

An Armenian Artist
in Ottoman Egypt

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Yuhanna al-Armani and His Coptic Icons

Magdi Guirguis

Photographs by Nabil Mankabadi

A Friends of Armenian Culture Edition
The American University in Cairo Press
Cairo New York

First published in 2008 by
The American University in Cairo Press
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt
420 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10018
www.aucpres.com

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Translated from the Arabic by Amina Elbendary.

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Dar el Kutub No. 20270/07
ISBN 978 977 416 152 0

Dar el Kutub Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Guirguis, Magdi

An Armenian Artist in Ottoman Egypt: Yuhanna al-Armani and His
Coptic Icons / Magdi Guirguis; introduction by Nelly Hanna.—Cairo: The
American University in Cairo Press, 2008

p. cm.
ISBN 977 416 152 1

1. Artists I. Hanna, Nelly (Intro.)
927

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 12 11 10 09 08

Designed by Mina Anis/AUC Press Design Center
Printed in Egypt

To my beloved
Intessar Malak

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Foreword

The Friends of Armenian Culture was founded in Cairo in the early 1940s by a group of like-minded Egyptian-Armenians. Their aim of presenting aspects of Armenian art, history, and culture to non-Armenians started a trend of activities highlighted by the publication in 1959 of Onnig Avedissian's *Peintres et sculpteurs arméniens*. As the earliest known Armenian artist in Egypt, Yuhanna al-Armani is prominently mentioned in this book.

Since 1985, when the manuscript of Nubar Der Mikaelian's brief study on Yuhanna came into our possession, a publication on the artist became part of our plans. In this we were fortunate to have the permission of Nabil Mankabadi to use his photographs of the icons of Yuhanna and Ibrahim al-Nasikh. Undoubtedly, during this long period the support and guidance of the president of our group, Vartkes Kredian, has been invaluable.

We are infinitely grateful to Nelly Hanna, first for suggesting Magdi Guirguis as the writer for this book and then for being so helpful all along in bringing it to fruition.

J. Mardick Guiragossian
The Friends of Armenian Culture

Preface

Magdi Guirguis

In 1998, I first became interested in Ibrahim al-Nasikh, a multi-talented Coptic painter in eighteenth century Egypt who had painted a large number of icons, and copied an even larger number of manuscripts. I subsequently wrote an article about Ibrahim to place him within the wider historical context of the period and to understand the factors that gave rise to his work and to that of other artists who worked with him.

Yuhanna al-Armani was one such artist and I was inspired by my research to broaden my exploration of the whole phenomenon of icon paintings that had flourished in the eighteenth century.

Fruitful dialog with Nelly Hanna about these two painters led me to another chance meeting, in the summer of 2003, this time with Jack Guiragossian, who initiated the idea of a detailed study of Yuhanna al-Armani. He informed me that the Friends of Armenian Culture in Cairo had had the idea for such a study some twenty years ago. I am very grateful for the society for providing me with the slides of Yuhanna's icons and for its financial support for my archival work. Nelly Hanna followed up on all the various stages of this work and made many valuable comments to the manuscript. Jack Guiragossian was instrumental in encouraging me to complete this work; his extensive knowledge

of Armenian history and traditions has been invaluable. I am also indebted to Armin Kredian, who filled in my knowledge of the Armenian clergy's hierarchy.

The idea of studying Yuhanna al-Armani in the context of time, place, and society as opposed to the narrower focus of a particular religious community was greatly shaped by discussions that took place in the Ottoman Seminar of the Egyptian Society for Historical Studies. I would like to extend my thanks to Raouf Abbas, Nelly Hanna, and Asim al-Dessouqi for their ongoing support in this regard, and to Nasser Ibrahim for organizing the seminar.

I wrote this book during the academic year 2006/2007 in Berlin while I was Gorg Graf Fellow of the Catholic Exchange Service (KAD) and subsequently a fellow of the research program "Europe in the Middle East—The Middle East in Europe" (EUME), which is organized by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. I am grateful to these institutions and particularly to the KAD and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for providing me with a scholarship that enabled me to work on my own project. The discussions during the seminars and workshops of EUME and the exchanges with my co-fellows from Iran, Turkey, Morocco, and other countries, as well as with colleagues from the Berlin Universities and the Center for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO) helped me to clarify and develop my ideas. In particular I would like to thank: Gudrun Krämer, Ulrike Freitag, Carsten Walbiner, Georges Khalil, Samah Selim, Christine Hofmann, Dana Sajdi, Raja Rhouni, Nora Lafi, Dyala Hamza, Shadin Tageldin, Ozlem Biner, Erol Koroglu, Eli Bar-Chen, Oded Schechter, Muhamed Vasfi, and Zafer Yenil.

My deep thanks and appreciation are due to Father Mansour Mistrih and Father Wadi Abu-Ellief of the Franciscan Center for Oriental Studies in Cairo. Many thanks are also due to Amina Elbendary, who translated this work, to the American University in Cairo Press, especially Nadia Naqib, and to Jennifer Speake, who patiently edited the manuscript. I would like to thank the staff at the National Archives in Cairo, especially Mrs. Nadia Mustafa and Mrs. Najwa Mahmoud, for their assistance during research undertaken there.

Introduction

Nelly Hanna

This work on an Armenian icon-painter living and working in Cairo has multiple significance. Yuhanna al-Armani is a well-known figure among historians of Coptic art and much has been written about him. There is a large body of literature about the artistic production of this eighteenth-century icon-painter in the context of art history; this work opens perspectives from a rather different angle, for a consideration of his life and works. Here, for the first time, Yuhanna is studied as an integral part of the history of the eighteenth century: his artistic production is considered as a social phenomenon rather than as a uniquely art-historical one. Rather than study the icons solely in the context of an icon-painting tradition to see where his works fits in, this book presents the icons as part of the eighteenth-century social scene in Cairo, providing answers as to what the conditions were that led to a proliferation of icon-painting in the lifetime of Yuhanna al-Armani, who it was who ordered and financed the icons, and how the painter coped with the increased demand.

This method for the study of the artistic production of Yuhanna al-Armani was made possible because Magdi Guirguis found a large number of eighteenth-century deeds recorded in the registers of the Ottoman courts of Cairo about the man, his family, his partners, and

other members of the Armenian community in Cairo. He has thus based his study on contracts of partnership, on contracts of sale, and on marriage deeds, all of which are essential in reconstructing the life of the artist. The icon-painter can, on the basis of these deeds, be seen in relation to the Coptic community and the Armenian community. It is this that distinguishes the book from earlier studies, since this documentation, used here for the first time, was not known to earlier scholars writing on Yuhanna. As a result, many dimensions of his life and his work can now be discussed on a documentary basis.

This study has also used as its source material the icons that Yuhanna al-Armani painted in the churches of Egypt, together with the deeds preserved in eighteenth-century court records. The use it makes of the icons is to glean from them material that can be useful for the reconstruction of the artist's life. The result is a social history of art, or, in other words, an attempt to understand artistic production on the basis of historical and social contexts. This means that the icons are both the result of centuries of artistic tradition and of artistic influences coming from various directions and of the social, economic, and political conditions that prevailed in Yuhanna's lifetime. The book may consequently be read in the context of art history, but, more importantly, it can be read as a social history that elucidates some aspects of eighteenth-century life, much in the same way as the great monumental buildings of the Ottoman sultans in Istanbul and the Mamluk sultans in Egypt are studied as social and political expressions rather than simply as architectural history. The difference between these major architectural structures and the work of Yuhanna al-Armani is one of scope: the churches where Yuhanna painted icons were modest structures, and the persons who financed them were not sultans or members of the military ruling class. On reading the book one can, on the contrary, get a glimpse of the life of ordinary people living in Cairo at the time, those about whom we know so little. We can try to reconstruct the way that the icon-painter organized his work, who the persons were who assisted him, what role his family played in his work, and so on.

The icons were by definition an aspect of religious art; they respected certain norms in form and in content. The scenes depicted and the choice of saints followed the traditions of Coptic art. Yet, as

the book shows, they reflect other aspects of civilian life that prevailed in eighteenth-century society. Icon-painters, for instance, seem to have belonged to guilds in the same way as other craftsmen did, even though they were not as numerous as other craftsmen. They sometimes worked individually but also sometimes in partnership with other craftsmen, dividing among themselves the different decorative schemes that a church required. What we learn about the way Yuhanna undertook his work thus sheds light on the working conditions of certain crafts.

The book develops a number of themes along these lines. First is the issue of identity: who exactly was Yuhanna al-Armani? The obvious answer was that he was an Armenian, living in Cairo, under Ottoman rule, and working in the context of the Coptic Church. There are thus several identities to deal with, and each one had its significance. There are also various dimensions involved: the religious dimension, since icons were an aspect of religious art; the social dimension of the complex network of relationships that Yuhanna maintained with both the Coptic and the Armenian community; and the economic dimension, since the works were commissioned by a wealthy class of civilian Coptic notables.

The existence of numerous communities in urban centers was commonplace in all the large towns and cities of the Ottoman Empire. In Istanbul, for instance, there were, among others, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Venetians, and Arabs; Cairo had important Maghribi, Turkish, and Syrian communities, not to mention smaller European and Armenian ones. What we learn about the relations between the members of different communities in Cairo may shed light on our understanding of how such communities functioned in other areas.

The analysis of Yuhanna's network of relationships in fact shows that members of the two Christian communities in Cairo, Coptic and Armenian, were intertwined, and relations between these two communities were porous and multifaceted. Not only did Yuhanna work with Copts, but both he and several other family members were married to Copts. It is also very likely that he lived in or near a Coptic district, so that proximity made social relations easy.

Secondly, there is the question of why there was this artistic revival at that particular moment in time. Not only were the icons that Yuhanna

painted beautiful works, but they were also very numerous. Therefore, one needs to ask “why then?” Why was there so much demand for his work at that particular period? As a matter of fact, for a long time, the eighteenth century was considered to have been a period of decline in Cairo that was arrested by the Napoleonic invasion. More recent work has questioned this approach. The analysis of Yuhanna’s work and the contribution he makes to the icon-painting tradition of the Coptic Church adds another dimension to this debate.

The third issue is trying to explain how the Armenian community in Cairo produced such an interesting figure at a time when this community was rather modest in number, resources, and social status, and did not figure significantly on the political scene. In fact, Armenian communities of the region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries existed under very diverse conditions and followed numerous trajectories. In Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, they were not only numerous but they also enjoyed high status, many of them being closely allied to power groups; likewise, in Aleppo, the third largest city after Istanbul and Cairo, a vibrant community was involved in international commerce. Just as prosperous were some of the Armenian communities outside of the Ottoman Empire. In Iran, they were involved in the silk trade, a major export business that extended to Europe and other places. The Armenian traders not only diffused the merchandise but were part of important international networks with other Armenian communities, and thus an important tie between countries where there were otherwise tensions and conflicts.

When we look at the Armenian community of Cairo in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, another picture emerges. Although Cairo was the second-largest city in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian community there, compared to that in other cities in the region, was estimated to have numbered only about two thousand people. And compared to their past glorious history in Egypt, as well as to their achievement in nineteenth-century Egypt, the Armenian community in eighteenth-century Cairo was at a modest stage in its existence. The problem, therefore, is to explain how there emerged from this milieu an icon-painter who may be credited with a rebirth of Coptic art. How, in this most modest of Armenian communities, did such a significant

body of work come about? This is one of the questions this book tries to address.

It does so by exploring different social aspects in eighteenth-century Cairo, offering the reader a page in Coptic history. This, however, is not the typical Coptic history of patriarchs and martyrs, but a history in which the urban dwellers of Cairo are very much present. For the Coptic community, the eighteenth century, as Magdi Guirguis portrays it, represents a time during which a civilian elite reached a high level of prominence and wealth. These civilian notables were instrumental, through their patronage of the arts and of church construction, in creating the conditions that allowed Yuhanna al-Armani to exercise his genius and to be so prolific. They paid for the restoration and the reconstruction of a large number of churches. Consequently they required icons to decorate these buildings.

One could add to this explanation the fact that as craftsmen in certain fields the Armenians were known to be highly skillful. In Cairo, as elsewhere, they worked in fine crafts such as jewelry. In Anatolia they were known for their skill in the making of ceramics and high-quality textiles. Yuhanna al-Armani can be placed in a long tradition of highly qualified artisans.

There are also connections to be made with the history of the region. By following the life and the work of Yuhanna al-Armani, this book presents us with a number of complex issues that concern historians of Egypt in the eighteenth century and historians of the Ottoman world in general.

The sheer volume of icon production of the eighteenth century leads us to ask whether these works were produced commercially rather than on commission since there are more than three hundred works done by our artist, either on his own or in partnership with others. The distinction is important. A product that was produced commercially implies that there was a market, and that the producer was confident that he would sell his product when he had finished it. For an artistic product (that means a non-essential one) to be marketed in this way means that we are talking of a certain sector of society with a high level of spending. Evidently, more study is needed for us to understand the implications of such a situation and to determine how generalized this trend was.

Moreover, this subject could be pursued in relation to other parallel trends in eighteenth-century society.

Another issue hinges upon the relationship between religious and non-religious life. The book suggests that, unlike earlier periods, in the eighteenth century, icon-painting passed from the hands of monks and priests to those of laymen. It is possible, even likely, that Yuhanna, himself a layman, produced decorative works for people's houses and was not fully occupied by the painting of icons. It is also possible that he was familiar with artistic traditions other than those of the Coptic Church. He should, consequently, not be identified purely as an artist of religious works. A close look at some of the icons provides some support for this idea. The main subjects of most of the icons are saints, painted in rich traditional garments, often decorated in gold, and in static positions, forming the central visual focus of the icon. However, some icons also contain, in a corner or less prominent space, and on a much smaller scale, ordinary people who could be the contemporaries of Yuhanna, depicted in a much freer style, with much more movement. Thus, at several levels we can observe the religious and the non-religious. Again, this can be taken to reflect a larger trend in society, which we need to subject to analysis in relation to other subjects.

Thus, the story of Yuhanna al-Armani can be seen as functioning on many levels. They touch in different ways and on different dimensions of the eighteenth century, Armenian history, Coptic history, and Ottoman history. As such, his life and works help us to gain a better understanding of the period and to open the door to new research on a number of issues.

1

The Background

Anyone interested in Coptic art of the Ottoman period (AD 1517–1805), whether scholars or others, is familiar with the name of Yuhanna al-Armani, an artist famous for paintings that today still adorn a number of churches in Old Cairo. Yet, curiously enough, this man, who is often credited with being behind a revival in Coptic religious art in the eighteenth century, was not a Copt himself. Yuhanna al-Armani (d. 27 July 1786) belonged to Cairo’s Armenian community, a community with ancient roots in Cairo, that was sufficiently well integrated into Egyptian society that one of its members could become a leading painter of Coptic icons. Yuhanna lived at a rich juncture of history and geography that allowed him and other artists of his generation opportunities to produce their art and for him to rise in society. This book is an attempt to place Yuhanna the man, and the icons he painted, within the historical, cultural, and social contexts of eighteenth-century Cairo.

It will attempt to sketch—as far as extant sources allow—a biography of Yuhanna al-Armani, placing him within a number of circles to which he belonged: that of the Ottoman Empire, of which he was a subject; that of the Armenian community, to which he belonged ethnically, linguistically, and socially; that of the city of Cairo in which he lived and worked, married, and had children; and that of the Coptic community within

which he built his artistic career. In some ways, the story of Yuhanna al-Armani was typical of many others living in this multicultural empire, especially in the large cities, of which Cairo was one. In other ways, his life trajectory was that of an individual whose story could be seen as a series of events, some of which were predictable and others unpredictable, some of which followed trends set by others, while others seem to have been accidents of history.

An Armenian by birth, language, and ethnicity, Yuhanna belonged to a community that had settled in Egypt many centuries earlier and had been actively involved in its economic, social, and cultural life. The Armenians had a presence in Cairo which dates from at least as far back as the Fatimid period (969–1171), that is some six to seven hundred years before Yuhanna arrived on the scene. And during these many centuries, Armenians maintained a distinct cultural and religious identity of their own. Yuhanna's own life and career are a clear indication of the degree to which this community was integrated in the wider Ottoman Egyptian society in eighteenth-century Cairo. Yuhanna's own family, nevertheless, had only recently settled in Egypt, probably the generation before his, sometime in the late seventeenth century.

Yuhanna shot to fame as the leading icon-painter in Egypt. Even though a number of other painters—Egyptians, Armenians, and Syrians—flourished at the same time, he was the most famous of them all. Modern church-goers, as well as numerous tourists, continue to admire his icons at churches such as the Mu'allāqa church (Hanging Church of the Virgin) in Old Cairo, one of the most frequently visited Coptic sites. The icons he painted remain an important part of the visual culture of modern Copts.

The icons Yuhanna painted appear almost abruptly on the Coptic art scene. They dominate studies of Ottoman Coptic art, many of which focus much of their attention on his work. In fact, his rise to fame and the ubiquity of his surviving icons have long posed a dilemma for historians of Coptic art, and, more generally, Coptic culture. One of the big questions is why at this particular time was there such a flourishing of this art form. In general there are only few studies that explore Coptic art in the Ottoman period, and the explanations that these studies propose in answer to this question tend to follow one mainstream line of