

MURAL #1 : THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT

TREASURES OF THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL:

LARGE MURAL PAINTINGS part 1.

By Bernard Lauwyck

Today we look at one of the two “murals” in the Roseau Cathedral with as subject “ The flight to Egypt”.

A **mural** is a piece of artwork painted directly on a permanent wall or sturdy ceiling. It is not the same as a **fresco**, which comes from “fresh” in Italian as the colours are applied rapidly on wet plaster which absorbs the pigment while the plaster dries and solidifies. These colours stay fresh and brilliant as one can observe with Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine chapel and Giotto's frescos in Assisi

Murals are secco painting, done on dry plaster (secco is "dry" in Italian). The pigments require a binding medium, such as egg (tempera), glue or oil to attach the pigment to the surface. Examples of secco painting can be found in Dominica in Massacre, by Earl Etienne; in the chapel of Mahaut River and Roman Catholic church of Salybia by Faustulus Frederick and numerous murals by Lennox Honychurch in Roman Catholic churches all over the island, especially the newly restored one at Soufriere church.

It is clear that the preservation of the murals depends on the permanence and stability of the wall on which it is painted.

The two large paintings in the Roseau Cathedral are, in the strictest sense, not murals as they were painted on canvas and glued to timber boarding.

We read in the Diocesan Archives : “ Early in 1907, when closely examining the pillars, which supported the roof of the Cathedral, it was noticed that they were altogether rotten at the base so that the roof had sunk already some 7 inches. It was more than time to replace them by something more sturdy and damp-proof. The wooden pillars were condemned and stone-pillars and arches erected instead. The ceiling of the nave, built with local wood, proved to be so worm-eaten that individual boards were becoming loose here and there and accidents to be feared. It had to be entirely renovated. A new floor was laid down in the church and Sanctuary, and the unsightly old pews replaced by brand-new ones.

When the renovation works were completed and the Cathedral painted inside and out , Redemptorist Brother Ildephonse decorated the Sanctuary and fixed two huge paintings from his own brush behind the altars of the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin.”

At that time, the only unfinished job was the construction of the western tower and steeple, which started in 1915: “ In 1915 all the cut and squared stones of an old church of Pointe Michel were brought to Roseau by boat, in order to build a western steeple to match the northern one, built in 1879.”

The archives of the Redemptorists from Belgium mention an Alphonse LEPAS, known as Brother Ildephonse (1860-1910). He died on 10 July 1910 in Zelzate, Belgium.

This painting is original and unique as it does not depict one of the traditional versions of the event as described only in the Gospel of St. Matthew.

Matthew 2.13 “ And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. 2.14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: 2.15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.”

In Christian art there are two traditional versions of this event :

- St. Joseph leading a donkey, on which is seated Mary and her Son.



- The second named

“The rest during the flight into Egypt”, which depicted the loving Holy Family taking a short break on a very tense and dangerous journey.



Taking a closer look at this mural, it is clear that Brother Ildephonse was a talented masterful artist who “painted from his own brush”. This is an image that breathes art and life.

But , where did brother Ildephonse get his inspiration from ?

Maybe artist Tintoretto (1597) gave him the idea of a local landscape in which the Holy Family travelled: the sky, the trees, the river, the little house.



Brother Ildephonse did a superb job as he was certainly inspired by the untrammelled and unparalleled beauty of Dominica. The Flight to Egypt has been a subject of many many painters but during all my research, I could not find anything so beautiful and magnificent as this mural in the Roseau Cathedral.

Here, Joseph, Mary and Jesus travel in a landscape like the Garden of Eden.

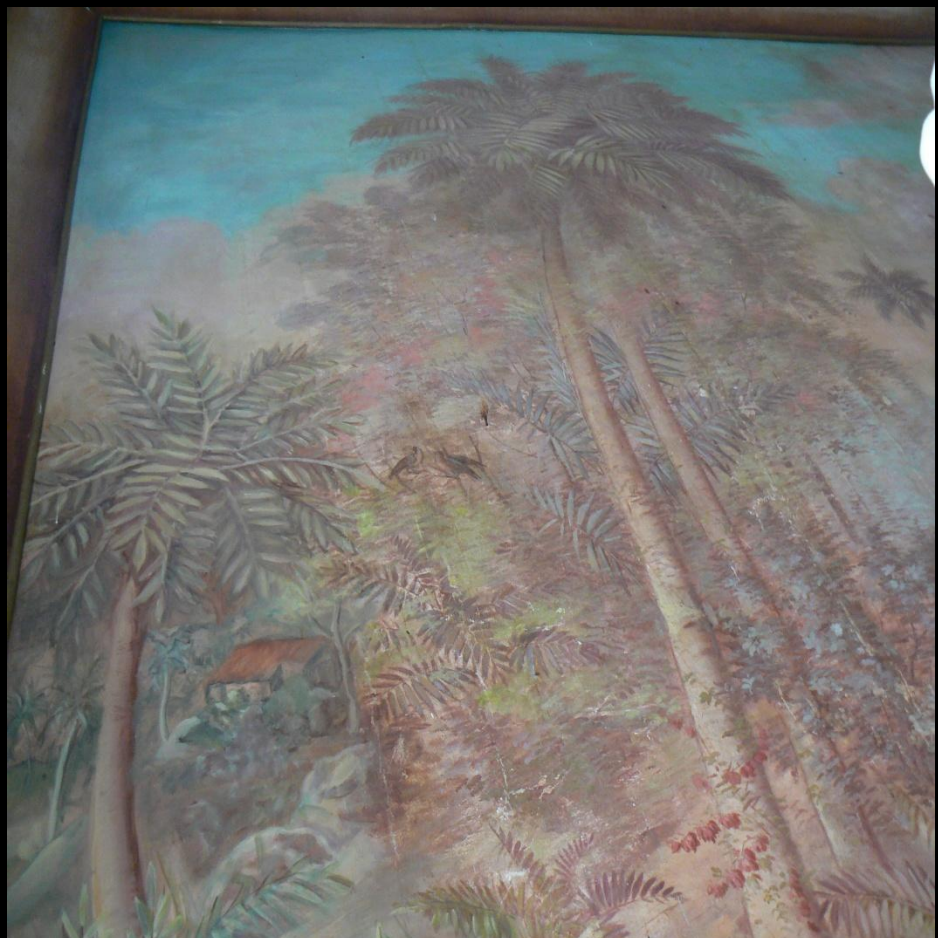
Look at the beautiful water lilies on the flowing water, the sheep, the angels with daisies, the ferns.





The lushness of Dominica's nature.

Royal palms,
a little red roofed
house



Actually, Brother Ildephonse was not the only person inspired by the beauty of Dominica as a source to depict a garden of Eden :

Adam Nicolson states in his book “Power and Glory” that one of the translators of the Bible, called Layfield, used what he saw and experienced during his visit to DOMINICA to describe the Garden of Eden. This translation became the KING JAMES BIBLE, first published in 1611. “The task of the translators was to bring to life some of the great narratives of the Bible.....Layfield was among the men who translated the famous opening chapters of Genesis.... As he did so he would have had in mind those incomparable forests of Dominica... the seventeenth- century English idea of Paradise, a vision of enveloping lushness, was formed by the seduction of an almost untouched Caribbean”

This beautiful painting on canvas, fixed onto close boarding was moved 12 feet back, during the renovation works after hurricane David in 1984 by Rev. Fr. Charles Vermeulen, Dean of the Cathedral at the time. He was assisted by a French artist of multiple talents, named Ronnie Rodriguez, who restored the painting to its former beauty with great skill.

Now almost 30 years later, on the eve of the start of the Cathedral roof renovation works, an enormous challenge faces us to preserve this treasure for the future .

Local artist Earl ETIENNE inspected the mural and concluded that the painting is too fragile and damaged to be moved and stored away. His recommendation is to box the painting up with plywood, protect it from the rain with a small roof and from condensation with brown paper and ventilators. Once the roof works are finished, he will have a huge task to restore the painting. An almost impossible mission.

Upon close observation, you will notice that the canvas has deteriorated with age and is torn in several places where the boards join. In other areas the paint and primer have lifted from the underground, a condition known as flaking, blistering and scaling. I will have more on this in part 2 of this article.



Bearing the beauty and fragility in mind, I would advise anyone to visit the Cathedral and admire, this old, worn out but still vibrant painting. Explain to your children and grand children what this painting is all about. How Jesus had to be protected from the mighty ones. Bethlehem, his birth place, is the town in the background under a mountain range. The nature and place of refuge for the Holy Family is Dominica, The Land of the Lord.