praised for their modernity, nor castigated for their ignorance of what is now afoot. They are approached on their own terms, as distant figures of unfailing interest.

Philip Rousseau


The scope of this book is narrower and more coherent than its title might suggest. The papers are limited largely to Bawit and (especially) Saqqara, and are predominantly the work of Marguerite Rassart-Debergh.

Two important and complementary contributions focus on the monastery at Saqqara, each supported by a large number of drawings and black-and-white photographs.

The first, an ‘essai de reconstitution’ by Mme Rassart-Debergh, is a cautious reassessment of the work carried out by Quibell and Maspero at the beginning of this century. The author correlates and makes explicit what was often present in the photographs of early reports, but less frequently explained or commented upon in the texts of the reports themselves. We are invited to retrace the steps of the early excavators. Quibell’s photographs, many of them reproduced and even enlarged, are made to speak again in ways he omitted to allow. Sketches and earlier descriptions are also brought in as evidence. The paintings are thus restored to their archaeological context and presented, as far as is possible, in the form they displayed before restoration or destruction took their toll.

The second contribution, by Paul van Moorsel and Mathilde Huijbers, describes exhaustively (and in this case with a few colour plates as well) what now survives from Saqqara in the Coptic Museum of Old Cairo.

The two studies, juxtaposed, provide an arresting example of method in art history. How often we need, how rarely we are able, to recapture the moment of first discovery, in order to make sense of what now resides outside its setting, in this museum or that.

But perhaps the most important piece in the book is Mme Rassart-Debergh’s article, ‘La Peinture copte avant le xiie siècle. Une approche’. She lists, first, what survives and what is known from literary evidence to have existed in all the major sites from Alexandria to Aswan (there are several asides on links with Nubia). She then catalogues the paintings according to iconographical theme, all with a rich bibliography and an abun-
dance of drawings and black-and-white plates. The result is perhaps the most succinct and stimulating account of Coptic art available.

The author includes interesting detail about the later influence in Egypt of Syrian and Armenian styles, and about a final rapprochement with the traditions of Byzantium. But I found of particular value her attention to pre-Christian examples, the antecedents of Coptic art in the proper sense, some of them Hellenistic and Roman, some of them reaching back to the pharaohs. (She makes astute comments also about the history of the icon, as revealed in Egyptian material both Christian and earlier.) Christianity introduced the biblical themes that one would expect, but also made possible, through a combination of tolerance, habit, and necessity, the survival of human figures and of genre scenery characteristic of older styles, not least Egyptian. Mme Rassart-Debergh retains a doubt, however, which I consider healthy, as to whether that series of relations and transitions should be described as 'syncretisme' or 'affrontement'.

I found it stimulating to discover how much of Coptic art remains obscure, not only in relation to its antecedents but also in terms of its meaning: what did the artists intend to portray? A great deal is also allusive and allegorical in form, which tells us something else important about the mentality of the artists. Many of them were monastic, wedded to a static and timeless representation of the heavenly, spiritual, angelic realm; 'ce moment d’inertie', in Professor Torp's words, 'abolissant le temps, qui est propre à la culture égyptienne'. The vivid and mobile vignettes of Egyptian life provided the setting for a new stillness; and even the human figure could symbolize virtue — hope, patience, wisdom — just as readily (and in a similar form) as a known hero of the prophetic or ascetic past.

I allowed myself to be persuaded in the end that a quality identifiably 'Egyptian' did emerge within this artistic tradition. I remain uneasy at the suggestion, by no means new, that its genuinely 'Coptic' phase represented a shift characteristic of Late Roman culture generally towards the local and the popular. I was relieved to see at least that Mme Rassart-Debergh would postpone such a phase until the sixth century and beyond. Her first or Early Christian period was represented, she admits, by examples more clearly associated with styles and practices common in other parts of the Empire. That suggests a less provincial culture, which we would be right to expect in many other spheres of Egyptian life.

Philip Rousseau