

COPTIC MUSEUM OF CANADA

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Keywords: Coptic art; Coptic migration; Canada; Coptic collections in museums; Museums; Painting; Scholars; Coptic studies; Art; Coptology; Icons; Iconography.

The Vision

The Coptic Museum of Canada (formerly St. Mark's Coptic Museum) is the vision of Fr. Marcos A. Marcos. When he was ordained to the priesthood and commissioned to minister to the spiritual needs of the Copts in North America in 1964, he asked Pope CYRIL VI (Kyrillos VI) if he could establish a Coptic museum in order to introduce the rich cultural heritage of the Copts to future generations and to the local population.

While Fr. Marcos was serving the Copts and establishing churches across North America, he was simultaneously collecting the initial artifacts for the museum. As Copts heard about Fr. Marcos's vision and efforts to build the collection, they began to donate their personal collections to the Museum. It took him twenty-five years and several trips to Egypt, France, and the United States to research and collect these objects. In Fr. Marcos's words, the Museum's collection was to represent a colorful "tile" in the Canadian multicultural mosaic.

Realizing the Vision

On 27 November 1996, His Holiness Pope SHENOUDA III inaugurated St. Mark's Coptic Museum. The plaque commemorating this pontifical visit expresses the wish of His Holiness that the Museum will "always be a beacon of enlightenment in the North American Continent."

The Museum was opened to the public on 9 July 2000 after Fr. Marcos had trained six volunteers as museum interpreters. In 2001 the first board of directors was appointed, with Fr. Marcos at the helm as the president. He held this position until he retired in 2018. On 15 December 2018, at a special event hosted by the board of directors in honor of his contribution and cultural legacy, a plaque was unveiled. The inscription reads as follows:

In appreciation for his inspired leadership, on 22 September 2018
the Board of Directors voted to confer the title of
Founder and President Emeritus upon Father Marcos A. Marcos
in recognition of his unwavering commitment to realize his vision for a
Coptic museum in Canada, in keeping with His Holiness Pope Shenouda III's
wish that the museum be a steward of the Coptic cultural heritage in North America.

The Mission

The mission of the Coptic Museum of Canada is to advance education by improving the public's understanding and awareness of the heritage and the art of the Copts, through exhibitions, events, performances, diverse programming, and publications. The Museum welcomes all individuals and institutions interested in participating or contributing to its vital role in preserving, researching, and celebrating the unique collections, stories, and rich cultural heritage of the Copts.

On 20 July 2018, the Museum’s Board of Directors received approval from the Ontario Ministry of Government and Consumers Services to change the Museum’s name to the “Coptic Museum of Canada (CMC)/Musée copte du Canada (MCC).” The new name more correctly identifies it as the first Coptic Museum in Canada, and reflects the Museum’s motto, “Coptic art as a living tradition.”

The Collection

When the Museum opened to the public in 2000, the collection consisted of 110 objects; by 2021 the collection had increased to over 1,400 objects.

Among the prized artifacts Fr. Marcos initially collected are six biblical scenes by Marguerite Nakhla, who in 1975 was named by the then Egyptian minister of culture Badr el Din Abou Ghazi as the leading Egyptian woman painter between 1925 and 1975 (Arab Socialist Union 1975). Father Marcos initially offered to purchase one painting, but once Ms. Nakhla was reassured that the Museum would be a place where people could learn how her paintings revived third-century Coptic religious art in a modern form, she offered him the full collection of six biblical scenes as a gift. Figure 1 portrays one of those scenes.



1. *Miracle of the Great Catch* (1960). Oil on wood, 120 cm x 140 cm. By Marguerite Nakhla (1908-1977), 1976.4.2.

In keeping with the commitment he made to Ms. Nakhla, the Museum published a book on her life and works titled: *Marguerite Nakhla—Legacy to Modern Egyptian Art* (Marcos 2009). Over the years the Museum mounted exhibitions of her art and works, and the Museum’s curator published several articles about her legacy. The Museum’s archival collection is visited by writers on modern Egyptian art as well. The Museum acquired four more of her paintings that reflect the diversity of her themes, along with paintings by two of Ms. Nakhla’s contemporaries: a portrait of

a Nubian child by Dr. Kawkab Youssef and a life-size painting of a traditional ‘*irq ‘isus* (liquorice tea) street seller by Isaac Guirguis Barsoum.

The Museum’s collection features icons dating from the 18th to the 21st century. Among these are Neo-Coptic icons written in 1964 and in 1971 by Dr. ISAAC FANOUS (1919–2007), father of Neo-Coptic iconography, and by the pioneer husband-wife team Drs. Youssef Nassif (1920–2013) and Bedour Latif (1921–2012). The series of ten icons by Victor A. Fakhoury, 2011–2017, reflect the impact of the post-2011 uprising in Egypt on the Copts and the Coptic Church (Moussa 2018). *The Martyrs of Maspero* is the second icon in the series, Figure 2.



2. *The Martyrs of Maspero* (2011). Tempera on wood, 70 cm x 50 cm. By Victor Assad Fakhoury, 2014.2.1. Photo: Eihab Saeed.

Another unique artifact Fr. Marcos acquired is the stunning painting of three crosses on 1 mm graph paper, Figure 3, created by His Holiness Pope MACARIUS III, the 114th Pope of Alexandria, when he was a monk (ca. 1888–1895). This style of cross is sometimes referred to as a “Geometric Cross” because it is drawn on 1 mm square geometric paper, but it is more appropriately named “Yota Cross,” because of the repeated use of the shape of the letter *yota* in the Coptic alphabet, the first letter in the name Jesus (pronounced *Iyesus*).



3. *Yota Cross* (ca. 1888-1905).

Watercolour on geometric paper, 130 cm x 75 cm. By Pope Macarius III when he was a monk. 1978.4.1. Photo: Akram Gabra.

Other artifacts, such as those listed here, represent the Museum's diverse collection:

- Textile fragments of varying sizes and colors dating from the 2nd to the 8th century, Figure 4, and contemporary wall carpets from the Wissa Wassef Art Centre
- Books and ancient manuscripts, Figure 5, including papyrus fragments
- Jewelry with faience beads dating to the 18th Dynasty
- Woodwork such as see-through (*mashrabeya*) frames ca. 18th century
- Clay works that include a 2nd-century oil lamp, 6th-century St. Menas pilgrim flasks, Figure 6, and a 20th-century statuette of the Holy Family in Egypt
- Coptic crosses of various styles and materials
- A coin collection dating from Alexander the Great to present-day Egypt
- An Egyptian stamp collection that reflects the history of the Egyptian postal service, historic sites, art, and culture, and includes stamps of Christian significance such as the Matareya tree under which the Holy Family is said to have rested during their flight into Egypt
- Liturgical and monastic vestments and the papal staff of Pope Shenouda III offered to the Museum by Pope Tawadros II
- The Museum holds a small collection from the ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: a 19th-century manuscript of the Book of Psalms known as the *Dawit* written on goat skin, and several intricately carved crosses made of wood, brass, and stone, Figure 7



4. *Textile fragment* (6th to 8th century).
Polychrome purple, white, and red.
Likely part of a liturgical tunic
2004.1.1.



5. *Agpeya* (AM 1615/AD 1869).
Copto-Arabic manuscript of 194 pages
with end leaves. Handwritten letters in red
and black ink on paper. Signed by scribe.



6. *St. Mena terra cotta pilgrim flask* (ca. 6th century).
Province: Alexandria, Egypt. Diameter: 7.5 cm. 2012.4.1.



7. *Multi-purpose Ethiopian Hand Cross Diptych* (20th century).
Wood. Dimensions 26.5cm (closed), 4.5 cm (horizontal arm of cross). 2002.5.1.

Liturgical objects from the early history of St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox parish and church in Scarborough tell the story of the beginnings of the Coptic Church in North America. This collection includes a 2021 painting by the Canadian-Coptic artist Kirolos Kilada, in commemoration of Fr. Marcos's legacy to Coptic culture, which has given rise to a generation of Coptic-Canadians who have chosen the arts as their profession. The painting is titled *The Flying Priest*, a nickname that Fr. Marcos earned in the first three years of his ministry in Canada because he single-handedly ministered to the Copts who were living in over 48 towns and cities across Canada and the United States, while literally living out of a suitcase.¹

All the artifacts were generously donated to the Museum from private collections. While most came from Copts, the Museum also received important collections from other Canadians and Americans.

Cecile Barsoum Reference Library

Established in 2002, the Museum's reference library is housed in the room next to the Coptic Museum of Canada's gallery. In 2014 it was named the Cecile Barsoum Reference Library in memory of its first librarian. The library contains books and journals related to Coptic art across the centuries, as well as historical, theological, and archeological print resources. The library's holdings can be found through the Museum's online catalogue on its website. Researchers can access archival materials from the Museum's collection in the library, as well as online references to publications in Coptic studies.

Outreach Programs

The Museum offers guided tours, art workshops, university student internships, in-house and traveling exhibitions, and publications about the Museum's collection. Participants attend from Canadian and internationally based Coptic churches and ecumenical organizations, and public and private schools. They include university and college faculty and students, scholars, museum curators and staff, tourists, and individuals with an interest in Coptic studies.

In 2006 the Museum initiated discussions at the University of Toronto that led to the offering of Coptic Studies courses in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations. The Museum was also invited to be one of the founding members of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies in 2008. The papers delivered at the Society's annual symposium are published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies*.

The Museum's newsletter is published three times a year and is posted on the Museum's website. Both the Museum's website and its social media networks offer information and updates to its virtual supporters.

Website: www.copticmuseum-canada.org

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/CopticMuseumCanada/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/copticmuseumcanada/>

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¹ The nickname was inspired by the popular late-1960s TV show *The Flying Nun*.