



## COPTIC TEXTILES

The art of weaving in Egypt dates back to the ancient Egyptian dynasties. "Coptic textiles" refers to fabrics found in Egyptian archaeological excavations mainly during the Roman, Byzantine and early Islamic periods. Unfortunately, once the value of these textiles was recognized they were cut, sometimes into several pieces for greater monetary profit; thus making it difficult to determine the source, original use and dating of fragments. It is not uncommon that parts of a tunic or decorative cloth will be found in more than one museum. For example, at the First Annual Coptic Studies Symposium at the University of Toronto (2008) Dominique Bénazeth, Louvre Museum Curator discussed parts of a beautiful wall hanging in the collections of the Louvre Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, however textile fragments are much smaller and therefore more difficult to determine their origin, such is the fragment illustrated on this page.

Textiles in Coptic Egypt were made at home for household needs by women mainly. Professional craftsmen produced textiles in shops for the society at large. Usually all members of the family were engaged in these workshops. To the present day, certain towns in Egypt such as Nagada, Isnā,

Akhmim are still known for unique kinds of textiles they produce. The Copts were very capable in the art of forming dyes from natural sources such as madder roots, indigo, saffron, murex shell, and the kermes insect. Wool and linen were the main fabrics used until the 18th century, when fine cotton was produced commercially under the reign of Khedive Mohamed Ali. Coptic textiles are rich with detail and varying subject matter from animal and plants to abstract designs. These designs would in the early centuries have mythological



972.2.49 Coptic Textile Fragment – birds and floral pattern (ca6th – 8th century)



004.2.1 Cotton Textile Harrania Centre (21 Century)

meanings and later Christian symbolic interpretations. The craftsmanship of Coptic weavers is admirable because there is no evidence to suggest that any stamping, use of pigment, dye or ink or other tracing material, was used directly on the warp threads to develop their designs. The designs seem to have been memorised and handed over by the master weavers to their apprentices or technical drawings may have been used to aid in the weaving pattern.

In the 20th century, Ramses Wissa Wassef was the leading contemporary artist in this field. He established a school at the village of Harrania, in the shadow of the Giza Pyramids of Egypt. To this day, the skills and methods of Coptic ancestors are re-invented in modern form and design in this centre..

St. Mark's Coptic Museum's collection includes textiles from the second to the eight centuries, as well as wool and cotton wall hangings from the Harania Centre.

<sup>1</sup> Bénazeth, Dominique. "D'un continent à l'autre, complémentarité de trois grandes collections d'art copte: Toronto (The Royal Ontario n Museum) Le Caire (muse Copte), Paris (muse du Louvre)." *The Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies*. Volume 1, 2008: 75-86.

## FIFTH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE CRÈCHE (November 10-12, 2011)

The Friends of The Crèche is an international organization with membership in nineteen countries whose purpose is to preserve, promote and develop an understanding of the crèches as a religious symbol. St. James Anglican Cathedral and its Museum in Toronto hosted the conference. St. Mark's Museum was part of the three year long programme planning committee. The conference opened on the evening of the 10th with very moving ecumenical services with Fr. Ammonius Guirguis representing St. Mark's Church. Three deacons from St. Mark's Church chanted two hymns. The programme included presentations on the different phases of the history of the crèche around the world and related topics. Coptic contributions to a stimulating two day programme was in two workshop: Helene Moussa participated on a panel with Corey Keeble, ROM Europe Curator, and Alexei Mezentsev, Ukranian iconographer, discussing icons on the Nativity in Orthodox traditions and



*St. Mark's Museum did very well selling all the books, clay figurines, icons, and Nativity greeting cards at the Manger Market!*

Coptic icons of the Journey of the Holy Family in Egypt. Dr. Ramez Boutros, U of T Lecturer gave a lecture on "Archaeological and Literary Sources of the Journey of the Holy Family in Egypt." The exhibition of several hundred crèches from around the world was best described by one of our volunteers as "A witness to Christianity in the world!"

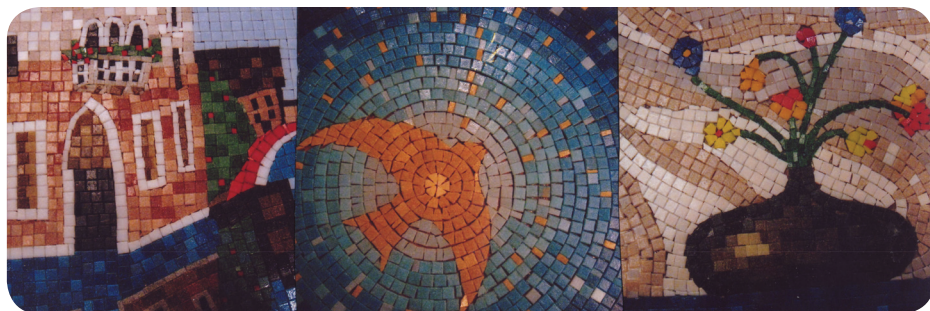


### ART WORKSHOPS IN THE MUSEUM

- Sixteen participants from 13 years of age to seniors attended the Introductory Mosaic Workshop. The instructors were Akram and Fadia Gabra. (Summer 2011)
- Bassem Abdelmallik was the instructor of the Portraiture Class with six participants each painting a portrait of their selection. (October- December 2011)
- Ten participants attended this intergenerational clay workshop with Akram Gabra as the instructor. (December 2011)

### 2012 ART WORKSHOPS

- Jewelry Workshop: February 4, 2012
- Mosaic Workshops: Introductory (six sessions) and Advanced (eight sessions) May - July 2012
- Icon Writing Workshop: TBA



### FIFTH ANNUAL COPTIC STUDIES SYMPOSIUM

The Fifth Annual Coptic Studies Symposium will be held in Toronto on Saturday March 24, 2012 in Lecture Hall B142, 5 Bancroft Avenue from 9.30am to 5.30pm. The theme of the symposium will focus on Coptic Literature. For more details on the programme and registration check the Museum's website link "Coptic Studies."