

## A divine display of Coptic art at St. John the Baptist Church



William's work maintains the authenticity of Coptic iconography while adding a graphic quality that renders the work contemporary.

By **Mariam Hamdy / Special to Daily News Egypt** **October 25, 2011, 5:53 pm**

The Church of St. John the Baptist in Maadi has been known for hosting regular art exhibitions that aim at bringing people of all backgrounds, religions and nationalities together in the house of worship.

This initiative, called "Caravan," was founded by Paul Gordon Chandler, the rector of this Episcopal Church. The idea was to use arts and faith — two disciplines that have been closely interlaced throughout history — to bridge the gap between Muslims, Christians, Egyptians and foreigners.

Despite sounding like one of those concepts that attracts more non-Egyptians than locals, their events are surprisingly attended by people from all walks of life. It may not reach as many people as Rev. Chandler would hope for, but the relentless strive of having events and presenting art through his church is certainly catching on.

Currently showing at the Church is "The Eternal Eye," a collection of works by Magdy William, the renowned Coptic icon writer/artist. William has been a student of the late Dr. Isaac Fanous, the founder of the school of modern Coptic painting and the initiator of the modern renaissance in Coptic art, and is considered one of the premier Coptic icon artists worldwide.

It is a shame that a figure of William's stature is not covered by the local press. His work is beautiful, maintaining the authenticity of Coptic iconography while adding a graphic quality that renders the work contemporary. The craftsmanship in itself is exquisite; each piece is gilded with gold paint, iconic royal blues, primary reds and a spectrum of ochre's and browns with the clarity of a laser printed image. Not a single brushstroke can be seen, but at a close range, the details are beautiful as they are simple.

The folds in the fabric of Jesus Christ's robes are indicated by a few well-placed lines, allowing a slight hint of three-dimensionality that does not negate one of the main qualities of Christian iconography: flatness. However, that quality is only extended to the lines and actual paint application — the facial expressions, much like their authentic ancestors, are far from that.

Christian iconography is essentially visual theology: the threshold between material and spiritual realms. Despite the fact that this art form holds the human figure as central to its visual expression, it needs to retain a sense of illusion to remind viewers that this is not in fact real — it is a representation of a divine existence.

In light of this, many accuse Coptic art of being too cold without enough emotion of depth in the expressions on the faces of Christ and Saints. Relative to later Christian art, Coptic iconography does retain an air of ancient Egyptian stiffness; it is thoughtful, passionate and deeply touching.

This can be clearly seen in William's rendition of Daniel and the Lion's den. Daniel was the official who, under the King Darius of the Persian Empire, was thrown into the lion's den for refusing to pray to the King rather than God but emerged from it unharmed. The beauty of this piece is its simple composition; the several planes depicting the sleeping lions crouched at the foot of Daniel as he calmly prays to the Lord.

In the near distance, the king looks upon this miraculous incident through the jail bars. The entire scene tells the complete story with little effort. The expression on Daniel's face is one of genuine contentment and peace, and the compositions



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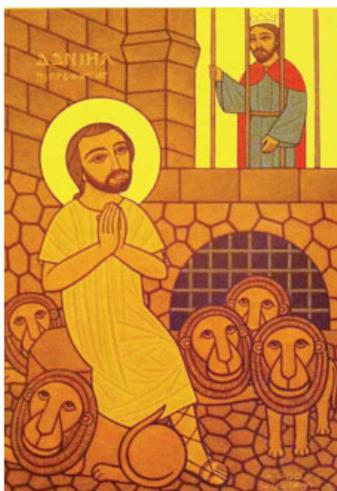
Two beautiful pieces include the classic "Nativity" and "The Holy family's flight to Egypt." Both are treated in the same manner, but with such love and loyalty to the events and characters; this sense of reverence is what makes William's work internationally renowned.

A personal favorite is "The Annunciation to Mary," where an angel tells the Mother of God that she is to expect a baby boy. There is an overwhelming look of kindness in the face of the angel, and a calm acceptance in the face of the Virgin Mary, as she raises her hands in the symbol of surprise and acceptance. The colors here are vibrant and graphic — bright reds, blues and gold, all interrupted by washed lines indicating fabric and textile folds. The pieces are simply gorgeous.

The icons also depict Coptic Saints such as Saint Mena, but are generally focused on Biblical stories as well as images of The Christ. As is the case with all shows associated with Rev. Chandler's "Caravan," 20 percent of all icon sales go to Egyptian charities. It was saddening that it needed to be stated in the brochure that these charities were for both Muslim as well as Christian Egyptians, but it's understandably unavoidable.

This is a show that celebrates Egypt and the history that has occurred in its land, a show that all Egyptians from all backgrounds and faiths must go see and celebrate.

St. John's Church  
Port Said Road & Road 17  
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