AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

Coptic Fabrics and the Fauves

Nancy Arthur Hoskins

The display of brash, color-splashed paintings at the Salon d'Automne in 1905 both astonished and amused Parisians. The exhibiting artists became known as the Les Fauves — the wild beasts. The name long outlasted the brief movement known as Fauvism, but the trend setting colorists influenced the course of twentieth century art. Among those exhibiting were Henri Matisse, Andre Derain, Georges Rouault, and others. Scholars have explored the explosive work of the Fauves searching for clues to the break in custom and conformity from academy art. Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and the contemporaneous interest in Japanese and Primitive art that preceded the first Fauve exhibit are generally acknowledged as influential. Another factor—the impact of Coptic tapestry art—is less well known. Art historians tend to dismiss the importance of textile art and few are even aware of the seemingly insignificant events that preceded the startling work of the Fauves.

Three Dancers on a Yoke Egypt, Coptic Fragment from Albert Gayet album
Tapestry weave: linen and wool, 4 1/4" x 8" (10.9 x 20.4 cm)
Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington
Helen S. Poulsen Collection, Acc. #83.7-56, Photo by R. Nicol

The French archeologist Albert Gayet had a "sensational tableau" of textiles from his excavations at Antinoé, Egypt at the Exposition Universelle de Paris 1900. A relatively unknown painter, struggling to support his art and family, was hired to paint "miles of garlands and flowers" to decorate the exhibition halls. This was Henri Matisse. Always a collector of textiles that caught his fancy — embroideries, prints, and bits of luxury silks– he added Coptic fragments to his horde.

This article is not intended to be comprehensive on the complex connection between Coptic tapestry art, the Fauves, and other artists, but will provide some clues for curious art historians and tapestry scholars.

The scene shifts from Coptic Egypt to turn of the century Paris when a French archaeologist, an Armenian antiquarian, and all the Fauves-to-be were there.

The Coptic Period

The Coptic Period (late 3rd Century A.D. to mid-7th Century A.D.) is an Egyptian era sandwiched between the time of the Pharaohs and the Muslims. In present usage a Copt is a Christian Egyptian, but in the early medieval world it denoted an indigenous Egyptian in contradistinction to the Greek, Roman, Persian, and Arab conquerors. There is a Coptic language which is the ancient Egyptian language written with a Greek alphabet, a Coptic church that honors St. Mark as its first pope, and a contemporary Coptic population of 6,000,000. With a government ruled from Rome and Byzantium and an ancient pagan culture overlaid with classical Greco-Roman and later Christian ideals, a distinctly different style of art called Coptic—expressed primarily through tapestry—flourished for hundreds of years. Because of the dry desert climate and the Christian burial practice of dressing and wrapping the deceased in clothing and cloth, thousands of these textiles have survived.

Coptic Cloth

The typical Coptic cloth is a combination of tabby (plain weave) and tapestry, sometimes called inserted tapestry. Tapestry decorations were used on clothing and on secular and sacred cloths. There were also wall hangings of tapestry. Found in Egypt and in a few other sites, this type of cloth was worn and probably woven all over the Roman Empire. Although tapestry is the most common technique used, there are weft-loop weaves, brocades, embroideries, knits, sprang, tablet weaves, and rare woolen taquetés (weft-faced compound tabby) and silk samitums (weft-faced compound twill).

The Phases of Coptic Art

The conquest and colonization of one country by another creates a rich cultural brew that transforms indigenous art. During the late antique world the canonical art of ancient Egypt was infused with Classical and then Christian art. Tapestries produced during the Coptic Period are testimony to that transformation of style. Though Coptic scholars use different descriptive terms, they generally agree that the style of the tapestries and other pictorial textiles can be sorted into these broad categories: Early Coptic, Middle Coptic, and Late Coptic. The Early Coptic (late third century to fourth century A.D.) is dominated by Greco-Roman influence with themes drawn from nature and mythology. Dionysian dancers in arboreal settings are a favorite theme. Subtle modeling with blended colors can be seen in the painterly polychrome portraits.

Fluency of line is evident in the monochrome tapestries of face, figures, endless knot, and interlace motifs sketched with white linen threads on dark fields. The Middle Coptic (fifth to mid-seventh century A.D.) is categorized by the abstraction of naturalistic elements. Color areas, no longer blended, are separated by heavy outlines or juxtaposed. Faces and figures are stylized. Christian saints and symbols begin to replace the pagan iconography. The Late Coptic or Early Islamic (mid-seventh to twelfth century A.D.), in which geometric patterns and calligraphic motifs supersede figurative art. Because of the manner in which these textiles were collected accurate dating is difficult. Textiles considered Coptic in style and technique continue to be woven in the early centuries of Islamic Egypt and are included in most museums' Coptic collections.

Essentially the style shifts from "classicism, an awareness of the physical world and the technical skill to capture that world in a realistic or idealized form to expressionism, the distortion, exaggeration, or radical simplification of form to intensify their emotional impact" (Trilling 1982). Polychrome and monochrome harmonies were used throughout all phases and portraits and some popular themes — especially dancing figures and interlace patterns — persisted. While there was continuity throughout the Coptic Period in the construction, composition, content, and palette of the tabby-tapestries there were profound changes in the iconography and in the style of rendering faces, figures, and narrative vignettes as familiar Greco-Roman motifs and themes were imbued with Christian messages.

Antinoé

Once a glorious and grand Greco-Roman city graced a Nile River site in middle Egypt. One entered the city through a magnificent triple arch. There were marble temples and broad colonnaded avenues. The emperor Hadrian founded the city he called Antinoöpolis in A.D. 130 to memorialize the site where his beloved boy Antinous drowned. Egyptians of Greek descent colonized the city. Their language and culture were Greco-Roman. The city flourished during the centuries when ideals and art slowly segued from Classicism to Christianity. The city faded a few centuries after the Islamic conquest of Egypt. Eventually even the architectural ruins of this ancient city were destroyed and Antinoöpolis seemed to disappear. Now the site of Antinoöpolis is a barren plain surrounded by stark rocky hills with a small mud village called Sheik Abada.

Antinoé, as the city was called by the French, would only be known through legend and a few drawings of its ruins done during Napoleon's 1811 expedition to Egypt, if it were not for Albert

Gayet — who became known as the Archeologist of Antinoé. Gayet excavated in Antinoé from 1895 until 1912. He collected mummies, grave goods, and thousands of fabrics, which were exhibited annually in Paris and published a long list of books and articles about the artifacts of Antinoé. The tapestries were especially rich in color and content. Gayet considered his work "the resurrection of a world to rival the discovery of Pompeii." He dreamed of a special museum to preserve the relics of that "efflorescent civilization." But eventually the findings of his digs were disbursed, and he died a disappointed man.

A Portrait of a Woman with Earrings, Egypt, Coptic
Fragment from Albert Gayet album
Tapestry weave: linen and wool, 4 1/2" x 3 3/4" (11.5 x 9.5 cm)
Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington
Helen S. Poulsen Collection Acc. #83.7-62
Photo by R. Nicol, ANU Art Forum Lecture 7-05-08

His legacy, however, lives on. Today the fabrics and fabulous mummy portraits found by Gayet are scattered in public and private collections around the world. I have examined over 60 different collections. Each thread is still connected to the culture in which it was created. When pieced together these fragments reveal a very personal story of textile traditions, tastes, and technology. Antinoé, instead of a mythical lost city like Atlantis, can be understood as the lively and colorful society is once was. Imagine walking down an Antinoé street on market day with everyone dressed in handspun, hand-dyed, handwoven cloth.

Albert Gayet and the Coptic Tapestry Albums

Since 1983 my Coptic research has been focused on a collection of Coptic fragments in a pair of albums autographed by Albert Gayet. They are at the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington (fig. 1 & 2). Gayet (1856-1916) was a protégé of the notable Egyptologist Gaston Maspero. His activities are important to review. During his early career he worked at Pharaonic sites, but the 1896 excavation season was spent at the site of ancient Antinoé. His sponsor Emile Guimet, the founder of the Musée Guimet in Paris, thought that the site might contain "vestiges of the civilization and some scientific surprises" (Thompson, D. L. 1982). Guimet

sponsored the first of Gayet's expeditions to Antinoé and many others that followed. The few temple remnants from the Pharaonic period that preceded the founding of Antinoé occupied most of Gayet's time in his first and second expeditions there. Near the end of the second season he discovered four cemeteries that he identified as Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Byzantine, and Coptic. He gathered the grave goods and textiles. He brought back to Paris an assortment of artifacts and textiles that were displayed in 1897 at the Musée Guimet. His discoveries in Antinoé and the description of the exhibited material were published by the museum that same year. This set the precedent for the long list of Gayet's expeditions, excavations, exhibitions, and publications of Coptic art fabrics and artifacts.

There were exhibits at the Musée Guimet in 1897, 1898, 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1907, 1908, and 1912. A 1905 exhibit was held at the Petit Palais. Archival exhibit photos show the vitrines filled with an assortment of items: mummies, plaster masks, mummy paintings, pottery, lamps, shoes, statuettes, hair nets, painted shrouds, and textiles. In 1900 Gayet had an exhibit at the Paris Exposition Universelle. The textiles, displayed in "sensational tableaux" arranged by Gayet at the Palais du Costume, were reported as being "one of the most decidedly interesting features of the Exposition" (Paris Exposition 1900). The costume exhibit was "for the glorification of feminine fashion from the nineteenth century back through history to the Late Antique world." Gayet considered his work "the resurrection of a world to rival the discovery of Pompeii.

The colorful, highly stylized Coptic tapestries shown during all of the Gayet exhibits were unlike anything seen before in Paris. Two 1901 events are important to mention. Gayet followed the success of his display at the exposition with a sensational discovery—the mummies of Thaïs and Sérapion. The mummies were featured in a macabre display at the Musée Guimet along with the season's other acquisitions. Thaïs and Sérapion were not anonymous souls, they were already well known through literature and music. Thaïs was a legendary fourth century A.D. Egyptian courtesan of great beauty and Sérapion a monk who encouraged her conversion to Christianity. The story of Thaïs, a sinner who became a saint, survived the centuries to become the heroine of an 1890 novel by Anatole France, a 1894 opera by Jules Massenet, a 1911 play by Paul Wilstatch, and five silent films produced between 1911 and 1917 in France, Italy, and America. "When Anatole France gave his Thaïs to the light, even the sex-worn brain of Paris received a new sensation. Recently a savant [Gayet] discovered the body of Thaïs in Antinoé" (France 1902). Even the president of France came to see the mummy of Thaïs lying in state at the Musée Guimet (Calament 1989). The pivotal episode in Gayet's career was the discovery

of Thaïs and Sérapion. It enthralled the enthusiastic public and the press, but ultimately brought the scrutiny of his skeptical and less gullible peers. His aggressive archeological methods were criticized, his discovery of Thaïs questioned.

A 1901 sale of Gayet's Coptic textiles and artifacts was held at the Musée Guimet. Forty lots, some containing as many as five hundred items, were auctioned off to public and private collections (Calament 1989). Thousands of other fabrics were eventually donated to French museums. Gayet, disillusioned at the end of his life, regretted the dispersion of his Antinoé artifacts and textiles. Though scattered in private and public collections around the world, each thread is still connected to the culture in which it was created. When pieced together these fragments reveal a very personal story of textile traditions, tastes, and technology. Antinoé, instead of a mythical lost city like Atlantis, can be understood as the lively and colorful society it once was.

Discovering The Fauve Connection

During my research on Coptic fabrics, which began in 1974, a single sentence in a book about Eastern Christianity caught my attention, "… the feeling of movement and the sense of liveliness in the stylized human and animal figures [in the tapestries] became a source of inspiration for some of the most notable modern masters, including Matisse, Derain, and Picasso" (Atiya 1968). The footnote cited a catalog Coptic Art by N. B. Rodney. Could it be that there was a connection between my favorite phase of modern art and the fabrics of Coptic Egypt? I searched for more information. Requests through Inter-Library Loan for the Coptic Art catalog were unsuccessful. Later, I found a Coptic textile in a college collection I was examining that had been donated by N. B. Rodney and found her address. I wrote to Rodney. She kindly lent me her personal copy of the exhibit catalog and has since provided helpful information. In the catalog she wrote, "The strong black outlines and brilliant flat colors used by…Matisse and Derain are obviously related to the pictorial techniques of the ancient Coptic weavers. The same analogy can be made in the paintings of Rouault. There is no doubt that these men were fascinated by and loved—and some collected—Coptic textiles" (Rodney 1955).

Coptic art as inspiration for the Fauves was acknowledged in a 1939 exhibit catalog The Sources of Modern Painting and in two other books: Matisse by Pierre Schneider and Coptic Fabrics by M. H. Rutschowscaya (Institute 1939, Schneider 1984, Rutschowscaya 1990). Scholars, who dismiss the Coptic connection as unimportant, must not be aware of the rich visual repertoire to be discovered in the textile art of Roman and Byzantine Egypt.

Dikran Khan Kelekian

Nanette Rodney, the author of Coptic Art uses the surname Kelekian in more recent letters. She reported that Matisse and Derain owned Coptic tapestries knowing that they had purchased their fabrics from her grandfather Dikran Khan Kelekian, the connoisseur, collector, and dealer in Eastern antiquities. Kelekian (1868-1951) was a Turkish born Armenian, and eventually an American citizen. He opened galleries in New York City in 1893, in Paris in 1895, and in Cairo in 1912 to display and sell "Persian" [Arab, Turkish, Islamic] art and antiquities. Kelekian guided the purchases of wealthy art connoisseurs. Their collections eventually enriched those of many major American museums including the Walters Art Gallery, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Boston Fine Arts Museum, and the Freer Gallery (Simpson 2000). He exhibited textiles and other artifacts at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1895), the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis (1904), and the Exposition des arts Musulmans held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (1903). He published numerous sale catalogs of textiles, rugs, and ceramics to lure potential buyers. He wrote that to visit his shop was like spending time in "the enchanted atmosphere of the Arabian Nights" (Jenkins-Madina 2000).

Of more importance for tracing the tangled threads of the Coptic/Fauve connection, is that Kelekian served as a juror for the exhibits at the 1900 Exposition Universelle. I suspect, but have not been able to verify, that Gayet and Kelekian knew one another. Their interests and activities certainly overlapped. At sometime early in his career, perhaps after seeing the popularity of Gayet's exhibits or at the Musée Guimet sale, Kelekian acquired Coptic textiles for his personal collection and for sale. Time and time again, when I am examining the documentation on a Coptic or Islamic fragment in a museum collection, Kelekian will be cited as the donor or source of acquisition. The cosmopolitan Kelekian also had an avid interest in modern painting and appreciated the affinity between past and present art. He was acquainted by 1893 with Mary Cassatt, who painted a portrait of his son (Jenkins-Madina 2000). By 1910 he owned a collection of works by Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, Bonnard, Vuillard, Picasso, Derain, and Matisse (Simpson 2000). He promoted and sold paintings by these artists and in turn sold some of them Coptic fabrics.

Henri Matisse

Matisse, the most famous of the Fauves, had a lifelong interest in fabrics. He was born in a "tiny tumble-down weaver's cottage in the textile town of Le Cateau-Cambrésis" (Spurling 1998). His

childhood was spent in Bohain, a city where homeweaving on both rustic and complex Jacquard looms complimented a textile industry that produced high fashion fabrics for France's haute couture houses. As an art student in Paris in the 1890s Matisse began "a little museum of samples with scraps and snippets of embroidery or tapestry-work purchased from secondhand stalls" (Spurling 1998). A few years later his studio was described as being filled with lengths of fabrics, embroidered cloths, and bits of tapestry (Spurling 1998). Camille Joblau, mistress and mother of his first child Marguerite was a seamstress in a hat shop. After marriage (1898), the family income was supplemented with his wife Amelie's millinery shop. She did needlepoint and hired out to do restoration work on tapestries. Fabrics had always been a quotidian part of his life. Hilary Spurling's book The Unknown Matisse, which follows his life and career up to 1908, is filled with references to his familiarity with and affection for fabrics. His taste in textiles was eclectic and ranged from printed toiles to Persian rugs. A visitor to his studio described it as "filled with tattered wall hangings" (Schneider 1984). Matisse's interest in textiles is evident in so many of his pattern rich paintings. However, his interest in Coptic tapestries is rarely recognized.

It is certainly possible—even probable—that Matisse and his Fauve friends might have attended Gayet's exhibits at the Musée Guimet. What can be clearly documented is that Matisse was in desperate financial straits in the winter of 1900. After tramping through the snow looking for work he was hired to paint "garlands of laurel leaves" to decorate the Grand Palais for the 1900 Exposition Universelle (Flam 1995). "There," according to his son-in-law George Duthuit, "Matisse probably discovered the Coptic tapestries from Antinoé displayed by Albert Gayet. They had attracted a great deal of attention. Matisse was deeply interested in them" (Schneider 1984).

Matisse, at some point in time, added Coptic tapestries to his textile collection, some of them purchased from Kelekian. Hilary Spurling reports that their present whereabouts is unknown (letter to author 2002). Matisse did own one of Gayet's books, Exposition Universelle de 1900, Palais du costume, Le Costume en Égypte du IIIe au XIIIe siècle d'apres les fouilles d'Albert Gayet (letter to author 2002).

Another exhibitor at the 1900 Exposition Universelle was Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). His sculptures were on display in his own personal pavilion (Spurling 1998). He began a collection Coptic fabrics. They are now at the Rodin Museum in Paris. That same year Matisse, who was working on sculpture, called on Rodin at his studio.

If you are familiar with the fabrics of Coptic Egypt, especially the portraits and scenes of dancers in arboreal settings you will see echoes of their style in many of Matisse's Fauve paintings. Only a few are mentioned here: Self Portrait 1906, Marguerite 1906, Portrait of Sarah Stein 1916, Head of Laurette 1916, and Le Bonheur de Vivre 1905-06. The Monk 1903 is hauntingly reminiscent of Sèrapion. I suggest studying Pierre Schneider's Matisse and John Klein's Matisse Portraits. Both are filled with examples of paintings that are nuanced with Coptic tapestry art. Even late in life when Matisse did gouache cut-out designs like his 1953 Negress and Large Decoration with Masks one can recognize a common motif from tabby-tapestry cloths—the crossed-rosette. Matisse did design three tapestry cartoons with Polynesian themes that were woven at Gobelins (Schneider 1984).

Matisse, His Art and His Textiles: The Fabric of Dreams was the title of a 2004 exhibit and catalog by Spurling and other Matisse scholars that featured Matisse's portraits and pattern-rich paintings along with relevant textiles and costumes from his personal collection. Many floral, striped, and patterned fabrics and costumes from the Matisse archives can readily be identified in his paintings and sketches. Less obvious – but nevertheless significant – was the influence of the insouciant, color rich, stylized tapestries from Coptic Egypt. I dream of another exhibit that would feature portraits, pastoral scenes, and Dionysian dancers by Matisse with inspirational tapestries by the artisans of Coptic Egypt.

Andre Derain

Andre Derain (1880-1954), who worked closely with Matisse in the period of painting preceding the 1905 Fauve exhibit, was also a collector of Coptic fabrics. "He copied them over and over" (Rodney 1955). I have not yet been able to locate his collection, which also included an encaustic mummy painting. Derain painted portraits and scenes of Dionysian dancers not unlike those found in the Egyptian tapestries: Self Portrait 1914, La Dance 1905-06, and Dancers in Bucolic Scenes. A 1919 Pencil Portrait by Derain was sold by Kelekian. The stunning dissonant, intense palettes; the flat, segmental, heavily outlined shapes; and even the Greco-Roman themes—as transformed by their confrontation with provincial Christianity—found new life in portraits, nudes, and lyrical landscapes by the wild beasts.

Georges Rouault

Georges Rouault (1871-1958) was a fellow student with Matisse in 1895. He did exhibit with the others at the infamous Salon d'Automne of 1905 but is considered a pseudo-Fauve. He initially trained in the art of stained glass—which in itself has a connection with Coptic art via a

Romanesque route — Rouault's faces and figures are outlined with strong dark strokes filled with segmental, textured colors. In The Holy Face Christ's face is framed with a decorative border similar to those on many tapestry portraits. In his Pierrot the garment worn can be recognized as the same type of tunic as those found in Coptic Egypt.

Marsden Hartley

Two American artists were also interested in Coptic tapestries. Kelekian showed Coptic textiles to his friend Marsden Hartley (1877-1943). Hartley was "completely bowled over by them" (Rutschowscaya 1990). Inspired by the textiles he painted a number of portraits he considered "archaic and representative of the genius of antiquity" (Robertson 1995 and Rutschowscaya 1990). These portraits painted by Hartley in the late 1930's have the "hardiness of gaze" and the "earnestness of approach" he found in the Coptic tapestries (Robertson 1995). In the last three years of his life he could finally afford to purchase from Kelekian five fragments. He considered them "classics in great painting" (Rutschowscaya 1990).

Mark Tobey

In 1978 I examined the Coptic collection at the Seattle Art Museum and found two fragments donated by Mark Tobey (1890-1976) that had been sold to him by Kelekian. As a former resident of Seattle, I had long appreciated Tobey's paintings. His *white writing* style I found especially intriguing. After discovering his Coptic fragments, I wondered if Tobey had studied the countless monochrome tapestries enriched with white linen sketching wefts. Tobey is quoted as saying, "Above the horizon has come the beauty of Byzantine art . . . the art of the Copts, and of the orient. We must understand these idioms of beauty because they are going to be a part of us" (Fuller n.d.). I am still searching for more clues to Tobey's interest in Coptic art.

Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate other Fauve and Expressionist artists, but I must mention that August Macke's 1912 painting of Saint George reiterates a theme and pose common in Coptic textile art. Those who create with hands and heart are not always aware of the sources of inspiration as they envision a new composition. Some subliminal scenes may have been dormant for years, suddenly to spring forth as a fully realized concept. This may have been the case with Matisse, Derain, Rouault, Hartley, and Tobey.

The artist/weavers of Coptic Egypt left a legacy of over a hundred thousand fabulous fabrics scattered around the world. The obligation now is to glean what we can from them by investigation and art-historical inference. The scholar who is interested in tying together the course of twentieth century art with Coptic tapestry art will discover a tantalizing trail of thrums.

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