

| Unfolding the New Faras Gallery

The National Museum in Warsaw's Faras Gallery, first opened in 1972, remained unchanged for more than 40 years. The most precious part of the Nubian collection – the medieval wall paintings discovered by Polish archaeologists during rescue excavations at the village of Faras in Northern Sudan – was displayed in two exhibition rooms on the ground floor of the middle wing of the museum's main building. Apart from the paintings, also exposed were relief elements of architectural decoration, and – in a dedicated room at the end of the Gallery's side exhibition room – epitaphs of local clergy along with pottery and objects found in the tombs of bishops. As a consequence of the division of finds, guaranteed by an agreement signed by Poland and Sudan, the National Museum in Warsaw acquired almost a half of 120 murals detached by the conservators off the walls of Faras Cathedral before its ruins were flooded by the waters of Lake Nasser. The cathedral was attended for almost seven hundred years, from the 8th through the 14th century AD. It was constructed on the foundations of an earlier church from the first half of the 7th century AD, within the outline of defensive walls surrounding the Late Meroitic town which at that time bore the name Pakhoras. Located in Northern Nubia near the border with Egypt, the town was an important political, administrative and cultural centre of the kingdom of Nobadia, and later of the kingdom of Makuria that included Nobadia.

The depictions on the walls of the main Christian church in the town were delivered successively throughout the seven centuries, usually at the instigation of local bishops residing in Faras / Pakhoras since the 7th century AD, but also by local priests of lower ranks as well as lay patrons – Nubian rulers and court officials.

The script of the first exhibition, conceived by the discoverer of the cathedral, Professor Kazimierz Michałowski, and his collaborators involved a chronological order of the presentation of the artefacts. At the entrance to the main exhibition room, a group of the earliest paintings was displayed that had been cut off the original layer of plaster, available for painters from the 8th through the early 10th century AD. Next, the murals from the second layer of plaster from the early 10th century AD were exhibited, as well as selected paintings from the third plaster layer from the second half of the 10th century AD. Nearby, a 1 : 25 model of the cathedral was presented and the exhibition was complemented with info boards with maps and plans of the town and the cathedral. Also, a group of decorative elements from Meroitic buildings (3rd c. BC – 3rd c. AD) were embedded into an artificial wall. At the other end of the exhibition room, the earliest painting – the composition from the semicircular wall of the apse that closed the chancel of Faras Cathedral from the east – was presented on a platform.

The side exhibition room, a little lower and narrower, contained the later paintings (from the 11th through 14th c. AD) and smaller elements of relief architectural decoration. In this small room, too, the pottery, oil lamps and crosses found in the tombs of Faras bishops were exhibited in glass cases arranged on the walls. In a low room formed under the heightened part of the main room, Nubian pottery from diverse periods was exposed on the walls, in glass cases.

On the lowest, underground floor, in the so-called 'Conservators' room,' photos, drawings, test samples and schemes were gathered that presented successive stages of conservation treatment to which the stones and paintings were subjected. In the course of time, selected artefacts from the lower rooms were relocated to glass boxes standing in the rooms with the paintings, while the remaining ones found their way to the storeroom.

When in 2012 it was decided that Faras Gallery would be modernized, the intention was to totally change the presentation style of both paintings and artefacts from the Nubian collection, and to incorporate new interesting items that have been acquired after Faras Gallery opened in 1972. The entire project could only be initiated thanks to the exceptional generosity of a private donor, Mr Wojciech Pawłowski and His Family, the renowned art patron from Poznań. The significant resources assigned by the Pawłowski Family Foundation enabled a new gallery design, but also to run the indispensable examination of the state of preservation of the paintings and their frameworks and artificial foundations, which after the decades could have suffered from damage and deformation invisible to the naked eye. It was also possible to carry out the necessary conservation treatment and update the documentation of the state of preservation of all artefacts. The new exhibition design would be devised by two architects from the Warsaw University of Technology: Grzegorz Rytel and Mirosław Orzechowski. They came up with the idea of reversing the visiting route within the gallery and arranging the paintings so that a separate space near the entrance area was provided for the purpose of information and education. The side exhibition room at the new Faras Gallery encompasses a multimedia room and a small projection room. The idea behind such an arrangement was to distinctly separate the exposition area from the educational area with its projection screens, game tables and info boards that would otherwise interfere with the visitors' reception of medieval works of art.

One of the basic guidelines for the new exhibition script concerning the arrangement of the paintings was to give up the chronological order in favour of the topographical one that exposed the paintings as close as possible to their original location in the Faras Cathedral.

The new design involved the pinning of the massive "patches" with paintings onto steel frameworks, resembling in this respect the original exhibition. However, this time around, the constructions would not be masked with a kind of passe-partout frame that were introduced in 1972. The surface of the paintings is now levelled with the surface of the walls made of autoclaved aerated concrete (AAC). Holes matching the irregular outlines of the "patches" with paintings were cut out in the AAC walls into which the paintings were fitted.

The NMW acquired paintings discovered mainly in the cathedral's narthex, northern aisle, apse and two chapels adjacent to the southern aisle. The murals were painted in different periods on three successive layers of plaster and on various levels – often as high as three metres above the floor. Paintings covered not only the walls but also arch soffits above the passageways and probably also the vaults. Frequently, new paintings neighboured earlier ones on the same plaster layer; sometimes, they covered them. The depictions were delivered successively, commissioned by the members of the religious community, both priests and laity, mostly rulers and courtiers who attended, and, most probably, also financially supported the important centre of Marian cult that Faras Cathedral was at that time. The designers' vision for the new version of Faras Gallery was to reconstruct these basic characteristics of the original painterly decoration of Faras Cathedral in the museum environment.

Consequently, a more coherent exposition came into being, presented in a slightly more limited space. Compositions divided into smaller fragments in Sudan and exhibited separately were now united.

The new design did not aim at a precise reconstruction of the cathedral's plan, but rather at the creation of an interior suggesting a church's nave preceded by a narthex and closed by a semicircular apse of the chancel. Pairs of perpendicular, narrow partition walls divide the elongated "nave" into bays. Arches connecting the partitions evoke the structure of the vaults.

The entrance to the "cathedral" leads through a narrow "narthex" confined between high walls. This part of the cathedral was destined for penitents, who were not allowed to enter the aisles or the nave of the church during the service. Gathered in the narthex, they could pray in front of the image of the Patroness of Faras Cathedral and the Archangels-helpers who, as believed, were to become people's advocates on the Judgement Day. In this part of the exhibition, the arrangement of the paintings recalls their original distribution in the cathedral (e.g., the western wall, with Archangels Michael and Gabriel flanking the recess with its latest version of the depiction of the Virgin Mary Eleusa with Child). The full reconstruction, however, was impossible due to technical and practical reasons – for instance, the painting of the Patroness of the cathedral on the eastern wall was lowered in comparison with the original location. Paintings from the upper parts of the walls were placed lower so that the angle was more convenient for the onlooker. Several fragments of plaster with inscriptions left by believers prove that it was customary for the pilgrims to mark their presence at holy sites. Wealthy Nubian Christians who visited the cathedral funded paintings, while those less well-off left inscriptions on the walls – usually, short prayers addressed to the Patroness of the cathedral, but also to the angels and saints, in which they asked for benediction and protection.

In the part imitating the "nave," exposed are the paintings from the cathedral's naos. On the left, depictions from the northern aisle and northern sacristy are exhibited, and on the right – depictions from the two chapels on the southern side of the cathedral and from the southern aisle. At the back of the exhibition room, in the "chancel" space, the reconstructed stone synthronon is placed, having the height and shape similar to the original construction in the cathedral. Above its upper stair, the composition discovered on the semicircular wall of the apse is presented.

The northern aisle was traditionally destined for women from the congregation, a fact mirrored in the iconography of this part of the church. Apart from the portraits of apostle saints and sainted bishops – the fathers of Monophysite theology – the northern aisle contained numerous images of the Virgin Mary with Infant Christ highlighting the idea of Mary's Divine Motherhood. In the same aisle, sainted women (i.e., Saint Anne) as well as Nubian donors with their patron saints were portrayed, which indicated the influence that Nubian women actually had on the shaping of the iconographic programme of this part of the cathedral.

Among the paintings from the southern part of the church – that is, the southern aisle where the male members of the congregation prayed, and the baptistery with the adjacent chapel – having, as it seems, liturgical functions related with the commemoration of the deceased priests of the cathedral – frontal depictions of sainted figures dominate: bishops, anchorites and warriors, presented in full figure, often in supernatural size. They were accompanied by equally monumental portraits of local bishops, among them Bishop Petros and Bishop Marianos, depicted in lavishly embellished liturgical vestments, with attributes of episcopal rank, in company of their patron saints whose symbolic gestures affirmed the legitimacy of their succession. In this part of the cathedral, too, male Nubian rulers and officials used to place their portraits.

At the very end of the "nave," above the reconstructed synthronon of original size, the composition representing the Virgin Mary with Infant Emmanuel on Her arm, standing among the Twelve Apostles was located in its original position on the apse wall. Mary puts Her

hands on the shoulders of a Nubian ruler whose figure was added later. The gesture symbolically conveys protection of the king who is therefore presented to the congregation praying in the church as the chosen one and king “by the grace of God.” The walls in this part of the gallery received two paintings: the portrait of the High Priest of the Jerusalem Temple (Aaron or Zacharias), discovered in the northern sacristy, and the fragmentarily preserved portrait of a ruler with his patron saints, originally painted in the cathedral’s chancel.

The paintings from outside the naos of the cathedral – that is, from the staircase that led onto upper galleries above the aisles, from the small northern vestibule and from the porch in front of the southern entrance to the narthex – were exposed together in the side exhibition room. These are mainly monumental depictions of archangels dressed in outfits of Byzantine high court officials and wearing crowns that hinted at their royal dignity. The cult of the angels was as wide-spread in Nubia as it was in Coptic Egypt and Ethiopia, so the images of the Asomatoi (Gr. ‘the Bodiless’), as a general rule, form the largest group of paintings in all Nubian sacred buildings with preserved painted decoration. Apart from the paintings with angels, the room contains two paintings detached from the external walls of the cathedral. The depiction of mounted Saint Mercurius piercing with a spear the small figure of Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate and the depiction of an Archangel holding a sword with both hands resting in an unbuckled sheath were situated at the western entrance to the narthex. They illustrated two episodes from the legend of Saint Mercurius, so popular in the East.

The lapidarium in the same exhibition room is home to almost all relief element of architectural decoration from various buildings in Faras that were incorporated into the museum’s collection. Ordered chronologically, they indicated changes occurring in the repertory of decorative motifs from various elements of Nubian buildings. The oldest door lintels, window frames and door jambs come from the Meroitic palaces and temples. Winged solar discs, cobra heads (uraei) and lotus flowers that dominated in Meroitic art imitated ancient Egyptian decoration. In the Late Meroitic period, they were joined by bull’s eyes and floral scrolls, which reveal Nubia’s connections with the classical world. In the Christian period, ancient Egyptian motifs were replaced by the cross which became the dominant decorative element. On door lintels, solar discs were replaced by Greek crosses and cross-rosettes in a variety of forms, often confined in a circle. Ancient Egyptian traditions are echoed in the occasional appearance – besides Christian motifs – of lotus flowers and so-called *cruces ansatae*, or crosses whose shape was based on the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph *ankh* meaning ‘life.’ On door jambs, next to traditional Meroitic depictions of African animals: lions, antelopes or birds, grapevine scroll with grapes, crosses and fish appear. Both stone elements and paintings are exposed in six shallow blind niches decorating walls in this exhibition room. Door lintels, fragments of door jambs, consoles, capitals of pilasters and columns are arranged in the way corresponding with their original function.

The small room at the end of the exhibition space gathers artefacts related to burial customs of Nubian Christians. In the tombs of Faras bishops, adjacent to the cathedral’s external walls, not only the skeletons of the buried priests were found, but also ceramic vessels for water and wine, pectoral crosses, oil lamps and fragments of liturgical vestments. The presence of grave goods suggested the continuity of the ancient custom of equipping the deceased with various objects. The custom was still alive in Nubia as late as the Christian period, be it only limited to the burials of bishops. Ordinary people were buried without equipment. The glass box presents several vessels and a bronze cross discovered in the tomb of Bishop Ioannes at the eastern wall of the cathedral. Stone epitaphs in Greek and Coptic were mostly found on the tombs of priests from Faras and Old Dongola. The plates with inscriptions were embedded

in sepulchral constructions. The text communicated essential information about the buried person complete with standard prayer formulas taken from funeral liturgy. After one of the epitaphs was cleansed, it turned out that a part of the engraved letters was filled with red paint, in this way forming a large Greek cross.

The main room also contains a new exposition of crosses from the cultural circle of Eastern churches. It includes the collection of Ethiopian crosses offered as a long-term loan to the National Museum in Warsaw by Waław Korabiewicz – a set already presented before – now completed with a modest set of Ethiopian crosses and liturgical objects. The wooden and metal pectoral and hand crosses, pendant crosses, or pectoral crosses imitating enkolpia (reliquary crosses), embellished with filigree and granulation, impress with their extraordinary diversity of form and decoration. While designing this part of the gallery, a decision was made to complete the exposition with artefacts from the Museum's holdings – the Old Russian enkolpia (reliquary crosses), crosses and pectoral icons forming the greatest collection of this kind of objects from the Orthodox tradition in Poland. Also on display are crosses, small altarpieces and icons manufactured by Russian Old Believers, characterized by their high artisanal quality and deeply traditional expression.

Behind the exhibition room with the crosses, on the platform, the ten glass boxes reveal the most interesting findings from Faras and other archaeological sites in Sudan explored by Polish researchers, and the most precious Byzantine artefacts like the icon of the Virgin Mary Hodegetria, golden coins, ivory reliefs and artefacts from Coptic Egypt – painted pottery and terracotta figurines, fragments of patterned textiles, carved wooden artefacts, papyrus documents and ostraca. Christian Nubia maintained close commercial and artistic contacts with Coptic Egypt. It was especially observable in forms and decoration of pottery manufactured in Faras, imitating similar objects crafted in the area of modern Aswan.

The exposition in the glass boxes is planned to be regularly exchanged. In future, they will provide exhibition space for the museum's latest acquisitions – like newly discovered artefacts from the excavation sites explored by Polish archaeologists or the objects that until now have remained hidden in the museum's vast storerooms.

Translated by Karolina Koriat