Coptic Manuscripts are the written records left to us by our forefathers, the Christians of Egypt. Each provides a unique picture as well as a window to view the past. No published text of such manuscripts can reflect that by its mere transcription of the texts included in them. Along with their all-important textual content, one can also observe art, life, history, and even the thoughts of our forefathers. Much of these cultural treasures made their way outside of Egypt. Several manuscripts became prey at times to fire, world wars, and the oblivion of the vaults of the private collectors.

Form:

Manuscripts have come to us in two forms:

- **Codex:** This is the book-format, which was probably invented by the early Christians to distinguish their writings from the scroll format of the Jews. Keep in mind that both the Jews and the Christians in the early centuries wrote their works in Greek.

- **Scroll:** This format was rare among the Copts or the Christian in General. However, some small scrolls survived, containing Coptic Material. They are written records that can be read horizontally across or vertically down a rolled sheet.

Writing Material:
The Copts used a variety of material to record their writings. Such choice depended on the availability of such material to the writer. The material that survived the test of time was of the following types:

- **Papyrus:** As an Ancient Egyptian invention, it took the Ancient World by storm. It became the material of choice by the scribes of the past. It continued in use till sometimes in the 10th century. This material was used in Codex format.

- **Parchment (vellum):** The skin of gazelle has long been used for writing manuscripts. However it did not gain popularity until the twilight of the papyrus age around the 8th century, and continued in use until the early 13th century.

- **Oriental Paper:** In the 13th century, the writing world was endowed with the appearance of linen paper in the Middle East. Its manufacture flourished especially in Egypt, and due to its cheaper production cost, it quickly replaced the parchment as the paper of choice but not for too long.

- **European Paper:** In the 14th century, the Italian mills began to produce a similar but less expensive paper. This was characterized by the introduction of watermarks to distinguish the different manufacturers. Eventually this replaced the Oriental linen paper around the 14th-15th centuries.

- **Limestone tablets:** Many written records, literary and nonliterary, were recorded on limestone tablets in ink. Many of these have been discovered in the different excavations of ancient monastic sites in Egypt.

- **Wooden Tablets:** Some writings have been preserved on small wooden boards. Such practice was one of the ancient forms of writing, but rarely used in Egypt.

- **Pottery Shreds:** It was more common and economical writing material which was used
to record short literary texts or excerpts as well as letters and legal texts. Thousands of these pieces, commonly referred to as “Ostraca”, are preserved in the museums and libraries of Europe and North America.

- Animal Bones: They were sometimes used for writings in the earlier centuries. The texts preserved on bones are usually of lesser importance than those recorded on other writing materials.

Writing Tools:

The Copts utilized the material available in their environment to create ink in a variety of colors for their manuscripts. The ink was chemically prepared from special materials to which Arabic gum was added to give it a cohesive form. Monks were specially noted for such skillful practices. Wooden reeds were mostly used in writing. Many of these are preserved in the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo. Some features made out of silver have been also found. To preserve the writing reeds, pen-cases were made. They were either from wood or commonly made of leather. Some as early as the 4th century are still preserved in museums. The copyists used small pots to store the ink. Some of these ink pots were found in excavations of old monasteries in Upper Egypt with visible traced of ink in them.

Binding:
To preserve the manuscripts intact, the Copts covered them with leather bindings. This practice gave rise to a flourishing art that attained a very high standard. These leather binds were embossed with special seals to provide eloquent designs, crosses, and figures of the apostles and saints. The Pierpont Morgan Library, in New York, preserves a remarkable collection of such bindings as part of its collection of the ancient monastery of St. Michael in Fayoum, Egypt.

Format:

The format of Coptic Manuscripts indicates the date and purpose of such document. There are many distinguishing and rather unique aspects of this format. The following is some of these unique characteristics found:

- **Rubrics:** The word is derived from the Latin "Rubrica" meaning red. It is used for headings or titles of manuscripts, which were commonly written in large, capital characters.

- **Colors:** The Copts used a variety of colors in their manuscripts. The red was reserved for rubrics and the black for the general textual material. Other colors such as yellow, blue, green, gold, and silver were used predominantly for the beautiful adornments decorating their manuscripts with.

- **Columns:** The Copts have their manuscripts written either in one or two columns when all in Coptic. The one-column format was the older one. After the 7th century, the manuscripts, especially those of liturgical use, were written in a 2-column format.

- **Bilingual:** Historically, Coptic manuscripts were written first in Greek then in Coptic and finally in Arabic. For mostly liturgical functions, bilingual manuscripts were produced utilizing combinations of either of the non-Coptic texts (Greek or Arabic) with that of the Coptic. The Coptic-Greek was definitely the more ancient of the two. Some manuscripts have survived with the Coptic column written in Arabic characters.
- **Size:** It is an important characteristic of the manuscripts. Usually a smaller size manuscript was produced for individual use, whether private or ecclesiastical. The larger format was typically produced for liturgical use as a reading book, and ultimately placed on lecterns.

- **Colophon:** At the conclusion of a manuscript, the scribe writes a small concluding section. In this colophon the scribe usually affix a small prayer as well as record such information as his name, profession, place of writing, ownership, and date of completion. The information in this section is sometimes as important as the contents of the manuscript itself.

**Illumination:**

The Copts had a custom of decorating their manuscripts with a variety of designs and images recorded in various beautiful colors. Manuscripts designed for Church-use seem to have more of these decorations. Some of the major features of such decorations are:

- **Paragraph marks:** The Copts used decorative design for the initial letter of a paragraph that combined pictures with clever design.

- **Decorations:** Throughout the manuscript page one finds drawings or geometric designs in the margins as well as beginning and ends of sections.

- **Crosses:** Most of the later liturgical manuscripts are adorned with an initial full page, beautifully-designed cross. Sometimes small miniatures or birds are attached to two or the four quadrants defined by the cross.

- **Miniatures:** One of the most attractive feature of a manuscript is a full or a partial page iconographic picture. The subject matter of such miniatures ranges from appropriate scenes from the Old and the New Testament in their respective Biblical manuscripts to hagiographic representations in liturgical and literary ones. The most illuminated of the Coptic Manuscripts is the Paris Four Gospels Bohairic manuscript B.N. Copte 13.
Subject:

A variety of subjects has been included in the preserved manuscripts. The most significant of these subjects are biblical, patristics, hagiographic, liturgical, canonical, historical, legal documents, letters, astronomical, and medical.

The Gnostic and Manichaean manuscripts have become most important among scholars due to the find of Nag Hammadi texts and the Asyutic Manichaean texts. Hundreds of Scholars have participated in their study in the past quarter century.