there isn't much work for anybody."

Father Marcos is a busy man. The only other Coptic priests in North America are in Montreal, New York and Los Angeles. Father Marcos's parish includes Western Canada and the American Midwest. He travels across Canada twice a year and visits Chicago once a month and other larger U.S. cities less frequently.

The Copts regard the Apostle Saint Mark, who brought the gospel to Egypt about the middle of the 1st century, as the first Patriarch of their church. There have been 116 Patriarchs since then, and the church is now working to elect a successor to Kyrillos VI, who died last March.

There are about 3,000,000 Copts in



Rev. Marcos Marcos

Egypt. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with about 9,000,000 members and its own Patriarch, is closely allied with the Egyptian Church.

"In 1967 when Emperor Haile Selassie was in Canada, I flew to North Bay to meet him and we had a Coptic mass," Father Marcos says. "It was a great surprise for him."

After the 5th century schism, the Copts withdrew from contact with the

rest of the world. They managed to co-exist with the Moslems who conquered Egypt, and now, Father Marcos says, suffer no discrimination.

Copts now attend meetings of the World Council of Churches, and sent observers to the Vatican II Conference.

"We are not politicians," Father Marcos says, "but we are involved in the Middle East situation as moralists. We think the Arabs have a right to the lands that were taken from them."

The Coptic Church in Canada isn't likely to grow very much, Father Marcos says few Egyptians are allowed to leave their country now, and those who are here tend to move out of the large cities.

But the church is slowly putting down roots. One of the most complex undertakings facing it is the translation of the liturgy into English from Coptic and Arabic. Scholars have begun to study the Coptic liturgy. The language has evolved from the spoken language of the ancient Egyptians, and the written language was formed by the translation of hieroglyphics into the Greek alphabet by early Church scholars.

When he gets his own church, Father Marcos hopes to set up an information centre for Arabic-speaking immigrants to Canada, Moslems as well as Christians.

And the Coptic Church is involved in community affairs with other churches in the area.

"We try to get along with all the other churches," Father Marcos says. "We've learned in 2,000 years to live with many different kinds of people."

CMC: People viewing this painting will have their own interpretation. As a Museum we like to share the artist's own interpretation. This is also important for research purposes and future generations studying the art of the Copts in 2020, and in this case Fr. Marcos' role as the founder of the Museum. What inspired you to create an image of Fr. Marcos and as the "Flying Priest?"

KIROLLOS KILADA: Fr. Marcos could have been forgiven for coming to Canada and devoting his life only to the basic pastoral needs of the church. The void in which he landed needed only the solid foundations of an orthodox spiritual life. That was what he was sent to do, and he would have been praised just the same if he had stopped at just that. But that was not him. This was his often-overlooked side that I've sought to present with this painting.

His short black figure stands in sharp contrast to the snowy, barren, hostile Canadian landscape. His cassock violently dances in the wind, giving him a sense of lightness, pointing to his nickname, *The Flying Priest*. He strides slowly and steadily towards an uncertain future. On his shoulder, he carries a ceremonial Ankh, a symbol of Coptic culture in its oldest, most indigenous form. Attached to it is a bouquet of lotus and papyrus leaves forming a visual bridge with Coptic rites where the cross is decorated with palms, like Palm Sunday or the feast of the cross. A cross sits in the middle of the ankh, bringing the entire object together as a liturgical and cultural symbol, expressing Fr. Marcos' belief in the importance of both.

CMC: And what moved you to offer this painting to the Museum collection?

KIROLLOS KILADA: It seemed to me that there would be no better destination for the painting than the museum which Fr. Marcos founded as a manifestation of his passion for Coptic culture and history.

Among my references for the portrait, an image from a *Globe and Mail* article in which the journalist, Peter Mosher had said that "the Coptic church is not likely to grow much in Canada" — a stroke of historical irony. The image in the article makes us think Fr. Marcos didn't know the journalist would add that remark, or that he didn't believe it. This liturgical and cultural torch which he carries, remaining green in spite of the storm, is what lit a burning fire, in the hearts of our generation of Copts, to live not only our faith, but also our culture, and for that we are greatly indebted to him. Christ is risen!

CMC: Thank you! The Museum is certainly dedicated carry this cultural torch! Can you tell us what you are currently working on?

KIROLLOS KILADA: I have been commissioned to create about thirty icons for a church in Australia in the Sydney area. The focus is on two themes: The Feasts of Our Lord Jesus Christ and The Mother of God.

www.kkilada.com

CMC: Thank you again for this precious gift to the Museum's collection!

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