

an insight into the major difficulties of post-crisis adjustment, sustainability of the gains achieved so far and the challenges that lay ahead, this book will be of interest to academics and scholars in the fields of International Political Economy and Globalization Studies, Middle East Studies and Development Studies, as well as having significance for practitioners in developing countries.

### M. Mustafa Erdoğan

Marmara University

**Magdi Guirguis. *An Armenian Artist in Ottoman Egypt: Yuhanna al-Armani and His Coptic Icons*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008, 144 pages.**

In this short book, Magdi Guirguis attempts to shed new light on the social history of Cairo and especially on the city's highly integrated Coptic and Armenian communities in the eighteenth century, by closely examining the work, career and social position of the famous icon painter Yuhanna al-Armani (d. 1786). Guirguis notes that already before his study Yuhanna attracted considerable attention from modern art historians as one of the most significant representatives of the flourishing Christian art in eighteenth-century Egypt. However, he wishes to redirect the attention from the formal and aesthetic qualities of Yuhanna's icons to the social conditions in which "a renaissance of sorts" (p. 96) could take place. The result, as Nelly Hanna notes in the introduction to the book, "is a social history of art" (p. 2).

Guirguis underlines the rise of the wealth and influence of the Coptic *mubashirs* during the period in question as the most crucial development in the social setting. These scribe-*cum*-bureaucrats from the relatively small Christian community of Cairo assisted the Mamluk amirs with their finances and administration and thus took a share of the growing fortunes of the amirs who gradually gained *de facto* control of the country. And artistic patronage in various forms (repair or reconstruction of churches and the production of manuscripts and icons in unprecedented numbers) was a manifestation of the visibility concerns of, and a kind of a competition within this class.

As detected by Guirguis, most of the patrons whose names were inscribed on the icons painted by Yuhanna al-Armani came from this very

class. Moreover, Guirguis notes that Yuhanna painted icons not only to the order of patrons, but also for sale, indicating the existence of a market for such paintings. According to probate records, he and his son appear to have been remarkably affluent, and Yuhanna was certainly the most prolific, but not the only Christian painter in Egypt who signed his works—another recent trend that helps to complete Guirguis's picture of "a renaissance of sorts."

Guirguis finds the beginnings of the rapid increase in the icon production in the later seventeenth century and emphasizes the roots of the trend long before Yuhanna came to the scene, in order to show the limits of the role played by this artist so heroized in the earlier literature. The book, in general, is intended to be a contribution to the recent scholarly efforts to elaborate on the "internal dynamics" and social roots of historical transformation in the early modern Ottoman world—as, for instance, Nelly Hanna does in her *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse, New York, 2003). However, to this end, the author presents a quite unnecessary challenge to earlier interpretations of Yuhanna. He notes the emphasis that previous scholars put on the visual elements of Yuhanna al-Armani's icons, presumably taken from Syrian Christian painting (Yuhanna's family was from Jerusalem) and from Armenian communities abroad (Yuhanna was of Armenian origin), both of which are portrayed as being in close contact with Europe. Guirguis denigrates this emphasis as a product of the "coming of the west paradigm" (p. 9) and chooses it as his main adversary. However, it is very clear that the social background of the artistic flourishing that Guirguis describes and the importation of pictorial elements from abroad are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While Guirguis's study has the merit of bringing the hitherto neglected question of social and economic setting to the debate, the influence of western painting, which he does not disprove, retains its relevance.

**Yavuz Sezer**

Massachusetts Institute of Technology