

## A MOMENT IN COPTIC HISTORY

John Watson

On Tuesday 22nd May 1990 an event, which may prove to be important in the history of Coptic Orthodox culture, took place in the Royal College of Art in London, England. For the first time since its foundation in 1837 the Royal College awarded a Ph.D. in iconography and, precisely, for a doctorate by project entitled "*Coptic Orthodox iconography*." The degree was awarded to Stephane Rene who is a student and disciple of Dr. Isaac Fanous Youseff, the head of the department of Art at the *Institute of Coptic Studies* in Cairo.

A Deacon in the London parish of the Coptic Orthodox Church and a convert to Orthodoxy, Stephane Rene is one of a very small number of people from the West who has been formally trained by Dr. Fanous in this sacred artistic tradition in Egypt. The RCA project included seven large icons all prepared and executed in London according to the traditional techniques and the artistic and theological values of the Coptic Orthodox Church. A thesis was also written over a period of two years which attempted to locate, define and interpret the tradition of Coptic Iconography especially in its contemporary form, as it is seen throughout Egypt, in the London Church and elsewhere in the Diaspora in the work of Dr. Fanous. It is because of the renaissance of Coptic artistic culture that this work was undertaken at the Royal College which is Britain's most prestigious independent institution of art and design, where the faculties of fine arts, design and communications award higher degrees in subjects ranging from painting, sculpture and printmaking to automotive and industrial design and cultural history. The illuminati of the Royal College of Art (RCA) include Henry Moore, Lucien Freud, David Hockney and virtually every great British artist of the Twentieth Century.

Stephane Rene's viva voce examination took place in the RCA's unique Visual Islamic and Traditional Arts School (VITA) which was established during the last decade under the Directorship of Dr. Keith Critchlow who is known internationally for his analysis of geometrical forms and their translation into structures and patterns. His research has found expression in three unique books on Islamic Patterns to which he has devoted 25 years of study in Arabia and Persia. He was immensely enthusiastic about the inclusion of a Coptic project in his department. There is no doubt that the humanistic and ecumenical implications and spin-off have proved his judgement to be correct. Human and inter-faith understanding at this high level can only help us all.

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Stephane Rene with his examiners; from left to right: Fanous, Watson, Rene, Frayling, and Critchlow.

Among the examiners was Professor Isaac Fanous Youseff who was flown from Egypt as the world's greatest authority on Coptic Iconography. He examined as a great iconographer himself and with a universal vision of the importance of this project. The Revd Dr. John H. Watson, FRAS was appointed as a theologian and cultural historian. The distinguished English art historian Professor Christopher Frayling, who is Chairman of the Faculty of Humanities in London, examined as an Art historian and historian of culture. Dr. Critchlow and Dr. Samar Damluji were in attendance as Director of VITA and recorder of the examination. An intensive exchange of three hours took place.

In the English tradition, it is expected that a Doctor of Philosophy be one who has added to the field of human knowledge in a significant way. There was no doubt amongst the examiners that the thesis of Dr. Rene is an original piece of work. The subject is rare in the United Kingdom. Thames and Hudson once published one book on Coptic Art in the 60's but it has long been out of print. Rene's thesis is, amongst other things, a major piece of cultural conservation and is now lodged in the most important Art Library in London. It will be a source book for future generations.