

From Vault to Altar: The Case for Repatriating *Christ and Abbot Mena*

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Colonial Extractions of African Cultural Treasures

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I. Introduction

In the storage vaults of the Louvre sits the oldest known Coptic icon in existence — unseen, unvisited, and absent from public display.¹ Christ and Abbot Mena, a panel from Egypt's Bawit Monastery, once anchored the devotional life of a thriving monastic community.² Today, it exists as an inaccessible object in a foreign institution's collection, severed from the tradition that created it and the community that still practices it.

This memo argues that Christ and Abbot Mena should be restituted to Egypt and placed in active religious use at the Monastery of Saint Simon the Tanner. The icon was extracted from Bawit in 1902³ under the French-dominated colonial antiquities system,⁴ a process that systematically devalued Coptic heritage in favor of Pharaonic material and left the Coptic community with no voice in its removal.⁵ As a devotional object rather than a work of secular art, the icon's placement in a museum — let alone in storage — fundamentally misrepresents its purpose and denies a living religious community the

¹ Musée du Louvre, "Christ and Abbot Mena," Louvre Collections, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010048163>.

² David Hendrix, "The Bawit Monastery at the Louvre Museum," The Byzantine Legacy, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.thebyzantinelegacy.com/bawit-monastery>.

³ Arthur Eduard Goldschmidt, "From the French to the British Occupation (1798–1882)," in "Egypt," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt/From-the-French-to-the-British-occupation-1798-1882>.

⁴ Dioscorus Boles, "The Brilliance of the Coptic Art from Bawit Monastery of Saint Apollo," *On Coptic Nationalism*, March 8, 2016, <https://copticliterature.wordpress.com/2016/03/08/the-brilliance-of-the-coptic-art-from-bawit-monastery-of-saint-apollo/>.

⁵ Toby Wilkinson, "Egyptomania," Clare College Cambridge, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://stories.clare.cam.ac.uk/egyptomania/index.html>.

object's intended function. Restitution is not merely a historical correction; it is a necessary step toward restoring a sacred object to the tradition and community it was created to serve.

II. Object Description

Christ and Abbot Mena is recognized as an 8th century wooden icon by the Louvre, although some historians trace it to the 6th–7th century. The icon is painted on wood from the Monastery of Bawit in Middle Egypt, measuring $58.5 \times 57.7 \times 4$ cm. The panel, carved from sycamore fig wood, is painted in encaustic (pigmented beeswax) combined with tempera.⁶

The icon presents Christ and Abbot Mena standing frontally against a stylized landscape. Both figures embody early Coptic visual language — large almond-shaped eyes, elongated features, and small mouths that reflect a spiritual rather than naturalistic emphasis on interiority. Christ, slightly taller to signal his place in the hierarchy of holiness, wears a jeweled Book of the Gospels and rests his arm on Mena's shoulder in a gesture of protection and endorsement. Mena, identified by inscription as "Apa Mena, superior," holds a scroll likely representing the monastic rule and blesses with his right hand, marking him as the monastery's spiritual leader.⁷

The icon's function was liturgical and devotional, not decorative. In Coptic practice, icons are understood as manifestations of holy presence rather than illustrations — objects meant to guide prayer, teach doctrine, and anchor communal identity within active worship.⁸

⁶ Louvre, "Christ and Abbot Mena."

⁷ David Hendrix, "Icon of Christ and St. Menas at the Louvre Museum," *The Byzantine Legacy*, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.thebyzantinelegacy.com/christ-menas>.

⁸ Ilaria Ramzy, "The Art of Iconography" (St. Mark Church, New Orleans, LA), accessed July 5, 2026, <https://cdn.suscopts.org/files/mightyarrows/art.html>.

III. Provenance and Colonial Extraction History

The modern history of *Christ and Abbot Mena* is inseparable from the colonial structures that governed archaeology in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century. Although Egypt was under British occupation from 1882 to 1952,⁹ its antiquities administration was controlled almost entirely by French scholars. The Egyptian Antiquities Service, founded and directed by Gaston Maspero,¹⁰ prioritized Pharaonic material and granted French teams primary access to major sites—meaning French institutions effectively controlled excavation rights and the mechanisms determining where artifacts ended up, even under British rule.¹¹

French archaeologist Jean Clédat rediscovered the Monastery of Bawit in 1901 while working under the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology (IFAO) in Cairo.¹² Between 1900 and 1905, he excavated monastic cells, chapels, and communal spaces, uncovering hundreds of wall paintings, wooden architectural elements, and devotional objects—including, in 1902, the icon of Christ and Abbot Mena.¹³

These excavations occurred while Coptic art held little value in colonial eyes. The Egyptian Antiquities Service was almost entirely run and controlled by French Egyptologists, most notably Gaston Maspero

⁹ Goldschmidt, "From the French to the British Occupation."

¹⁰ Elizabeth Macaulay, "Partage: Dividing Archaeological Finds and Building Museum Collections, c. 19th–20th Century," Smarthistory, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://smarthistory.org/partage/>.

¹¹ Dioscorus Boles, "The Oldest Known Coptic Icon: Christ and Abbot Mena," *On Coptic Nationalism*, December 13, 2013, <https://copticliterature.wordpress.com/2013/12/13/the-oldest-known-coptic-icon-christ-and-abbot-mena/>.

¹² Boles, "The Brilliance of the Coptic Art from Bawit Monastery."

¹³ "Bawit," Art of the Middle Ages, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://artofthemiddleages.com/s/main/item/3207>.

who valued pharaonic artifacts over Coptic ones in order to create a narrative of Egypt as a singular ancient people. Maspero and the Cairo Museum were fixated on Pharaonic antiquity—pyramids, mummies, royal gold—while Christian-era objects were dismissed as "late" or "provincial."¹⁴ This preference was not merely bureaucratic; it reflected the broader phenomenon of Egyptomania that had gripped Europe since Napoleon's 1798 expedition and the publication of the *Description de l'Égypte*.¹⁵ Pharaonic Egypt had become a European cultural fantasy—a source of monumental grandeur, mystery, and prestige for museums and collectors alike—while Coptic Christianity, as a living, non-European religious tradition, offered no equivalent appeal. This asymmetry heavily influenced the division process: under *partage*, the colonial system splitting finds between Egypt and foreign excavators, objects deemed "duplicate" or "non-unique" were routinely cleared for export.¹⁶ Because the Cairo Museum believed it already possessed "sufficient" Christian material, Coptic materials were often categorized as expendable.

This is how the icon left Egypt—officially cleared and gifted to France under standard *partage* rules, despite being the oldest known Coptic icon. No dedicated Coptic Museum existed yet to advocate for its retention; it would not be inaugurated until 1910. Once cleared, the icon entered French academic networks: since the IFAO funded Clédat's excavation, Maspero routinely rewarded French colleagues

¹⁴ "Gaston Maspero," Encyclopaedia Britannica, last updated June 26, 2026, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaston-Maspero>.

¹⁵ Wilkinson, "Egyptomania."

¹⁶ "Reuniting Archives and Artefacts," Egypt Exploration Society, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.ees.ac.uk/resource/reuniting-archives-and-artefacts.html>.

by allocating Christian-era objects to French museums, treating a "minor" wooden panel as an acceptable concession for continued French investment in Pharaonic digs.¹⁷

The icon was eventually purchased by Lecomte du Nouy, a French architect and collector, and donated to the Louvre in 1918, becoming part of its "Bawit Room".¹⁸ The Bawit artifacts Egypt retained were placed in the newly founded Coptic Museum in Cairo.

This extraction raises significant ethical concerns. The icon was taken from a sacred monastic space, severing it from the community that created and venerated it, and fragmenting Bawit's visual and spiritual heritage across European collections. Its presence in the Louvre today is a direct result of colonial structures that privileged European institutions and treated Coptic heritage as expendable.

IV. Historical and Religious Significance

Coptic iconography is a living religious tradition and icons function as active participants in worship in churches and homes alike—not as decorative objects. Theologically, an icon signifies the presence of the holy figure it depicts, showing the saint's glorified body rather than physical likeness. Their lack of naturalism—enlarged eyes and heads, small mouths—marks the image as belonging to the spiritual realm.¹⁹

¹⁷ "Reuniting Archives and Artefacts," Egypt Exploration Society, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.ees.ac.uk/resource/reuniting-archives-and-artefacts.html>.

¹⁸ Louvre, "Christ and Abbot Mena."

¹⁹ Monica Boulis, Jacob Lang, Despina Stamatopoulou, and Gerald C. Cupchik, "Attachment and Imagination in Coptic Christians' Religious and Aesthetic Experiences," *Saeculum* 56, no. 2 (2023): 109–32, <https://doi.org/10.2478/saec-2023-0023>.

Icons operate relationally: veneration is directed through the wood or paint toward the saint, who is believed to intercede for the faithful.²⁰ Liturgically, icons also functioned as visual theology in Late Antique Egypt, where many new converts were illiterate. Images taught doctrine that texts could not reach.²¹

Within this framework, Abbot Mena held particular significance. As head of the Bawit monastery at some time in the 6th-8th century, he served as both spiritual father and administrator, his authority earned through decades of ascetic discipline. In the icon, Christ's hand on Mena's shoulder signals protection and divine approval of his leadership; the scroll he holds likely represents the monastic rule, marking him as teacher and guardian of the community.²²

This significance extends beyond the icon's original context. Coptic iconography still thrives in Egypt and its diaspora, where communities use icons to reclaim heritage and articulate identity. Modern Coptic artists often merge traditional forms with Pharaonic motifs—particularly in images of contemporary martyrs—to assert Copts as "true Egyptians." Scholars including El Gendi and Pinfari note that icons have become central to how Copts narrate history and respond to political violence.²³ Because iconography remains an active, evolving tradition, *Christ and Abbot Mena* cannot be treated as a static artifact. It belongs to a continuous lineage of Coptic sacred art and still carries theological,

²⁰ "Coptic Icons," Holy Cross Coptic Orthodox Church, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://holycrossaustin.church/icons/>.

²¹ Ramzy, "The Art of Iconography."

²² Hendrix, "Icon of Christ and St. Menas."

²³ Yosra El Gendi and Marco Pinfari, "Icons of Contention: The Iconography of Martyrdom and the Construction of Coptic Identity in Post-Revolutionary Egypt," *Media, War & Conflict* 13, no. 1 (March 2020): 50–69.

cultural, and communal meaning. Its displacement from Egypt interrupts that continuity. Returning the icon would restore a foundational piece of Coptic monastic heritage to the community that still lives with and practices this tradition.

V. Argument

Christ and Abbot Mena should be returned to Egypt and held in a Coptic Christian place of worship because it is an active religious object, not secular art, and displaying it in a museum disrespects that value. This devotional purpose is entirely foreclosed by the icon's current placement: the Louvre's own collection database lists its status as "not exposed," meaning it is held in storage, inaccessible even as a secular object of art or study.²⁴

This distinction between sacred and secular objects is not a standard I am imposing from outside museum practice — it is one museums' own governing bodies already recognize. The International Council of Museums' Code of Ethics does not call for restitution of sacred objects, but it explicitly requires that materials of sacred significance be acquired, researched, and exhibited "in a manner consistent with professional standards and the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from which the objects originated." ICOM repeats this obligation across every stage of an object's institutional life — acquisition, research, and display — signaling that source-community input is a continuous professional responsibility.²⁵ *Christ and Abbot Mena* fails this standard at every stage: it was acquired without any Coptic voice in the partage process, and no record

²⁴ Louvre, "Christ and Abbot Mena."

²⁵ International Council of Museums, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* (Paris: ICOM, 2017), accessed July 5, 2026, <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>.

exists in either the Louvre's official publications or Coptic historical documentation of the museum consulting Coptic community boards or religious leaders in designing the object's display case or written description.²⁶ It remains in storage without consultation with the community whose devotional practice it belongs to, and its eventual future display, however tactfully curated, will still occur without restoring the relationship the icon was created to sustain.

Coptic Christians represent a longstanding religious minority in Egypt, tracing their Christian identity back to the arrival of Saint Mark in 62 CE and considering themselves descendants of Egypt's ancient population. Islam arrived with the Arab conquest in 641 CE, though it took roughly three centuries for Muslims to become the demographic majority, largely through gradual conversion of the existing population rather than displacement. Beginning in the 9th century, Copts faced sustained persecution under successive Muslim rulers — including the destruction of churches, the burning of religious texts, and the imprisonment of community leaders. By the time Britain established control over Egypt in 1882, centuries of conversion pressure had reduced the Coptic population to roughly one-tenth of the country's total.²⁷ This marginalization did not end with the colonial period; it shaped how colonial administrators treated Coptic heritage as well. As established above, the absence of a dedicated Coptic Museum until 1910 left Christian-era material with no institutional advocate during the exact period of the Bawit excavations, while the broader European fixation on Pharaonic antiquity — Egyptomania

²⁶ "The Department of Egyptian Antiquities," Louvre-DNP Museum Lab, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.museumlab.eu/startannounce/section.html>.

²⁷ "Copts," Minority Rights Group International, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://minorityrights.org/communities/copts/>.

— meant Coptic material drew no equivalent protective interest.²⁸ This devaluation could escalate into outright destruction, not merely neglect: in 1891, French Egyptologist Eugène Grébaut ordered the removal of the remains of an ancient Coptic church built inside the temple of Ramesses II at Medinet Habu, motivated by his open contempt for Copts and his refusal to see any connection between ancient and living Egyptians.²⁹ A community already diminished and marginalized within its own homeland had no institutional power to resist a colonial administration that further devalued its sacred heritage — a pattern *Christ and Abbot Mena's* own removal exemplifies.

There is precedent to the specific situation and method of restitution I am suggesting. Although the return of cultural artifacts to museums is more common, restitution directly to places of worship and religious significance exists for sacred items. One example is the Byzantine Gospel Manuscript (Evangelistary Manuscript 220) that was returned to the Kosinitza Monastery in Northern Greece from the Museum of the Bible based in DC, in August of 2022. The ancient gospel was among hundreds of priceless artifacts looted from the monastery by Bulgarian troops during World War I in 1917.³⁰ Although the question of restitution was more straightforward in this case, given the violent and illegal method of looting, it nonetheless demonstrates that restitution to an active place of worship is an established, workable practice — not a radical departure from museum norms. Additionally, there

²⁸ "British Museum, London — Egyptian Collection," Wonderful Museums, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.wonderfulmuseums.com/museum/british-museum-london-egyptian-13/>.

²⁹ Chris Naunton, "Decolonising Egyptology: The Dirty Little Secret," July 23, 2020, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://chrisnaunton.com/2020/07/23/decolonising-egyptology-the-dirty-little-secret/>.

³⁰ Brigit Katz, "Museum of the Bible Returns Centuries-Old Gospel Manuscript to Greece," Smithsonian Magazine, August 30, 2022, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/museum-of-the-bible-returns-centuries-old-gospel-manuscript-to-greece-180980670/>.

have been instances of return of sacred religious objects directly to the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, such as the return of Saint Mark's relics. Saint Mark founded the church in Egypt, but his remains were stolen from Alexandria by Venetian merchants in 828 CE. In June 1968, the Vatican returned a portion of the relics directly to Coptic Pope Cyril VI. Instead of going to a state museum, they were permanently enshrined inside an altar built specifically for them at the St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo, where they are still venerated today.³¹ I would argue that *Christ and Abbot Mena* holds similar religious significance as the oldest Coptic icon, which began the crucial practice that still lives today.

The practice of iconography within the Coptic Egyptian community and diaspora is still alive and very much in use today.³² Copts today are denied the specific devotional and communal function this object was made for. *Christ and Abbot Mena* does not only hold historical significance, but also an on-going significance as one of the foundational pieces of a practice that plays a role in defining Coptic Orthodoxy. Copts today experience the harm of the absence of this icon from a place they can worship it as it was intended, or even view it because of its place in storage.

VI. Path of Repatriation

³¹ Luis Badilla, "Egypt, When Paul VI Returned the Relics of St. Mark to the Copts," Abouna, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://en.abouna.org/content/egypt-when-paul-vi-returned-relics-st-mark-copts>.

³² "Coptic Iconography," Coptic Iconography, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.copticiconography.org/>.

I recommend that *Christ and Abbot Mena* be returned to Egypt to reside in the Monastery of Saint Simon the Tanner, also known as the "Cave Church," rather than the Coptic Museum in Cairo. Unlike the Coptic Museum, which — however sympathetic to Coptic heritage — remains a secular institution presenting artifacts for study and preservation rather than veneration, the Cave Church offers the icon active liturgical use, restoring the devotional relationship it was created to sustain. I recommend the icon live on the altar of the Monastery of Saint Simon the Tanner, in the main amphitheater.

I believe the best location for *Christ and Abbot Mena* is the St. Simon the Tanner Church because of its history, current standing, accessibility, and tourist popularity. The church's founding traces to a 10th-century tradition in which the Coptic community, led by a humble leather worker named Saint Simon, was said to move Mokattam Mountain through three days of prayer and fasting to prove their faith before Caliph al-Muizz, where the Copts built the church in the 1980s. The Monastery of Saint Simon the Tanner currently has the highest weekly attendance of any Coptic church, with a capacity of 20,000 in its largest amphitheater alone and 70,000 across all service spaces.³³ The church attracts tourists from around the world for the carvings and paintings covering its walls. The icon would not be accessible only to Coptic Christians, but to anyone who would like to see it. In fact, the icon would be more accessible in the Cave Church with no entrance fee than in a museum like the Louvre (\$30 for EEA residents and \$43 for non-residents),³⁴ the Grand Egyptian Museum (\$4 for Egyptian citizens and

³³ "Monastery of St. Simon the Tanner," Egypt Tours Plus, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.egypttoursplus.com/monastery-of-st-simon-the-tanner/>.

³⁴ "Hours & Admission," Musée du Louvre, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/visit/hours-admission>.

\$30 for foreigners),³⁵ or the Coptic Museum of Cairo (<\$1 for Egyptian citizens and \$6 for foreigners).³⁶

Although I believe that the Monastery of Saint Simon the Tanner is the best place for *Christ and Abbot Mena*, there are limits to this method of repatriation. The church I am suggesting to receive the icon is not the same one that it was taken from. The Bawit Monastery never reactivated as a place of worship for the Coptic people of Egypt.³⁷ With that in mind, I looked for the most vibrant place for Coptic Christians today within Egypt, leading me to the Monastery of Saint Simon the Tanner. Additionally, the location of the Cave Church may be considered not ideal, requiring visitors to travel through Manshiyat Nasser, known as Garbage City. The residents of “Garbage City” are the Zabbaleen community – Coptic Orthodox Christians who have built a society around recycling and waste management. Some may see the church’s location as a downside but it could be an opportunity to learn more about the culture and resilience of the Coptic Orthodox community. The monastery even has educational facilities that provide schooling for local children as well as adult literacy programs, uplifting the Coptic community in more ways than one.³⁸ The Monastery of Saint Simon the Tanner serves as a pillar in the Coptic Orthodox community in Egypt, and would make an amazing home to the icon.

VII. Predicted Counterarguments and Rebuttals

³⁵ “GEM Ticket Prices 2026: Booking & Guide for Foreigners,” Grand Egyptian Museum Tour, February 13, 2026, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://grandegyptianmuseumtour.com/grand-egyptian-museum-ticket-prices-foreigners/>.

³⁶ “Coptic Museum,” Egypt Monuments, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://egy monuments.com/details/CopticMuseum>.

³⁷ Hendrix, “The Bawit Monastery at the Louvre Museum.”

³⁸ “Monastery of St. Simon the Tanner.”

The Louvre justifies retaining contested objects through its stated mission "to offer to the largest possible audience access to some of the world's finest art spanning centuries and civilizations."³⁹ This justification fails on its own terms in the case of *Christ and Abbot Mena*: the icon's status is currently listed as "not exposed,"⁴⁰ meaning it is inaccessible to any audience at all, paying or otherwise. Even setting that aside, the Louvre's model of access — a ticketed institution charging admission — is a more restrictive form of "access" than the one the Monastery of Saint Simon the Tanner would offer as a site of free, open worship.⁴¹ But accessibility is not the only value at stake. Icons are not created for secular viewing; the relationship between a Coptic believer and an icon is devotional;⁴² a museum setting invites the public to view the icon as decorative art rather than sacred presence, regardless of who is technically permitted through the door. Returning the icon to its altar would not restrict access — it would recontextualize it, allowing any viewer, regardless of faith, to encounter the icon as it was created to be encountered: as a devotional object within a living religious tradition, not a curated artifact behind glass. To address accessibility concerns directly, a collaborative digital archive — combining the Louvre, the Coptic Museum of Cairo, and the Monastery of Saint Simon the Tanner — could document all excavated Bawit artifacts with accurate descriptions of their liturgical and monastic function, preserving public educational access without requiring physical retention of the sacred object itself.

³⁹ "Outreach and Transmission," Fonds de dotation du Louvre, accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.endowment.louvre.fr/presentation/ouverture-et-transmission/>.

⁴⁰ Louvre, "Christ and Abbot Mena."

⁴¹ "Monastery of St. Simon the Tanner."

⁴² Ramzy, "The Art of Iconography."

A second anticipated counterargument is that the icon was not stolen but legally acquired through the partage system. As established above, however, that legality was determined entirely by French Egyptologists who prioritized pharaonic material and did not consider Coptic Christianity authentically Egyptian — meaning the Coptic community itself had no voice in the decision to part with the icon. A transfer conducted under colonial authority, without the consent or representation of the community whose sacred object was at stake, cannot be treated as legitimate merely because it followed the administrative procedures of its time. Legality under a colonial legal order is not the same as justice, and the technical legal status of the icon's departure from Egypt should not foreclose its restitution today.

VIII. Conclusion

Christ and Abbot Mena is not a relic of a vanished culture but a devotional object belonging to a faith that is still practiced today. Its removal under colonial partage, its subsequent obscurity in Louvre storage, and its absence from the community that continues to venerate icons like it all point to the same conclusion: retention serves no one, while restitution would restore the icon to the purpose it was created for. Returning *Christ and Abbot Mena* to the Monastery of Saint Simon the Tanner is not merely an act of historical correction, but a recognition that Coptic Christianity is a living tradition deserving of its own sacred heritage.

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