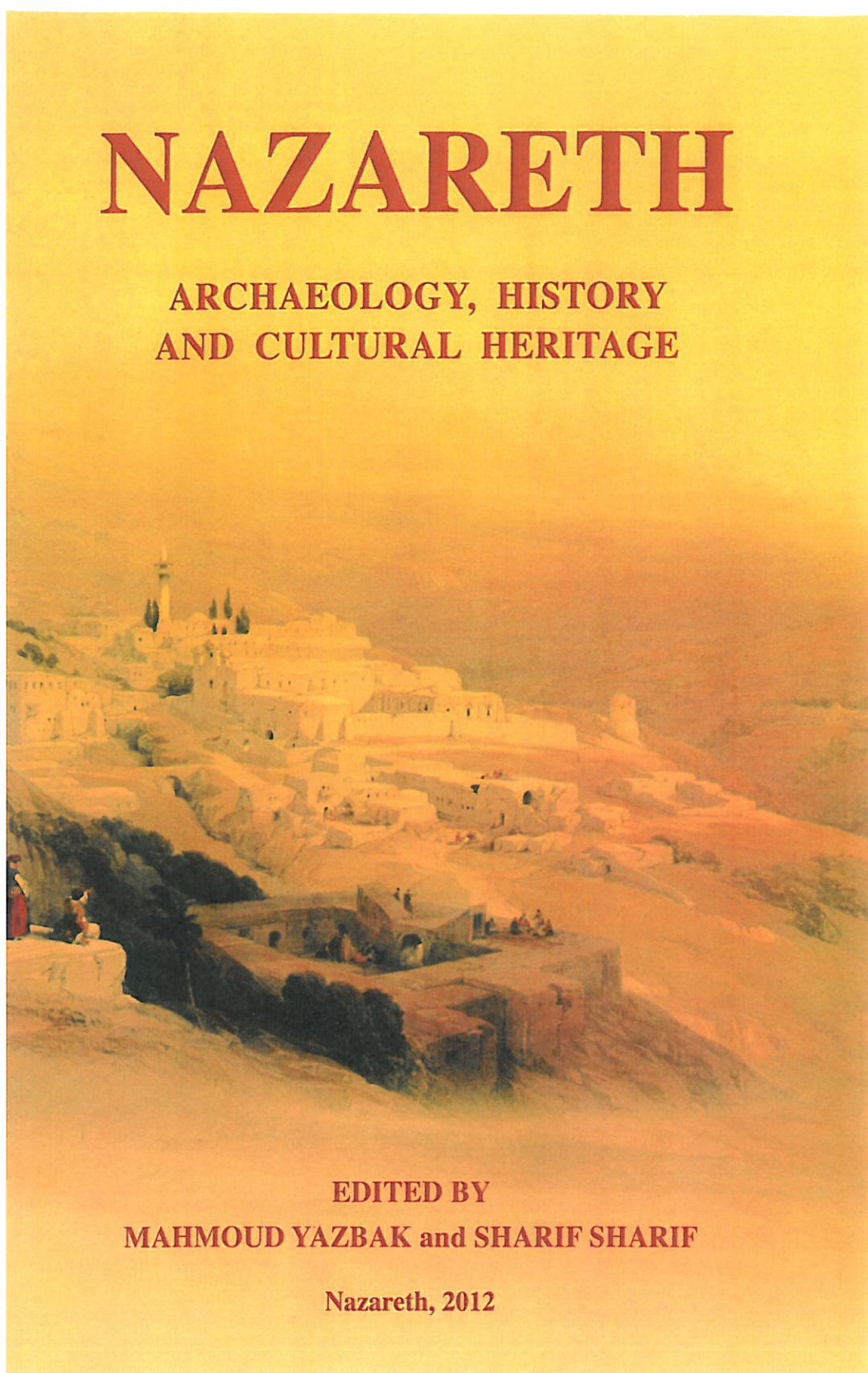


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Dialogues in the Local Christian Art of 20th Century Nazareth: The architecture and imagery of the Carmelite, Salesian and Franciscan monastic churches

Nurith Kenaan-Kedar

The history of 20th-century art and architecture in Nazareth has yet to be the subject of a systematic investigation. In this article, I present aspects of the visual perceptions and iconographical programs of three monastic churches built in Nazareth in the first half of the 20th century. The churches each constitute part of a larger compound that also comprises a monastery and school. Their construction reveals an awareness of the European historicism of the period and a varied neo-medieval architecture.¹ Thus, the Salesian Church of Jesus the Adolescent engages in a dialogue with French neo-Gothic architecture;² the Carmelite Church of the Holy Family exhibits a strong link to French neo-Romanesque models; and the Franciscan Church of Saint Joseph bears references to Early Christian and Romanesque models in Italy.³

1. Kathleen Curran, *The Romanesque Revival: Religion, Politics and Trans-national Exchange* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); idem, "The Romanesque Revival, Mural Painting and Protestant Patronage in America," *The Art Bulletin*, 81/4 (1999), 693-722; William H. Pierson, "Richardson's Trinity Church and the New England Meetinghouse," in *American Public Architecture European Roots and Native Expression*, ed. Craig Zabel and Susan Scott Munshower (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 12-56 (note: Pierson's characteristic writing style, cogent and concise, makes this elusive reference worth the search); Walter Kidney, *Pittsburgh's Landmark Architecture: The Historic Buildings of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County* (Pittsburgh Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 1997).

2. Francis Desramaut, *L'Orphelinat Jésus-adolescent de Nazareth en Galilée: au temps des turcs, puis des anglais (1896-1948)* (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1986); Mgr. Max Caron, *Guide du Pelerin à Nazareth (Palestine)* (Paris: Imprimerie des Orphelins Apprentis d'Auteuil, 1928).

3. Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, *The Madonna of the Prickly Pear Cactus, Tradition and Innovation in 19th- and 20th-Century Christian Art in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2010).

The edifices of these three monastic churches, all constructed between the years 1910 and 1926, are not only an integral part of Nazareth, but also play a dominant role in shaping the town's urban landscape. The pictorial artworks found in the three churches depict a local concept of the Holy Family and the adolescent Jesus. They also include renderings of local landscapes and urban scenes of Nazareth, displayed on the churches' apses. The model for these conceptions of figural imagery was probably that of the Carmelite church.

Sources of monastic architecture in 20th-century Nazareth

To date, scholarly research into Christian architecture in the Holy Land has focused largely on Jerusalem and investigated the sources of various architectural details. 20th-century Christian architecture and visual arts in the Holy Land, however, have not yet been examined as a separate chapter in Western art history; similarly, their specific connections and dialogue with Western arts, as well as with local art, have not been systematically studied.

I thus begin with a brief survey of the Western sources of inspiration for the religious Latin architecture in Nazareth, which contributed to the overall urban development of the town in the 19th and early 20th centuries. I relate mainly to the European neo-Gothic and neo-Romanesque conceptions of art and architecture.

In general, and not exclusively in relation to the construction of churches, construction in various European countries began to be influenced by a revival of historical styles from the early 19th century onwards. Examples are the neo-Baroque style of the French Opera House and the neo-Gothic style of the British Houses of Parliament. This architecture, characterized by historical styles and historicism, attracted harsh criticism from architects and architectural theoreticians such as Nicholas Pevsner,⁴ who

4. Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (London: J. Murray, 1948). See also note 1.

detected a reactionary expression in these works and a rejection of the conceptual approach of the time, as expressed in the new architecture.

However, prominent processes could be seen in the use of these historical styles from the beginning of the 19th century, as well as at the end of that century, with the advent of the Romantic Movement. In contrast to nascent modernism, and later to the Industrial Revolution, the tendency toward medievalism as an expression of anti-industrialism, and as extolling the pure and sublime homogeneous world that had existed in the past, was particularly strong in Europe, as well as in the United States. Neo-Gothic architecture first saw light in England as early as the beginning of the 19th century, and still featured prominently at the end of the century, in public buildings such as the already-noted new Houses of Parliament in London, and, of course, in churches. The neo-Gothic architecture in Germany and France was for the most part accompanied by the neo-Romanesque architecture of the time.

In Germany, the neo-Romanesque style was prevalent, and such architecture was associated not only with the institutions of the Catholic and Protestant churches, but also with the Prussian monarchy and government in Bavaria. It was perceived as simpler than the Gothic style, and the neo-Romanesque style assumed a nationalist hue from around 1940. In the United States, too, many churches, such as the German immigrants' church in Philadelphia, were built in the neo-Romanesque style, mainly by German immigrants. The style was also prominent on university campuses, including that of the University of California, Los Angeles, where one of the main buildings is an almost exact copy of the Church of San Lorenzo in Milan.⁵

In France, the reality was far more complex. The years 1830-1840 saw the emergence of a generation of revivalists of

5. Kathleen Curran, *The Romanesque Revival: Religion, Politics and Transnational Exchange* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

Gothic art in France. This group of archaeologists was active throughout France and studied Gothic art, which they regarded as the sublime French art form. The French Archaeological Society was founded in 1834, and began to publish the influential journal *Bulletin Monumental*. This reemergence and renewed awareness of the importance of Gothic art and architecture were a result of the work and writings of Victor Hugo (1802-1885) and Prosper Merimee (1803-1875), who were both of the same generation, alongside the younger architects and theorists Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) and Denis Didero (1806-1867). Victor Hugo wrote several manifestos on the importance of Gothic art, but his most influential book was *Notre-Dame de Paris* (translated into English as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), in which he tells the story of Paris's Notre Dame as the most sublime cathedral on earth. This group was also involved in a government committee for the preservation of the arts and architecture, and restored and maintained Gothic monuments. As a member of this committee, Viollet-le-Duc restored a number of major Gothic churches and monuments in France, including the Basilica of Sainte Madeleine in Vezelay, and wrote several books and dictionaries on medieval architecture. His preoccupation with neo-Romanesque architecture in France was reflected both in his theoretical writings and in his restoration works in several regions of France.⁶

I shall refer to the art and architecture in the Holy Land in the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century as neo-medieval or, indeed, as part of the “new Middle Ages”. This architecture should be viewed primarily as reflecting the European architecture of the time, as introduced by the Latin Church and by pious lay patrons and artists. In addition, its local elements must also be considered.

6. Jean-Bertrand Barrere, *La Fantaisie de Victor Hugo*, (t.1, 1802-1861) (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973); Madeleine Blondel and Pierre Georget, ed., *Victor Hugo et les Images* (Dijon: Aux Amateurs de Livre, 1989).

The Carmelite Monastic Church of the Holy Family

The monastery of the Carmelites is owned by the reform Order of the Discalced (Barefoot) Carmelites, founded by Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross in 1562. The life, works and writings of Saint Teresa are beyond the scope of the present article, and here I mention only a few necessary facts.

Teresa of Avila was born in 1515 and died a Carmelite nun in 1582. She was a prominent mystic and a founder of the reform Order. Teresa became a nun in Avila when she was about twenty years of age. Following a bout of serious illness, she increasingly entered into contemplation and was frequently found rapt in ecstasy. Among her spiritual experiences, which she described in her writings, was the mystical piercing of her heart by a spear of divine love. When she reached middle age she resolved to establish the Convent of Saint Joseph, with the encouragement of Saint Peter of Alcantara, under strict Carmelite rule. This was in 1562, and it was the first convent of the Discalced Carmelites. The communities of the Order were to be poor, small and strictly closed. Under her influence, reform spread to the monks of the Order, one of whose leaders was Saint John of the Cross. Saint Joseph and the Holy Family became the Order's main focus of veneration. The most important writings of Saint Teresa are those of her life *Vita* up to 1562, and her *Way to Perfection*, intended for the instruction of her own nuns.

There is a significant difference between the ways in which Saint Teresa was perceived in Europe and in the Holy Land. In Europe, she was admired during her lifetime and her visions and writings had a great impact on various religious communities. Her writings also became a source of inspiration for the visual arts and artists; here, one need only mention the celebrated sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in the Church of Saint Vittoria in Rome. Bernini depicted Saint Teresa in the ecstatic throes of divine,

piercing love. Contemporaneous with such pictorial works were numerous visual depictions of the saint as a middle-aged nun.

In the Holy Land, the figure and personality of Saint Teresa were considered highly important and exemplary both in the Carmelite convents and by the Latin Catholics. Her image and writings, however, did not become part of the religious culture of Palestine and Israel. There are four convents of the Discalced Carmelites in the Holy Land, all strictly closed and regulated. The following quotation is taken from the Carmelites' website:⁷

On August 20, 1875, ten Carmelites left their monastery in Pau, France, to undertake the founding of a Carmel in Bethlehem. Among them, Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified (Mariam Baouardy), called the 'Little Arab,' was the soul of this small group.

The Discalced Carmelites' convent life in the Holy Land was inaugurated in Bethlehem on November 21, 1876, while work on the building continued. Mariam died on August 26, 1878, before its completion.⁸

The Carmelite monastery in Nazareth owes its origin to Sister Mary of the Crucified Jesus. In 1876 Sister Mary first spoke of its hoped-for foundation to Bishop Vincent Bracco, the then Patriarch of Jerusalem. In 1878 authorization for its construction arrived from Rome. In May that year the Prioress of Bethlehem explored the area for a possible site, accompanied by Sister Mary and another nun.

On 28 July 1907, the cornerstone was laid, blessed by Father Cyril, a Discalced Carmelite and vicar of the community of Mount Carmel. In

7. See <http://carmelholylan.org>

8. The biography of Mariam Baouardy deserves a detailed study, which is beyond the scope of this article. I note only that she was born in the village of 'Ibellin in the Galilee, and after a very dramatic period of wandering she arrived at the Convent of Pau.

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1910, after construction of the monastery, the new community was formed by nuns from the Carmelite order in Bethlehem.

It was the Patriarch who chose the title of 'The Holy Family' for this monastery. The group of eleven founding nuns, who had left the Carmelite monastery in Bethlehem on October 24th 1910, was composed of six French nuns, three Palestinians, and one German. They were accompanied by Fathers Roy and Lahon (of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Bethlehem), and Baouardy, nephew of Sister Mary of the Crucified Jesus.

The Carmelite monastic church

The Carmelite monastic church is constructed according to a Romanesque vocabulary of forms, and reflects the architect's profound, panoramic knowledge of this style. The church is a hall church, built with four bays and a gallery on the western entrance wall, recalling the layout of Romanesque churches. The impression one receives from the round arches, wall pilasters and columns and groin vaults is indeed that of a Romanesque church. In order to convey the spatial sense of a Romanesque church's round arches, the end walls are divided into two areas. In each of the lower sections of the two supporting walls are four deep blind niches, each with a barrel vault. The outer round arches of the vault of each niche, which are part of the wall, are borne on either side on classical columns, raised on classical bases and bearing classical capitals, each installed in a small niche of its own. This system of deep niches, which are associated with the form of side aisles, and their relation to the main nave, are emphasized by the classical columns.

The clerestory above each lower arch features a round stained-glass window. On the stone wall between the niches, parallel to the emerging arches, is a corbel in the form of small

stairs, which bears the columns that in turn bear the capitals from which the bay vaults' transverse arches emerge.

All the elements that delineate the structural parts of the church are composed of natural stone, featuring walls and vaults painted in light yellow. In yellow, too, are the round arches that frame the niches in the lower wall, the window frames in the clerestory, the wall pilasters and columns in front of the niches and above the arches on the wall that supports the vaulted bay's transverse arches, and the frieze dividing the lower and upper areas of the wall.

The semi-hemispherical dome of the apse is decorated with a mural framed by a floral frieze. In front of the innermost apse is installed a painted sculpture depicting the Holy Family, with the adolescent Christ in the center, the Virgin to his right, and Saint Joseph to his left [Fig.1].

The murals in the apse behind the sculpture depict two panoramic local views: to the right is Christ, next to an arboreal landscape and an image of the old (Latin) Church of the Annunciation; and to Christ's left is a view of the Carmelite monastery, or perhaps the Salesian monastery as seen from its Carmelite counterpart [Fig.2]. Whatever the case, these local landscapes are depicted in the spirit of early 20th century paintings. The pictorial whole of the apse creates a visual illusion of the Holy Family standing in the local landscape. Thus the iconography of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, accentuated and developed by Saint Teresa of Avila in the 16th century, while bearing those aspects of popular devotion in the official canonic approach, has here assumed a local character.

The sculpture of the Holy Family in the Carmelite monastery was brought from Germany, and it seems to be part of a popular imagery reflecting prevailing religious emotionalism and devotion toward the Holy Family. This conception of



Fig.1: Carmelite church general view of the apse.

the adolescent Christ standing between Mary and Joseph, located within a local landscape, was an important and highly concrete narrative in Nazareth, where Christ, according to tradition, spent his adolescence. Thus, this period in the life of Christ became important and sacred to the town's Christian inhabitants. The new pictorial model for this conception of Nazareth is reflected in the apse of the Carmelite monastery, where the painting is juxtaposed with the sculpture, integrating the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional works. Artistic images of the Holy Family in Nazareth thereby acquired a specific importance. And it is this specificity of the Carmelite visual perception, as expressed in the apse of the Carmelite church, that I consider to have had an impact on the two additional monastic churches in Nazareth: the Salesian and the Franciscan.



Fig. 2: Carmelite church, apse, detail, an urban scene in Nazareth, with the sculpture of the Holy Family

The Salesian Church of Jesus the Adolescent

The compound of the Salesian orphanage and school crowns the north-western hill of Nazareth. It has a panoramic view from Acre to Mount Tabor, and is a dominant component in the city's urban silhouette. The church was built to complement the Salesian orphanage and school, which were founded in 1896 and constructed in the prevailing style of the late 19th century. The church itself was founded later, in the year 1906, and was completed in 1926. Mgr Maxime Caron (1845-1929), head of the Petit Seminaire in Versailles, an ardent French patriot and a devotee of Jesus the Adolescent, initiated the church project, accompanied its construction and was himself buried in the church. He wrote extensively of the model he proposed for it, which manifested his perception of Gothic architecture under Saint Louis as a sublime expression, a perception that echoed

those of Gothic revivalists such as Viollet-le-Duc and even Victor Hugo.⁹

Lucien Gauthier, the architect whom Caron chose on account of his being “a man of Old France,” followed Caron’s concepts, though not his actual model, and planned a monumental Gothic-Revival church with a two-towered façade.¹⁰ The church’s interior is built in a neo-Gothic style, while the façade is a peculiar combination of the general outlines of an early Gothic cathedral and classicist elements. Thus, for example, the flight of stairs leading to the church is built in the neo-Renaissance style, with an entrance in the lower central wall leading to the lower church. In the main portal the arches are only slightly pointed, with a gable above the main arch, while the central section of the façade, the gallery, features round arches reminiscent of early Gothic church façades of the transitional style.

The inner church seems to be a combination of Cistercian vaults, as in the Cistercian Gothic Abbey of Pontigny, in the late Gothic style, combining pillars with no capitals, and blind arcades with round arches on the lower area of the outer walls, as in the early Gothic cathedrals. The overall architectural concept of the church draws on elements from various periods of Gothic architecture in the Île-de-France, including French neo-Gothic and Gothic architecture.

The Salesian church, whose patron figure is the adolescent Christ, engages in two visual dialogues with the Carmelite apse: the first is that of the sculpted Holy Family, installed above the altar in the apse of the lower church, and very similar to that of the Carmelite church. The second is located in the center of the main apse of the upper church. Here, a sculpted pile of stones is set against a painted local landscape that depicts cypress trees and a prickly pear cactus, on top of which is installed the sculpture of the adolescent Christ, created by the sculptor Bogino

9. Desramaut, *L’Orphelinat*, 107-110.

10. *Ibid.*, 100-101.

in France and brought to Nazareth [Fig.3]. For the Salesians, this depiction of the young Jesus, the divine adolescent, set in the local landscape, is the most sacred of spiritual images, a heavenly vision.

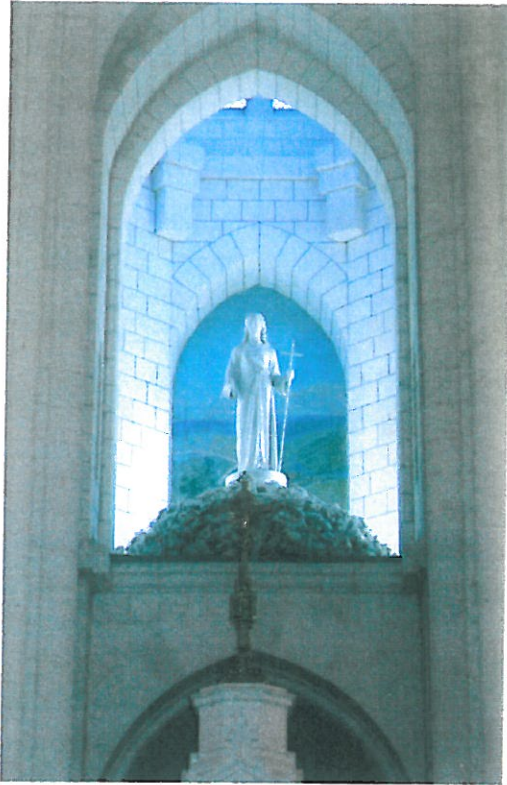


Fig.3: .Salesian church,,inner view with the sculpture of Jesus the Adolescent in the apse

The Franciscan Church of Saint Joseph

The Church of Saint Joseph was built in 1917 in the style of the medieval revival, combining Romanesque and early Christian elements.¹¹ Upon entering the holy site of the Latin Church of

¹¹. Kenaan-Kedar, *The Madonna of the prickly pear cactus*.

the Annunciation in Nazareth from the north and passing the excavations of the ancient village, one arrives at a set of steps that leads up to the Church of Saint Joseph. These steps are concealed from the Latin Church of the Annunciation but connect to the large stone building of the Franciscan monastery. This church, built in 1911-1913, was constructed above the earlier Byzantine and Crusader buildings that serve it as a sort of lower church. Some of these buildings have been identified as the workshop of Saint Joseph, the husband of Mary, mother of Jesus. Part of the church itself was also built in the Romanesque revival style. Its western façade is associated with Romanesque churches in Italy and France.

The church is a three-aisled basilica with a layout that echoes not only early Christian basilica churches, but also early Romanesque churches. The long central nave and two side aisles are separated by rows of pillars in the classical style with Corinthian capitals. The clerestory of the nave wall features round stained-glass windows. The central nave and the accompanying side sections end in an apse, and the entire structure is covered by a flat wooden roof.

The imagery

Next to the small southern portal of the church a sculpture of the Holy Family is installed in a small niche. It has the same iconographic features as the sculpture in the Carmelite church [Fig.4]. The church's three apses were painted by the artist Angelo Della Torre in the 1950s, once he had completed the cycle of paintings in the lower Church of the Visitation at 'Ayn Karim. The paintings offer an iconographic program that relates to Joseph and to the Holy Family. This program, which apparently developed within Christianity in the early 20th century, emphasizes Christ's adolescence in Nazareth, and the town's special role in his life.



Fig. 4: Church of Saint Joseph Sculpture of Holy Family
the southern façade

The paintings by Della Torre, however, display an acute artistic awareness of the contemporary pictorial languages, and are fundamentally different from the visual culture of the other monastic churches, making no concession to popular devotion. In the central apse in the Church of Saint Joseph, Angelo Della Torre painted the Holy Family in keeping with the scheme established by the two other monastic churches [Fig.5]. Here, however, they are depicted standing before an altar in the foreground, symbolizing the Eucharist, an image that is far removed from the family image that appears in the other monastic churches. The landscape in the background, to their left, portrays a small, isolated group of urban structures standing next to a small cypress tree. Both the houses and the cypress tree are depicted as minimalist, symbolical forms resembling stage sets. To the right of the Holy Family is a solitary

image of another cypress. The landscape appears theatrical, in a way that stresses the deliberate illusion created by its various elements. The painting is devoid of decorative elements, to the benefit of those few images that comprise it. The depiction of a solitary building with large arches or windows evokes de Chirico's metaphysical paintings, and while the small cypress trees seem more architectonic than organic, they might be associated with the local landscape.



Fig. 5: Central apse, the Holy Family (painted by Angelo Della Torre)

The Holy Family is also depicted on the left (northern) apse, with Joseph seated in the center, the Madonna kneeling to his right, and the young Jesus to his left. This scene seems to represent the moment of Joseph's death [Fig.6]. On the left of the picture is a stark red building, metaphysical in appearance, and on the right a solitary tree, apparently an olive, set on a broad

hill in the midst of a green and brown area. Joseph's dream is the subject of the right (southern) apse; in it, he lies on the ground while the angel appears to him set against the rocky landscape.



Fig. 6: Northern apse, the Holy Family upon Saint Joseph's death

Angelo Della Torre's painting, which offers very few scenic details, is meditative in nature. While it introduces elements that are characteristic of the local landscape, such as the olive tree, Della Torre depicts them as isolated, each in itself possessing the power to create an autonomous and complete landscape, and hence also to constitute a symbolic image.

Conclusion

This preliminary study of the three monastic churches addresses an important chapter in neo-medieval architecture in

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the Holy Land and in popular religious imagery. My forthcoming study of the stained-glass windows in these churches will hopefully contribute additional knowledge on these foci of religious art.

Tel-Aviv University