

THE TAPESTRIES OF COPTIC EGYPT

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Frescoes from Roman catacombs and villas, secular and sacred paintings on parchment from Late Antique and Early Christian manuscripts, and mosaics from cities and provinces in the Roman Empire – Ravenna, Antioch, Tunisia, Sicily, and Israel – depict the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Century citizen dressed in a distinctive garment. Emperors, priests, children, servants, and Jesus all wear similar garments; some are quite simple and others profusely decorated. These frescoes, manuscripts, and mosaics show the same type of fabric used as curtains and altar cloths. The fabric of the costumes, curtains, and ceremonial cloths is a balanced plain-weave natural linen with decorative wool tapestry bands, borders, panels, or medallions. The fabric, much abbreviated as illustrated in the paintings and mosaics, can be identified by its neutral background with simple stripes and dots. What does not show in the paintings is that the dark dots and stripes depict birds, fish, fruit, flowers, geometrical motifs, religious symbols, pictures, portraits, and intricate narrative scenes both mythological and Christian. The textiles are in reality a miniature art form in fiber reflecting the diverse themes, styles, and iconography of the Ancient and Early Medieval World. This ubiquitous fabric, worn, used, and perhaps woven all over the Roman Empire from the Second to the Twelfth Century A.D., has been found only in Egypt – the great desert storehouse of ancient artifacts. Over 150,000 fabrics and fragments from Egypt – whole tunics, shrouds, shawls, pillowcovers, ceremonial cloths, curtains, and a few large wall hangings – have survived because of the desert climate and because the Christian practice of burying the deceased fully clothed in shallow sandy graves, instead of mummification, became common after the Second Century A.D.



These archeological fabrics are referred to as 'Coptic' textiles to distinguish them from earlier Pharaonic textiles and from later Egypto-Islamic textiles; both are interesting historical textiles, but not pictorial. The Coptic Period is really a cultural, rather than a political period, from the late Second Century A.D. to the Seventh Century A.D., but textiles considered 'Coptic' may be dated as late as the Twelfth Century. Designs were slow to change, and the Moslems were tolerant of the Copts. 'Copt' and 'Egypt' derive through Arabic from the same Greek word that defined the ancient Egyptians as worshipers of the 'Ka of Ptah', 'Ka' meaning the soul or spiritual double of 'Ptah', the God of creationism and patron of artisans. The Copts were the indigenous population of Egypt in contradistinction to the Greek, Roman, and Arab colonials; only present usage defines a Copt as a Christian Egyptian. Coptic textiles are therefore Egyptian, but not necessarily Christian.

Egypt was conquered by Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., by Julius Caesar in 30 B.C., briefly by the Persians in 619 A.D., and by the Moslems in 641 A.D. There was also a religious conquest in the early centuries. The apocryphal story is told that St. Mark evangelized in Egypt in the First Century A.D., and he is credited with the conversion of Egypt to Christianity over a hundred years before Constantine declared the Roman Empire as Christian (312 A.D.). The Alexandrian conquest brought new tapestry weaving techniques, loom technology, and a better quality wool to Egypt along with the Classical tradition in art. The Greco-Roman overseers controlled much of the weaving industry, but it was also done at home. Coptic tapestry art is an amalgamation of Greek, Roman, Persian, Syrian, Early Christian, Byzantine, and Islamic styles, themes, and traditions translated into a provincial Egyptian idiom. Many religions co-existed in Fifth Century Egypt – Pharaonic and Greco-Roman Gods were still worshipped, there were many Christian sects, and the Coptic and Roman Catholic Church were separated on a theological difference. Pagan and Christian tapestries are both prevalent; the metaphors are mixed, multi-layered, and even deliberately disguised during the period of persecution. If the Coptic tapestries seem diverse, remember these many stylistic, religious, political, and economic influences, and that this genre was created over the span of a thousand years by both skilful

and naive cottage and guild craftsmen. Any one museum might have pieces made centuries and miles apart.

I began the study of Coptic textiles ten years ago and have been fortunate enough to view the collections at the Seattle Art Museum, the University of Washington Textile Study Collection, the Seattle Museum of History and Industry, the Stanford University Art Museum, the California Academy of Sciences, the Denver Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum; and all too briefly, those in the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris, and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Most recently, I visited the Coptic Museum in Cairo, Egypt.

One must search for Coptic Egypt, but it is there. Cairo is a huge, busy, Islamic metropolis with many medieval Moslem monuments; the Nile River Valley with its mud-brick villages, grand temples, and haunting mortuary sites – Giza, Luxor, the Valley of Kings, and Abu Simbel – are alternately verdant and desolate, but always reminiscent of the Pharaohs. The Coptic Museum, by contrast, surrounds the visitor with the ambience, architecture, and artifacts of that period of time sandwiched between the Egypt of the Pharaohs, the Greek Ptolemies, and the Roman Emperors, and that of the Islamic rulers. The Coptic Museum is situated within the walls of the First Century A.D. Roman fortress of Babylon in Old Cairo. Nearby are the remains of several old Coptic churches and the sacred crypt under the Church of Abu Serga, the legendary place where the Holy Family rested while in Egypt. Columns with ornate foliate capitals, wood carving, stone sculpture, manuscripts, icons, pottery, metalwork, glass, mosaics, tools, and textiles are on display in the museum. The textiles are housed in a large second floor gallery. Panels, large hangings, and whole tunics are wall mounted. Running the entire length of the gallery is a bank of glass-covered frames that can be turned like the pages in a book to examine at close hand the pieces on each side. It is a fine display of the many different techniques and styles of art found in the Coptic textiles. I had written far in advance of my special interest in the textiles. Dr. Mounir Basta, the Director General of the Museum, and Dr. Girgis Daoud, Chief Curator of the

Coptic Museum, were very courteous and helpful. Muhammed Yahya Gamal, my excellent Cairo guide, had arranged for Salah El Demiry, a Cairo textile designer and engineer, to escort me through the museum. I made many friends in Egypt with an interest in textiles and hope to return to continue my study.

I was fortunate to have Emil Sharir Gaprial, a Copt with an education in Comparative Religion, as my guide in Luxor. Many Pharaonic temples – Luxor, Karnak, Kom Ombo, Edfu, and others – were for a few centuries Christian churches. The pagan paintings were covered over with new frescoes of Saints and Last Supper themes, the statuary and wall sculpture of pagans literally defaced, and the Roman arched niches used as altar alcoves. Fifth Century monasteries still stand in the desert as witness to the birth of Western monasticism in Egypt. There are currently about 6,000,000 Copts. The language and the temple music of the Pharaohs have survived through the church liturgy, and the ancient bloodlines through its members. Egypt's Coptic era is not as familiar or as visible as its ancient history, but it is a very interesting and important part of the history of Christianity.

The textile history of Egypt stretches back five thousand years or more. There are many ancient textiles in the Egyptian museum, including some from Tutankhamun's tomb. These textiles are predominantly plain-weave natural linen and were woven on both upright and horizontal looms. Warp threads are those which interlace across the warp. A balanced plain weave or 'tabby' weave shows both warp and weft threads equally. Tapestry is a special weaving technique in which the warp threads are spaced so that the weft threads pack closely together and completely cover the warp. A single row of weft interlacing may have many color changes. As the weaving progresses, these different colors weave back and forth in small areas to build lines, patterns, shapes, and finally complete compositions. Tapestry weaving is a hand-controlled technique comparable to a painting: it is versatile and highly individualistic. A tabby weave can be changed to a tapestry weave if one begins interlacing over and under sets of warp yarns instead of single warp yarns. That divides the number of ends per inch and causes the weft threads to beat down over the warp. The weft-faced areas in this combined tabby-tapestry textile are called

'inserted tapestry'. This is the method commonly used in the Coptic textiles and tunics mentioned at the beginning of the article to weave the ornamental borders, bands, yokes, panels, and medallions.

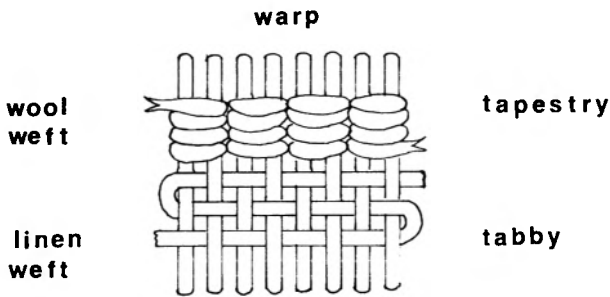


Diagram 1

"Smooth cloth with woolen decorations" came into fashion during the late Augustinian Age, but the earliest illustration of the textiles in the Roman catacombs, and the earliest proposed dates for any of the excavated textiles would be Second or early Third Century A.D. By the Fifth Century the fabric and the tabby-tapestry are ubiquitous and worn all over the Roman Empire.

Although there are some large tapestries in existence, most pieces were probably tunic ornaments cut from the original cloth. The typical Coptic tunic is woven in one piece with the warp running parallel with the sleeves and neck slit. The tunic is folded at the shoulder line, and the sides and sleeves seamed.

Complete Coptic tunics exist. A tunic of vast proportion is on display at the Brooklyn Museum, and in the Stanford collection there is a personal favorite – a tiny child's tunic lovingly decorated with little ducks. Colored woolen tunics are also found. Tapestry ornaments are often recycled, cut from the original garment and applied to a new tunic. There is an unusual plaid linen tunic in the Coptic Museum with decorations from several older garments. Most museum collections consist of an eclectic batch of fragments cut from the original fabric.

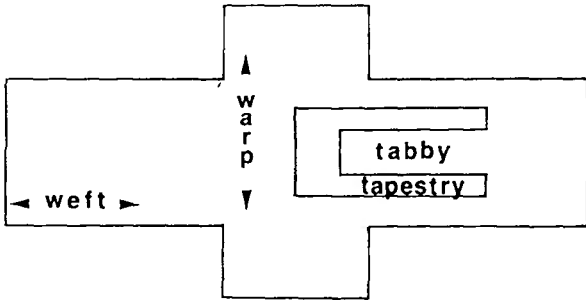


Diagram 2
The tunic as woven on the loom.

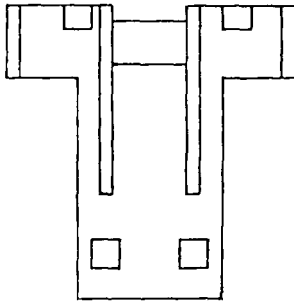


Diagram 3
A typical Coptic tunic.

The best preserved linens are creamy and lustrous with little indication of their antiquity. The wool yarns are brilliant and beautiful even after a thousand years, and the rich spectrum of hues and values used by the Copts is amazing. Dyes used were indigo, madder, murex, shellfish, woad, saffron, weld, and others. Our current notion of tapestry, and the tradition since the Middle Ages, is that tapestry is a dense, heavy, and stiff fabric, but the Coptic pieces, because of their fine sett and delicate yarns are pliable and wearable. Some are as soft as challis wool and seem filmy in spite of the weft-structure. The designs are like pointilist paintings and some surprisingly impressionistic. Many other weaves and types of fabrics from that period still survive – silk brocades, basket weaves, weft-loop weaves, knitting, sprang, and embroidery. Brocades, weft-loop weaves, and embroidery are also pictorial.

Styles and Traditions of Coptic Tapestries

Because of their relationship to other art forms of that period of time and because of their representational content, the tapestries are of particular interest to art historians. Though Coptic scholars use different descriptive terms, they generally agree that the styles fall into three broad categories:

1. An Early, Late Roman-Egyptian, or Proto-Coptic category with naturalistic and interlace designs predominating.
2. A Middle, Early Byzantine, or High Coptic category when tapestry designs are highly stylized, the naturalistic elements abstracted.
3. A Late Coptic period when Egypt is ruled by the Moslems and geometric patterns supersede figurative art.

Within these broad and overlapping groups, there are two tapestry traditions with associated techniques that persist throughout the stylistic changes of the centuries – a monochromatic and a polychromatic tradition.

The monochromatic tapestries are of natural linen and one color – dark blue, violet, brown, or maroon. In photos they seem to be black and white, but they are really colors darkened with time and reduced to positive-negative values by the camera. Mid-values are obtained by mixing the two colors in an area, and the 'white' linen is used as a drawing tool to sketch features and to delineate patterns. Geometric interlace patterns and simplified scenes with symbolic figures are typical of the early pieces. Sketching wefts and mixed color areas tend to disappear and figures are very geometric or poorly described in late work.

The equestrian tapestry from the Coptic Museum (Figure 1) is a typical monochromatic style tapestry with one other accent color. Mixed color harmonies are not unusual; after all, weavers have to work with the handspun and home-dyed materials at hand. The division of space with its scroll border, central figure, and four corner figures is a common format. To create the design, as many as 36 color changes might be made in any one weft row. The ancient equestrian becomes in a Christian tapestry (note the four crosses) a 'Saint on Horseback' and the pagan puttis become angels. The equestrian theme is used for centuries; the figures vary from realistic to rustic, and appear in monochromatic and polychromatic pieces, as well as in silk brocades and embroidery.

Polychromatic tapestries are rich in color. Early examples reflect the naturalism of Greco-Roman classicism with such painterly techniques as shading. Identical designs can be found in mosaics from Santa Costanza in Rome to Antioch. Realism may be extremely debased in late tapestries with discombobulated figures and animals. Portraiture is a continuing tradition in Egyptian art. The subject may be a God or Goddess, a Saint, or a memorial portrait, as in the encaustic paintings from the Faiyum. The tapestry portrait from the Coptic Museum (Figure 2) has a strikingly similar counterpart in the Textile Museum Collection in Washington, D.C. The scroll frame, the high contrast use of red and black, and other technical details are similar enough in the illustrated monochromatic and polychromatic tapestries to suggest a common workshop.



Figure 1 Coptic Weaving
Coptic Museum



Figure 2

As a tapestry weaver, I am continually impressed with the technical skill and virtuosity of these Coptic artists. As one interested in the history of art, I am fascinated by the expressed individuality that epitomizes their work. Paradoxically, these tiny textile treasures are a part of the mainstream of Late Antique and Early Christian art and at the same time develop a totally unique 'Coptic-Egyptian' style.

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