

**Note on the Regional production of Icons in the crusader
era. Case History: Egyptian - Byzantine Masterpiece
from c. 1200**

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Thirteenth century icons survive in Egypt in Greek and Coptic
collections, painted in the Byzantine or Byzantinising style on supports
from the wood of the sycamore tree (considered sacred since the
Pharaonic era). These locally-made panels all share a common feature:
the back is plastered and decorated with alternating bands of brush
strokes applied with semi-transparent colorants, arguably indigo and
madder (*indigofera argentea*, which grows wild in Nubia and
Ethiopia, and would have been known to Egyptian artisans thanks to
the textile industry, and the root of *Rubia tinctorum*).

The appalling state of the support of one of these icons—a large
Deesis portrait of *Saint John the Forerunner* partly devoured by
insects—made it possible to look literally, through the sacred object
and scrutinize in detail otherwise hidden workshop practices peculiar
to the Nile valley. The fine front priming and the thicker reverse
plaster layers camouflaged the timber, whose irregularities were filled
in with chunks of raw gypsum and whose joints were further smoothed
with what appear to be palm fronds—a material commonly used in
local industries such as basketry and matting. The tempera paint layer
and gilding on the yellow ochre were the skills of a Greek-trained
master.

What can be learnt from the techniques and materials used by the local
carpenter and itinerant artist? How do these Coptic details compare
with the contemporary production of icons in the Monastery of Saint

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Catherine at Sinai painted on fine panels with comparable reverse finish? Did these two dissimilar methods of icon production, which apparently existed side by side, have common sources?

And, how can a sacred picture, partly devoured by desert insects, be best restored and retouched *in situ*?