

*The Role of Coptic symbol
in Design Decoration*

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Abstract

This research aims to enrich the field of decorative designs for youth clothes. The decorative ideas have been inspired from some main symbols of Coptic arts. The study of Coptic arts can contribute to design development and innovation. This incorporates the cultural power of Coptic art as a vital starting point for new design ideas and development of products. For this purpose, some methods of printing and embroidery have been applied. Twenty-one designs are presented here and five of them have been implemented.

Keywords: Coptic, Culture, Decoration, Embroidery, Symbols, T-shirt

1. Introduction

The term "Copts" is equivalent to the word "Egyptians". It is derived from the ancient Egyptian word "Ha-ka-Ptah," i.e. "the house of the spirit Ptah" the most highly revered deity in Egyptian mythology (Atiya, 1991). Nowadays, this term refers to the Orthodox Christian People who lives in Egypt. However, the Copts as the successors of the ancient Egyptians are defined as the modern sons of the Pharaohs. Coptic arts began in ancient Egypt about the third century BC after opening of Alexander the great in 332 BC. As a result of the conflict between the ancient Egyptian arts and the other ones which are reaching Egypt with each new king continued since 30 BC until after opening Egypt by Muslims in 641 AD (Samir, 2004).

Coptic art is religious, public and civil art born in the late stages of the Pharaoh's. It has special characters, different from the other arts, influenced by Greek/Roman arts alongside by Byzantine and ancient far Eastern arts (Dale, 1993). On the other hand, it influenced by the art of Christian civilization which spread in Egypt between 3th and 7th century AD. From the 7th century to the 19th century, the Coptic arts influenced by Islamic arts and vice versa (du Bourguet, 1971). Coptic art is a high-level beautiful art, depending on many kinds of ornaments, which appear in many examples of stones, metalwork, wood, ivory, writings (manuscripts), pottery, glass, icons, cloths, textile, as well as architecture; much of them survives in monasteries and churches (Sibley, 1981; Volbach, 1969; Wessel, 1965). The Coptic Museum in ancient Cairo has some of the world's most important examples of Coptic arts¹.

¹ <http://www.ask-aladdin.com/Coptic-Monuments/Coptic-museum.html> & <http://www.copticwave.com/copticmuseum/copticmain3.htm>

The typical motifs in Coptic art include human figures, geometric shapes, images of nature (plants, animals, birds etc.), as well as the Christian saints mixed with Egyptian and Roman mythological figures and symbols (Akashi, 1955; du Bourguet, 1964; Kendrick, 1920-1922). Coptic art took new features in drawing persons different from the Pharaoh art, which draws people from side view. Coptic art draws people from the face referring to the spiritual meanings overcome the physical ones; drawing wide and large eyes referring to the enlightenment thinking; and short legs referring to the richness. On the other side, the Coptic arts used many colors for many kinds of ornamentations. Common Coptic colors include black, red, brown, yellow, white, purple, green, blue, and orange (Kybalova, 1967; Sibley, 1981; Shurinova, 1967; Thompson, 1971).

Coptic artists depend in implementation of their works mainly on the symbols because of the persecution caused by Romans to the ancient Christians in Egypt. They were meeting inside caves and dead vaults, their passwords were including drawn symbols instead of utter words, like cross, monogram, fish, etc. (Wessel, 1965; Atiya, 1967; Edward, WD; Sibley, 1981;; Murad, WD; Tadros, 1993; Heshmat, 1994). The challenge in studying Coptic arts as ancient culture comes from the lack of provenience, but through successful historians, they can fill the missing information and provide clarity ideas to study ancient cultures.

This paper is organized as follows. In Sec. 2, Coptic symbols are presented and explained. The methodology is presented in Sec. 3. Achieved and suggested designs are clarifying in Sec. 4. The final conclusions are obtained in Sec. 5.

2. Coptic symbols

Coptic symbol includes the essential meaning of the symbol which hiding behind the image it has. The notion, clarity, feelings, conscience, beliefs, ideas and the reference are incarnating in the philosophical meaning of that image. In this context, some light have been thrown on the ancient Coptic symbols with their meaning and how they can react towards the new modern designs. Such symbols can be found in the shapes of Cross, ankh, monogram, aura (halo), geometric symbols, and living organisms (plants, birds, fish, animals and reptiles).

2.1. The Cross, Ankh, and Monogram



The Coptic ankh cross, also known as the Gnostic cross, has its origin in the Egyptian Ankh and is the pre Coptic cross of the early Christian Gnostic movement. Egyptians tended to identify the Cross with their own sign of eternal life, "the Ankh" which was held in the hands of the immortals such as gods and pharaohs. The "Ankh" sign took the shape of a cruciform with rounded tip, which was readily adopted and used by the Copts from the very early times (Tadros, 1993, Yusab, 1995), see Fig. 1 (a: d). On the other hand, a monogram means single; "mono" means a one, and "gram" means an image, so the whole word "monogram" means a unique single image. A monogram is a Christo-gram or a combination of letters that forms an abbreviation for the name of Jesus Christ, traditionally used as a Christian symbol. In Eastern Christianity, the most widely used of the Christo-gram is the four-letters abbreviation, ICXC, which are abbreviation of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ". Most of monogram designs show the alpha and Omega, referring to Jesus Christ; the starting and ending; the beginning and eternally. There are many forms of monograms as shown in (Samir, 2004), Fig. 1 (e, f).

2.2. The Aura and Geometric symbols



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An aura, or nimbus halo, is a field of luminous radiation surrounding a person of particular power or holiness. It is appeared in the beginning of the fourth century; drawing around the head of Jesus Christ only on his throne. Since so, such kind of auras have been drawn for saint Mary the virgin, angels and other saints. Auras differ in color and shape, depending on the person you are looking at. The Coptic halos characterized by round shape and the white, yellow, and gold colors. In particularly, the halo of Jesus Christ has a Cross inside, or/and divided by three strips refers to the holy Trinity (Atiya, 1991; Phlipe, 1992), as shown in Fig. 1(g). It is worthy to mention that the aura was one of some geometric symbols that used in Coptic arts. The Coptic designs have many Geometric forms, e.g. triangles of equal sides referring to the doctrine of triangulation and unification; boxes referring to the four directions of the whole world and also to the four Gospels (Samir, 2004); and circles referring to the eternally, see Fig. 1(h, i).

2.3. Plants



There are many symbols of plant, e.g. Fig tree, Palm, Vine grapes, Wheat & Weeds and Olive branches; as shown in Fig. 1(j: m). The Fig tree; which mentioned in the Bible in the story of Adam and Eve when they were customarily naked, referring to the lust. Also, the Palm fronds plant refers to the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, and also to the triumph of the martyrs on torture and death. Martyrs have been drawn with a Palm of victory holding in their hands. One of the most important symbols in Coptic arts is the vine grapes and their intertwined foliage referring to Jesus Christ. It also indicates the Holy dinner and usually draws around its portrait. Coptic artists used blisters and prominent grapes for many decorations. On the other hand, they used Wheat and Weeds symbols referring to the good and evil; peace and war; prosperity and drought; as

well as, Olive branches referring to the peace times as mentioned in the story of Noah and the flood (Atiya, 1991).



2.4. Birds

Dove and Eagle are the most important ingredients birds used by Coptic artist; see Fig. 1 (n, o).

The Dove is a common symbol in Coptic arts, referring to the Holy Spirit; also it is symbolizing the simplicity, purity, chastity and peace. The flying Eagle is a symbol of Jesus Christ highness, and also refers to the resurrection. The pigeon is amazing Coptic symbol using in decorative mural paintings with watercolors and thermal in sacred manuscripts (Heshmat, 1994).

2.5. Fish

The fish symbol of early Christianity was the symbol of the secret faith for persecuted Christians. The first Letters of the word fish in Coptic language indicate the "Jesus Christ, the son of God". Fish also refer to the baptism and the Apostles who were fishermen. Coptic weavers used the fish symbol in their wears with many details of color and shades to show the fish in three dimensions, see Fig. 1(p). There are maritime symbols can be found in Coptic art such as Dolphin and Whale as well (Phlipe, 1992).

2.6. Animals

The Lion, the sheep, and the four animals embodied with throne of God are the most important animal symbols in Coptic arts. The Lion refers to the Lion of Judah who was Jesus Christ. Lion symbolizes strength, courage, and as the King of the forest symbolizes the King Messiah. It also symbolizes the Apostle evangelizing St. Mark, the source of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. On the other hand, the sheep which offers to sacrifice is permanent symbol redemption by

Jesus on the cross (Morcos, 2006). The four animals embodied with the throne of God (the four angels) have four faces (a Man, an Ox, a Lion and an Eagle); see Fig. 1 (*q, r*).



2.7. Reptiles

Snake or Serpent and Dragon are symbols of the Devil who associated in the very beginning with the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve. Therefore, reptilians, snake- or dragon-like are always referring to evil in Coptic arts. The demonic opponents God, Christ, or good Christian people has commonly been portrayed as reptilian one (Hondelinik, 1991), see Fig. 1 (*s, t*).

3. Methodology

In the world of fashion, the embroidery plays a vital role where the designers present their creativities. Embroidery and print enable youth to select their designs the way they want. The Stitches help us to make various combinations, e.g. embroidery with silk and metal threads, beads, spangles, silk ribbons and applique work. The designs were implemented used silk screen printing in three different effects of colors and texture. In this respect, a set of Twenty-one proposal T-shirts for youth have been designed, adopted and reformulated from Coptic symbols using Adobe Photoshop software “CS3”. The aesthetic effects of these designs range from a simple line to complex layers of color, line, shape, and texture. Five of them have been achieved in three different schemes as shown in more details on our site “<http://barorock.webs.com/>”. These achieved designs have been carried out using fully automatic screen printing with plastisol colors; in addition some different stitches of embroidery have been implemented with Machine and Hand in different effects for each.

3.1. T-shirt materials

All T-shirts are made of 100% cotton from knit fabrics especially jerseys and ribs. Jerseys are most frequently used, versatile, comfortable, and relatively inexpensive. They also are popular material for applying screen prints and embroidery. Rib knits of the neckbands add support to the garment and give the neckline of the T-shirt more finished look. Neckbands are generally one-by-one inch rib knits, although some T-shirts may require two-by-two rib knits. Additional T-shirt materials include tape or seam binding, made of twill. Binding reinforces the neckline and shoulder seams it protects them from ripping apart under tension. Thread is of course an essential element in sewing any garment. Several colors of thread have been used to make those T-shirts in good shape. Visible topstitching is done with a color of thread that blends with the fabric. The most commonly used seams for T-shirts are narrow, superimposed seams, which are usually made by placing one piece of fabric onto another and lining up the seam edges. This particular seam and stitch combination results in a flexible finished seam. Another type of seam that may be used for T-shirts are bound seams, in which a narrow piece of fabric is folded around a seam, as the neckline. These seams may be stitched together using an over-edge stitch.

3.2. The Processes of assembling T-shirt

The separated pieces of the front and back sections should be stitched together at the sides using the superimposed and over-edge stitches. Shoulder seams require a simple superimposed seam, reinforcing seams with tape. The seams at the shoulder may be completed before attached the neckband. Sleeves are generally finished before they are fitted into T-shirts. The hem of sleeve's edge is finished by folding it over, forming the hem and stitching, or by applying a band. The band may be attached as a superimposed seam or folded over the edge as binding.

The neckband of rib knits should be slightly shorter in circumference than the T-shirt neck. Thus, the neckband must be stretched just the right amount to prevent bulging. The superimposed seam is stitched with an over-edge stitch. V-neck requires mitering the neckband; stitching the band accurately and sewing it at center front, then sew a tuck to form a V. The T-shirt hem is commonly sewn with an over-edge stitch, or by applying a band, resulting in a flexible hem. Alternative hem styles include combination of edge finishing stitches.

In next paragraph, we display in details the designs that have been achieved and those we are suggested respectively.

4. Achieved and suggested designs

4.1. Achieved designs

- **Design No. 1**

This design, Fig 2 (a), is inspired by the Cross shape and wrapped Plants; it is suitable for youth female. This design is carried out in three different ways as shown in Fig 2 (b, c, d) respectively. The first one (Fig 2-b) is a red half sleeve T-shirt with white neckline and cuff ribs. This design has effectiveness printing with black and white velvet flock. Some white silk braids have been added to the white areas of the T-shirt used festoon stitches and small black Crosses of lace with branches of steam stitches. The dark areas of the design have been decorated using some bright small black beads. The second way (Fig 2-c) is a red half sleeve T-shirt with bands of blue light turquoise color around the neckline and outline borders. This design has effectiveness of glitter bronze with white-yellowish and light blue colors. Beads and spangles have been added to it as well.



The third one (Fig 2-*d*) is a red long sleeve T-shirt with round neckline without band. This design has printed with bright silver and blue colors. Some beads have been added to the limits of the design and sticking together by iron them.



- **Design No. 2**

This design is inspired by the monogram of Jesus Christ with round shape of the halo; Fig 3(*a, b*) they are suitable for youth female and male respectively. In female design, the monogram putted in a new form for female, where a coin shape with different colors of the Coptic letters Alpha and Omega has been installed; the halo shape is extended around the coin in graduated points. While some modifications have been settled in male design, where concentric radiation beams have extended to the limits of the T-shirt. The female design has been carried out in three different ways as shown in Fig 3 (*c, d, e*) respectively. The description of the first T-shirt (Fig 3-*c*) is the same as the design shown in (Fig 2-*b*). It has printed with bright white, yellow and blue colors. The second design (Fig 3-*d*) has effectiveness printed with protrusion in white, black, orange and purple colors. Stain, long and short stitches have been embroidered in colored silk threads. The third one (Fig 3-*e*) has printed with mute green-white; black and white colors. Some beads and spangles have been added in graduated sizes on the halo shape.

- **Design No. 3**



The main idea of this design Fig 4 (*a*) depends on the combination of the decorated Lion's head with the plant units. Concentric beams radiation are surrounding it in graduated way; giving a kind of rhythm and movement. This design applied on a dark blue half sleeve T-shirt for male in three different styles. The first one (Fig 4-*b*) has glitter bronze effectiveness with red, grey,

yellow and white colors. The second style (Fig 4-c) is printed with shiny rose, yellow and grey colors with protrusion in Lion's head. Also, narrow zigzag stitched have been embroidered with silk threads. The third one (Fig 4-d) has effective protrusion in Lion's head and halo's beams using bright green, yellow, orange and white colors. The beams have been Embroidery with steam stitches.

- **Design No. 4**

This design Fig 5 (a) depends on some units of planet and a shape of the dove as taken from Figs 1 (k, m, n, r). Ankh sign, Fig (1-a), has been used in a simple form; extending with the shape of the Cross; combining with some colored points. This T-shirt has been applied in three different ways as shown in Fig 5 (b, c, d). The first way is a half sleeve T-shirt of white and cuff ribs using bright blue, yellow, white and orange colors with effectiveness of protrusion. Embroidery has been achieved using stain, zigzag and steam stitches by silver metal thread. Applied work has been used on tulle white net fabric. The second way is a three quarter sleeve T-shirt of orange neck facing and bands use silver printing with yellow, bright green and orange colors. Turquoise, orange beads and spangles have been added. The third one is a half sleeve T-shirt of wide yellow bands around. It printed with dark-red, yellow, bright-blue, and white with the effectiveness of glitter bronze. Embroidery has been achieved using stain and zigzag stitches with silk threads.

- **Design No. 5**

The fifth design Fig 6 (a) is a T-shirt that works for all youth; the shape of the Cross and the decoration units of olive leaf in crown have been used. It is putted in the upper corner of the front of the T-shirt, while in the back of the T-shirt, it modified in spiral shape around the Cross; giving some rhythm and movements.

On this respect, three different white female T-Shirts have been achieved. The first one (Fig 6-b) has red bands without embroidery, while the second (Fig 6-c) is a three quarter sleeves T-Shirt with orange bands and small bright-crystal beads. The third one (Fig 6-d) has no additions at all, but embroidery with golden metal threads and bright-violet crystal beads; stain and steam stitches have been used. The printing effectiveness of the first was graduated green with red colors; the second was graduated gray with orange; while the third one was glitter bronze with graduated violet and yellow.

4.2. Suggested designs



More suggested designs inspiring by the Coptic symbols that mentioned in Sec. 2 are presented here. The first design depends on the combination of the Crosse and Ankh with some geometrical units, e.g. lines, triangles, squares and circles, arranged in harmony way suitable for male as shown in Fig (7-a) and for female as shown in Figs (7-b, c). Another design, Fig (7-d), represents a male design which its front depends on the combination of the Cross and the palm branches, while its back contains only the branches of the palm. Fig (7-e) represents a new design for all youth with the original shape of wheat branches with some crossed lines in three gradually levels referring to the abundance and prosperity. There are two types of female designs; the first, Fig (7-f), depends mainly on the branches, leaves and clusters of grapes; and the second one, Fig (7-g), includes a shape of the Cross as well.

Also, three types of T-shirts are suggested here, the first one (Fig 7-h) inspired from the holy spirit and the shape of the dove, it proper for all sexes. The second (Fig 7-i) appears the shape of the long two wings of an angel, which bounded together in a shape of a rose between them implying the power of the angels, it suitable for female. The third one (Fig 7-j) appears an eagle

extends its long wings. The left wing has a rainbow compound with spectral lines around the Cross in the middle; it is suitable for female.

There are two types of fish designs suitable for all youth have been presented here. The effectiveness of water's waves appeared. The first design (7-k) appears the shape of a fish with curved lines in different colors around it, implying on the third dimensions in the front and back of the T-shirt. The second one (7-l) shows two curved fishes around the Cross in the middle in a smoothing way.

Also, two types of animal designs have been presented here for male as shown in Fig (7-m) where it shows a shape of a sheep's head rounded by Olive leaves. While, Fig (7-n) appears the front and back of a T-shirt of a shape of Lion with plants branches and Lotus flower.

Another two types of reptile designs have been presented for male as shown in Fig (7-o, p). The first T-shirt shows a shape of a dragon's head with its tail in prominent colors. The second one has a combination between the shapes of a Snake and the Crosses in a harmony way.

5. Conclusions

An extremely important factor in the present research is the fact that the Coptic arts heritage; as the last version of the Pharaoh era in Egypt; can be contributed, development and enrichment many fields of arts especially in decoration designs. The objective of this research is to revive the Coptic arts, using its symbols in innovating and contemporary designs for Egyptian youth. On the other hand, these designs can be used as souvenirs for tourists who want to learn more about ancient Egypt. In this respect, Twenty-one different ideas (designs) have been presented

and many symbols of ancient Coptic arts, e.g. Ankh, Crosses, Aura, Monogram, Geometric, Plants, Birds, Fishes, Animals and Reptile have been used; Five of them were achieved.

This work has been evaluated by many academic specialists who emphasize that the elements of sensibility, creativity, personality and cultural heritage are still playing a very important role in our designs' inspiration.

It is expected that this initiative will provide a developing future researches on the history of Egyptian arts and decoration designs. So our work is not limited to the field of decoration designs; nor to focus on Coptic designs; but also to open a new horizon for young designers with a spirit of innovation based on their designs' history and heritage. Finally, we hope that our approach to decoration arts will highlight new frontiers in design production, generate new opportunities for education and introduce new approaches to all fields of designs.

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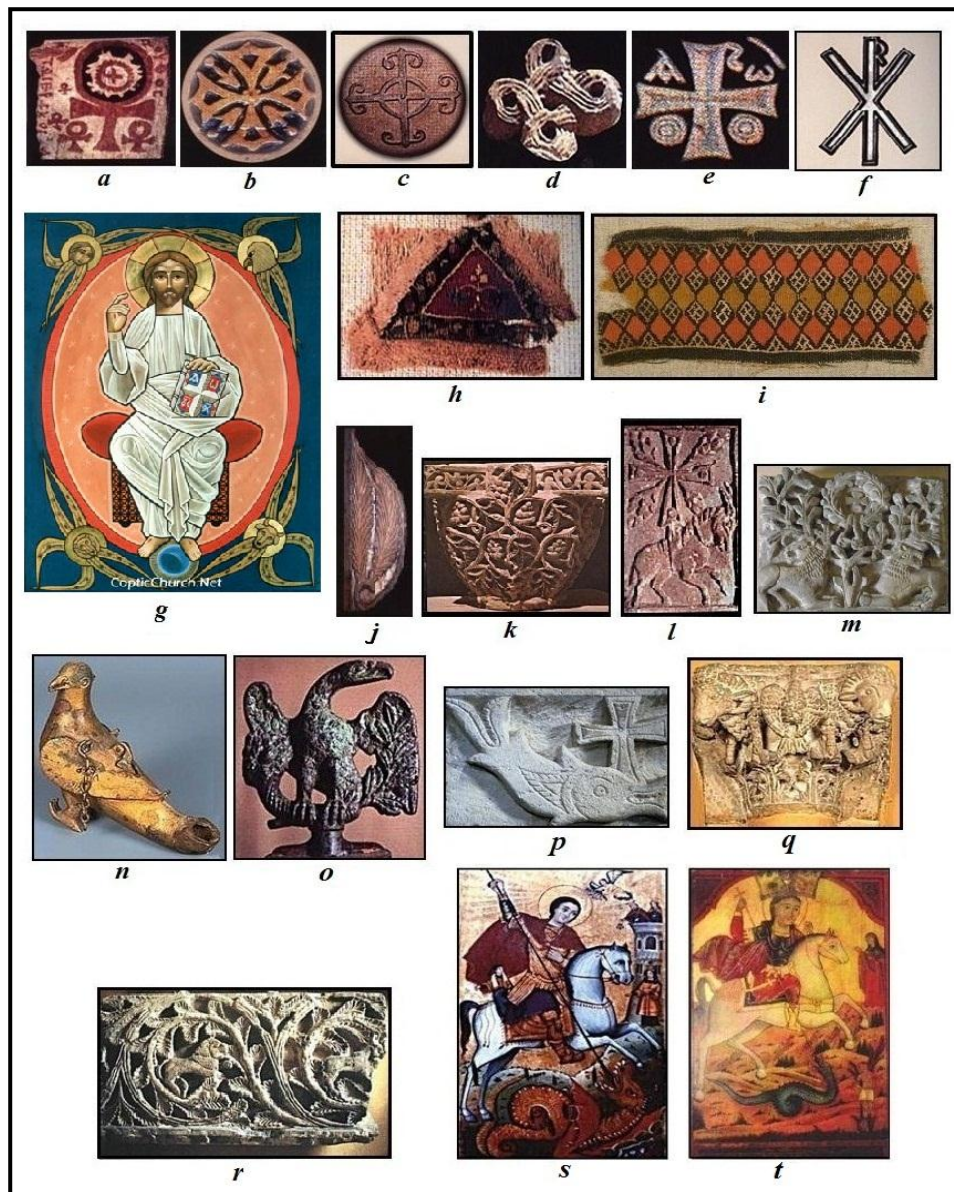


Figure (1)

- (a) Coptic ankh on a piece of tapestry textile. (b) Coptic cross carved in wood. (c) A metal prominent cross.
 (d) Cross stone inspired by infinite plait. (e) A Limestone monogram.
 (f) A monogram taken from the Coptic museum in Cairo.
 (g) Jesus Christ's aura, and his throne carried by the four animals.
 (h) A triangle piece of tapestry textile (the Holy Trinity symbol plant).
 (i) A Coptic Shawl of tapestry textile made of wool and linen.
 (j) A decorative frieze of the limestone from Palm fronds.
 (k) Crown column grape bunches of limestone belongs to the century 6.
 (l) A cross carved in stone decorated with wheat like rays coming out of the four aspects of the cross.
 (m) Stone ledge engraved by Lion with Cross inside wreath olive and leaf ornate plant.
 (n) Lamp shaped like a dove made of bronze decorated with prominent blades and blue bead eyes.
 (o) A bronze statue of an Eagle with opening its wings.
 (p) Piece of limestone of the Coptic Museum engraved in the form of a Cross with the fish, the symbol of Christ.
 (q) A Stone engraved of Lion amid ornate Plant.
 (r) Crown column of limestone decorated from top with two headlands of goats and a winged Eagle in the Center.
 (s) St. Georg icon who Known in Egypt as Mar Girgis, the Dragon appears in the below of the Figure as a symbol of evil.
 (t) The Coptic saint Tadros Alshtabi who challenged the devil in Dragon shape.



Figure (2)

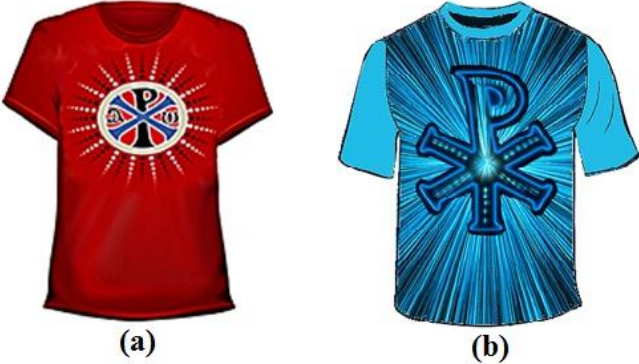


Figure (3)



Figure (4)



Figure (5)



(a)



Figure (6)



Figure (7)