

Shenouda Esmat's *Temptation on the Mountain*

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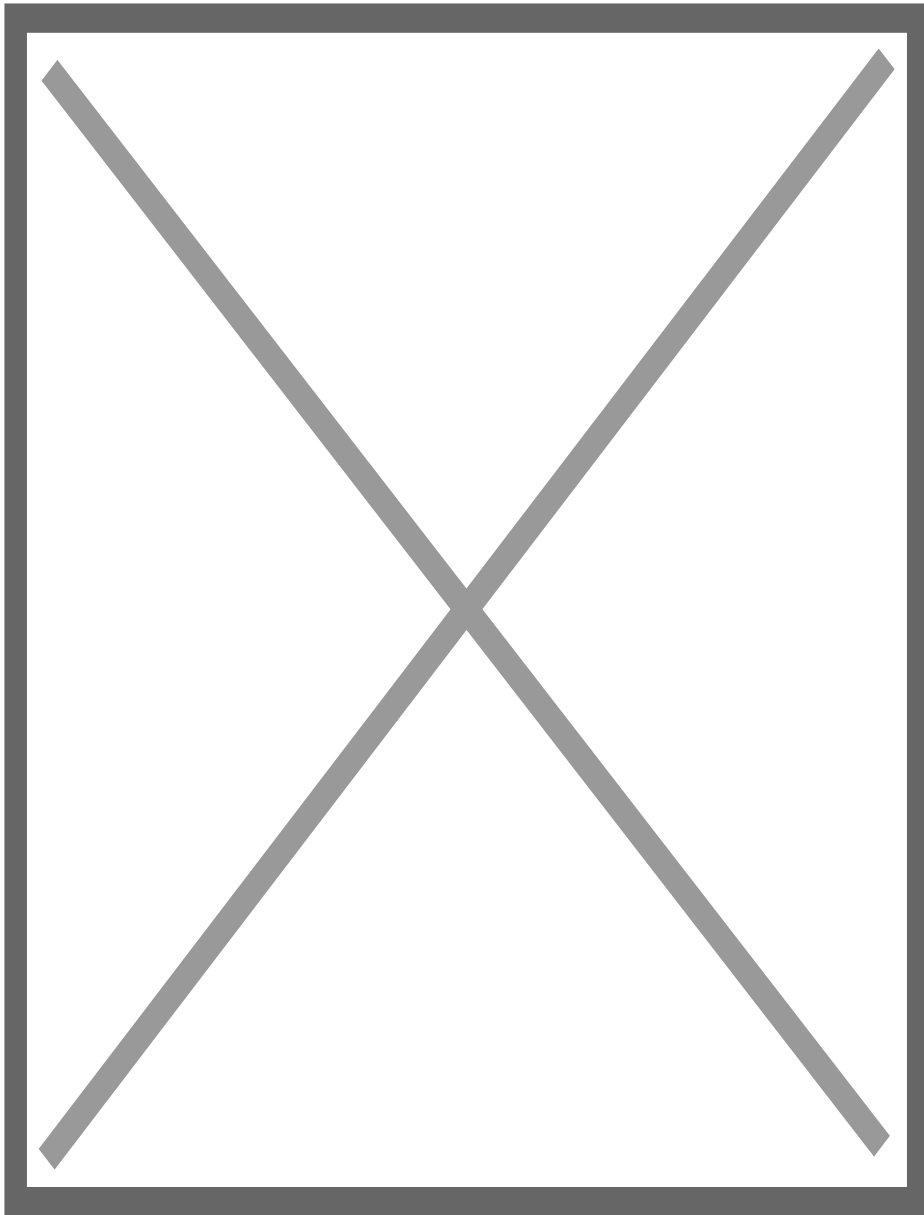


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Shenouda Esmat walks the ways of the wilderness. The Egyptian Coptic Christian artist first visited the storied Sinai region to paint a welcoming mural for the 2000 visit of Pope John Paul II to St. Catherine's Monastery, the sixth-century pilgrimage site at the foot of the mountain where Moses is said to have received the Ten Commandments. In the years since, Esmat has climbed to the mountain's sacred summit six times. He returned to Sinai on a ten-day art residency in 2020 and then devoted two more years to desert drawing expeditions, creating artworks, like this charcoal sketch, inspired by the region's majestic vistas.

Desert dwelling is a timeless trope of Jewish and Christian spirituality. Moses and the Israelites wandered for 40 years in the wilderness to shed the mindset of slaves for the freedom to be God's people. Jesus was drawn into the wilderness after his baptism to endure 40 days and nights of temptation in preparation for his public ministry. Esmat brings these two biblical traditions together in this plein air sketch of a solitary bedouin contemplating the sheer cliffs of the outcropping in Sinai so revered by the world's three monotheistic faiths.

"My time spent amid the enchanting natural wonders of Sinai," Esmat told the century, "with all its biblical associations, has been beautiful, sacred, inspiring, and healing."