

Iconography of the Illusory Curtain in Coptic Murals and its Significance

Manal Mahmoud Abdelhamid

Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Alexandria University

Abstract

The curtain is widely used in the Coptic Orthodox Church, either as a decorated textile hung before the door of the sanctuary *haikal*, or as a pictorial motif being extensively represented on the walls of the niches of different monasteries like the monastery of Apa Apollo at Bawit, the Red Monastery and the Monastery of Abu Fana, taking four different forms; the closed, the opened or torn curtain, the semi-opened and the drapery which decorates the lower zones of the walls of the churches.

The using of the curtain in churches is influenced by Jewish tradition of separating the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle, where the God exists, by using a curtain (Exodus 26: 1-6), beyond which only the high priest was allowed to pass to present the atonement for sins. According to the Christian tradition, this curtain was torn in two parts at the moment of the death of the Christ who, through his sacrifice, presented the sufficient atonement for sins, opened the Holy of Holies to the faithful for salvation and gave the Christians a free permanent access to God (Mathew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). Therefore, the curtain subsequently became the symbol of the Christ, the transparent boundary connecting the earthly and the heavenly worlds, transformed into an essential liturgical feature in the Coptic Church.

This paper aims to discuss the different representations of the illusory curtain in Coptic murals and their architectural context to understand its symbolic concept in the Coptic liturgy.

Keywords: Curtain, Veil, Illusory, Coptic, Liturgy, Altar, Christ, Textile, Drapery

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Among collections of the museums all over the world, there are the richly Coptic decorated curtains which are adorned with different animal, vegetal and geometric motifs, besides the different themes of Old and New Testaments, invoking the importance of this element in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Generally, the tradition of veiling can be obviously seen in the Coptic Church through the five types of eucharistic veils: altar veils, chalice veils, mats, paten and chalice veils, and paten veils. After a church has been consecrated, the altar should at no time be left uncovered; the altar veil is a set of cloth coverings and curtains on and around the altar, consecrated by means of special prayers, to provide the right protection and veneration during the liturgy (Basilios, 1991).

They are usually adorned with cross and figures of the Christ and saints, sometimes as standing figures and sometimes in narratives (Osborne, 1992).

The canopy over the altar, upheld by wooden, stone, or marble pillars, used to be surrounded with curtains hanging down from rods, usually were drawn at certain times during the liturgy to screen off the clergy in the sanctuary, for example, at the descent of the Holy Spirit and the Fraction Prayers. In modern times, such curtains no longer constitute part of the altar coverings, except some few examples, since the curtains on the iconostasis doors provide the necessary protection (Pl.1) (Basilios, 1991; O'Flynn D., 2017).

Pl.1 View of the Altar Room shows the Curtain on the iconostasis door Church of the Monastery of Abu Fana



After, Gabra G.(2012) *The Churches of Egypt*, p.244.

The usual word for curtain in the later period is the Latin *velum* or *velarium*, but, in churches, the word *katapetasma* is used to refer to the curtain that divides the main body of the church from the sanctuary, the same word *katapetasma* is mentioned in the gospels referring to the veil of the temple of Jerusalem or Tabernacle used to separate the Holy of Holies, including the Ark and the seat of God. It was made of blue, purple, scarlet and linen threads and embroidered with cherubim (Claressa, 2005):

"Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim woven into them by a skilled worker" (Ex.26:1). Only the high priest was permitted to pass beyond the curtain once each year for making the atonement for sins (Ex.30:10).

It is important to mention that the Virgin Mary spun the veil of the temple and when she had finished it, she carried it to the temple to the chief priests, who blessed her, and said unto her: *"The Lord thy God shall magnify thy name, and shall make thee to be a woman blessed among all the families of the earth"*, then Mary returned to her house in great joy (Budge, 1889).

The Jews believed that the veil is the symbol of cosmos and eternity, later on, the Jewish spiritual religion suggested that the veil was also an image of the sacred time representing the past, the present and the future, forming the boundary between the visible earthly and the invisible heavenly realms; the most holy eternal world beyond the veil was unchanging and without a temporal sequence of events, but the visible sacred world outside the veil was a place of change, Philo assured this opinion and adding the interaction between these two sacred worlds, earthly and heavenly (Lidov, 2008).

In Christian belief, this veil, the temple veil (*katapetasma*) was torn in two from top to bottom at the moment of the Christ's death (Osborn, 1992): *"And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom"* (Matthew 27:50-51).

The Christ passed beyond the veil, through his death and sacrifice, he opened the Holy of Holies to all the faithful for salvation and removed the barriers between God and people who have now a free permanent access to God and can approach Him with confidence and boldness whenever they want:

"Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart"

and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrew 10:19-22)

Therefore, the veil became the symbol of the flesh of the Christ (Lidov, 2008) who said: *I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture (John 10.9).*

It is not strange then to see, besides the real curtains, the painted illusory curtain extensively represented as a pictorial motif on the dadoes or socles of monasteries walls, like those in the Red Monastery, and inside sanctuary niches in many monasteries like the monastery of Appa Apollo at Bawit, Deir Abu Fana and the monastery of St. Macarius in Wadi Natrun.

The illusory curtain is shown painted in four different forms: the closed curtain, the opened, the semi-opened curtain knotted in the middle, and finally the drapery that is always represented on the dadoes of the walls.

Both the closed and the opened forms are the most common features of the illusory curtain in Coptic murals evoking clearly the closed curtain of the Temple then the torn one that symbolizes the Christ.

The closed illusory curtain is beautifully represented in the triconch sanctuary of the church of Begol in the Red Monastery that has some well-preserved paintings with figural subject and patterns that stretch around columns. (Gabra, 2002).

The northern niche, divided into three registers, the middle one has three niches, each one of them is decorated with a closed painted curtain with folds hung on rod with rings (**Pl.2**). A similar representation appeared in the two niches of the lower register of the same niche (Bolman, 2006).

All of them bear the same decoration, as each curtain is decorated with a double line of decoration in the upper and lower parts with trifoliate flowers connected by lines with wreathed crosses.

Pl.2 Left: The Closed Illusory Curtains in Triconch Sanctuary of the church of Begol in the Red Monastery, Right: A detailed section of the Illusory Closed Curtain.



After, Bolman E.S. (2015) *The Red Monastery Church Beauty and Asceticism in Upper Egypt*, Figure. 5.13. After, Bolman E.S. (2006) *Late Antique Aesthetics*, Pl.11

Another outstanding representation of the closed curtain is shown in the lower register of the southern niche of the same sanctuary (Pl.3), depicting a white curtain with folds decorated with red lines, wreathed crosses and trifoliate flowers, in front of the closed curtain stands the Christ with a nimbus around the head, and holding the bible in his left hand (Bolman, 2006).

Pl.3 The Closed Curtain in the Southern niche of the Triconch Sanctuary in the Red Monastery.



After, Estafanus F.(2009) *Saint Beshay and Begol Monastery, The Red Monastery*, P.61

The second most common representation is the opened curtain or the torn curtain that is usually attached to two columns or folded around them.

An opened curtain is beautifully depicted in the annunciation scene in sanctuary of St.Mark of the monastery of St. Macarius (Pl.4), showing the Virgin Mary sitting to the right, in front of her, is a small shrine supported by two columns with a red opened curtain folded around the two columns supported the arch, and inside the shrine, there is a pot probably a censer. On the opposite side appears archangel Gabriel approaching the Virgin (Leroy,1982).

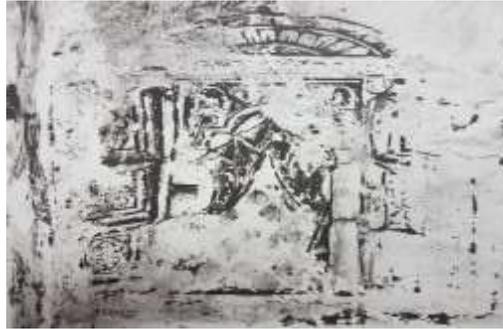
Pl.4 Right: The Opened Curtain in Sanctuary of St.Mark in the Monastery of St. Macarius, Annunciation Scene, Left: Detailed Section of the Curtain.



After, Leroy J.,(1982) *Les Peintures des Couvents du Ouadi Natrun*,Pl.42

In the same sanctuary of St.Mark, on the southern wall (Pl.5), there are the remains of a painting showing Christ's entry into Jerusalem, parts of the city buildings are still preserved, and at the right side of the painting is a representation of the arched entrance of the city adorned with an opened curtain whose two folds are attached to the two columns supporting the arch (Gabra, 2002; Leroy, 1982).

Pl.5 The Opened Curtain in the Sanctuary of St.Mark in the Monastery of St. Macarius, Christ's entry into Jerusalem



After, Leroy J., (1982) *Les Peintures des Couvents du Ouadi Natrun*, Pl.82

The south wall of chapel No.XII at Bawit (Pl.6) shows another example of the opened illusory curtain hung on iron rod with a representation of a winged cock symbolizing resurrection (Clédat, 1999).

Pl.6 The Opened Curtain in Chapel No.XII at Bawit



After, Clédat M.J. (1999) "Le Monastère et La Nécropole de Baouit", Pl. XXXVIII

The same triconch sanctuary of the Red Monastery has in the lower register of the northern niche (Pl.7) a representation of an opened curtain attached to the two columns that support the arch of the niche which adorned with a painted big cross (Bolman, 2006).

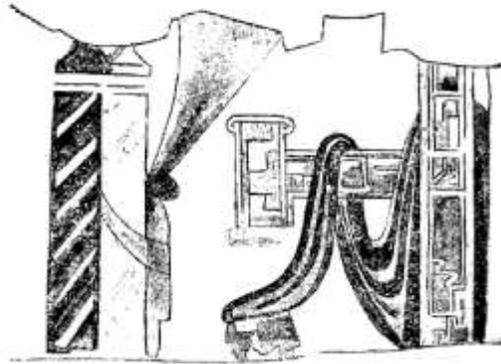
Pl.7 Left: The Opened Curtain with a big Cross in the Triconch Sanctuary of the Red Monastery
Right: Detailed Section of the Opened Curtain



After, The American Research Center in Egypt web site, Red Monastery Sohag,
<http://archive.arce.org/>, 15/03/2018

On the lower register of the wall in the church of Deir of St.Fana (Pl.8), there is a depiction of three crosses draped with garments, one of them is flanked by two columns, on the right side of the cross, there is an opened curtain suspended away from the cross, knotted in the middle and attached to the column, I think that there must be another one on the other side but it disappeared now (Martin,1972).

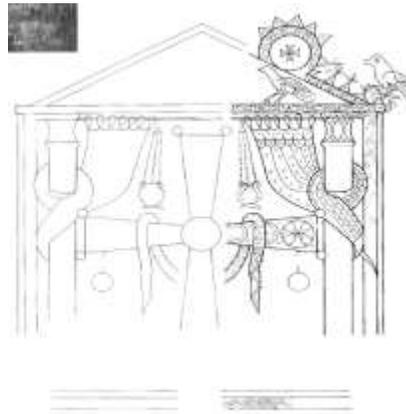
Pl.8 The Opened Curtain on the Lower Register of the wall in the Church of Deir of St.Fana



After, Martin M. (1972)" Notes inédites du P. Jullien sur trois monastères chrétiens d'Égypte,*BIFAO* 71,P.121,F.3

The representation of a cross inside a curtained niche appears also in the northern wall of the eastern niche in the Red Monastery (Pl.9) which is decorated with a big painted cross represented under a pediment; under the lintel is a rod with suspended opened curtain with two folds, the right one has no decoration and wrapped around the column, while the left fold is garnished in the top with fixed rings and a double row of pleats.It is all decorated with pearls and its lower part is folded around the column leaving the central space where the cross is shown (Laferriere,1993).

F.9 The Opened Curtain on the Northern Wall of the Eastern Niche in the Red Monastery



After, Laferriere P.H. (1993) Les Croix Murales du Monastère Rouge à Sohag, *BIFAO* 93,F.11b
The third category of the painted illusory curtain is the semi-opened curtain knotted in the middle.

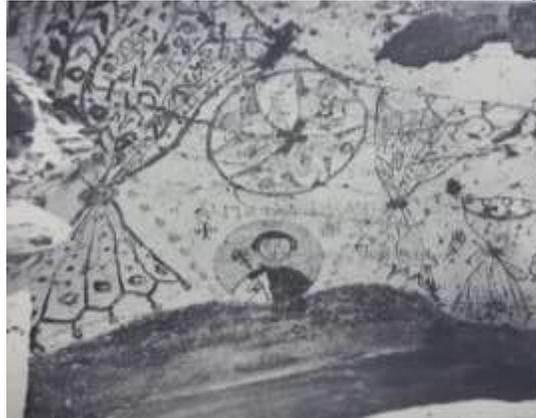
On the eastern wall of oratory No.6 in Esna desert (Pl.10), there is a unique decoration.The oratory takes the shape of a niche in the form of a furnace with an arch supported by two columns with small capitals.The upper part of the niche is adorned with the usual wreathed cross under a horizontal rod, drawn little carefully, supports two hanging semi-opened curtains, each

has four rings, and decorated with circles, crosses, flowers, and zigzag lines, they are clasped in the middle by a knot, then flare down again, with the form of oak nuts in their lower parts.

Under the cross is engraved a circular medallion with the bust of a man with a triangular face and a high hairstyle, he is dressed in white and dark brown, and holds in his right hand a stick which is surmounted by a cross, the medallion is flanked by two crosses, and a kind of a flower with seven petals.

The name of the Apa Philox (ene) is inscribed between the upper cross and the medallion with the human bust. On the right side of the niche, is represented another semi-opened curtain similar to the others, but smaller in size, suspended on its rod, and flanked by two vases. This type of painting, which is very unique, probably evokes the image of the closed niche with a curtain that protects the images of saints and the cross inside (Sauneron, 1972).

Pl.10 The Semi-Opened Curtain on the eastern wall of Oratory No.6 in Esna desert



After, Sauneron S.Jacquet J. (1972) *Les Ermitages Chrétiens du Désert D'Esna I*, Pl.XXXI

Another representation of the semi-opened curtain can be seen on the left side of the chapel No.28 in Bawit (Pl.11) where there is a white curtain knotted in the middle, with no decoration, hung in a stepped shrine between two columns, three persons are sitting near the stepped shrine, dressed in white, every one of them holds a stick, the inscription above the head of one of them reads : Father Issac, and to the left of the niche inscribed the name Apa Apollo (Clédat, 1904).

Pl.11 The Semi-Opened Curtain in Chapel No.28 in Bawit



After, Clédat M.J.(1904)"Le Monastère et La Nécropole de Baouit,*MIFAO III*, PL.CV

The last form of the illusory curtain is the drapery which is always used to decorate the lower parts of walls of the niches. One of this representations is available in the northern niche of the triconch sanctuary in the Red Monastery Church of Anba Begol (Pl.12) where the lower register

is decorated with a white drapery adorned with two parallel red lines in the upper and lower parts with trifoliolate flowers and wreathed crosses (Bolman,2009).

Pl.12 Above: The Drapery in the Sanctuary in the Red Monastery Church of Anba Begol
Below: Detailed Section of the Drapery



After, *The American Research Center in Egypt web site, Red Monastery Sohag,*
<http://archive.arce.org/15/03/2018>

Another similar large white drapery is represented covering the lower part of the wall of chapel No. XLII in Bawit (Pl.13) stretching on both sides of the niche which has two registers, the upper one shows the Christ enthroned in mandorla, and the lower section the Virgin is enthroned, holding the infant Jesus, and flanked by the twelve apostles and two local saints, the drapery is decorated with a diamond pattern with a flower in the center (Clédât, 2002).

Pl.13 the Drapery in Chapel No. XLII in Bawit



After, Clédât M.J. (1999) "Le Monastère et La Nécropole de Baouit, *MIFAO 111*, No.46-47

Discussion

The iconography of the four categories that can be traced through (Table 1) reflects the importance of the curtain and its conceptual significance in Coptic liturgy, as all of them are accumulated in the holy sanctuary area, adorning niches, where the rites are performed by the high priest behind the curtain.

It can be said that the opened or the torn curtain, represents the death of the Christ and the opening of the Holy of Holies to all mankind through his body, announcing the conversion from the old religion or Jewish that takes the form of the closed curtain or the drapery, to the new

religion or Christianity. Moreover, the semi-opened curtain represents a middle stage between the closed and the opened curtain and reflects a kind of mystery as hiding a precious thing beyond; all of these stages of the illusory curtain are professionally illustrated in the triconch sanctuary of the Red Monastery.

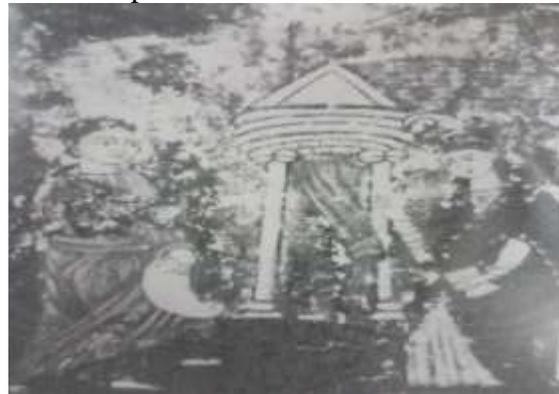
The opened and the semi-opened curtain were subsequently used to frame or outline the sacred context and holy persons especially the Virgin and the Christ; and this is evident through a limestone relief in The Coptic Museum (Pl.14) of the sixth century represents The Virgin enthroned, between two angels and two apostles, in an architectural setting composed of pairs of columns with two semi-opened curtains knotted in the middle and hung between them, The Christ child turns his upper body to hand a scroll to the bearded man at his left (Gabra,2007).

Pl.14 A limestone relief of The Virgin and The Christ child shows the Semi-Opened Curtain



After, Gabra G.(2007) *The Treasures of Coptic Art*,Cairo,No.74,Coptic Museum,Inv.No.7814 Generally in Coptic art, both opened and semi-opened curtains are used alternatively in the same context. For instance, the opened curtain is used in the annunciation scene, as mentioned above (Pl.4), and at the same time the semi-opened one is represented within the same context on an icon in the Coptic museum (Pl.15) shows the archangel Gabriel approaching and greeting Virgin Mary who is standing in an architectural setting with a semi-opened red curtain attached to the column (Moorsel, 1991).

Pl.15 The Semi-opened Curtain in the Icon of Annunciation



After, Moorsel P.V. (1991) *The Icons,Catalogue Générale du Musée Copte*,Pl.47a The same attitude is repeated in the artistic representation of the tomb of the Christ, as on The Metropolitan Coptic Pyxis (Pl.16 left) is represents the visit of the two women to the tomb that takes the form of three arches with fluted columns and opened curtains attached to them,beneath the central arch is an altar in the form of a table with the Gospel on it depicted as a substitute for the tomb, as the tomb of the Christ represents the main altar of the Christian church (Clair,1979;Morgans,1919).

The same topic of the visit of the tomb is represented on another pyxis in Cleveland museum (Pl.16 right) , but the opened curtain is replaced by semi-opened curtains knotted in the middle, evoking the same symbolism (Clair,1979).

Pl.16 The Opened and Semi-Opened Curtains within the Same Context
Left: The Metropolitan Coptic Pyxis, Right: The Cleveland Museum Pyxis



After, Morgans P.(1919)"*Eine Koptische Pyxis mit den Frauen*, Tafel 34,abb.1

After: Clair A.St. (1979) "*The Visit to the Tomb*,F.9

It is important to mention also that the drapery motif appeared in the lower zone is not only an ornamental margins but also represents the same symbolic concept of the closed curtain (Lidov,2008).

The architectural context of the illusory curtain, meaning the using of specific elements like colours and decoration motifs, used to evoke the Jewish influence and the symbolic concept of the curtain in Coptic liturgy. Josephus mentioned that the veil represented the universe, and the colours had symbolic significance: the scarlet signified fire; the linen or the white colour, earth; the blue, air; and the purple, sea, all these four are the principal elements of life, (Lidov,2008).

As for the pillars, which give support to the curtains and arches, it is also mentioned that the Gate of the Tabernacle had four pillars to held up the curtain of the Gate: "*And for the gate of the court a curtain of twenty cubits, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and twined byssus, embroidered with needlework; their pillars four, and their bases four*" (Ex.27.17).

Moreover, similar to the column which gives support to the entrance of the paradise , also does the curtain, which symbolizes the body of the Christ, is folded around the column for more strength, emphasizing that this perpetual entrance to paradise will be always available because of the great sacrifice of the Christ for all mankind.

Moreover, the ornamentation the curtain with trifoliate flowers, was probably inspired by Josephus's description of the Temple veil being embroidered with flowers and patterns, and also number three symbolizes the holy trinity (Lidov, 2008).

Moreover, the rods and the rings, appeared in the representation of the illusory curtain,are mentioned also in the description of the Temple : "*and the twenty pillars thereof and their twenty sockets shall be of brass; the hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver* (Exodus 27.10) ; "*All the pillars round about the court shall be filleted with silver; their hooks shall be of silver, and their sockets of brass*" (Ex. 27.17).

Conclusion

The curtain constitutes a principal element in the Coptic liturgy, therefore many coloured curtains are among the collections of the museums all over the world, and can be seen in churches to separate the altar from the other parts of the church.

Besides the real curtain, many other painted illusory curtains are represented on the walls on the niches in many monasteries, decorated with many motifs imitating the Jewish veil mentioned in the Old Testament.

I assume that the mural depiction of the illusory curtain, with its various forms, was an effective way used by the artist that helped him to express the different aspects of the curtain symbolism more than the real curtain, by summarizing the whole concept in a simple pictorial way.

Through this survey of the wall paintings, it can be concluded that:

- The illusory curtain is mostly represented on the walls of the niches in the sanctuary area either in the churches or in the oratories.
- It takes four forms, the closed and opened curtains which are the most common among the other forms, besides the semi-closed curtain, and the drapery which is used to decorate the lower parts of the walls.
- The closed curtain and the drapery can be considered the first stage of the curtain symbolism in Coptic belief referring to the Jewish veil, then the second stage is the opened one which evokes the tearing of the veil at the death of the Christ, then the artist used this opened curtain instead of the semi-opened in the same context.
- The illusory curtain is also represented on icons, pyxides, and chalices besides the murals.
- All the elements of architectural context of the illusory curtain were dedicated to reinforce this symbolic meaning especially the depiction of the holy figures on the woven curtains, and the Christ in front of one of the illusory curtains, as if they are coming from behind the curtain to emphasize this active eternal communication between the two spheres.
- The curtain plays two double reversed roles isolate the altar from the other part of the church and, at the same time, connect between the earth and the heaven.

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Place	Form	Architectural context			
	Plate	Location	Accompanied Theme/ Items/persons	Colour/s	Decoration Motifs
Red Monastery, Begol Church, Triconch Sanctuary	Closed Pl.2	Five northern Niches. Middle /Lower Registers	Double parallel lines, trifoliolate flowers, wreathed crosses	White, Green, Red	Four columns, Rod
Red Monastery, Begol Church, Triconch Sanctuary	Closed Pl.3	Southern niche. Lower register	Double parallel lines, trifoliolate flowers and crosses	White, Red	Christ holding the Bible, Four columns
Sanctuary of St. Mark, Monastery of St. Macarius	Opened Attached to columns Pl.4	Sanctuary of St. Mark	No-Decoration Only folds	Red	Annunciation Scene Virgin Mary, Archangel Gabriel, Censer, Two Columns
Sanctuary of St. Mark, Monastery of St. Macarius	Opened Attached to columns Pl.5	Southern wall,	No-Decoration Only folds	Not identified	Christ's entry into Jerusalem Two columns, arched entrance
	Opened			Not Identified	

Monastery of Bawit	Attached to columns Pl.6	Chapel No.XII,South wall	No-Decoration Only folds		Cock, rod
Red Monastery,Begol Church,Triconch Sanctuary	Opened Attached to columns Pl.7	Northern niche, lower register,middle niche	No-Decoration Only folds	Black	Big Golden Cross
Monastery of St.Fana	Opened Attached to columns Pl.8	Lower register of the wall	No Decoration	White	Big cross with folded garment
The Red Monastery	Opened,folded around the columns Pl.9	The eastern niche	Double pleats and pearls	White	Big painted cross,rod, rings, two columns
Oratory 6 eastern wall Esna Desert	Semi-opened Knotted in the middle Pl.10	The niche of the oratory 6 in desert of Esna	Circles, crosses, flowers, oak nuts	White	Two columns, wreathed cross, medallion with human bust, rod, vases
Chapel 28 in Bawit	Semi-opened Knotted in the middle Pl.11	The left side of the chapel	No decoration	White	Two columns,stepped chapel, two saints
Red Monastery Church of Anba Begol the lower register	Drapery Pl.12	The northern sanctuary	two parallel red lines trifoliolate flowers, wreathed crosses	White red	Four columns
Chapel No. XLII in Bawit	Drapery Pl.13	the lower part of the wall	diamond pattern with a flower in the center	White	Christ, Virgin Mary, twelve apostles and saints