

THE MELKITE ICONS

By Brother John Samaha, S.M.

When you think of icons, what comes to mind? Most people think of icons as delicate Byzantine triptychs, or the legendary jewelled icons of revered Byzantine churches of the past.

But for almost three centuries, Arab artists made exquisite icons in the Near East. There artists were usually members of Byzantine Christian religious orders.

Though icon is a Greek word meaning "image," ancient funeral portraits in Fayyoun, Egypt, suggest that the iconic art form may be of Near Eastern origin.

The Arabic icons are called Melkite icons because they were painted by Arab artisans of the "Greek" Catholic and "Greek" Orthodox Churches; that is, Byzantine Melkite Christians (later separated into Orthodox and Catholics) of Arabic-speaking background. This name was first attributed to the Arabic icons by Virgil Candea, a Romanian scholar, when he was consultant for an exhibit of icons from Lebanese and Syrian collections produced by the Sursock Museum of Beirut in May 1969.

At that time, Sylvia Agemian, a researcher at the Sursock Museum, was possibly the only specialist on Melkite icons in the Near East. She maintained that the identification of the Melkite icons was an important academic discovery, because for the first time scholars recognized that there were schools of iconographers in the Near East whose artists followed the Byzantine iconic tradition with the addition of Arabic and Islamic elements.

Icons are in integral part of the religious life of Byzantine Christians. They are regarded as objects of inspiration and veneration, not simply as decoration. But simply as decoration they are unique. Originally icons were images painted onto a gold veneer applied to a smooth coat of plaster on a board. Ordinarily they were placed on an iconostasis or screen in front of the altar of Sacrifice. Until the seventeenth century, traditional Byzantine icon painters followed church guidelines directing that holy persons appear as other-worldly as possible. To achieve this impression, the artist made his subjects appear almost fleshless by means of geometric molding of the body. Any hint

of the sensual was minimized by draping the bodies in heavy garments. Since the holiness of the saints exuded an inner light, the artist painted fine white lines on a saint's cheekbones and hands to suggest light.

To emphasize the holiness of the saints, the artistic formula called for foreheads disproportionately wide with formally molded hair and beards. Even colors were specified by the church manual of instructions. For example, the Virgin Mary's *maphorion*, a veil covering the head and shoulders of all women saints, was always ochred.

If mountains or buildings appeared in an icon, they were highly stylized and not at all realistic. But they were seldom included.

In Orthodox icons, holy persons were portrayed against a background of gold with no earthly elements other than those associated with the saint; for instance, books for evangelists and patriarchs, swords for martial saints like St. George.

Most likely, Melkite artists learned the iconic form from icons brought to the Near East by Byzantine Greek and Russian patriarchs and pilgrims, and from the fine specimens painted by Greek artists living in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Yet the Melkite craftsmen knew also the Cretan works of the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. For on a 1726 icon of St. Michael the Archangel done by Hanna al-Kuksi, the eighteenth-century artist included an inscription explaining that it was based on an earlier Cretan model.

Byzantine Melkite icons, however, differ from their Greek and Russian counterparts more in detail and treatment of subjects than in form. Distinguishing the Melkite icon are the characteristic style of decoration, the faces and bodies of the subjects, the frequency of particular themes, and Arabic inscriptions.

In their early efforts, Melkite artists naturally looked to Byzantine Greek models. As they matured, they quickly learned to express their own tastes and feelings. Although Byzantine elements prevail in the majority of early paintings, markedly Arabic characteristics are present.

All the faces painted by the Melkite artists—not just of Near Eastern saints, but of Christ and the angels too—have Arabized complexions. These faces have a more oval and softer expression than in the Byzantine icon. The bodies are fuller and rounder with less of the modeling which is characteristic of traditional icon painting. In addition, one sees Arabic costumes, contemporary furniture, and daily household objects—all in sharp contrast to the other-worldly Byzantine portraits. In one early eighteenth-century Melkite work, for example, the infant Virgin Mary is being rocked in a cradle still common in Syria and Lebanon. In other specimens, the viewer sees Abraham