



The European Academy of Coptic Heritage (TEACH)

Course Title: The Icon Through the Ages – Year 3

Level: High Diploma

Duration: October 2025 – June 2026

Course Objective

This course introduces students to the historical development of the icon, beginning from its foundations in the Old Testament and tracing its progression through the early Christian centuries up to the seventh century. Students will study how the use of images was understood, regulated, and transformed across different periods, how Christian iconography emerged, and how theological, cultural, and historical realities shaped its evolution. The course aims to give students an accurate understanding of the origins, symbolism, and spiritual value of icons as expressed across the ages.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify the place and function of images in the Old Testament.
- Describe the artistic and cultural influences that contributed to the early Christian use of images.
- Recognise the reasons for the delayed appearance of Christian icons in the first centuries.
- Understand the various symbols and artistic forms used by early Christians.
- Explain the testimonies of early Church Fathers regarding images and their spiritual role.
- Trace the development and spread of icons from the fourth to the seventh century.

Course Structure (Modules)

Module 1 – The Old Testament Foundations of Sacred Imagery

- The non-absolute prohibition of images.
- The divinely commanded artistic elements in the Tabernacle: cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant.
- The unique holiness of the Ark and its imagery (e.g., the death of Uzzah).
- God's precise instructions to Moses for sacred craftsmanship.
- Bezalel and Oholiab chosen by God and filled with the Spirit for artistic work.
- The bronze serpent: purpose, misuse, and destruction by Hezekiah.

Module 2 – Early Christian Artistic Development

- Influence of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art on early Christian expression.
- Use of pre-Christian symbols and imagery by new converts.
- Gradual purification and re-orientation of symbolic art toward Christian meaning.

Module 3 – The First Three Centuries of Christianity

Reasons for the delayed appearance of icons:

- Strict observance of the Second Commandment by Jewish converts.
- Aversion to pagan statues by Gentile converts.
- The elevated spiritual life of early Christians reducing reliance on physical images.
- Persecutions and lack of formal worship spaces.

Common Christian symbols used in this period:

- The Good Shepherd
- The Fish (Ichthys)
- The Anchor
- The Dove
- The Vine
- The Ark
- The Christogram (XP)

Texts and testimonies:

- Tertullian and Origen warning against pagan artistic influence.
- Irenaeus reporting Gnostic images of Christ.
- Clement of Alexandria advising caution in the choice of symbols.
- Eusebius of Caesarea confirming the existence of images of Christ, the Apostles, and the woman healed of blood flow.

Module 4 – The Fourth and Fifth Centuries

- Expansion of Christian art after the conversion of Constantine.
- Appreciation of icons by Church Fathers.
- Gregory of Nyssa's description of icons of Christ's Passion and the sacrifice of Isaac.
- Examples of early icons:
 - The Virgin and Child (Priscilla catacomb)
 - Christ blessing the children
 - The raising of Lazarus
 - Christ the King
 - Abraham offering Isaac
- St. John Chrysostom keeping an icon of St. Paul before him while writing.
- St. Nilus encouraging biblical scenes to instruct the illiterate.

Module 5 – The Sixth and Seventh Centuries

- The spread of icons into England with Augustine.
- Existence of icons of the Virgin, the Apostles, the Gospels, and Revelation.
- Development of icons combining scenes and theological symbols.

Assessment

Two term examinations.

Prerequisites

GCSE certificate, high school, or equivalent qualification.

Delivery Method

The course will be delivered entirely online through TEACH's Learning Management System (LMS).

All lectures will be conducted live via Zoom, supported by recorded sessions, reading materials, and discussion forums.

Certificate

Upon successful completion of the course and passing both term exams, students will receive a **Certificate in The Icon Through the Ages – Year 3 High Diploma** from The European Academy of Coptic Heritage (TEACH).