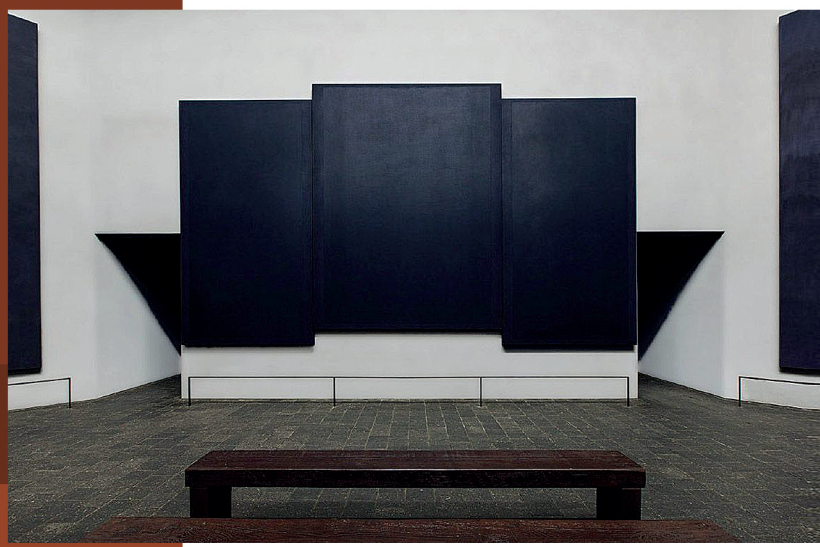
Dr Uroš T. Todorović
Ouresis Todorovich



# Byzantine Painting *through* Contemporary Eyes

## *Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision*

Foreword by Father Andrew Louth





ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ ΔΥΤΙΚΗΣ ΜΑΚΕΔΟΝΙΑΣ
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN MACEDONIA

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**Dr Uroš T. Todorović**
**(Ouresis Todorovich)**

# Byzantine Painting *through* Contemporary Eyes

*Hermeneutics of Spiritual Vision*

University of Western Macedonia 2024

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# Author's Remarks and Acknowledgements

My introductory remarks to this book are mostly related to the fact that the material included within it was completed much earlier as a doctoral dissertation and as such has been accessible to the public in printed form since 2012, more than a decade before the present publication. For a studious reader, this is rather significant, because with this information they can discern whether publications which occurred after 2012 build on or borrow from the research outcomes of the present work.

More particularly, this book has initially been written under a different title as a doctoral dissertation, which was defended in 2012 at the University of Sydney, Australia. The title of the dissertation was: *The Diachronic Character of Late Byzantine Painting: The Hermeneutics of Vision from Mistra to New York*. Since 2012 until now, the printed colour-version of the doctoral dissertation has been available in a number of university libraries. During that period, I have presented significant parts of the material included here at various lectures and conferences, as well as at a Workshop at Oxford University in 2016. It should be stressed that in terms of both the essential content and the presented arguments and outcomes of my research, but also, in terms of numerous authentic visual comparisons and authentic visual demonstrations, the present book is the same as my dissertation completed in 2012.

That said, for this revised publication, I have deliberately made technical changes and merely modified certain aspects of the content, which are mainly related to the rearranged sequence of chapters in the first half of the work. Further still, in my last and final editing of this work, comparatively speaking, I very much tended to cut down the text of the initial dissertation rather than increase it, while quite deliberately not trying to alter the obvious dissertation-like manner in which the initial work was written. In this process, the chapter related to the modernism of the frescoes at Mistra was decreased to a very concise summary of an otherwise comprehensive chapter in the dissertation.

Most importantly, notwithstanding the aforementioned minor changes and minor modifications applied in this publication, the actual date of this material being first avail-

able to the public is October 2012, when the dissertation became available in printed form and in colour, at university libraries in USA, Australia, Greece and Serbia. Therefore, all research outcomes, authentic visual comparisons and authentic visual demonstrations included both in this book and in the doctoral dissertation entail author's rights since 2012.

I wish to express my gratitude to *Kostas and Eleni Ourani Foundation* and to *Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation* for supporting my doctoral research which is related to this work. The scholarships I received from these two foundations were of crucial importance for the completion of my research. During the years of my doctoral candidature I simultaneously studied theology at the University of Athens (2008–2012), while receiving a scholarship from the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece. I express my gratitude for the kind support I received from the Holy Synod. I am also grateful to Fr Vasileios Chrysopoulos without whose assistance in that period my work would have been set back significantly.

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I warmly thank Sebastian Press for publishing this final version of my book, and in particular, I thank his Grace Bishop Maxim Vasiljević of the Western American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church for his kind interest and willingness to make the publication possible.

# Foreword

Somewhat over a hundred years ago, there occurred a striking synchronicity in the visual arts between the rise of modernism (prepared for, it could be argued, by Impressionism) and the rediscovery of the Orthodox icon (both Byzantine and Russian). This synchronicity can be characterized (if not accounted for) by these two events (or movements) having in common the rejection of a tradition, then long customary in Western art, of realism (or naturalism), the beginnings of which can be found in the Italian *trecento*. Modernism challenged this convention, while Orthodox iconography represented the tradition from which Giotto and others had departed. This affinity rapidly manifested itself in the interest shown in the icon by early Modernists, especially Russians such as Kandinsky, Goncharova, Malevich, and later, the American artist of Latvian origin, Mark Rothko. The Orthodox icon tradition had stood in need of being recovered, however, for it had been virtually lost, both literally and by being abandoned: literally, in that, by the late nineteenth century, icons in churches had been covered by centuries of soot from the icon lamps and incense by which they had been venerated, and which had rendered them dark and gloomy; furthermore, attempts to 'restore' them by over-painting could no longer follow the traditional way of painting icons, which had been all but abandoned in favour of Western traditions of art. It was the discovery of how icons could be cleaned—initially quite abrasively, nearly destroying what it had been the intention to reveal—that snatched icons from the oblivion caused by centuries of use, and revealed the brightness in their use of colour. This revelation was displayed for the public in an exhibition of Old Religious Art, which opened in Moscow in 1913, to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty. This revealed both the 'high aesthetic quality' of ancient Russian iconography, as well as 'the liveliness of its colouring', as the art historian, Oleg Tarasov, has put it.[1] In an early reaction to this revelation of the radiance of early Russian icons,

[1] Oleg Tarasov, 'Russian Icons and the Avant-Garde: Tradition and Change', in *The Art of Holy Russia* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1998), 93–99, at 97.

Prince Evgeny Trubetskoy remarked on 'extraordinary beauty and the brilliance of its colours… revealed to us quite recently'—revealed, he went on to say, as consolation for Russia, already plunged into a World War, and moving towards the devastation of the Bolshevik Revolution, for 'the whole of Russian iconography is a response to the infinite sorrow of our existence'.[2] The rediscovery of the authentic Russian icon attracted the attention of Russian connoisseurs, not least two collectors, Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morosov, who made collections of ancient Russian icons. Both came from families of Old Believers, who had preserved the ancient tradition of iconography, not least that associated with Andrei Rublev, even if they, too, had lost knowledge of the ancient methods of icon painting, leaving it to fall into desuetude. As well as collecting ancient Russian icons, Shchukin and Morosov also collected modern art, and indeed commissioned paintings by modernists such as Matisse and Picasso. Whether it was their appreciation of authentic Russian icons that had opened their eyes to modernist art, or an enthusiasm for pre-modernist Impressionism that had enabled them to see the value of ancient Russian art, has been disputed. Nevertheless, their collecting both forms of art suggests that they sensed some kind of affinity between them.

Something similar is to be found in the great polymath, Fr Pavel Florensky—equally mathematician, philosopher, theologian, and art theorist—whose engagement with ancient Russian art, inspired or nurtured by his role in cataloguing the religious treasures of the Spiritual Academy of Sergiev Posad in the wake of the Revolution, led to sustained and profound reflections on the presuppositions of ancient iconography and the metaphysical speculations about the nature of space and time and our experience of the world, entailed by such a pre-modern approach. Florensky's actual writings on these matters were only published half-a-century later and so can hardly have influenced directly the intervening period. Nevertheless, his ideas owe much to ancient Neoplatonism and may reflect a mood inspired by the revelation of icons as 'contemplation in colour'.

The rediscovery of the icon led to attempts to recover the lost tradition of icon painting, first by Russians in exile, such as Leonid Uspensky and Gregory Krug. Quite independently Fotis Kontoglou sought out this lost technique, turning, not to the Russian icons of Rublev and his contemporaries, but to late Palaiologan Byzantine iconography. Modernists themselves, such as Natalia Goncharova, made attempts at icon painting, though engagement with icons among the modernists mostly took a less direct form.

So far, it is probably fair to say, most reflection on the apparent affinity between Mod-

[2] Eugène Troubetskoi, *Trois Études sur l'icône* (Paris: YMCA-Press/O.E.I.L., 1986), 22, 46; in an essay on Russian icons called 'Contemplation in Colour' (1916).

ernism and the rediscovered icon has been either by artists trying to think one form in terms of the other, or by art historians pursuing influences, or by philosophers of art seeking to understand what structures of thought there might be common to Modernism and seemingly presupposed by the ancient iconographic tradition. If there is a common theme, it might be characterized as a rejection of depiction as trying to create an illusion of reality in favour of seeing art as a way of encountering the real, or engaging with being/Being—which was St Sophrony of Essex's quest as an artist, prior to becoming a monk.[3] It might also be said that finding such a theme and pursuing it, more than fitfully, is rare, because it requires the combined skills of an art historian, a philosopher of art, and a practising artist. It is just these skills that Uroš Todorović brings to this book, the fruit of a decade's reflection and artistic struggle since the publication of his Ph.D. thesis in 2012.

My first memory of Uroš concerns one of his quite striking insights. The original decoration of the Great Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople is universally described as aniconic (if not anti-iconic). Uroš's theory concerned the marble panels in the walls of the nave. They are not figurative icons, but Uroš argued that they are not random decoration, either. They are formed from prepared slabs of marble, carefully split and then 'opened out' (like a book), the surfaces revealed then being levelled and polished so that the shapes formed by the differently coloured strata of the marble panel face each other symmetrically. They echo the figures of the six-winged seraphim in the pendentives beneath the dome (which are later, and likely, I suppose, inspired by the low walls at the bottom of the pillars), but they are certainly not figurative. Nevertheless, they seem instinct with what one can only call meaning; they are not mute. Uroš called them 'apophatic' icons: icons that speak by denying meaning—gesturing, as it were, towards the transcendent. Sometime after reading what Uroš had written about this and talking with him, I visited Hagia Sophia (not for the first time), and saw these marble panels as I had never seen them before: precisely as apophatic, refraining from any kataphatic assertion, inducing the capacity 'of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (as the English poet, Keats, described what he called 'negative capability'), or still more precisely as apophatic *icons*, answering to Florensky's account of the role of the icon: 'Like light pouring forth light, the icon stands revealed. And no matter where the icon is physically located in the space we encounter it, we can only describe our experience of seeing it as *a beholding that ascends*.'[4]

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[3] See the works of Sr Gabriela of the Monastery of St John the Baptist in Essex, especially: *'Being': The Art and Life of Father Sophrony* (Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, Essex: 2016).

[4] Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 72.

This book takes a large theme—the affinity that has been perceived between the aspirations of modernist art and the canons of the Orthodox icon, as recovered a century ago—and seeks to explore it by looking at Byzantine art from the eleventh century to El Greco (controversially perceived as belonging to that tradition), on the way drawing in fourteenth-century hesychast theory which, in exploring the metaphysical presuppositions of the prayer of the heart, deepened the practice of Byzantine iconography (meaning by practice both the artistic intentions of the iconographers and the apophatic intentionality of those who engaged in hesychast prayer), as well as exploring the pull towards abstraction present in the frescoes of Mistra, and the way in which the depiction of Christ's birth in the cave recalls the abstraction of pre-historic cave paintings—as well as bringing the presuppositions of Byzantine iconography to bear on understanding the modernism of Kandinsky, Malevich, and Rothko—all this demonstrated with an intellectual rigour, not blunted by the range of Todorović's imagination, and with his imaginative flights supported, rather than reined in, by the integrity of his intellect.

Archpriest Andrew Louth,
Professor Emeritus,
University of Durham UK

# Dedication

In memory of a hieromonk of the Monastery of Kalenić,
Makarije Davidović Todorović (c.1849–1897)



# Introduction

What led to the writing of this book is a conviction that when science is creative it becomes equal to art, whereas when art is revelatory it becomes equal to science. But neither of these two phenomena can occur, unless through either science or art we pose the right questions. Having this in mind, we wish to pose two critical questions so that we can address them in this work both through the means of critical observation and through the means of visual analysis and visual demonstration. The first question, which defines the topic of the first part of this book, is: How would we experience Byzantine painting if we were able to view it not only through modern and contemporary eyes but also through Byzantine eyes? The topic of the second part of this book is defined by the second critical question: How could those great examples of Modern abstract painting of the 20th century, which were significantly inspired by the Byzantine tradition, be experienced, if besides our contemporary perspective we were able to view them simultaneously through Byzantine eyes? These two questions, which correspond to the two respective parts of this book, have inspired its final title: Byzantine Painting through Contemporary Eyes. In this sense, the phrase "through contemporary eyes" simultaneously alludes to the diachronic significance of the aesthetics of Byzantine painting.

Besides being based on the PhD thesis defended in 2012,[1] this book is a product of the author's innate love of Byzantine cultural and artistic heritage as well as a product of a number of years of in situ examination of Byzantine frescoes, mosaics, and icons. Through its visual analyses, it aims at interpreting the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting beyond the obvious stylistic specificities of the Byzantine artistic tradition in order to make the diachronic character of Late Byzantine painting more observable than what it ap-

[1] Uros T. Todorovic, "The Diachronic Character of Late Byzantine Painting: The Hermeneutics of Vision from Mistra to New York" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012). Note: The photographic material in this book, including the authentic visual comparisons and visual demonstrations created by the author, is the same as in the doctoral dissertation defended in 2012. Also, the printed colour version of the doctoral dissertation has been available at university libraries since 2012. Therefore, authentic visual comparisons and visual demonstrations included both in this book and in the doctoral dissertation entail author's rights since 2012.

pears to be in the existing scholarly literature. In the second part of this book, the examination of influences from the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting in the works of three great Modern painters, Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Mark Rothko, aims at demonstrating the diachronic character of Late Byzantine painting.

As it is very well known, since the Renaissance period until the late 19th and early 20th century, Byzantine art has been disliked and even held in contempt by the West. After a renewed interest in Byzantine art emerged at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, it contributed significantly to the rise of abstract art of Modernism and therein made the centuries during which Byzantine art was held in contempt seem like seconds of human ignorance. Today, in early 21st century we could say that, as a topic of scholarly discussion, Byzantine art is made rather popular.

In the existing scholarly literature there are a number of works which in various contexts discuss Late Byzantine painting but even more of those which focus exclusively on painting or mosaic decoration at particular Byzantine shrines; the majority of the latter are in languages other than English. When considered collectively, the existing publications lack a holistic approach that would present Late Byzantine painting in respect of its deeper aesthetic significance and its contemporary relevance. Nevertheless, since the publication of Talbot-Rice's book entitled *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (1968) until the present time, the field of Late Byzantine painting has become far less unfamiliar, and noteworthy publications now exist which have been translated in a number of languages. Of course, there are significant works available in English. For example, in regards to the Byzantine painting in Cyprus, there is a valuable publication by Andreas and Judith A. Stylianou entitled *The Painted Churches of Cyprus: Treasures of Byzantine Art* (first published in 1985). However, what is still missing in any language is a work that would touch on not only each of the main stages of the historical development of Late Byzantine painting but one that would also consider its contemporary aesthetic relevance, or rather, its diachronic character, through both contemporary and Byzantine eyes. As we asserted earlier, this will be the task of our present work.

We argue that scholarly investigation of the past can profoundly benefit from a creative synergy with novel ways of appropriating past artistic expression, combining both the knowledge of what happened and the hindsight of what followed. But, as we said in the beginning, this cannot be accomplished unless we address the right questions through either science or art. In posing the questions and in his/her interpretation an art historian should ideally act both as a scholar and as a re-creator of the artwork being interpreted. Professor Henry Maguire has rightly pointed out that the practice of art history be-

gins, indeed, with seeing.[2] In addition, following a creative engagement with the historical development of Greek art, we argue that one of the major aims of the practice of art history is to eventually arrive at a particular kind of seeing. Thus, the practice of art history begins with seeing so that one can arrive at a new kind of seeing. This new kind of seeing can conditionally be termed as *meta-historical seeing*. We name it *meta-historical* because it attempts to simultaneously understand the examined ancient artifacts from a contemporary point of view and through the eyes of their makers, as well as through the eyes of their epoch in general.

Accordingly, in order to begin seeing beyond the surface of the objective specificities from the past, one must firstly try to produce a new language, through which the relevant phenomena can then be articulated to others. For the practice of art history this construction of a new language constitutes a point of the renewal of methodology, and it is at this point that an art historian can offer to the audience what we have termed: the *hermeneutics of vision*. In light of this last view and given that in Art History, Modernism is the last unquestionably major event of continuing relevance, our hope is that the presented *hermeneutics of vision* shall also be understood as an artistic intervention in the understanding, contextualisation and interpretation of the art of past periods, especially those periods where similar or parallel phenomena of crisis and transformation were taking place.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to entirely comprehend the powerful impact that the depiction of a saint or an icon had on the average person in Byzantium. Whether a fresco, mosaic or an icon, it was carried in one's memory long after the veneration, it was contemplated and re-visualised in one's mind. Artists would make sketches of those examples of painting that they drew inspiration from or wanted to copy. Such sketches would then travel to distant places where they would be used upon the making of new work, and this new work would then often inspire new sketches. For a Byzantine artist, in spite of the aid provided by such sketches as well as manuscripts, the role of memory was crucial, because the *icon* is first and foremost a theological experience or a theological truth and not 'art' – the way we understand the term in our time. Unlike the abundance of easily forgettable digital imagery that one encounters on daily basis in our contemporary epoch, in Byzantine times, through its observation and contemplation, the depiction of a saint or a sacred event was permanently planted into one's memory as a seed of faith. The image perceived with eyes was ultimately carried in the mind and heart and from there it provided spiritual strength to the observer.

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[2] Henry Maguire, *The Icons of their Bodies: Saints and their Images in Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), xvii.

The Byznatine fresco-painters worked on fresh mortar, a technique known as *ἐφ' ὑγροῖς* (on wet), so that the image might be most permanently set within the church interior and thus within the memory of the faithful. After the fall of Byzantium, having understood the power of the Byzantine *image*, the Ottomans aspired to eradicate it from the consciousness of the believers. In many churches the original decoration is completely destroyed and there is no evidence of how the frescoes might have appeared. Thus, a researcher is limited to an examination only of the preserved examples, and fortunately, a significant number of those are of the highest quality and as such are able to indicate the true glory of Byzantine painting.

Before we introduce the reader to the actual content of this work, in the following paragraphs we shall synoptically outline certain perceptions of Byzantine art, as well as general developments in art, which occurred in Western Europe in the period following The Age of Absolutism (c.1610–c.1789) until our own epoch. A keen interest in the legacies of the Byzantine Empire arose in France during the 17th century. However this interest was mostly restricted to Byzantine historiographical achievements and the political theories concerning the centrality of the imperial office. In the 18th century, the movement known as the Enlightenment condemned and rejected Byzantine civilisation in its entirety. To François-Marie Arouet, better known by the pen name Voltaire (1694–1778), and to other representatives of the Enlightenment, Byzantine civilisation constituted a long decline of classical antiquity; it was understood as a negation of the Roman Empire and the name itself became a synonym for decadence. The culmination of this perception is realised in the discourse of scholars such as Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), who in his work entitled *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (published in VI volumes between 1776 and 1788) described Byzantine civilisation as a long story of decadence, decline and corruption which encompassed not only political life but also artistic expression, literary articulation and all aspects of creative activities. In their assessment of Byzantine aesthetics, scholars like Gibbon sought primarily for resemblances to classical models inaugurating thus the movement which was to be called Neo-Classicism. Because of this, the austere stylisation and hieratic immobility that characterises many examples of Byzantine art were considered as barbarous corruptions of proper and 'canonical' figurative form.

In the second half of the 18th century, the artistic, literary and intellectual movement of Romanticism gained strength in reaction to the scientific rationalisation of nature which was inspired by the Industrial Revolution; it also constituted in part a revolt

against aristocratic social and political norms of the age of Enlightenment. Thriving on the power of vision and imagination, the painting of Romanticism simultaneously praised intuition and emotion over Enlightenment rationalism. It focused on Nature as a place free from the restrictions imposed by society and social norms. This attitude is most obvious in the almost completely abstract (late) compositions of English Romantic landscape painter Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851). It is noteworthy that the Romantics, on the one hand, rediscovered the beauty of Gothic monuments, while on the other they showed no particular interest in the works of art from the Early Christian and Byzantine world, probably because of the religious themes in them.

In the 19th century German aesthete Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1807–1887) found the images of Byzantine saints to resemble mummies.[3] In essence, anything at all different in form from the Classical prototypes was not appreciated by Neo-Classicists. However, towards the end of the 19th century, a more positive perception of Byzantine art already began to be nurtured among art historians, mainly of Russian descent. The 20th century brought with it the rise of photographic and cinematographic technologies – new and innovative art disciplines in their own right – which originated in the 19th century. The rise of photography and cinematography had suffocated any objective need for realism in the practices of fine art. Consequently, this led to a need for an art that is oriented towards a different direction, in any case not towards the realistic or the romantic. More particularly, at around 1900 there emerged a tendency in Western art towards two-dimensionality, stylisation and towards the exploration of archetypal patterns underlying all forms of visual expression.

This new orientation in art, which consequently gave birth to the abstract art of Modernism, was contemporaneous with the growing interest of certain scholars in not only Early Christian and Byzantine art, but also Primitive and Archaic art. In the early 20th century, the work of Gabriel Millet (1867–1953) stands out as an immense contribution to the later achievements in the field of the history of Byzantine art. Although it was 18th century French encyclopedist Denis Diderot (1713–1784), who emerged as the first 'modern' authority to treat Byzantine art seriously, it was in fact Millet who, as late as 1916, was the first to seriously refute the unfavourable views of his predecessors, therein making an objective evaluation of the art of the Late Byzantine period possible.[4] After Millet,

[3] See: Friedrich Theodor Vischer, *Ästhetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen* (6 volumes, 1846–1857). Volume 4: *Kunstlehre. Bildnerkunst/Malerei* (Munich: Meyer & Jessen, 1923), 424.

[4] Regarding Diderot's views on Byzantine art see also the text by Professor Demetrius Constantelos entitled *The Byzantine Empire,* which is a synopsis of the Alexander S. Onassis Lecture Series (March 2002). URL: http://intraweb.stockton.edu/eyos/arhu/content/docs/djc%20archive/The%20Byzantine%20Empire%20What%20was%20it….pdf

scholars such as André Grabar (1896–1990), David Talbot-Rice (1903–1972), Robert Byron (1905–1941), Gervase Mathew (1905–1976), Steven Runciman (1903–2000), and others, have provided us with an understanding of Byzantine aesthetics rather contrary to the dismissive views propagated by the movement of Enlightenment. Critics of the 20th century, headed by Roger Fry (1866–1934), had also rediscovered El Greco and thereby contributed immensely to what was by then a growing appreciation of the true significance of Byzantine art.[5] Within this new wave of interest, El Greco was often perceived as the last great Byzantine artist. Other scholars of the 20th century, such as Cyril Mango and Charles Delvoye, have at certain instances tended to interpret the painting of the Late Byzantine period somewhat negatively, as a style that was prevented by its theological nature to follow the aesthetic standards and values of the Renaissance art of the West.

Also, certain scholars whose own heritage is Byzantine or Slavic-Byzantine, such as Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) and Leonid Alexandrovich Ouspensky (1902–1987), have perceived the painting of Byzantium with a particular level of fondness but also with a level of subjectivity. Notwithstanding the sometimes justified contemporary criticism of their work[6] these scholars have undoubtedly contributed to a deeper understanding of Byzantine painting; particularly significant is Florensky's essay entitled *Reverse Perspective*.[7] Within this deeper understanding of Byzantine painting, the significant shift towards a renewal of methodology in the examination of Byzantine aesthetics is realised most clearly in the insightful book entitled *An Aesthetic Approach to Byzantine Art* (1946)[8] by Panayotis Michelis (1903–1969). Michelis has constructed the first ever systematic theoretical basis upon which the aesthetics of Byzantine art can be approached and interpreted, as well as compared with the arts of other traditions and periods, based on Immanuel Kant's categories of the naïve and the sublime. Despite its shortcomings, Michelis' study inaugurated a new chapter in the appreciation and appropriation of Byzantine art by stressing the experimental spatial arrangements and the luminosity of hu-

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[5] In relation to Roger Fry's criticism see also: Fried Michael, *Roger Fry's Formalism*, delivered as part of the lecture series "Tanner Lectures on Human Values" at University of Michigan, November 2 and 3, 2001. URL: https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/f/fried_2001.pdf

[6] For example, Kordis mentions the fact that in their discussion of icons, L. Ouspensky and P. Florensky hardly take into consideration the fact that the Orthodox Church already has a formulated theology regarding the icon – which is the theology that was formulated during the period of Iconoclasm and is legitimised by the 7th Ecumenical Council (787). See: Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ἱεροτύπως, Ἡ εἰκονολογία τοῦ ἱ. Φωτίου καὶ ἡ τέχνη τῆς μετεικονομαχικῆς περιόδου* (Ἀθήνα: Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 2002), 17.

[7] Although this essay was written in 1919 it was first published (in Russian) in 1967. For the English translation of *Reverse Perspective* see: Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, translated by Wendy Salmond and edited by Nicoletta Misler (London: Reaktion, 2002).

[8] More precisely, the original Greek version was published in 1946. For the Greek version see: Παναγιώτης Μιχελής, *Αἰσθητικὴ Θεώρηση τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Τέχνης* (Ἀθήνα: Ἵδρυμα Παναγιώτη & Ἔφης Μιχελή, 2006).

man form that we find in the best examples of Byzantine tradition, throughout its long historical trajectory.

The progress was then observed in a number of other works which were published in subsequent decades, such as the book by Kostas Papaioannou (1925–1981) entitled *Byzantine and Russian Painting* (1965),[9] a rather comprehensive work by Vojislav J. Djurić (1925–1996) entitled *Byzantine Frescoes in Yugoslavia* (1974),[10] and a concise but thoughtfully composed book by Thomas F. Mathews entitled *The Art of Byzantium* (1998). Of course, there are other significant authors and works that deserve their place among those mentioned, and they shall be addressed later in this book. However, what concerns us at this introductory stage is the fact that, on the one hand, the publications of the second half of the 20th century commit to comprehensively interpreting the aesthetic characteristics of Byzantine art, while on the other, these works, each one for different reasons, do not explain whether and why Byzantine art (particularly Byzantine painting) should be appreciated as diachronic.

The noteworthy progress in the more recent literature is observed in J.B. Bullen's interdisciplinary study entitled *Byzantium Rediscovered* (2003), which elaborates on the 19th and early 20th century manifestations of Byzantine aesthetics in Bavaria, Prussia, Austria, France, Britain and North America.[11] Although Bullen's discussion of the Byzantine influence in Gustav Klimt's paintings is particularly insightful,[12] Bullen's study does not attempt a more comprehensive analysis of the issues which concern the hypothesis of the diachronic significance of Late Byzantine painting.

Another author relevant to our topic is an iconographer, George Kordis, whose numerous books and studies published in recent years (in Greek) collectively contribute to the understanding of various aspects of Byzantine painting. But in spite of the valuable aesthetic analyses included in them, these books do not insist on the diachronic character of Byzantine painting.[13] Further still, in his book entitled *The Character and the Reason of the Abstraction in Byzantine Painting*, Kordis argues that there is no essential relationship between the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting and the abstrac-

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[9] This first publication was in French.

[10] This first publication was in Serbian.

[11] See: J.B. Bullen, *Byzantium Rediscovered* (Phaidon Press, 2003).

[12] Ibid., 49–53.

[13] See for example the following publications: Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ὁ Χαρακτῆρας καὶ ὁ Λόγος τῶν Ἀφαιρετικῶν Τάσεων τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Ζωγραφικῆς* (Ἀθήνα: Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 2007). Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ἐν ῥυθμῷ: Τό ἦθος τῆς γραμμῆς στή βυζαντινή ζωγραφική* (Ἀθήνα: Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 2000). Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Αυγοτέμπερα με Υποζωγράφιση: Το χρώμα ως φως στη βυζαντινή ζωγραφική. Θεωρία και πρακτική* (Ἀθήνα: Ἐκδόσεις Αρμός, 2009). Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ἡ χρωματικὴ δομὴ στὶς μορφὲς τοῦ Θεοφάνη τοῦ Κρητός. Μιὰ αἰσθητικὴ ἀνάγνωση* (Ἀθήνα: Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 1998). Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ἱεροτύπως, Ἡ εἰκονολογία τοῦ ἱ. Φωτίου καὶ ἡ τέχνη τῆς μετεικονομαχικῆς περιόδου* (Ἀθήνα: Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 2002).

tion in the 20th century Modern painting.[14] It should be noted that within its broader scope our book argues for precisely the opposite.

In light of what has been said so far, it can be surmised that in spite of the tremendous progress made in the field of Byzantine aesthetics, the painting of Late Byzantium is today mainly perceived and appreciated as an artistic experience limited to the antiquarian connoisseur or the over-specialised scholar. In our view, the diachronic character of Late Byzantine painting is best demonstrated if we succeed in literally *seeing* the Late Byzantine experience in the painting of our most recent past, or even more particularly, if we succeed in tangibly observing the traces of the Late Byzantine experience in the examples of 20th century abstract painting. This of course requires not only a methodological way of seeing but also a creative way of seeing.

How should Byzantine painting be described in respect to its style? This is the question from which any studious observer should begin their enquiry. The impressive magnitude of the more recent literature, although in itself a positive phenomenon, obliges us to be particularly selective in citing a possible answer to this question. Our choice is to turn to Gervase Mathew, who outlines the four main aspects of the aesthetics of Byzantine Art, as follows:

"a. A recurrent taste for classical reminiscence, which expressed a conscious inheritance of a Graeco-Roman past;

b. An essentially mathematical approach to beauty, which led to an emphasis not only on exact symmetry but on *eurhythmos* and balanced movements;

c. An absorbed interest in optics, which led not only to many experiments in perspective but to a concentration on Light – conceived as in itself incorporeal, though finding expression in contrasted colours;

d. And finally a belief in the existence of an invisible world of which the material is the shadow – so that an image presupposes the Imaged just as a shadow presupposes the human body that casts it, and is as closely linked to it. A scene is not a mere representation of something that has once happened but a *mimesis*, a re-enactment."[15]

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[14] In particular, in the conclusion of this book Kordis states: "The observed abstract mood (in Byzantine painting) does not seem to have a connection with the equivalent tendencies of Modern painting, where the attrition of the natural form by rule serves the expressionistic inquiries and expresses beyond the form some spiritual, ideological or emotional content." Our translation of: «Ἡ παρατηρούμενη ἀφαιρετική διάθεση δὲ φαίνεται νὰ ἔχει σχέση μὲ ἀνάλογες τάσεις τῆς μοντέρνας ζωγραφικῆς, ὅπου ἡ φθορὰ τῆς φυσικῆς μορφῆς ὑπηρετεῖ, κατὰ κανόνα, ἐξπρεσσιονιστικές ἀναζητήσεις καὶ ἐκφράζει κάποιο ἐπέκεινα τῆς μορφῆς πνευματικό, ἰδεολογικό ἢ συναισθηματικὸ περιεχόμενο.» See: Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ὁ Χαρακτῆρας καὶ ὁ Λόγος τῶν Ἀφαιρετικῶν Τάσεων τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Ζωγραφικῆς* (Ἀθήνα: Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 2007), 76.

[15] Gervase Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics* (London: John Murray, 1963), 1.

Mathew's definition, as well as his related views, do not provide a thorough answer to a number of more particular questions, one of them being a question of: Why should Late Byzantine painting be regarded as diachronic? Accordingly, as we asserted earlier, the main purpose of our collective hermeneutics in this book is to make the diachronic significance of the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting more observable than what it appears to be in the existing scholarly literature. To this end, we shall adhere to a number of visual paradigms and visual demonstrations. More specifically, besides the obvious historical approach, our methodology shall consist mainly of: (a.) analyses of the selected visual material, (b.) visual comparisons, and (c.) visual demonstrations. In our visual demonstrations we shall present the photographs of certain examples of both Byzantine and 20th century painting, over which we have actually intervened in order to make the theoretical argument visually comprehensible. Therefore, as a whole, the included visual material constitutes an inseparable part of the present book.

The detailed information regarding each selected image is included on each of the pages where that image appears. We note that for methodological reasons certain images appear more than once. The numbering of images is separate in each chapter. Due to archival reasons, wherever the photograph of an example of Late Byzantine painting has been produced by the author of the present book, this is noted within the information which relates to that photograph. The actual order of the images throughout the book follows the logic which exists within the collective text, while at the same time this order is envisaged as a visual presentation in its own right. Thus, the reader can only benefit if before reading this book they examine the visual material in its given order.

In respect to the particular periods, with certain exceptions, we shall consider the influence of Byzantine painting, dating from the late 11th to the mid 15th century, on the work of the selected 20th century artists. Additionally, certain 16th century examples of Post Byzantine painting shall also be discussed, as these constitute an inseparable development of the Byzantine painting tradition of previous centuries. We note that Byzantine painting of the last phase is characteristic for its coherent and entirely elaborate system of constructing the composition, as well as for integrating the specific segments within its composition in a manner which is rhythmical, flawless and which at points, due to the narrative dimension, even has cinematographic and scenic qualities.

More particularly, with the commencement of the Palaiologan period (1261–1453) the traditionally employed red margin between fresco compositions is used far less often, and the figure of a depicted personage is often repeated within a single composition which comprises two or more related themes that follow one another in sequence – as seen in *image 41* in our chapter on El Greco, showing: *Deposition* followed by *Lamenta-*

*tion* in the narthex of Vatopaidi. The Byzantine painters arrived at such a cinematographic character of the composition, as well as at a number of other aesthetic characteristics, not by making sudden and radical innovations, but through a gradual and centuries-long process of subtly enriching the conventions of the existing tradition.

In fact, we should note that although the painting style before the period of Iconoclasm was coherent, it is only in the periods following Iconoclasm, from 843 and thereafter, that Byzantine painting acquired its stylistic and aesthetic completeness – which subsequently led to the emergence of the style which is today often termed as 'Palaiologan Renaissance.'[16] Although we shall mainly be discussing those examples of Byzantine painting which have been completed between the 11th and 16th century, special attention shall be given to Palaiologan painting, which regards the period between the liberation of Constantinople from the Crusaders (1261) and the final fall of the Byzantine Empire (1453). Therefore, our primarily aesthetic approach in the present book does not aspire to provide a comprehensive history of Late Byzantine painting but aims at elaborating on its hitherto undermined diachronic significance.



In Byzantine artistic tradition, and especially from the Post-Iconoclast period and thereof, the classical sculpturality of form is not a phenomenon of secondary or purely formal significance but constitutes an experience within which the Ancient Greek *agalma* (statue) retains most of its spatial qualities in spite of the fact that from a statue it becomes an *icon*. In other words, although it limits the observer to a single view-point of itself, the human figure in Byzantine painting retains its classical-sculptural qualities and thereby also its rich Hellenistic heritage. With the pivotal period being that of Post-Iconoclasm, throughout the preceding and subsequent centuries, we observe that in its contemplated transition from a three-dimensional *agalma* to a two-dimensional *icon*, it is as if the human body enters a new kind of space, a 'fourth dimension,' and therein becomes less bodily, while acquiring a transfigured kind of spatiality, by virtue of which, until the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and well after, the *Byzantine body* remained closely associated to a sculptural experience.

This *less bodily but still of the body* artistic experience can find its theoretical roots in the most significant theological writings of the Church Fathers, such as those by St John

[16] The term "Palaiologan Renaissance" is regarded as problematic by a number of Byzantine scholars. We shall discuss the perceptions of these scholars in our chapter entitled *The Relationship between Hesychasm and the Aesthetics of Late Byzantine Painting*.

of Damascus, who observes that when compared to a human, the angel is bodiless and immaterial whereas anything that is compared to God, who alone is incomparable, is thick and of the material (including the angels).[17] Certainly such theological concepts would have had a significant influence on the authors of the best examples of Byzantine art. Yet, in spite of the vast bibliography, Byzantine painting has not yet been sufficiently interpreted in respect of the theological ideas and concepts which contributed to its overall formation. Instead, in respect of the Late Byzantine period, which constitutes a period of the most significant achievement in the realm of Byzantine painting, scholars of the 20th century were mostly interested in Western influences and in the relationship between Byzantine and Renaissance painting.

The first part of the book comprises three chapters. In our first chapter entitled *From El Greco to His Byzantine Predecessors* we aim at presenting the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting in a new light. More particularly, this chapter elaborates on a number of complex aesthetic problems, and on the answers the Late Byzantine artists gave to them, in order to provide a deeper level of understanding the characteristics of Late Byzantine painting. Particular emphasis is given on the following phenomena: (a.) realism in Late Byzantine painting, (b.) tendency towards abstraction, and (c.) transcendental mood of compositions.

The second chapter entitled *The Relationship between Hesychasm and the Aesthetics of Late Byzantine Painting,* assesses the significance of the influence of Hesychasm on Byzantine fresco painting of the 14th and 15th century. This study aims at contributing to the previous research undertaken on the related topics.

In our third chapter entitled *Modernism of the Frescoes of Mistra*, we focus mainly on a few selected frescoes rendered in the medieval city of Mistra. That said, it should be mentioned that the frescoes in the churches of Mistra collectively embody a stylistic variety most representative of the main currents and innovations which occurred between the late 13th and mid 15th century.[18] As implied in the title of this brief chapter, certain comparisons are made between the selected frescoes of Mistra and 20th century

[17] In particular, St John of Damascus states: «Ἄγγελος τοίνυν ἐστὶν οὐσία νοερά, ἀεικίνητος, αὐτεξούσιος, ἀσώματος, θεῷ λειτουργοῦσα, κατὰ χάριν ἐν τῇ φύσει τὸ ἀθάνατον εἰληφυῖα, ἧς οὐσίας τὸ εἶδος καὶ τὸν ὅρον μόνος ὁ κτίστης ἐπίσταται. Ἀσώματος δὲ λέγεται καὶ ἄυλος, ὅσον πρὸς ἡμᾶς· πᾶν γὰρ συγκρινόμενον πρὸς θεὸν τὸν μόνον ἀσύγκριτον παχύ τε καὶ ὑλικὸν εὑρίσκεται, μόνον γὰρ ὄντως ἄυλον τὸ θεῖόν ἐστι καὶ ἀσώματον.» See: Δαμασκηνοῦ Ἰωάννου. *Ἔκδοσις ἀκριβὴς τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως*. Μετάφραση: Νικόλαος Ματσούκας (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Πουρναρά, 2009), 100.

[18] In our PhD thesis there is a comprehensive chapter related to frescoes of Mistra.

Uros T. Todorovic, "The Diachronic Character of Late Byzantine Painting: The Hermeneutics of Vision from Mistra to New York" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012).

abstract painting. The entire first part of this book focuses more on the frescoes than on the icons, mainly because in the existing scholarly work attention is notably directed in favor of the icons.

We then leave the Late Byzantine period and enter directly into the 20th century in order to examine how the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting became creatively transplanted within the realm of the Modern experience. The three chapters of the second part of this book are committed to the work of three major 20th century abstractionists: (a.) Vasily Kandinsky, (b.) Kazimir Malevich and (c.) Mark Rothko respectively. The common criterion for the selection of these painters is the fact that the Byzantine element in their work constitutes an influence of essential importance.

Of course, there are a number of other 20th century artists who found inspiration in Byzantine art, such as French painters George Roualt[19] (1871–1958) and Henri Matisse (1869–1954). Matisse visited Russia in 1911 and believed that the study of the theory and technique of iconography was of great significance for contemporary art.[20] In relation to this experience, Matisse also stated: "You surrender yourself that much better when you see your efforts confirmed by such an ancient tradition. It helps you jump over the ditch."[21] Thus, in his essay entitled *Matisse and Russian Icons: The Metaphysics of Pictorial Space*, James Patrick Reid rightly observes: "It is not wrong to say that the icons influenced Matisse; but it is truer, and more to the point, to say that they confirmed his originality."[22] To the best of our knowledge, a statement this strong has not been made in regards to the relationship of Byzantine aesthetics to the painting of Kandinsky, Malevich or Rothko. The exception to this is the overall argument of the book entitled *The Byzantine Malevich*, written by Yannis Ziogas (Athens, 2000); we shall discuss this book later in regards to Malevich's painting. Also, the book by Andrew Spira (2008), entitled *The Avant Garde Icon: Russian avant-garde art and the icon painting tradition*, explores the complex and intricate role that icons have played in the development of avant-garde

[19] David Talbot-Rice, *The Appreciation of Byzantine Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 39.

[20] See: John Stuart, *Ikons* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 23.

[21] Jack Flam, ed. *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 178.

[22] Reid then continues: "A certain kinship can be noted between ancient icons and Matisse's paintings even before the artist visited Russia. *The Painter's Family* was finished just before Matisse left for Moscow in October, 1911; yet the brilliant reds and black – and white checkerboard patterning are already reminiscent of icons. Matisse had very likely seen icons in 1906 in the exhibition organized by Sergei Diaghilev as part of the Salon d'Automne, and was probably familiar with more examples of iconography through reproductions. Interest in icons was 'in the air' at that time. The 1911 Salon des Independants included works by several contemporary Russian artists working in a neo-Byzantine or archaic style; Guillame Apollinaire said they seemed to have 'fooled the centuries.' Painters and patrons of contemporary art in Russia at this time, like Riabushinskii and Oustrukhov, collected icons." URL: http://www.sacredpaintings.org/matisse-and-russian-icons

art in Russia. Although Spira discusses the work of Kandinsky and Malevich, his approach is rather different from ours and we elaborate extensively on that difference in the appendix of this book.

In the view presented here, given that Kandinsky, Malevich and Rothko are among the most significant 20th century painters, Byzantine influences in their painting should be taken as the starting point for a serious reconsideration and indeed a re-evaluation of their whole artistic effort and enduring achievement. So far, these influences have been somewhat underappreciated and even ignored by certain scholars. Such gaps of the existing literature should be rectified, especially if we consider the renewed interest in Byzantine art which occurred at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

Lastly, in its overall perspective this book also takes into consideration one obvious but rather undermined level of relevance of the Late Byzantine painting to our contemporary epoch. Being directed explicitly towards the otherworldly and the cosmic, the aesthetics of Byzantine art entails an experience most relevant to our century – which itself is consumed by the scientific interest in the mysteries of the Universe. Inspired by the teachings of the Orthodox Church, the mystagogical dimension of Late Byzantine painting does not exist merely as a didactic narrative of the Gospel events, but it actually partakes in the infinity and timelessness of the entire Creation, and therein it visually poses a number of critical questions.

# Part I

# Chapter I

# From El Greco to his Byzantine Predecessors

Through the unique style of the later phase of his painting, Domenikos Theotokopoulos, better known as El Greco, discreetly preserves the spiritual experience of the Post Byzantine tradition within which he initially matured as an artist, while simultaneously inventing his own distinct and highly original kind of Renaissance painting. At the same time, through his work he is also distinctly heralding the aesthetic values of abstract and expressionist painting, which were to emerge in the 20th century.

When artists and art historians engage in a discussion about Byzantine art or about El Greco, the truism which is often heard is that El Greco is the last of the Byzantine painters.[1] Although it has long become a cliché, this statement is not entirely true. Nevertheless, when predominately aesthetic, rather than strictly historical parameters are applied, such an assertion acquires a new meaning, as it tempts us to anachronistically approach El Greco's later work as a starting point rather than as a final point of an enquiry into the significance of Byzantine painting. It also incites us to trace the aesthetic connections between El Greco's later work and the painting of all preceding periods of the Byzantine tradition. In doing so, it is necessary that we seek not only the explicitly formal connections, as this has already been realised,[2] but more so those of an expressive kind, or in other words, those that give the mystagogical kind of life to El Greco's later work. Thus, in respect to our present consideration of El Greco's painting we are not interested in stating the obvious. We are not interested in arguing that after moving to Venice, through his very personal style, El Greco painted as a Renaissance painter but also remained under a certain influence of the Cretan tradition of Byzantine painting. Given the vast bibliography on El Greco's work, such an argumentation could hardly constitute a contribution to the field.

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[1] For example, David Talbot-Rice concludes his book entitled *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* by saying the following: "All were Greco's forerunners and in this respect, if in no other, in the spiritual, unworldly, yet wholly human character of his art, Greco may still be considered the last of the Byzantines." See: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 192.

[2] We shall discuss the relevant literature below.

Our hope is that the relevant analyses in this chapter will practically demonstrate that the topic of El Greco's later work is where the historical and aesthetic enquiry into the significance of Byzantine painting commences most properly. Such an anachronistic hypothesis is the main reason for starting our present discussion with El Greco and then returning to the work of his Byzantine predecessors, especially those of the Late Byzantine period. The period between 1204 (the Crusaders' conquest of Constantinople) and 1453 (the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople and the final collapse of the Byzantine Empire) is conventionally regarded as the Late Byzantine period. However, in the particular context of the discussion of the development of Late Byzantine painting, we often tend to make a background reference to examples of Byzantine painting from the period of the Komnenian dynasty (1081–1185), which ruled during the later phase of the Middle Byzantine period (843–1204).

As we already indicated, our analytic enquiry shall not be limited to merely formal aspects, but shall aspire to *infiltrate through the surface* of selected examples of painting – in order to unveil that which we might term as *naked content*. This *naked content* is synonymous with the unity of the artistic creation, a unity which, as Manolis Chatzidakis states, is absolutely indivisible.[3] More particularly, Chatzidakis rightly points out that the understanding of an artwork in terms of separate formal elements is purely conventional.[4] However, Chatzidakis claims to be adhering precisely to such a conventional approach, as he puts it, "for the sake of clarity of formulation and easiness of understanding."[5]

The basic scope of Chatzidakis' aforementioned text is to critically examine whether Greek (Byzantine) art explains all of the personal characteristics of El Greco's work (Byron's view) and whether it constitutes his initial root (Prevelakis' view).[6] The answer that Chatzidakis eventually provides is that in art history El Greco's case is highly unique[7] and that in his later work the significance of his knowledge of Greek (Byzantine) painting should not be sought in the relationship which can be observed among particular details, but in far more essential principles: "in the perception regarding the meaning of art."[8]

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[3] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Δομήνικος Θεοτοκόπουλος Κρης: Κείμενα 1940–1994* (Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης, 1995), 53–54.

[4] Ibid.

[5] See Chatzidakis' text entitled *Comparative Morphology: Iconography, Colour, Light, Form, Space, Proportions* included in: Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Δομήνικος Θεοτοκόπουλος Κρης: Κείμενα 1940–1994* (Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης, 1995), 53–54.

[6] Ibid., 53.

[7] Ibid., 79–82.

[8] Ibid., 81.

Chatzidakis then continues: "Then we shall understand that the Greek painting of his time has taught him the dominant value in the art of the expressive power of *style*, without having provided him with the style itself; that it taught him the value of distortion which occurs according to the demands of the style, without showing to him the particular distortions themselves."[9]

Through the above observation, Chatzidakis has progressed much further than other scholars in their understanding and interpretation of "the Byzantine El Greco." He has also provided a synoptic answer to the question of: how does the Byzantine element in El Greco's later work exist? However, as we shall see later in this chapter, David Talbot-Rice, whose certain views Chatzidakis systematically criticises,[10] also makes a significant contribution to the understanding of our present topic by, in our view, adhering to a mode of perception equally valid but simply different to that of Chatzidakis.

Of course, in view of what has been said so far, it is needless to state that the mere question of whether there are Byzantine aspects in El Greco's later work is acutely outdated. The question that we here wish to pose is the following: *how can El Greco instruct us in seeing the expressive and creative potential of Late Byzantine painting?* In this context, the most important aim of the present chapter is to present the Late Byzantine fresco painting in a new light, through the prism of El Greco's artistic achievement. Our approach shall lead us through a gradual process of comparative analyses, whereby in a manner of speaking, we shall follow El Greco down to his own artistic heritage and thus progress to a discussion of the diachronic character of Late Byzantine as well as Post Byzantine fresco painting. Although it is not our aim to provide a complete survey of Late Byzantine painting, we have divided the chapter into several sub-chapters so that the reader can follow the development of the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting (as well as Post Byzantine painting) as it occurred chronologically. With certain deliberate exceptions to that order, we shall be discussing the period from the late 11$^{th}$ to the 16$^{th}$ century, while making analytical comparisons with El Greco's later work.

[9] Ibid. Our translation of: «Τότε θα καταλάβομε ότι η ελληνική ζωγραφική της εποχής του τον δίδαξε την κυριαρχικήν αξία στην τέχνη της εκφραστικής δύναμης του *ύφους* (στύλ), χωρίς όμως να του δώσει το συγκεκριμένο ύφος, ότι τον δίδαξε δηλαδή την αξία της *παραμόρφωσης* που γίνεται σύμφωνα με τις απαιτήσεις του ύφους, χωρίς όμως να του υποδείξει και τις συγκεκριμένες παραμορφώσεις.»

[10] Ibid., 54–59.

## El Greco's Forerunners of the 11th, 12th and 13th Century

The Komnenian style of fresco painting has been an object of interest among 20th century scholars. Its finest and most characteristic examples are found in the churches of Sts Anargyroi at Kastoria in Greece (1180), St Panteleimon at Nerezi (1164), St George in Kurbinovo (1191), both in present day FYROM, and the church of *Panagia tou Arakou* near Lagoudera in Cyprus (1192). The frescoes at the church of St George in Kurbinovo constitute the new but also the final phase in the development of the Komnenian style.[11] Our first comparison is between El Greco's work entitled *Visitation* (c.1607–1614) and a late 12th century fresco at Kurbinovo, depicting *The Meeting of Mary and Elizabeth.* The analogies are very obvious in view of the position of the bodies but also in view of the overall arrangement of the composition. The reciprocal and clearly schematic entanglement of the hands between the two figures in the scene at Kurbinovo (*image 1*) can be understood as reinvented by El Greco in *Visitation* – where each figure places its one palm on the shoulder of the other figure (*image 2*). In El Greco's *Visitation* the contours of the drapery which divide the figures (in the middle) have a multiple role, as they seem to simultaneously bring the figures together into a spontaneous kind of unity – reminiscent of the effect of lightning.[12] In the scene at Kurbinovo, the unity is emphasised through the strict symmetry of movement between the two figures and through the drawing which leaves no doubt that the movement of the one figure is mirrored (with almost mathematical precision) in the other.

It is noteworthy that despite the seeming inflexibility of form the two figures at Kurbinovo are not touching the ground with their feet but are suspended in air. In El Greco's *Visitation* the figures are not suspended in air, but despite that, the effect of weightlessness is achieved through the dynamic rendering of the masses of drapery – which remind more of 'dancing flames' than of clothing. In the scene at Kurbinovo, the architectural features in the background serve as a setting for the symmetrical arrangement of the composition; thus the two figures are centralised by the architectural features depicted on the left and right. In El Greco's *Visitation*, the figure on the left comes out of a doorway to greet the other figure, while there are no architectural features on the right. However, the composition of *Visitation* is depicted within a drawn circle, which emphasises the symmetry and can be understood as a halo of its own kind.

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[11] Vojislav Djurić, *Vizantijske Freske u Jugoslaviji.* Drugo izdanje (Beograd: Jugoslavija, 1975), 14.

[12] Marina Lambraki-Plaka observed this "lightning" effect in El Greco's painting: "White flashes strike from the 'metallic' folds as if they were lightning." See: Marina Lambraki-Plaka, *El Greco: ο Έλληνας / the Greek* (Kastaniotis Editions, 1999), 52.

The task of our comparison was not to determine or prove that El Greco based his *Visitation* on some Cretan version of the scene at Kurbinovo – although of course we do not exclude such a possibility. The following comparisons shall be similar in this regard. What we wish to focus on through these comparisons is the actual potentiality of El Greco's later work to absorb and thus embody the Byzantine painting experience – without implying that El Greco had a particular Byzantine model in mind when he painted each of these works.

Female portraits require special attention in El Greco's painting. They often express an exalted spiritual state where the gestures of hands aim to stress the sanctity of the depicted moment. For example, such is the portrait of *The Repentant Mary Magdalene with the Cross*, shown in *image 3*. Notwithstanding the obvious Western style of these portraits, their unassuming Hellenistic aspects seem to be the catalyst for their otherworldly aura. For example, this can be observed to an extent in the characteristic, intensely meditative gaze of the eyes in such portraits, which seems to lead back to the burial portraits of Fayum. The famous Fayum portraits, from the Fayum region in Egypt, such as the one shown in *image 5,* date between the 1st and the 3rd century AD and are justly considered as an aesthetic predecessor of Byzantine portraiture.

For example, dating to the late 7th and early 8th century, the portrait, probably of *St Elizabeth* in the church of Ekatontapyliani on the island of Paros in Greece is one of many fine examples of the continuous intrinsic influence of the Fayum portraits in Byzantine painting (*images 4* and *6*). The notably exaggerated and schematised almond-shaped eyes of *St Elizabeth* and her small silence-imbued lips are coupled with a wondrous expression which is both humanistic and spiritual. This portrait may be considered as an irregularly early example of the first phase of Byzantine humanism.

Our visual comparison can now extend further, incorporating also another two examples of female Byzantine portraits, from the 9th and 13th centuries respectively, as well as a selected female portrait by El Greco, dated between 1587 and 1596. In particular, five portraits are juxtaposed: a *female portrait* from the Egyptian region of Fayum, *St Elizabeth* from Ekatontapyliani, *Mother of God* from the conch of the apse of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, *The Virgin* from the mosaic of *Deesis* in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, and *The Repentant Mary Magdalene with the Cross* by El Greco. Despite the obvious differences among these portraits, the emphasis which is given to the gaze of the eyes connects them in quite a unique and mystagogical way. In the comparison between the *Virgin* from the mosaic of *Deesis* (*image 8*) in Hagia Sophia and *The Repentant Mary Mag-*

*dalene with the Cross* (*image 9*) we observe a distinct similarity not only in the gaze of the eyes but also in the bowing of the heads in reverence: it is almost as if a single person was rendered twice in the same position – but simply in two different periods and in different techniques and styles.

With Constantinople being the main centre of artistic activity, the developments in Byzantine painting of the late 11th and early 12th century eventually led to the formation of a characteristic style, which David Talbot-Rice, in order to avoid the use of the more complicated and difficult word Renaissance, rightly termed the *Revival* style.[13] An interruption occurred with the Crusaders' conquest of Constantinople in 1204, upon which the artists had to flee to other places of the Byzantine Empire. Thus, due to the movement of artists, as well as due to the major commissions outside the empire (mainly in medieval Serbia), by the late 13th century the *Revival* style of Byzantine painting was effectively universalised. In the following paragraphs we shall follow only a very basic line of the developments which occurred between the late 11th and the late 13th century, so that we can focus on the aesthetic analyses of the representative examples of each distinct phase and compare these to El Greco's later work.[14]

We start with the church of Daphni, near Athens, which contains groups of mosaics that were most likely rendered in different periods (roughly in the late 11th century). The monumental character of the scene of *Crucifixion* at Daphni is subtly complemented by the discreetly expressed emotions of the three portrayed figures (*image 10*). The lamenting Mother of God is positioned to the left and holds a stature reminiscent of a colossal ancient sculpture. On the right, the figure of Saint John the Theologian discreetly points with a hand gesture towards the crucified Christ in the middle; whilst standing in a classical *contrapposto* position, with clothes that, much like the clothes of the mother of God, mimic the rendering of drapery in Classical Greek sculpture. The head of the crucified Christ is bent to His right side while His figure is in the strict centre of the composition. Admittedly, many later Byzantine examples of Crucifixion could be compared much more successfully with El Greco's rendering of the same theme. Although in terms of style the Crucifixion at Daphni is not very similar to El Greco's renderings of Crucifixion, such as the one shown in *image 11*, a basic connection can be observed in the iconic frontality to which El Greco adhered throughout his entire development. This significant phenomenon shall be encountered again.

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[13] David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 31.

[14] For a more comprehensive insight into the phases of painting of this period see Talbot-Rice's chapters, *The Twelfth-Century Renaissance in Byzantine Art* and *Byzantine Painting in the Thirteenth Century*, in: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 9–37, 39–56.

Although El Greco's mature style of painting does not aim to simply copy the kind of distortions characteristic of Byzantine painting, with a certain degree of creativity in one's perception, some distortions of human form, which are typical of El Greco's mature style, can be related to the distortions found in the Byzantine painting of the 11th, 12th and 13th century. We provide here an example (*images 15* and *16*) where we have placed the hand of *Christ the Pantokrator* at Daphni next to a hand painted by El Greco – which is a detail of his painting entitled *Saint Ildefonso*. In view of this comparison the argument is that the Byzantine analogy detected in El Greco's rendering of the hand is a phenomenon which owes to El Greco's conscious intention to reinvent his (Byzantine) artistic heritage. The fast and decisive brush work and the elongated fingers of *Saint Ildefonso* amount to a stylized form clearly comparable to Christ's hand shown in *image 15*.

In order to test this hypothesis in El Greco's other paintings, next to the other hand of the Christ at Daphni (*image 17*) we placed a hand of El Greco's *Mary Magdalene* (*image 18*) as well as a hand from his work entitled *The Knight with a Hand on his Chest* (*image 19*). Here, due to a higher level of realism of the hands painted by El Greco, one could dispute the hypothesis easier than in the previous example – but the similarity nevertheless remains visible. The depiction of two fingers closely joined together, in hands which are touching the chest (*images 18 and 19*) is a motif all too reminiscent of the Pantokrator's hand which holds a book close to His chest. We should emphasise that in spite of the fact that in our comparisons we give attention to certain details of form, we do so in order to explain the particular psychology of style which is common to both El Greco and the discussed examples of Byzantine painting, and not in order to simply argue that El Greco struggled to liberate himself from the Byzantine experience or that he arrived at his mature style by simply reinventing that experience. Thus, although any further analyses will continue to address certain formal aspects of the selected examples of El Greco's painting, the main aim of these is to reveal the existence of a Byzantine El Greco beyond the realm of form.



Towards this end, selected representative examples of Byzantine painting of the 12th and 13th century could be studied. The Nerezi church, built in 1164, during the Komnenian dynasty, is of small size, and within its interior intriguingly elaborate compositions are found. As observed by David Talbot-Rice, given their metropolitan style and their clear distinction from most other frescoes of that period in the regions of FYROM, Greece,

Serbia and elsewhere where more provincial qualities are apparent, the frescoes at Nerezi must have been rendered by an artist from Constantinople.[15]

In the depiction of *Lamentation* at Nerezi (*image 21*), the drama of the biblical event is most directly conveyed through the expressive manner of the drawing. Although embraced by the Virgin, and by a male figure (possibly St Peter) to the far right, Christ's body appears to be self-suspended in air. The contours of the landscape appear to echo around the upper part of Christ's horizontally placed body, while from above, the deep blue sky seems to be gradually pressing down on the rest of the composition. The line of the horizon flows uninterruptedly from the far left, and rhythmically corresponds with the halo and the contours of the embracing Virgin. One of the crucial features of this fresco is the continuation of the line of Christ's left arm into the line that outlines the bent back of St John. More particularly, as seen in *image 20*, Christ's hand is venerated by the bowing figure of St John (to the right), and the flow of the line of Christ's hand is clearly continued into the contour of St John's curved back, eventually leading to the portraits of the two bowing figures to the far right.

Although lifeless and loose, in *Lamentation* at Nerezi, Christ's body initially appears to the observer as laid on some kind of a horizontal platform. This illusion is owed to a rather stiff rendering of the horizontally stretched white drapery beneath Christ's body. In this way, the painter has implied that the burial is the next event of the narrative. This effect is further enhanced by the overall gravity of the composition, which instructs the spectator's vision to keep focusing on the lower part of the scene, where Christ's lifeless body is parallel with the horizontal red margin – which marks the lower end of the composition. The distinctly horizontal position of Christ's body also assists the mechanism of the visual narrative, where in a linear succession the rest of the figures convey different levels of a personal relationship with the sacrificed Christ. Such textual reading might start from the left, with the most intimate sorrow of the mother of God, and then continue to the right, where Saint John is bowed with reverence, and then extend to the two figures on the far right – one of which holds Christ's feet in fear and sadness. The female figure which can be discerned on the far right is probably that of Mary Magdalene.

Thus, in the scene of *Lamentation* at Nerezi the eye of the spectator is seamlessly guided by the eurhythmos of the drawing, as the contours of all major features systematically and dynamically connect the expressive portraits, which, in a manner of speak-

[15] David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 30. Talbot-Rice states: "Similarities to the frescoes at Nerezi are found in the fragmentary evidence at Djurdjevi Stupovi in Serbia (1168) and to some extent at Bačkovo in Bulgaria. The metropolitan style of Byzantine painting had by this stage reached Russia, where it subsequently acquired a unique kind of expression." See also: Ibid., 35.

ing, function as significant *stations* within the composition. Even the faces of angels in the upper section of the composition communicate a personal relationship with the drama at hand. Thus, if we focus exclusively on the flow of the lines and the expression of the faces within this composition, we see that the touching heads, of Christ and Virgin, emit their intimate sense of drama through the linear connection of Christ's left arm and the contour of St John's back.

This distinctly narrative function of the main contours, as well as the iconic frontality, can be observed in the same theme rendered by El Greco – shown in *image 22*. In the same work we also observe that the Virgin's left hand, which holds Christ's body, and Christ's left hand, which is held in reverence by Mary Magdalene, are inter-crossing in the same way as in the scene of *Lamentation* at Nerezi. Just like at Nerezi, in El Greco's work Christ's body is rendered almost as if it is envisaged within a theatrical stage – strictly in relation to the observer. It is important to note that this particular criterion of the structure of the composition has its oldest roots in Egyptian relief and painting.

Although, in 1204, the Byzantine Empire was effectively defeated, a number of Greek states had formed on the outskirts of the Latin occupied territories.[16] These, still Greek controlled regions, such as the state of Nicaea,[17] the town of Arte of the Epirus Despotate, the city of Mistra of the Morea Despotate, and the city of Trebizond in its own region, attracted the artists who fled from the occupied Constantinople. The migration of artists was also directed to the neighbouring Serbia and Bulgaria, as well as to South Italy. Thus, with Constantinople being no longer the centre of artistic activity, the high level of skill which was achieved during the previous centuries in the capital of the Byzantine world was gradually passed on to the wider Balkans – and this has undoubtedly influenced the development of distinct trends and schools in the subsequent centuries.[18]

The persistence of linearity is one of the main characteristics of the 13th century Byzantine painting in the Balkans. As it can be seen in *image 23*, the painter of the *Crucifixion* at Studenica in Serbia displays a very soft approach to form, propagating therein a delicate blend of classical stature and the subtle humanistic expressiveness of the faces.

[16] The fall of Constantinople into the hands of the Crusaders (1204) had subsequently caused a curiously positive effect in the field of visual art. This was particularly the case with Byzantine panel icons, of which throughout the Latin rule (1204–1261) a number of significant examples has been produced.

[17] Also spelled: Nicea.

[18] For example, the Morava school of Serbian painting (14th and 15th century) was greatly influenced by the Byzantine painting of the preceding centuries.

Unlike in the scene of *Lamentation* at Nerezi, in view of the *Crucifixion* at Studenica the spectator is not preoccupied with the drama, but becomes attentive of the smallest of details which function effectively within a more static composition. The blue background of quite a cosmic sense is filled with stars of golden colour, where to the left side of the composition, the red morning sun represents the beginning of the New Testament, whereas to the far right, in line with the sun, is the moon, representing the passing of the Old Testament. Beneath Christ's right arm and roughly above the Virgin's head we see two miniature figures, that of the angel and another female saintly figure personifying the Church as a bride: escorted by the angel the Church is receiving blood and water (in a chalice) from a pierced torso of Christ's crucified body. The analogous miniature personification of the Synagogue is depicted as being escorted out of the composition by another angel – to the far right.

The frescoes at the monastery of Mileševa in Serbia, are most clearly the work of the 13th century Greek painters trained in one of the main imperial centres: Constantinople, Nicaea or Thessaloniki. These artists were most probably trained in the technique of mosaic. As observed by Vojislav Djurić, they were able to realise the founder's idea of promoting the mosaic technique through fresco painting.[19] Thus, in Mileševa, in the golden background which is applied in the frescoes of the naos, and in one composition above the entry into the naos from the narthex, the painters have drawn small cubes in order to mimic the effect of the mosaic. The frescoes in the sanctuary and those in the narthex have a blue background without the drawn cubes.

The authors of the frescoes at Mileševa worked approximately between 1222 and 1228. Their arrival to Serbia owed to the efforts of the Serbian king to be and a founder of Mileševa, Vladislav.[20] Three distinct ways of rendering the saintly figures are noted by Djurić to exist in the frescoes of Mileševa.[21] Near a figure of *St Demetrius*, the frescoes are signed by three painters: Demetrius, George and Theodore.[22] In our view, the Hellenistic character of the figures and portraits at Mileševa has so far been somewhat underappreciated in scholarly literature.[23]

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[19] Vojislav Djurić, *Vizantijske Freske u Jugoslaviji*. Drugo izdanje (Beograd: Jugoslavija, 1975), 35.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 36.

[22] See also: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 40.

[23] The following observations of Mileševa frescoes by David Talbot-Rice constitute a significant exception: "Yet the angel is a figure of almost classical majesty (*image 24*), and may be compared to that of the eight century in Santa Maria Antiqua at Rome, which has always been signalled out as a striking example of the survival of the classical style in Early Christian Art. In fact the Angel at Mileševa justifies the application of the term Renaissance to the art of this age perhaps more than any other figure, for in it are blended both hints of a new humanism and features that indicate a return to the spirit of the antique. The way in which the scene is shown is also interesting, for the Resurrection was

More specifically, the *White Angel* seated on the tomb of Christ appears as a classical Greek sculpture transcribed pictorially into a fresco (*image 24*). With the left hand the angel points to the empty tomb of Christ, while his left wing, although directed in the opposite direction, seems to be an extension of that movement. The pointing left hand is placed across the torso of the angel while the left wing opens into space towards the frightened myrrh-bearers (the two Marys) – heralding therein the Resurrection of Christ. The sleeping soldiers are depicted below the figure of the angel, almost as if belonging to a separate composition.

Within the organisation of the composition, the position of the angel's expressive and distinctly Hellenistic portrait[24] is not at all accidental. In particular, the seated figure of the angel is positioned in such a way, that its outer contours to the lower right roughly mark the middle of the composition, while the outer contours of the torso to the right are closer to the left side of the composition. In this way, the angel's portrait which crowns the steady axis of his seated figure is distinctly placed away from the centre of the composition and near the empty tomb of Christ, while the actual centre of the composition is where the movement of the angel's left wing starts to expand towards right: the wing in motion heralds the Resurrection which is witnessed in view of the absence of Christ from the tomb. The Resurrection of Christ is further conveyed by the full presence of the angel's saintly gaze – which is directed at the observer.

One could suggest that, the portrait of the *White Angel* at Mileševa recapitulates the entire history of Ancient Greek as well as Byzantine portraiture up until that period. More particularly, in view of this portrait we are simultaneously reminded of the sculptural portraits of Greek gods, the expressive Fayum burial portraits, the portraits in the Hellenistic mosaics, and of course, the Byzantine portraits of the previous periods. More importantly, with their pensive expression, the widely opened eyes of the *White Angel* tangibly project the existence of a concealed reality, one which is communicable only to those who see spiritually. Thus, although this portrait has its typological roots in the distant past of the Greek art, through the gaze of its eyes it becomes an eschatological prosopography that heralds not just the Resurrection of Christ, but also the final Resurrection of all believers, and indeed of the fallen human nature. Given its pronounced

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usually rendered in Byzantine art by the scene where Christ raises up Adam and Eve from the tomb, with the broken gates of limbo at His feet; the empty tomb was more usual in the West. But there are Eastern prototypes for the Mileševa rendering, as for example in paintings at Karabas Kilisse in Cappadocia which date from 1061." See: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 41.

[24] By using the term Hellenistic, in this particular instance we are referring to the style of portraits of the Hellenistic mosaics. In other instances we use the term Hellenic in order to refer to phenomena which relate to the aesthetics of the Ancient Greek art in a broader sense.

Hellenistic quality it could also justly be speculated that this portrait is partly inspired by an expectation of the resurrection of Greek Constantinople from the tyranny of the Latin Crusaders.

In 1261, Mihail VIII Palaiologos liberated Constantinople, and subsequently, the city of Constantine was again made into a cultural centre of artistic activity.[25] In the decades following the liberation of Constantinople, as we shall later elaborate in more detail, a more refined processing in the rendering of form and in the treatment of colour was the result of a new wave of interest in Classical Greek and Hellenistic art. The costumes were painted more graciously, the architecture in the background was also given more attention and acquired a certain illusory appearance, whereas the treatment of the landscape became more fluid and imaginative. Thus, the liberation of Constantinople strengthened the artists' interest in what might justly be termed as Hellenistic aesthetics.

The frescoes at the Monastery of Sopoćani in Serbia, completed by Greek painters (c.1265) shortly after the liberation of Constantinople, are the earliest preserved example of this new revival of classical form in Byzantine painting. Just like in Mileševa, in the golden background of the frescoes at Sopoćani, we again encounter a series of inter-crossing lines which aim at mimicking the mosaic cubes.

The frescoes at Sopoćani are of a more progressive style than those of Hagia Sophia at Trebizond (c.1260), which should be given special attention in a separate study. A careful but decisive transition from the conventions of the Komnenian painting towards the yet to be style of the Palaiologan painting is what makes the frescoes at Sopoćani so characteristic and historically so important. Their uniqueness can be discerned even when we compare them to examples of frescoes which were completed much after the rule of the Komnenian dynasty (1081–1185). For example, when compared to the figure of the *White Angel* at Mileševa (c.1222–1228, *image 24*), the figures of apostles in the apse of Sopoćani, as well as the figures in the *Dormition of the Virgin* at Sopoćani (*image 28*), display a more decisive, even formulaic classicism of form. Also, as seen in *image 25*, besides the classical rendering, the painter quite deliberately imbues the figures with rhythmic motion that adheres to volumetric balance and symmetry. More particularly, as seen in *image 25*, with its overall body movement, the figure on the left almost mirrors the figure on the right – and the slight difference between their stances is what provides these figures with an organic kind of unity and rhythmic dynamism. As seen in *image 26*, the head of the apostle to the right is in parallel motion with the heads of apostles in

[25] More particularly, it was general Alexios Strategopoulos who on the 25th of July 1261 liberated Constantinople from its last Latin ruler, Baldwin II.

the background, while the head of the apostle to the left is bowed in the opposite direction; in this way, the painter makes sure that there is no monotony in the flow of the movement. Also, in the figure to the left, the *contrapposto* stance is clearly derived from the classical Greek forms. Our drawing over the photograph of this detail of the *Dormition of the Virgin* also aims to demonstrate the existence of the musical kind of flow of the invisible intersecting currents which the stances and gestures of the depicted figures rhythmically follow.

That which is most important here is the fact that the painter most decisively treats the line as rhythm and colour as harmony. In fact, the lines as rhythmic currents interrelate throughout the entire composition of the *Dormition of the Virgin.* The figure of Christ holding the Virgin's soul is the central axis of this scene, and it is from this axis that the rest of the composition musically expands to both sides in quite a symmetric and reciprocal manner. Our two drawing-interventions on top of the photograph of this fresco (*images 27* and *29*) demonstrate that there is simultaneously a circular-kind of expansion and a recession of the entire composition – one which is particularly atmospheric and very similar to the sound produced by a church bell: both expanding from and retreating back to its source. If this effect is considered independently from the existent depictions of human form, the composition of the *Dormition of the Virgin* can become quite reminiscent of examples of abstract paintings, such as those by Vasily Kandinsky. Of course, the abstract qualities and the associations with music observed in Late Byzantine painting are not aspects simply owed to some unprecedented experimentation conducted by certain artists, but are a product of a centuries-long developing tradition and an explicitly liturgical purpose of this art.

George Kordis, an iconographer, has contributed to the contemporary understanding of certain related phenomena with his book entitled *In Rhythm* (*Ἐν ῥυθμῷ*), although the scope of his study is not to incorporate an examination of the possible relationship of the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting to Modern, abstract art of the 20th century. In another study, which does compare the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting to the 20th century abstract painting, the basic view presented by Kordis is rather one-sided. In particular, in his book entitled *The Character and the Reason of the Abstraction in Byzantine Painting,* Kordis concludes that the aspect of abstraction in Byzantine painting does not seem to have connection with analogous tendencies of Modern, abstract painting of the 20th century.[26] As we have already noted in the introduction,

[26] More particularly, Kordis states in the conclusion of his book: "The observed abstract mood (in Byzantine painting) does not seem to relate to the analogous tendencies of Modern painting, where the attrition of the natural form serves by rule the expressionistic inquiries and expresses beyond the form some spiritual, ideological or emotional

within its broader scope our book argues for precisely the opposite, especially in the last three chapters, where we adhere to the systematic analyses of the relevant visual material.

In view of the earlier discussed eurhythmic "musicalisation" of the classical sculptural form (at Sopoćani), we might argue that the sculptural or three-dimensional representations of saints were not exactly forbidden per se in Byzantine art, but that they were actually transcended by a reality of a new, exalted kind of sculpture – one that has to do more with musical vibrations of light in space than with mere narrative depictions of the gospel events. This tendency towards abstraction and otherworldly treatment of light in Late Byzantine painting are phenomena which have been given far less attention than what they deserve, as scholars have concerned themselves much more with questions concerning the Western influences which occurred after 1204.

The truth of the matter is, however, that each time they occurred, the Western influences were absorbed by the Byzantine painters into a style of painting which always remained (even in most examples of Post Byzantine painting) immediately recognisable as Byzantine. Thus, for example when we speak of levels of realism in various examples of Byzantine painting which date before the fall of Constantinople, we should not automatically identify that phenomenon with the influence of the Western artistic tradition. Together with Western influences in Byzantine painting there is the far older, embedded influence from the Fayum burial portraits which, as we already mentioned, are the aesthetic predecessors of the Byzantine icon, and which are indeed generally quite close to realism – see *image 5*.

There is, in Byzantine painting, a realism which can be understood and termed as theological realism – rather than naturalistic realism which is concerned with precise anatomy and faithful naturalistic depictions of the human form. This theological kind of realism which does not aim to depict the human form naturalistically exists also in El Greco's later work, a phenomenon which bespeaks El Greco's enduring attachment to the most exalted characteristics of the Byzantine aesthetics, while he was of course already well familiar with and well trained in the domain of realistic painting of the Renaissance style.

To summarise, the linear quality of the frescoes of the Komnenian style (such as the composition of *Lamentation* at Nerezi) and the persistence of the classical form in the

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content." Our translation of: «Ἡ παρατηρούμενη ἀφαιρετική διάθεση δὲ φαίνεται νὰ ἔχει σχέση μὲ ἀνάλογες τάσεις τῆς μοντέρνας ζωγραφικῆς, ὅπου ἡ φθορὰ τῆς φυσικῆς μορφῆς ὑπηρετεῖ, κατὰ κανόνα, ἐξπρεσσιονιστικές ἀναζητήσεις καὶ ἐκφράζει κάποιο ἐπέκεινα τῆς μορφῆς πνευματικό, ἰδεολογικό ἢ συναισθηματικὸ περιεχόμενο.» For the original text see: Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ὁ Χαρακτῆρας καὶ ὁ Λόγος τῶν Ἀφαιρετικῶν Τάσεων τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Ζωγραφικῆς* (Ἀθήνα: Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 2007), 76.

frescoes of the early 13th century (Mileševa) are aspects which later, in the early Palaiologan period constituted the essential basis for a new development, one which led to a highly narrative style of painting. Within this development, as we observed in the frescoes at Sopoćani (c.1265), a seemingly paradoxical combination of realism (of a theological kind) and a tendency towards abstraction was brought to its ultimate consummation.

## The 'Renaissance' of Palaiologan Painting

During the Crusaders' occupation of Constantinople (1204–1261) various Greek officials struggled in vain to reclaim the city. The long awaited liberation of the empire's capital is associated with a prophetic-kind of miracle. In particular, when in 1258 Mihail VIII Palaiologos stood inside the monastery of Akapniou in Thessaloniki, he heard through a "divine way" an incomprehensible word: MARPOY. The metropolitan of Thessaloniki at the time, Manuel Disipatos, interpreted this word as an abbreviation which stood for *Μιχαήλ Άναξ Ρωμαίων Παλαιολόγος Οξέως Υμνηθήσεται,* which means: Mihail, King of Romans, Palaiologos, (is) Greatly Hymned.[27] Subsequently, upon the liberation of Constantinople in 1261, Mihail VIII Palaiologos entered the city as a "new Constantine" and thereby the Palaiologan rule of Byzantium commenced – which was to last until the Ottoman conquest almost without interruption.[28]

Within this period of slightly less than two centuries, the Palaiologans re-established the study of ancient Greek literature and revived the study of classical arts. This new cultural consciousness was especially supported by the Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (who ruled between 1282 and 1328) who had a broad classical education and who gathered in his royal circle intellectuals such as Thomas Magistros (c.1270–c.1325) and Nikiforos Grigoras (c.1290/1–1360), as well as higher political officials, such as Nikiforos Houmnos (c.1250/5–1327) and Theodoros Metochites (1260/1–1332). These individuals passionately devoted themselves to the study of ancient Greek literature and engaged in

[27] Μαρία Καμπούρη-Βαμβούκου και Θανάσης Παπαζώτος, *Η Παλαιολόγεια Ζωγραφική στη Θεσσαλονίκη* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Εξάντας, 2003), 9.

[28] John V Palaiologos (1332–1391) was the son of Emperor Andronikos III Palaiologos and Anna of Savoy. At the age of nine, in 1341 John V Palaiologos succeeded his father as Byzantine Emperor, and thus remained as the official ruler until his death in 1391. However, after having fought a civil war (1341–1347), John VI Kantakouzenos served between 1347 and 1354 as a regent and co-emperor together with John V Palaiologos. Thus, technically speaking, we could say that the Palaiologan rule was interrupted between 1341 and 1354 – a year in which John V Palaiologos assumed full political power. For a more detailed description of the related events see: George Ostrogorsky, *Ιστορία του Βυζαντινού Κράτους.* Τόμος Τρίτος. Μετάφραση: Ιωάννης Παναγόπουλος. Επιστημονική εποπτεία: Ευάγγελος Κ. Χρυσός, 8η έκδοση (Αθήνα: Ιστορικές Εκδόσεις Στέφανος Δ. Βασιλόπουλος, 2006), 205–231.

discussions regarding rhetorical capability and astronomy.[29] Andronikos II Palaiologos was also deeply devoted to Orthodoxy and he applied himself to restore its prestige, which was previously affected by the inclination of his father Mihail VIII Palaiologos towards the union with the Roman Catholic Church.[30]

Therefore, in the royal court of Andronikos II Palaiologos a distinct cultural development occurred, which significantly influenced the last phase of Byzantine painting. The orientation of this era towards the study of humanities was one which combined Christian theology with Classical philology. Undoubtedly, the cultural and spiritual revival which took place during the Palaiologan rule of Byzantium is most clearly exemplified in the preserved frescoes and icons.

Most of the names of artists of the Palaiologan period remain unknown. In fact, we know considerably little of the very best of them. For example, the mosaics and frescoes of the church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki, which was founded by patriarch Nifonas around 1310–1314, are of the finest quality, yet there is no evidence of the names of their authors. In other important churches of Thessaloniki, such as St Panteleimonas, the Virgin of Chalkeon,[31] and St Aikaterini, where the best of artists must have been employed, there are only fragments of frescoes from the Palaiologan period (at St Panteleimonas these are very few and extremely small), as these churches were systematically destroyed during the Ottoman rule. Due to such extensive damage, today we can only have an incomplete knowledge of the actual achievement of Palaiologan painting.

Although the most representative examples of the Palaiologan fresco painting and mosaic were completed in significant centres of the Byzantine Empire (Constantinople, Mount Athos, Thessaloniki, and Mistra), a number of Orthodox shrines outside the empire (such as those in medieval Serbia) were also decorated by the very best of artists that the empire had in its history. We have seen the work of some of these artists in our earlier discussion of the frescoes at Sopoćani – which belong to the early Palaiologan period. Having described the historical and aesthetic significance of both the frescoes at Mileševa (which precede the Palaiologan period) and those at Sopoćani, throughout this sub-chapter we shall discuss the frescoes which were completed in the decades following the completion of frescoes at Sopoćani (c.1265).

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[29] Μαρία Καμπούρη-Βαμβούκου και Θανάσης Παπαζώτος, *Η Παλαιολόγεια Ζωγραφική στη Θεσσαλονίκη* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Εξάντας, 2003), 10.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Panagia Chalkeon (Παναγία Χαλκέων: Virgin Mary of the Coppersmiths).

The main characteristics of the late 13th century Palaiologan frescoes are the classicism of form and a distinct tendency towards abstraction. Although the Palaiologan painting at the end of the 13th and beginning of the 14th century has formally a lot in common with the painting style of the Komnenian period, it should undoubtedly be appreciated as a category of its own. The meticulous elaboration of specific aesthetic principles led the artists of the early Palaiologan period towards compositional and thematic solutions for which the bible themes were no longer the only source.

Additionally, certain depictions of human figures are reminiscent of those in everyday life, relating therein the ordinary and the vernacular to the divine and the inconceivable. The reversed or relative perspective, which is particularly characteristic of the Palaiologan painting, was in the preceding periods of Byzantine art conveyed mostly through rendering the figures which are in the backgrounds of compositions as of the same size with or illogically proportioned in relation to the ones depicted in the first plan.[32] In the Palaiologan period, the reversed perspective is most clearly expressed in the drawing of the architectural features. These architectural features, contrary to the forms in natural perspective, expand towards the distance.

We observe how the buildings and other geometrical forms are sometimes seen from more than a single angle. The architectural motifs, as well as landscape features, construct a setting for each of the scenes. Thus, in the painting of the Palaiologan period, in the emphasised reversed perspective, the lines close in towards the observer, or more precisely, it is implied that they commence from the point of view of the observer and expand into the background of the composition. In this way the observer, as a main point of reference, becomes absorbed by the blue sky in the background of the frescoes, as if merging into a space of the fourth dimension, where the body is *less bodily* than in the third dimension.

Also, it seems that the monochromatic surface of the sky in Byzantine frescoes produces a prevailing mystical effect in the overall interior of many Byzantine churches – and this is in itself a major aspect of the tendency towards abstraction in Late Byzantine painting. The narrative and by all means a dream-like character of the Palaiologan painting is undoubtedly complemented by the aforementioned effect. Unlike the painters who

[32] Mainly after the period of Iconoclasm, the reversed or relative perspective was also conveyed by placing those figures which belong to the second plan of the composition simply above those which belong to the main plan, without the naturalistic differentiation of their size. Also, generally in Byzantine painting, figures of main importance within a composition, such as the figure of Christ and the Virgin, are often deliberately depicted as bigger than those which are right next to them.

painted in the Komnenian period, the painters of the Palaiologan period often do not use the red margins to separate the depictions of the Gospel scenes. Rather, these scenes are often rendered within a sequence of a continuous narrative. For example, *image 41* shows the scene of *Deposition* and the scene of *Lamentation* incorporated within a single composition at Vatopaidi – where the figure of Christ, and that of the Virgin, appear twice within a unified composition (as do other figures of the two scenes).

Notwithstanding the vast number of skilful anonymous painters of the Palaiologan period, based on the preserved examples of painting, it can be said that the end of the 13th and beginning of the 14th century was marked by the works of 'Manuel Panselinos,'[33] Mihail Astrapas, Eutychios (Mihail's assistant) and George Kalliergeς. Their painting style is commonly termed as Macedonian school, and relatively recently Euthymios Tsigaridas named this style the Thessalonian school, as Thessaloniki was the centre from which this style sprang.[34] These artists completed the best of their works approximately in the period between 1290 and 1320/21. Of course, there are preserved frescoes of the similar style which have been completed by anonymous artists after 1321, such as the frescoes at the church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki, completed between 1328 and 1334. Also, as we shall discuss later in this chapter, the frescoes at the church of Chora in Constantinople, which were completed by unknown artists approximately between 1315 and 1320, are of the highest quality and significance.

Special attention should be given to 'Manuel Panselinos,' who is by far the most influential painter of the period at question and one of the most important artists in the entire history of Byzantine art. The name 'Manuel Panselinos' is most probably a pseudonym ascribed to the painter much after his life. His influence on other painters of the Thessaloniki workshops is believed to have significantly contributed to the strong momentum of this style of painting – a style which was to inspire the works of Byzantine painters even well after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Panselinos decorated the church of Protaton on Mount Athos (c.1290), which preserves the most significant body of his work. He also rendered the majority of frescoes in the small chapel of St Euthymios in Thessaloniki (1302/3). Other frescoes, such as those in the outer narthex of the Vatopaidi katholikon (1312), as well as a fragment of a fresco at The Great Lavra, are also attributed to him (or his atelier). Although Panselinos also painted portable icons, his style is essentially that of a monumental wall-painter. The first known reference to his work dates to the early 18th century and is written by a hieromonk and himself a painter, Dionysius of

[33] 'Manuel Panselinos' is most likely a pseudonym ascribed to this painter much after his life.

[34] Euthymios N. Tsigaridas, *Manuel Panselinos: From the Holy Church of Protaton* (Hagioritiki Estia, 2003), 23.

Fourna, who explains in his *Painter's Manual* that he learned how to paint by adhering to the style of: "Master Manuel Panselinos of Thessaloniki who shines like the moon, from both the holy icons painted by him and the lovely churches on the sacred mountain of Athos; who, ever shining in this art of painting like the golden, radiant, moving moon, surpassed and overshadowed all old and new painters with his wonderful art, as is clearly shown by the images painted by him on walls and panels."[35] The reference to the moon is owed to the painter's supposed name, Panselinos, which means "full moon."

Panselinos' style is one of broad contours and widely rendered forms. The architectural features, as well as the depictions of the landscape, are rendered with an intention to provide a specific structure to each of the compositions; these features often emphasise the reciprocity of approximate symmetry, as well as dynamically correspond to the depicted movement of the figures. Thus, Panselinos' compositions are characterised by a geometric kind of balance and motion. These compositions are never rigid, as in each case, they are imbued with the eurhythmos which is conveyed through the depicted body movements, similarly to the composition of the *Dormition of the Virgin* at Sopoćani (*image 28*). Yet, Panselinos' work is quite distinct.

The classical sculpturality in Panselinos' work is most obvious in the way the renderings of the folds and creases of the clothing simultaneously depict both the shape and the movement of the body. The delicate metallic sheen of the clothing conveys the volume and plasticity of each depicted figure, and often comes to emphasise a particular part of the body or its movement. The individual garments of each figure are rendered with three or more tones of colour. Beginning with the darkest, each of these layers is lighter than the previous and applied in a characteristically broad, yet rather calligraphic manner.

Panselinos blends the colour tones with a delicate sense for chromatic harmony. In the rendering of the plastic form he progresses from the darker tones to the lighter ones with incredible softness – which wondrously complements the eurhythmos of the clear linear drawing. Indeed, the claim that the line constitutes the rhythm while the colour constitutes the harmony in Byzantine fresco painting is most valid in view of Panselinos' frescoes. Although plastic and lucid in a sculptural sense, the drapery on the figures gives the effect of an otherworldly translucency, one which bespeaks not some kind of imaginary but a different existence of the body – the existence of a transfigured human body.

The analogies with El Greco's later work are clearly apparent in the non-naturalistic treatment of light, light which is in both cases itself corporeal (despite the seemingly

[35] Ibid., 24.

intense shading in El Greco's painting), and in the abstracted, fluid rhythm within which the human forms interrelate. However, by having abandoned the line as a means of conveying the contours, in his later work El Greco constructed the form of his figures by immersing them gradually in light. Admittedly, unlike in Byzantine fresco painting, the light in El Greco's work is depicted as cast from an angle, but the distribution and intensity of that light is far from naturalistic, in a sense that it is present throughout the entire composition. These similarities would perhaps be of lesser significance if the theological understanding of light was not one of the main characteristics of Byzantine, and especially of the Late Byzantine painting. Accordingly, in Panselinos' work, the details of certain compositions project a very particular notion of a revealing, apocalyptic light.

For example, in the composition of the *Crucifixion* at Protaton (*image 38*), Christ is presented with his head deeply tilted towards his right side. In this way the contours of Christ's head harmonically correspond with the lower contours of the chest – as if the head has dived into an enclosed area which belongs to another dimension. The horizontal line of the stretched arms is not discontinued by the tilted head, as only the hair is above this line. In other words, the upper line of the stretched arms continues flawlessly into the bent-neck area and the top of the forehead, passing therein from one arm to the other and leaving the head buried in the illuminated area of the chest. It is not unlikely that this detail is related to the influence of Hesychasm, as Saint John of Sinai (St John Climacus) writes that: "Hesychasm is the enclosing of the bodiless mind (*nous*) in the bodily house of the body."[36]

In short, that which is obvious in *Crucifixion* at Protaton, is that Panselinos, by adhering simultaneously to both a notably abstracted and a notably realistic manner, consciously exploits the motif of the tilted head of Christ and therein projects a distinctly theological meaning through the depicted bodily gesture – something that in his later work El Greco does almost as a rule. This probable connection between Panselinos and El Greco relates to the psychology of style and not its outer appearance. As such, this connection leads us to an observation of one complex phenomenon. In particular, in Panselinos' painting, the tendency towards abstraction (which is otherwise common to Byzantine painting) is most directly related to the concealed levels of theological meaning resident in his compositions. This has so far been completely disregarded in the relevant literature, as scholars have generally avoided seeing in the person of Panselinos a

[36] See: *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 27, 5 (Step 27, 6 in the Holy Transfiguration edition). For the revised edition see: Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (3rd Edition, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2012). More will be said on the influence of Hesychasm in a separate chapter, entitled: *The Relationship between Hesychasm and the Aesthetics of Late Byzantine Painting.*

creator who in his painting, besides other achievements, exceeds his own self – something that again can rightly be said about El Greco. Thus, in the following paragraphs, we shall examine more closely the relationship between the tendency towards abstraction and the theological meaning in Panselinos' work.

An in situ assessment of the frescoes at Protaton – including those in the upper registers is extremely revealing. This assessment was possible due to the scaffolding which in 2007 was in place inside the church (*images 30 and 31*). In the following paragraphs we shall discuss certain compositions from the upper registers at Protaton, starting with the composition of *St John the Theologian and St Prohoros* (*image 33*). The symmetry here is emphasised by means of a simple arrangement of the two seated figures on each side of the composition. St John the Theologian is seated on the left while St Prohoros is seated on the right, and their positions seem to almost mirror one another.

The turning gesture of St John's head towards the observer indicates that St John's enlightenment, conveyed as a ray of light shining upon him from the upper left corner of the composition, is to be shared through the contemplation of the words which come through him. With a calm gesture of his left hand he instructs his student, St Prohoros, to write these words on paper. In response, St Prohoros bows his head to the task and is presented to be writing the beginning of the sentence which reads: *"Εν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος..."* – which means: "In the beginning was the Word..." If we pay closer attention to St Prohoros' writing, we notice that his right hand is depicted to be writing the second-last letter (omicron) of the word Logos (Λόγος).

As seen in *image 32*, guided by the mystic motion of the landscape whose contours tilt from left to right, we notice firstly the *uncreated* light in the upper left corner, then the responsive gesture of the enlightened St John, and then St Prohoros, who is writing the second-last letter of the word Logos. Seeing that the word Logos is yet to be completed by St Prohoros (with its last letter ς), we can conclude that Panselinos creatively assigns the completion of this scene to the observer. In fact, just like in other examples of Byzantine painting, all of Panselinos' compositions are rendered in such a way, that they do not simply presuppose the participation of the observer, but their structure is by rule organised strictly in relation to the observer. Thus, as seen in *image 33*, in the composition of *St John the Theologian and St Prohoros*, the central place of the observer, as an imagined third figure of the theme, is insinuated by the arrangement and position of the two depicted figures. In the scenes of *Baptism* and *Resurrection* at Protaton, this reference

to the observer achieved through the structure of the composition takes on a more abstracted character.

As it can be seen in *image 37*, in *Resurrection*, from both sides of the upper section, the diagonal lines of the landscape descend towards the centre and seemingly continue behind Christ's figure into the lower sections of the composition, and thus roughly form an X-structure setting for Christ's act of saving Adam. The composition of the *Resurrection* is located directly opposite the composition of the *Baptism*, in the west part of the nave, in the forth register of the program of the north wall. These two compositions relate to one another in respect of their structure but also in respect of their narrative. In the smaller scene depicting St John the Baptist preaching to a crowd, which is incorporated as a secondary scene within the main scene of *Baptism* (the upper left corner of *image 34*), Christ appears to be inside the crowd and unacknowledged by the figures around Him; whereas, in the analogous secondary scene which is incorporated within the *Resurrection* (right side of *image 36*), the resurrected Christ appears to the Apostles in front of them – having their absolute attention. In this way, Panselinos emphasises the fulfilment of St John's prophecy, where Christ's identity as Saviour is made official through the act of Resurrection. Accordingly, the X-structure of the composition which is applied in *Baptism* is considerably more pronounced in the scene of the *Resurrection*, appearing to symbolically cross out the below gates of Hell, on top of which Christ is standing.

In the *Resurrection*, the hand of Adam is pulled by Christ's right hand, and the line which is created by this connection is most immediately integrated into the X-structure of the composition, and extends also into the landscape behind Christ. The same can be observed in view of the other intersecting line of the X-structure, which goes through the axis of Christ's torso and continues into the upper right side of the landscape. Under the conquered gates of Hell, darkness is depicted, with scattered nails, a door lock, keys, and other metal features hovering. Directly above Christ's head is a Cross with the crown of thorns hung on it. The analogous place in *Baptism* hosts a depiction of the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, above which there is a depiction of a blessing hand of God.

In *images 35* and *37* we have drawn the actual lines of the X-structure over the photographs of *Baptism* and *Resurrection* at Protaton. As a result, we realise how, when considered on its own, the observed X-structure of the two compositions (*Baptism* and *Resurrection*), which pertains to a sense of flight, can even be compared to certain abstract paintings of the 20$^{th}$ century, such as those by Kazimir Malevich, whose style of the so called *Suprematist* period aspires to convey the notion of free flight (more on this will be said in the chapter on Byzantine influences in Malevich's painting). In this respect, it

appears as plausible that Panselinos, just like El Greco, thought abstractly while rendering the compositions which depict the human form. Both in Panselinos' and in El Greco's work, this phenomenon can be observed even in view of individual figures. For example, we notice that El Greco's work *Visitation* (*image 2*) conveys the two figures almost as abstract shapes that vibrate in mid-air. The same can be observed in El Greco's *Concert of Angels (image 56)*, which strikingly reminds us of Kandinsky's concept of the "musicalisation of composition."

One of the most significant groups of frescoes from the Palaiologan period is found in the chapel of St Euthymios, a small basilica located in the southeast corner of the great basilica of St Demetrius in Thessaloniki. These frescoes, rendered most likely by 'Manuel Panselinos' and his associates, date to 1303 (according to an inscription on the north wall). Their patrons were the distinguished members of the royal court of Andronikos II Palaiologos: Mihail Doukas Glavas Tarhaneiotis and his wife Maria Doukaina Komnini Palaiologina Vranaina, who besides the chapel of St Euthymios have renewed the church of Pamakaristou in Constantinople.[37]

The chapel of St Euthymios is the only in Thessaloniki which contains a complete iconographic program designed for a proper church building.[38] Its frescoes are of great significance and their early date in the history of the new painterly style alludes to their likely influence on the work of painters who were active in the subsequent decades. The sense of monumentality with which they radiate, in spite of the micrographic rendering of the compositions (within a chapel which itself is a micro version of the basilica), makes an immediate impression.[39] We shall see below how this particular achievement might have influenced the work of other painters of the same school.

In the Palaiologan period the uniqueness of the individual talent evoked more attention among the patrons of art, and thus painters begun to sign their work – which was not a common practice until then. We know that a painter from Thessaloniki, Mihail Astrapas and his assistant Eutychios, have in 1294/5 worked in the church of Perivleptos in Achrida (FYROM).

The work of Mihail and Eutychios in Perivleptos constitutes a transitional phase of their development, which is to reach its peak in the first two decades of the 14th century –where their style becomes even closer to the style of frescoes at Protaton. As can be

[37] Μαρία Καμπούρη-Βαμβούκου και Θανάσης Παπαζώτος, *Η Παλαιολόγεια Ζωγραφική στη Θεσσαλονίκη* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Εξάντας, 2003), 14.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

observed in their rendering of *Jacob wrestles with an angel* at Perivleptos (*image 39*), even at this transitional phase, Mihail and Eutychios demonstrate a highly abstract and an almost cubist understanding of the human form. However, there is more to their style than a mere tendency towards abstraction and a pronounced sense of cubism.

In *image 40* we present a drawing which, by emphasising the basic shapes and the dynamic interdependence of features, aims to demonstrate that Mihail and Eutychios, as paradoxical as this may occur, consciously adhered to abstract solutions for the sake of clarity of human form, as well as for the sake of harmony and unity of the composition as a whole. This makes these two painters medieval *abstract realists*, and perhaps, in view of its style the entire "Macedonian school" could be renamed and understood as *Abstract Realism*.

Mihail Astrapas and Eutychios were commissioned by the Serbian king Milutin (1282–1321) to decorate the following churches: the church of The Virgin of Ljeviška[40] in Prizren in Kosovo and Metochia (renovated in 1307 and decorated around 1310–1313), St Nikita in Čučer near Skopje (built before 1316) in FYROM, the small chapel of St Joachim and Anna at the Monastery of Studenica (built in 1314 and decorated around 1316), St George in the village of Staro Nagoričino (decoration completed in 1317/18) in FYROM, and the church of the Monastery of Gračanica in Kosovo and Metochia, where they completed the work by 1321. They (or perhaps one of them) are also believed to have painted certain frescoes in the church of the Holy Apostles in the Patriarchate of Peć in Kosovo and Metochia, around 1300; but there is no evidence that can unequivocally confirm this.

In our view, inside the small chapel of Saints Joachim and Anna at the Monastery of Studenica, Mihail Astrapas and Eutychios completed the work which is as refined as Panselinos' work both in Protaton and in the chapel of St Euthymios in Thessaloniki. For example, in *image 42* we see the same level of sophistication in the rendering of the figures and the treatment of colour. Also, there is a strong possibility that Mihail Astrapas and Eutychios had seen how Panselinos managed, within a rather small chapel of St Euthymios in Thessaloniki (1302/3), to render on a micrographic scale forms which are of a monumental style – a decision which was necessarily influenced by the limitations

[40] As argued by Djurić, given the great size of the church building, in The Virgin of Ljeviška, which was the cathedral church of Prizren, it is most probable that Mihail Astrapas had worked with more than one assistant; Eutychios, who assisted Astrapas in both earlier and subsequent projects, was most likely one of them. In the narthex of The Virgin of Ljeviška there is an inscription which mentions the name Astrapas. In St Nikita (c.1316) and in Staro Nagoričino (1317/18) Mihail Astrapas and Eutychios have also signed their work. Certain scholars have claimed that the name Astrapas refers to a separate individual. However, we know that Astrapas is the surname of Mihail because he signed his work in Perivleptos in Achrida (1294/5) as painter Mihail Astrapas. See: Vojislav Djurić, *Vizantijske Freske u Jugoslaviji*. Drugo izdanje (Beograd: Jugoslavija, 1975), 49.

of the wall surfaces. It seems that Mihail Astrapas and Eutychios have applied this particular experience in their work inside the relatively small interior of the chapel of Saints Joachim and Anna at the Monastery of Studenica (c.1316). After all, both Panselinos and Mihail Astrapas were from Thessaloniki and it is almost entirely undoubted that they would have met if not even cooperated in one of the ateliers of Thessaloniki, or perhaps even worked in the chapel of St Euthymios together. The dates of their work allow us to make such a speculation.

The peculiar interior in the monastery of Gračanica is characteristic for its high ceilings and a somewhat narrow space of the naos. This prevents the observer from appreciating many of the frescoes in the upper sections. However, the image of *Christ the Pantokrator* in the dome of Gračanica (*image 55*) gazes at the observer most directly, with the austerity of the analogous depiction at Daphni (*image 13*), and the wisdom of Christ's portrayal in *Deesis* at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. *Christ the Pantokrator* at Gračanica, is undoubtedly the work of Mihail Astrapas and Eutychios. This is the most representative rendering of this particular type of Christ's portrait that has been preserved from the Byzantine epoch. The carefully rendered proportions of Christ's torso, the slow, cosmic-like motion implied in the stretched clothing, and the movement of the blessing hand, are crowned with Christ's austere and wisdom-imbued gaze. As seen in *image 55* it is as if the depiction of Christ absorbs the viewer into the actual space of the dome.

In 1315 Georgios Kallierges decorated the church of Christ the Saviour in Veria (Greece) and perhaps the church of St Vlasios, also in Veria (the painting in the latter has not been published yet). In the church of Christ the Saviour he signed his work and included a statement that he is "the best of all painters in Thessaly."[41] Through his painting Kallierges demonstrated an intense creativity concerned with the inner world. This inner world is primarily conveyed through a very particular approach to colour.

As it can be observed in the *Dormition of the Virgin* in the church of Christ the Saviour in Veria (*image 45*), in spite of depicting the figures in dynamic motion, through his drawing, Kallierges projects a serene kind of stillness. In this composition the purple-blue and red-earth nuances, used in certain features, relate the entire theme to the deep blue colour of the sky in the background. Together with the golden-colour halos, the ochre which is used for Christ's robes, as well as in few other segments of the composition, softly balances the dominant nuances of blue and purple. The overall atmospheric outcome of this fine chromatic combination is reminiscent of the ambivalent colour that the

[41] Μαρία Καμπούρη-Βαμβούκου και Θανάσης Παπαζώτος, *Η Παλαιολόγεια Ζωγραφική στη Θεσσαλονίκη* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Εξάντας, 2003), 18.

clear sky has approximately three hours before the sunrise. It seems that Kallierges consciously aspired to convey a very particular kind of a dimmed glow, or should we say, a glow which is continuously in the process of becoming. To a certain extent the dream-like effect of this glow can be related to El Greco's work entitled *Agony in the Garden* shown in *images 43 and 44*.

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The frescoes of the Monastery of Chilandar on Mount Athos, which have been completed between 1318 and 1321, are some of the finest of the Palaiologan period. Unfortunately, they have been painted over in 1803 and one can now only see some of the sections of the original decoration. Tsigaridas believes that the original frescoes in Chilandar have close iconographical and stylistic connections to those in the church of St Nicholas Orphanos in Thessaloniki.[42] Other scholars, such as Bošković (1959) and Miljković-Pepek (1967), have associated the frescoes at Chilandar with Mihail Astrapas and Eutychios,[43] while Vojislav Djurić is of the opinion that the main painter at Chilandar might have been George Kallierges, whose work we addressed previously.[44] None of these speculations can be entirely rejected or confirmed, and until the frescoes at Chilandar are cleaned, the only thing that can be said with absolute certainty about their authors is that they were among the best painters of their period and that they were trained in or had close ties with the Thessaloniki ateliers. It is also possible, in our view, that Mihail Astrapas, Eutychios, and George Kallierges worked together in Chilandar; however, this too is only a speculation.

The processional icon of the *Virgin Abramiotisa*, kept in the treasury of Chilandar, dates to 1345 and is a particularly clear example of the tendency towards abstraction being nurtured in the decades that followed the achievements of the artists such as Mihail Astrapas, Eutychios, and George Kallierges. As seen in *images 51* and *53*, a spiral expansion of the depicted forms can be detected in the way the contours of the Virgin and those of the child are rendered. It is as if while depicting Christ as a child, the painter simultaneously had in mind the creation of the World and the first words from St

[42] Ευθύμιος Ν. Τσιγαρίδας, *Τοιχογραφίες της περιόδου των Παλαιολόγων σε ναούς της Μακεδονίας* (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Πουρναρά, 1999), 27–29. Note: Certain scholars of the 19th century have wrongly attributed the frescoes of Chilandar to 'Manuel Panselinos.'

[43] In relation to these opinions see: Ευθύμιος Ν. Τσιγαρίδας, *Τοιχογραφίες της περιόδου των Παλαιολόγων σε ναούς της Μακεδονίας* (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Πουρναρά, 1999), 27.

[44] Vojislav Djurić, *Vizantijske Freske u Jugoslaviji*. Drugo izdanje (Beograd: Jugoslavija, 1975), 52.

John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word."[45] Also, the meaning of Christ's words "I am not of this world"[46] could be related to the position of Christ's head within the composition of this icon. Christ's head is depicted as almost completely upside-down, which can be understood to mean that He is simultaneously within and beyond space and time. Accordingly, as seen in *image 53*, if this icon is turned so that Christ's head looks at the observer in a normal position, the icon becomes positioned entirely upside-down. There are other examples of the theme of the Virgin with child of this particular type. We note the following two, which are most characteristic: a small fresco rendering, also at Chilandar (inside the church), and a 14th century (double-sided) icon of the Virgin "Pelagonitisa" at the Monastery of Dečani, in Kosovo and Metochia. The characteristic motif of this type of the icon depicting the Virgin with child, is the head of the Virgin being in empathic motion over the child Christ, and Her sad expression which denotes the future sufferings of her child.

The spiral expansion of form noted above, is also observed in the detail of the scene of *The Second Coming* at the church of Chora (*image 50*). In this scene the angel of the Eighth Day seems to be simultaneously unfolding and rolling-up the scroll of time, on which we discern the depiction of the moon, the son, and the stars. Thus, in the act of simultaneous unfolding and rolling-up the scroll, the earthly notion of time is transcended. More specifically, in the realm of time as we know it on earth, the Creation (Universe) appears to begin and thereafter continue its existence from a certain point – which is the basic theory of the "big bang." However, according to Orthodox theology, Creation does not actually start to exist in the realm of time, because, within the realm of God's volition, which does not have a beginning and is timeless, Creation has always existed, and therefore it is also timeless and endless. Thus, the manifestation of Creation within the realm of time is simply understood as the manifestation of God's volition in history – without that meaning that His volition ever underwent a point of changing. To put it simply, although we experience the process of changing throughout the course of history, in the realm of God's volition, things always were and are the same. Because of this, according to Orthodox theology, since not only God but Creation too is timeless, the term "timeless" remains as simply one of the many insufficient attributes that man ascribes to God. In fact, to say that God exists as infinite or timeless, conditions His existence by the notions of space and time. Saint Gregory of Nyssa thus points out the difference between the notion of *beginningless* and the notion of *endless*, and he emphasises

[45] Gospel according to St John, 1:1.

[46] Gospel according to St John, 8:23. The complete verse is: "And he said unto them, Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world."

that while all things are endless, the term *beginningless* can only be ascribed to the being which exists "without the cause" – that is, it can only be ascribed to the uncreated Creator.[47]

In view of such an abstract discourse of Orthodox theology – the principal inspiration of Byzantine painting – we deem that the angel with the scroll from *The Second Coming* in Chora (*image 50*) and the icon of the *Virgin Abramiotisa* (*image 54*), authentically speak of the tangible human experience of the mystery of the uncreated Cause of all things. Accordingly, our view is that the core of the uniqueness of El Greco's painting is precisely the authentic theological experience and content, one which can be related most closely to the dogmas and teachings of the Orthodox Church.

We should not fail to mention that El Greco's personal library included the writings of the theologians of the Orthodox Church, such as Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, who in his teachings speaks of the mystic light and the unknowable Cause of all things. An insightful and to the best of our knowledge the only observation of the connection between El Greco's work and the angel with the scroll from *The Second Coming* in Chora, although not referring to a theological meaning, has been made by David Talbot-Rice. In his discussion of the scene of *The Second Coming* at Chora, Talbot-Rice states: "Especially striking is the rendering of the scroll of heaven, a visionary conception suggestive of the mind and brush of el Greco."[48] This "visionary conception," which in fact should be termed as a theological conception, can be observed in many examples of Late Byzantine painting. We should bear in mind that the tendency towards abstraction is as such very common in Byzantine painting and can be observed both in the overall compositions and in their details. For example, *image 46* shows the detail (torso) of the figure of *St George* at Chora; here too, we encounter a spiral expansion of form towards the observer.

One of the most beautiful Byzantine scenes of Resurrection preserved today is in the conch of the apse of the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople (*image 47*).[49] The artists who painted this fresco have managed to render a particularly monumental and by all means eschatological scene on a relatively humble scale. The depiction of *Resurrection* at Chora bespeaks a final and glorious resurrection of all. With the heavenly glory depicted around His figure, Christ dressed in white is in the strict centre of this composition. To the sides the painter has arranged the figures of the kings, the righteous,

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[47] The excerpt reads as follows: «εἰ γὰρ εἶχέ τινα διακριτικὴν ἐπιστήμην, οὐκ ἂν ἠγνόησε τὴν ἰδιαζόντως ἐγκειμένην τῷ τε ἀνάρχῳ καὶ τῷ ἀτελευτήτῳ διάνοιαν, καὶ ὅτι τὸ μὲν ἀτελεύτητον κοινὸν πάντων ἐστίν, ὅσα διαρκεῖν πεπίστευται τῇ ζωῇ πρὸς τὸ ἄπειρον, τὸ δὲ ἄναρχον μόνου ἐστὶ τοῦ ἄνευ αἰτίας ὄντος.» Emphasis added. P.G. 45, 1092 C: Gregorius Nyssenus Theol., Contra Eunomium, Book 2, chapter 1, section 541, line 5.

[48] See: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 124.

[49] A writer and a very significant intellectual of the time, Theodoros Metochites, was responsible for the commissioning of the frescoes and mosaics at Chora, as well as for the repairs to the church (which begun around 1305).

and of the prophets. In the group to the left we discern St John the Forerunner pointing at Christ, while in the group to the right we discern Abel standing upon Eve's tomb.

Christ pulls Adam and Eve from their tombs while standing upon the conquered gates of Hades; the figure personifying Hades is depicted as tied up under Christ's feet. The two sides of the mountainous landscape seem to open up and uncover the abyss-like deep blue colour of the sky. The contrast between the glow of Christ's glory and the dark sky projects a particularly effective notion of the divine presence: a divine light which can be seen in the dark sky, in view of the incarnate Saviour.

## Theophanes the Greek

Before addressing the work of an outstanding Byzantine painter, Theophanes the Greek, we must take into consideration the state in which his native city Constantinople was at the time of his departure for Russia (14th century). Constantinople, as well as other significant centres of the gradually disintegrating Byzantine Empire, was no longer wealthy enough so as to provide work for all its artists. However, in terms of its outer appearance there is no doubt that Constantinople was as lavish as before, as it comprised the architecture and the artistic achievements of the previous centuries. In this respect, guarded by its protective walls, Constantinople of the 14th and early 15th century could probably be compared to an impressive jewellery store located amidst ominous neighbourhoods.

It is from a Constantinople in this state, seemingly wealthy but essentially collapsing, that Theophanes the Greek left for Russia. Approximately in the late sixties and early seventies of the 14th century he stayed at the colony Caffa (now Theodosia in the Crimea), Lower Novgorod and Novgorod. According to a preserved chronicle, before he departed for Moscow (not later than the mid-nineties of the 14th century) he had decorated over forty churches and a significant number of palaces.[50] In Moscow, between 1395 and 1405 he decorated three churches: the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin, the Church of the Archangels, and the metropolitan Church of the Annunciation in Kremlin.[51] He also decorated the state treasury of Prince Vladimir Andreyevich Serpukhovsky and the small chambers of Grand Prince Vasily I (1389–1425), also in the Kremlin. Unfortunately, today

[50] See: Κώστας Παπαϊωάννου, *Βυζαντινή και Ρωσική Ζωγραφική*. Μετάφραση: Ελένη Νάκου (Εναλλακτικές Εκδόσεις, 2007), 119–211.

[51] Viktor Lazarev, *Old Russian Murals and Mosaics: From the XI to the XVI Century*. trans. Boris Roniger (London: Phaidon Press, 1966), 154.

only the fresco decoration in the Church of the Transfiguration in Novgorod and the icons of the iconostasis of the church of the Annunciation in Kremlin are preserved. The frescoes at the Church of the Transfiguration are preserved only in fragments, which are fortunately in good condition; they date to 1378.[52]

The unprecedented characteristics of Theophanes' style have puzzled a number of scholars in the past. He was also an enigma for his contemporaries. "A philosopher of great cunning" who "uses his mind to ponder the lofty and wise ideas," and in whose work "the small detail will reveal the whole to your understanding" – are the words said by Theophanes' friend and biographer, Epiphanius the Wise.[53] The freedom with which he constructs his compositions, the wide brush-work reminiscent of the prehistoric cave painting, and a deliberately simplified colour-palette, are aspects which can collectively be encountered in Theophanes' rendering of *The Old Testament Trinity* at the Church of the Transfiguration (*image 57*). In the same church, portraits such as that of *Abel*, then *St Stylite Simeon Junior*, *St Macarius of Egypt (image 58)*, and *Stylite Olympius*, bespeak an asceticism of the painter perhaps more so than of the painted personages. All of Theophanes' portraits in the church of the Transfiguration are rather expressionistic. Particularly in the portrait of *St Macarius of Egypt* there is a highly abstract rendering of the human form, as if the painter aspired to ascribe to the saintly personage a value of a sacred kind of inscription – almost letter-like.

Therefore, in their simplicity Theophanes' portraits are quite close to expressionism and to abstraction. Comparatively speaking, they are indeed much less realistic than the portraits rendered by the Byzantine painters of previous periods. Further, the sharp brush strokes of Theophanes, the decisive manner of his drawing, and the free and broad arrangement of the figures within the composition, are aspects which, in our view, bespeak the influence of the change of the environment that the artist had undergone after leaving Constantinople.

Coming from Constantinople where there was limited room for aesthetic innovation, Theophanes must have been profoundly inspired by the broad landscapes of Russia – which in each season amount to a combination of few dominant colour-tones. Thus, for the backgrounds of his fresco compositions, Theophanes uses a neutral silvery-blue colour, for the faces he uses an earthy orange-brown similar to terracotta. The garments of saintly figures are of silvery pinks, greens, pale yellows and pearl whites, while the dom-

[52] The Church of the Transfiguration in Novgorod was built in 1374. See: Viktor Lazarev, *Old Russian Murals and Mosaics: From the XI to the XVI Century.* trans. Boris Roniger (London: Phaidon Press, 1966), 146.

[53] See: Mikhail Vladimirovich Alpatov, *Theophanes the Greek* (Moscow: Izobrazitelnoye Iskusstvo Publishers, 1990), 192–193.

inating tones of his compositions are the orange-brown and silvery-blue. Concisely speaking, Theophanes' palette can be compared to the colours of the vast Russian landscapes in autumn. Of course, the overall uniqueness of Theophanes' style is related both to his arrival in Russia and his actual Constantinopolitan background and heritage.

Before leaving for Russia Theophanes was well trained in the Palaiologan tradition of painting and was undoubtedly aware of the theological currents which were prominent at the time (such as Hesychasm). In fact, our view is that in the work he completed in Russia, Theophanes acts in a sense as an Orthodox painter-theologian from the heart of Byzantium who is experiencing new visual and cultural influences. However, he did not ponder – in the academic sense – on how to renew the Byzantine style, but rather, in his painting he arrived at new levels of simplicity by recapitulating and theologising his overall experiences as a migrant-artist. In this particular sense Theophanes' journey and biography is to some extent comparable to El Greco's experience in Italy and Spain.

The white highlights on the earthy orange-brown of the faces are rendered by Theophanes with intense sharpness and obvious diligence. These highlights imbue the portraits with tremendous liveliness – but not with a naturalistic kind of realism. Also, the figures appear as permeated by light which softly radiates from the brownish garments.[54] Therefore, for example, the Orthodox theological teaching that man is transfigured by the grace of the divine energy – which is often experienced as light, finds its visual form most fittingly in Theophanes' frescoes.[55] In this sense, we could say that Theophanes the Greek was an itinerant-theologian who theologised through painting.

His treatment of colour and his brush strokes remind us of the statement made by Manuel Philes (c.1275–1345), a Byzantine poet of the fourteenth century, who said that one of the achievements of Byzantine art was that it represented "in material form the emotions of the spirit."[56] More than five hundred years later, in his book entitled *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911), a major 20th century abstract painter, Vasily Kandinsky propagated precisely this role of art, with one significant difference: Kandinsky insisted that this is achieved explicitly through pure abstraction. Through such insistence, perhaps without realising, Kandinsky adhered to a certain kind of dogmatism. His work nevertheless remains related to the Byzantine experience and we shall discuss that relationship more extensively in a separate chapter of this book.

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[54] Ibid., 191.

[55] We are referring here to the teaching of Hesychasm.

[56] Our translation of: «τέχνη...τα της ψυχής τυπούσα ταις ύλαις πάθη.» Miller, E. *Manuelis Philae Carmina.* IV. Codex Vaticanus. Ex Codicibus Escurialensibus, Florentinis, Parisinis et Vaticanis. Volumen Posterius. Parisiis, M DCCC LVII. See also: Henry Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 91.

The style of Theophanes' painting had a strong influence on the local painters of Novgorod, but also on other Russian painters who worked elsewhere and on those who worked in the following periods.[57] Theophanes' name and artistic achievement are also closely associated with his most talented student, Andrei Rublev, with whom he worked together in the Church of the Annunciation in Kremlin.[58] Rublev eventually became regarded as the most important Russian iconographer and his work exercised a decisive influence on the following generations of artists not only in Russia but also in the Balkans.

## Post Byzantine Painting and Theophanes the Cretan

Notwithstanding the rich history and a number of known names of painters of the Post Byzantine period (mid 15th – early 17h century), as well as the many geographical locations of the preserved examples of frescoes and icons, we shall here firstly outline only the basic aspects of the history of Post Byzantine painting. In the second part of this text, we shall then focus on the achievement of Theophanes the Cretan and the Cretan school of painting. Thus, our main aim here is to explain the significance of Theophanes' painting, and therein also to aesthetically interpret the previously undermined meaning that his work acquires when considered as a Byzantine pre-El Greco achievement.

We shall first synoptically address some of the main facts concerning the history of research which has hitherto been undertaken in the field of Post Byzantine painting. The interest in this field occurred as early as the end of the 19th century, and, as Miltos Garidis states, in some cases much earlier.[59] The research of Post Byzantine Painting (and Byzantine painting) was initially begun mainly by Russian scholars, but in the same period it also commenced in France (G. Millet), Germany, Austria and other European countries.[60] However, this initial research focused mainly on historical aspects, on the development of certain iconographical themes, and on foreign influences. In short, the scholars of the late 19th and a majority of those of the early 20th century did not undertake an in-depth enquiry into the aesthetics of Byzantine and Post Byzantine painting. Instead

[57] In Novgorod, Theophanes was essentially a leader of the trend of painting, a trend with which the decoration of the two churches is connected: the Church of St Theodore Stratelates and the Church of the Dormition at the field of Volotovo (the latter was destroyed during the Second World War). See also: Viktor Lazarev, *Old Russian Murals and Mosaics: From the XI to the XVI Century.* trans. Boris Roniger (London: Phaidon Press, 1966), 154–155.

[58] At the Church of the Annunciation, Theophanes worked with Andrei Rublev and Prokhor from Gorodets.

[59] Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία.* Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 27.

[60] Ibid.

they have approached it as a purely confessional kind of art, devoid of any aesthetic significance.[61]

As studies of Byzantine art developed between the two world wars,[62] scholarly interest in Post Byzantine painting of the 16th century increased. While Post Byzantine painting of the 16th century was not an unknown field, due to previous research that had been conducted, for the first time scholars also synoptically enquired into issues related to style.[63] After the Second World War the interest in Post Byzantine painting was renewed again.[64]

The main insufficiency of existing scholarly literature could be summed up in the fact that the potential magnitude of contemporary relevance of the aesthetics of Post Byzantine painting is simply not assessed. Therefore, simultaneously the enigma of the person and achievement of El Greco seems all the more unsolvable – as he is a traditional Byzantine painter who lived in the Post Byzantine period, and then, after moving to Venice developed a highly unique style which consequently inspired even the abstract painters of the 20th century. In fact, El Greco was regarded by the 20th century abstract and expressionist painters as their forerunner.

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[61] Ibid.

[62] We are referring to publications such as: Robert Byron and David Talbot-Rice, *The Birth of Western Painting: A History of Colour, Form, and Iconography, Illustrated from the Paintings of Mistra and Mount Athos, of Giotto and Duccio, and of El Greco* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1930), and Sergio Bettini, *La pittura bizantina* (Florence: NEMI / Novissima Enciclopedia Monografica Illustrata, 1938).

[63] Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία.* Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 29.

[64] Some of the most relevant publications from this period are:

Manolis Chatzidakis, "Contribution à l'étude de la peinture post-byzantine, 1453–1953. Le cinq-centième anniversaire de la prise de Constantinople," *L'Hellénisme Contemporain* (1953): 1–31.

Ανδρέου Ξυγγοπούλου, *Σχεδίασμα ιστορίας της θρησκευτικής ζωγραφικής μετά την άλωσιν* (Αθήναι: Βιβλιοθήκη της εν Αθήναις Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας, αριθ. 40, 1957).

Sreten Petković, *Wall Painting on the Territory of the Patriarchate of Peć 1557–1614* (Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1965).

There are also more recent publications, such as:

Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Ο Κρητικός Ζωγράφος Θεοφάνης: Οι Τοιχογραφίες της Ιεράς Μονής Σταυρονικήτα* (Έκδοση Ί, Άγιον Όρος: Ιερά Μονή Σταυρονικήτα, 1997). Note: This work was initially published in 1986 under the following title: «Ο Κρητικός ζωγράφος Θεοφάνης: Η τελευταία φάση της τέχνης του στις τοιχογραφίες της Ιεράς Μονής Σταυρονικήτα.»

Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ἡ χρωματικὴ δομὴ στὶς μορφὲς τοῦ Θεοφάνη τοῦ Κρητός. Μιὰ αἰσθητικὴ ἀνάγνωση* (Ἀθήνα**:** Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 1998).

Δημήτρης Τριανταφυλλόπουλος, *Μελέτες για τη Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική: Ενετοκρατούμενη και Τουρκοκρατούμενη Ελλάδα και Κύπρος* (Σύλλογος προς Διάδοσιν Ωφέλιμων Βιβλίων, 2002).

Ευθύμιος Ν. Τσιγαρίδας και Δημήτρης Ζ. Σοφιανός, *Άγια Μετέωρα, Ιερά Μονή Αγίου Νικολάου Αναπαυσά Μετεώρων: Ιστορία-Τέχνη* (Τρίκαλα: Ιερά Μονή Αγίου Νικολάου Αναπαυσά, 2003).

Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία.* Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007).

In spite of the fact that the existing relevant literature does partly address the issues related to style of Post Byzantine painting, so far, scholars have not been able to surpass the predominately archaeological and historical approach to Post Byzantine painting and thus see it as art in its own right. Also, if one aspires to understand El Greco, one must approach the painting of the Post Byzantine period as contemporaneous with El Greco – in a sense that in El Greco's experience it was precisely that. Therefore, in the second of the two remaining sections of this chapter, we shall aim to provide a particular perspective on the painting of the most significant Byzantine painter of the Post Byzantine period, Theophanes the Cretan: a perspective which in part helps in developing an understanding of the person and achievement of El Greco.

## I

In the following pages, we shall outline the basic aesthetic developments in Post Byzantine Painting. Firstly, before discussing facts relating to its aesthetics, we must acknowledge that all separate phases of Post Byzantine Painting should collectively be understood as Orthodox art under foreign oppression – Latin and Ottoman.[65] In these phases we observe not only distinct foreign influences, but primarily a reinvention of aesthetics of the previous period (13th–15th century).

At its best, although directly inspired by previous achievements of Byzantine painting, the painting of the Post Byzantine period represents a distinct aesthetic category worthy of special attention. In the second half of the 15th century it was a creativity in search of survival, whereas in the 16th century it became a humble, truthful and rather contemplative revival of everything that Byzantine painting achieved in the period from the 13th to the 15th century. In this revival, the most important role was played by the 16th century painter Theophanes the Cretan, for whom Zacharias Papantoniou so fittingly says: "Theophanes re-contemplated Byzantine Art."[66]

[65] After the fall of Constantinople, the Ottoman conquest expanded into Asia Minor and Europe. The last free Serbian state known as the despotate of Morava was defeated in 1459, the despotate of Morea in Greece was claimed in 1460. In 1458 Athens was conquered whereas Trebizond (Trapezounta) was conquered in 1461. Albania was conquered after 1468. The Venetian held towns and territories of the Aegean and the Adriatic also fell into Ottoman hands. Lesvos was conquered in1462, Evia in 1470 and Samos in 1475. The strongholds of Peloponnese were defeated in 1500 (as well as Naupaktos, Methoni and Koroni). Montenegro was defeated in 1499.

[66] Our translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: «Ο Θεοφάνης ξανασκέφθηκε τη βυζαντινή τέχνη.» See: Ζαχαρίας Παπαντωνίου, *Η Ζωγραφική στο Άγιον Όρος*. Ανάτυπο από: *Άγιον Όρος: Άθως, Ιστορία, Τέχνη, Παράδοση*. Πρόλογος-Επιμέλεια: Ι.Μ. Χατζηφώτης (Εκδόσεις Παπαδήμα, 1996), 48.

In the beginning, the painting of the Post Byzantine period survived as a marginal art.[67] Unfortunately, in Greece, as well as generally in the Balkans, very few decorations from the mid 15th century remain and most of them are not entirely preserved.[68] In the examples of the late 15th century fresco painting which still survive in the Balkan region, Western, Gothic, and other more subtle influences were detected – evident mainly in distinct iconographical motifs.[69]

In the second half of the 15th century, Cypriot painters followed earlier local traditions of painting which was in its early stages of becoming emancipated. It is with the arrival of painters who in this same period came to Cyprus with waves of refugees, such as the painter who worked in the narthex of the Monastery of St John Lampadistis, who came from Constantinople, that the new aesthetic developments were clearly manifested.[70]

However, in Cyprus, the isolation of the island after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and the absence of the Orthodox artistic centres, led to a new orientation towards artistic trends of the West.[71] As Garidis observes, the clear adoption of Gothic and Renaissance aesthetic tendencies and their collision with medieval Byzantine tradition are expressed as a particular and characteristic artistic tendency which by the end of the 15th century morphed into the so called "italo-byzantine" school of painting, whose expansion however remained limited.

The most comprehensive group of frescoes representative of this "italo-byzantine" style rendered at the end of the 15th century, is preserved in the so called "Latiniko Parekklisi" (Latin Chapel) which is built at the north side of the main church of the Monastery of St John Lampadistis in Kalopanagiotis (in Cyprus). As noted by Garidis, here the influence of the Italian Renaissance is felt in the drawing, in the rendering of form, in the landscapes, as well as in the third dimension applied in the architectural elements of the background.[72] However, in spite of the Italian, and the additional Gothic influence which is obvious in the decorative elements in the vaults, most of the compositions in this chapel remain faithful to Byzantine iconography.[73]

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[67] Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία.* Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 3.

[68] Ibid., 77.

[69] Ibid., 77–130.

[70] Ibid., 67.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid., 65.

[73] Ibid.

All of the abovementioned factors and developments led to a formation of a characteristic Byzantine style of painting in Cyprus during the 15th and 16th century.[74] It is also worth mentioning that, although late, the influence of Palaiologan painting was indeed felt in Cyprus, and this is mostly evident in the not so well preserved frescoes in St Paraskevi Geroskipou, in those in Panagia Katholiki (which are preserved in fragments), as well as in those in Palaia Egkleistra in Kouklia (completed approximately after 1442).[75]

In regards to Crete, one must bear in mind that from 1204 until the Ottoman invasion in 1669, Crete was under Venetian rule. Similarly to Cyprus, until the mid 16th century, in Crete we observe a continuation of the tradition of fresco painting of a somewhat provincial but also archaic character. Nevertheless, in the 14th and 15th century the painters of Crete did come into close contact with various artistic currents coming from big Byzantine centres.[76] This contact was likely made possible due to the fact that painters from wider Greece were seeking refuge in Crete.[77] For example, in the first half of the 15th century, painters Nikolaos Filanthropinos, Emmanuel Ouranos, Angelos Apokaukos, Aleksios Apokaukos, Andronikos Sinadinos, as well as others, arrived in Crete.[78] After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 the number of painters who found refuge in Crete had of course increased.[79]

Although in the area of fresco painting there were sporadic influences of Italian motifs and certain iconographical elements, which were caused by the presence of the Latin culture, these influences were weaker than elsewhere in the Latin-ruled Greece at the time, and they did not greatly affect the Byzantine style. On the contrary, the Cretan frescoes of the mid 15th century manifest aesthetic connections to their more or less contemporary counterparts in Mistra – primarily the frescoes of Pantanassa (1430), but also those in Perivleptos (which approximately date between 1350 and 1375).[80]

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[74] Ibid., 67.

[75] Ibid., 64.

[76] Manolis Chatzidakis, "Contribution à l'étude de la peinture post-byzantine, 1453–1953. Le cinq-centième anniversaire de la prise de Constantinople," *L'Hellénisme Contemporain* (1953): 11. See also:

Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Σχέσεις ανάμεσα στη ζωγραφική της Μακεδονίας και της Κρήτης τον 14ο αιώνα.* Αθήνα: IX CIEB, τ. Ι΄. (1955): 136–148.

[77] Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία.* Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 69.

[78] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Ύστερη Βυζαντινή Τέχνη (1204–1453)*, στον τόμο: *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους*, τομ. Θ, Αθήνα 1979, 421.

[79] Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία.* Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 69.

[80] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Ύστερη Βυζαντινή Τέχνη (1204–1453)*, στον τόμο: *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους*, τομ. Θ, Αθήνα 1979, 421.

In the second part of the 15th century and thereafter there was a gradual decrease of the number of churches being decorated with frescoes in Crete[81] and an increase in the production of portable icons. It can be said that the painters of this period abandoned fresco painting and focused on the painting of portable icons. It is mainly to these icon painters that the gradual formation of the Cretan school of painting, which blossomed in the 15th and 16th century, is owed.[82] Also, towards the end of the 15th century, icon production in Crete was no longer limited to strictly ecclesial purposes; rather, there was a demand for icons both from the rich lay people of the Cretan society and from elsewhere in Greece, and consequently an exportation of Cretan icons commenced.[83]

Although terms "Macedonian school" and "Cretan school" are today often avoided by scholars,[84] we must bear in mind that at the end of the 15th century Cretan icon painters have indeed established not just simply a trend but a specific school, which in terms of technique, style, as well as general iconographic approach, is in most cases clearly recognisable.[85] As in regards to fresco painting of the second half of the 15th century, as Garidis observes, this development is notable only in the technique and generally does not entail any necessarily Cretan phenomenon.[86]

While the best examples of fresco painting of the Cretan school are rendered outside Crete, in Crete itself there are very few preserved frescoes from the 16th century; we note those in the chapel of the Dormition of the Virgin in the village of Agia Paraskevi in Amariou (1516), and those in Episkopi Pediados. The movement of painters capable of painting on large wall-surfaces was instigated by the fact that in the 16th century, Mount Athos and Meteora, the two most significant monastic centres, were experiencing a new period of prosperity, which owed to the general prosperity of the Ottoman empire at the time.[87] As stated by Chatzidakis, generally speaking we could say that the Cretan-school

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[81] Manolis Chatzidakis, *Les débuts de l'école crétoise et la question de l' école dite italo-grecque* (Venice: Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Studies, 1974), 169–211.

[82] Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία.* Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 70.

[83] Ibid., 75.

[84] Gabriel Millet introduced these terms in order to clarify the differences between the two styles.

[85] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Ύστερη Βυζαντινή Τέχνη (1204–1453)*, στον τόμο: *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους*, τομ. Θ, Αθήνα 1979, 169–211.

[86] Furthermore, in the same period, this specific development, limited to technique in the domain of fresco painting, is also observed in Cyprus, Epirus, Moldavia and elsewhere. See: Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία.* Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 73.

[87] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Δομήνικος Θεοτοκόπουλος Κρης: Κείμενα 1940–1994* (Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης, 1995), 26.

fresco painting which was completed during the 16th and the 17th century is either the work of Cretans or of their students.[88]

## II

Thus, after Byzantine painting struggled to survive, which characterises the period of the second half of the 15th century, in the early 16th century we observe evident developments, which lead us to the emergence of the Cretan school and the achievement of Theophanes the Cretan. Some of the examples of fresco painting in Crete show that the distinct characteristics of the Cretan school were already manifested in Crete at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century.[89]

However, although at the beginning of the 16th century the Cretan School was in the gradual process of forming, its final characteristics were shaped within the period between 1535 and 1546 in the work of Theophanes the Cretan, whose expression and style have been thereafter copied both by his contemporaries and by painters of the following generations.[90] The full name of this intriguing painter is Theophanes Strelitzas, also known as Bathas. As asserted by both Chatzidakis and Tsigaridas, although he was probably born in the last fifteen years of the 15th century in Herakleion on Crete, he was probably a member of the Strelitzas-Bathas family of painters who fled to Crete from Ottoman-held Peloponnese.[91]

Theophanes was invited to Meteora to paint frescoes at the small church of the Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas.[92] These frescoes were sponsored by deacon Kyprianos and were completed in 1527.[93] Theophanes' signature together with the founder's inscription are well preserved to this day above the entrance to the naos from the narthex (*images 59* and *60*). These particular frescoes represent the beginning of Theophanes' development as a fresco painter. He thereafter decorated the church interiors and refec-

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία.* Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 184.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ευθύμιος Ν. Τσιγαρίδας και Δημήτρης Ζ. Σοφιανός, *Άγια Μετέωρα, Ιερά Μονή Αγίου Νικολάου Αναπαυσά Μετεώρων: Ιστορία-Τέχνη* (Τρίκαλα: Ιερά Μονή Αγίου Νικολάου Αναπαυσά, 2003), 101–102.

[92] Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία.* Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 184.

[93] Ευθύμιος Ν. Τσιγαρίδας και Δημήτρης Ζ. Σοφιανός, *Άγια Μετέωρα, Ιερά Μονή Αγίου Νικολάου Αναπαυσά Μετεώρων: Ιστορία-Τέχνη* (Τρίκαλα: Ιερά Μονή Αγίου Νικολάου Αναπαυσά, 2003), 101.

tories of two large monasteries at Mount Athos: The Great Lavra and Stavronikita. Together with his son Simeon, Theophanes completed the painting at Stavronikita in 1546, which is his last dated and signed work that we know of. A number of large icons preserved on Mount Athos are also considered to be the work of Theophanes: those from the iconostases in the Great Lavra, Stavronikita, Iviron and Protaton.[94]

It is important to emphasise that the allusions to Western painting by Theophanes and his students (contrary to other Cretan icon painters and their contemporaries, such as Mihail Damaskinos) were limited to particular aspects, those which mainly relate to a renewal of thematology, which did not alter the Byzantine style. In other words, at times Theophanes and his students turned to Western sources strictly in order to partially renew their themes.[95] Theophanes had the comprehensive knowledge of the two contrasting styles existent in his period, "alla Greca" and "alla Italiana," and he undoubtedly attempted to respond to the challenge of renewing the Byzantine style by selectively borrowing from the Renaissance style.

We know that before he commenced his work at St Nicholas Anapausas, Theophanes painted mainly portable icons, and it is not certain whether he engaged in fresco painting prior to his assignment at St Nicholas Anapausas.[96] However, Tsigaridas rightly observes that "the monumental aspect of the narthex murals (at St Nicholas Anapausas) and the high standard of his technique show that Theophanes was already a mature artist and equally proficient in the techniques of icon painting and fresco work."[97] From the general arrangement of frescoes at St Nicholas Anapausas, it is obvious that Theophanes had knowledge of the prototypes and techniques of the Macedonian school of fresco painting.[98] However, at St Nicholas Anapausas, the technique and style of Theophanes' painting had not yet reached their final aesthetic result.[99]

In 1535, Theophanes commences his most significant project, the decoration of the Great Lavra at Mount Athos, where his frescoes are characteristic for their monumental appearance, which is owed significantly to the adaptation of compositions to large concave wall surfaces of the interior. These frescoes have a relief, plastic kind of quality, and the rules of their style are notably strict. This style is classical, idealistic, but at the same

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[94] See: Manolis Chatzidakis, "Recherches sur le Peintre Théophane le Crétois," *DOP* 23–24 (1969–1970): 323–327.

[95] Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία*. Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 188.

[96] Ibid., 185.

[97] Ibid., 103.

[98] Ibid., 185.

[99] Ibid.

time also subtly evocative of realism. This carefully measured balance is one of the major characteristics of Theophanes' painting. However, his achievement is not exhausted in, nor is it unique only because of this phenomenon, as the carefully measured blend of idealism and relative realism is a characteristic which is also rightfully ascribed to the Palaiologan style of painting.

One of the main differences, and in respect to form we could even say the most obvious difference, of the compositions rendered in the Palaiologan era to Theophanes' compositions, is that the former adhere to an almost expressionistic depiction of body movement (*images 39* and *41*), while in Theophanes' work the body movement is considerably less dynamic. This can be observed even in examples of the segregated depictions of standing figures where the movement is necessarily minimal: *Image 64* shows the figure of *The Righteous Noah* painted by Manuil Panselinos in Protaton, while *image 65* shows the same theme rendered by Theophanes the Cretan in Stavronikita. Admittedly, the movement of the particular figure rendered by Theophanes had to be more or less subdued necessarily due to the size of the wall on which it was painted but his other figures can also be used effectively in this comparison.

Unlike the painters of the Palaiologan period, Theophanes sought not to emphasise a narrative, rather, he emphasised the sanctity of the individual figures. But in spite of this observed difference, in The Great Lavra, Theophanes managed to preserve in each of the rendered scenes the most essential iconographic and aesthetic traditions of the previous periods. Thus, Chatzidakis insightfully observes that the real magnitude of Theophanes' painting can be appreciated in view of the fact that he managed to work creatively within the (strict) norms of the preceding traditions.[100] Theophanes' frescoes in Great Lavra later served as a prototype for a series of the 16th and 17th century frescoes. Therefore, the actual beginning of the entirely formed and mature Cretan school of fresco painting occurred upon the completion of Theophanes' work at Lavra.[101]

The comparatively less dynamic body movement in Theophanes' figures reflects a spiritual reaction of the oppressed Byzantine world of the 16th century (*image 63*). It reflects the desire to preserve, recapitulate and re-live the entire past of the Byzantine theological, aesthetic and civilisational experience. This can be observed in all three monasteries where Theophanes worked (St Nicholas Anapausas, the Great Lavra and Stavronikita).

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[100] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Δομήνικος Θεοτοκόπουλος Κρης: Κείμενα 1940–1994* (Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης, 1995), 28.

[101] Μίλτος Γαρίδης, *Μεταβυζαντινή Ζωγραφική (1450–1600). Η εντοίχια ζωγραφική μετά την πτώση του Βυζαντίου στον Ορθόδοξο κόσμο και στις χώρες υπό ξένη κυριαρχία*. Μετάφραση: Αγγελική Γαρίδη (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Κ. Σπανός, «Βιβλιοπωλείο των βιβλιοφίλων», 2007), 188.

In this particular sense, we could say that the dynamic movement (and stances) of the human figure depicted in the Palaiologan painting, where clothes are sometimes rendered in free motion as if carried by wind, is comparable to a spontaneous, freehand calligraphic-kind of writing, whereas the movement depicted by Theophanes could be understood as a conventionalisation but also a renewal of the style of that writing. However, this comparison is only intended to clarify the main difference between the two periods in respect to the rendering of movement – and it does not imply that similarities could not be equally and at points even more clearly observed.

In the refectory of The Great Lavra, Theophanes left very overt evidence of a profound level of creativity. We are referring to the scene of *The Second Coming* (also named *The Last Judgment*), which is probably painted by Theophanes' students – but Theophanes was in charge of the entire project, which was undoubtedly closely supervised. As shown in *images 66* and *67*, in the scene of *The Second Coming*, Theophanes exploited the considerable size of the walls in order to render truly apocalyptic scenes which follow wide and dream-like currents of a synchronized and unified movement. On the left, the processions of saints and martyrs depicted within clouds radiate with otherworldly weightlessness (*image 66*), while on the right, the river of fire which springs from beneath Christ's throne incorporates effective depictions of the tormented (*image 67*). The flow of the massive river of fire enters the jaws of the beast which represents Hades, and the observer becomes consumed by the overall drama at hand. Other details are equally impressive.

But it is not an enigma that Theophanes was ready to make such a drastic step towards a notably freer depiction of a theme such as *The Second Coming*, for he initially rendered this theme at the Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas. Images *61* and *62* show this first depiction of *The Second Coming* painted by Theophanes, where he already demonstrates a clear tendency to emphasise the massive flow of the river of fire and organise certain other segments of the last judgment in a manner which pertains to abstraction.

Both in St Nicholas Anapausas and in the refectory at Great Lavra the heightened level of abstraction in the theme of *The Second Coming* is a result of an eschatological visionary experience, one which in our view is dialectically linked with the earlier mentioned desire to preserve, recapitulate and re-live the entire past of the Byzantine experience. Of course, the motifs which comprise Theophanes' renderings of this theme are inspired by the Palaiologan tradition, and can be observed in the church of Chora in

Constantinople – *images 48–49*.[102] However, the innovation in *The Second Coming* at the refectory at Great Lavra is particularly revealing and Zacharias Papantoniou is right in saying that this scene constitutes a significant step towards the freedom of expression, and that it reveals that the painters of the Orthodox world would have been more daring in their work if they had the opportunity to paint on unrestricted wall surfaces.[103] This brings us back to the enigma of El Greco.

We know that having moved to Venice and thereafter, El Greco gradually lost a sense of restriction – not just to the rules of the Byzantine tradition, but also, he lost a sense of restriction to any rules other than those which his own style was producing. We are of the view that this in itself indirectly reflects a specific kind of creative potentiality, one which within the Byzantine and Post Byzantine periods is not exclusively limited to the person of El Greco. More particularly, perhaps the way Theophanes the Cretan rendered *The Second Coming* in the refectory of the Great Lavra entails a typically Greek mode of conceiving a composition. And perhaps the potentiality of such a mode was waiting to blossom in the work of a person (such as El Greco) who needed to be taken out of the traditional Byzantine environment and become *re-planted* elsewhere, so as to live the existent spiritual vision without the defined limitations imposed by tradition – limitations which regard the technique and style of Byzantine painting. Of course, in saying this we by no means wish to undermine the Western influences which had a decisive role in the formation of El Greco's personal style; these Western influences are the inseparable part of El Greco's experience of being *re-planted* in a different environment.

If we accept the above presented hypothesis, then in view of Theophanes' considerably free and almost El Greco-like rendering of *The Second Coming* at the refectory of the Great Lavra, we could argue that Theophanes the Cretan is an *El Greco* that stayed home.[104] In this particular sense, and without aspiring to oversimplify the related phenomena, we could say that the other Theophanes who in the 14th century went to Russia

[102] As stated by Tsigaridas: "Introduced into church programmes of decoration in the ninth to tenth century, the Last Judgment took shape mainly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and was further developed and expanded in the fifteenth and, especially, sixteenth centuries. The iconography comes from the Revelation of St John, Old Testament prophecies, the Apocalypse of Paul, and the eschatological teachings of Christ (Matt. 25:31–46)." See: Ευθύμιος Ν. Τσιγαρίδας και Δημήτρης Ζ. Σοφιανός, *Άγια Μετέωρα, Ιερά Μονή Αγίου Νικολάου Αναπαυσά Μετεώρων: Ιστορία-Τέχνη* (Τρίκαλα: Ιερά Μονή Αγίου Νικολάου Αναπαυσά, 2003), 111.

[103] Ζαχαρίας Παπαντωνίου, *Η Ζωγραφική στο Άγιον Όρος*. Ανάτυπο από: *Άγιον Όρος: Άθως, Ιστορία, Τέχνη, Παράδοση*. Πρόλογος-Επιμέλεια: Ι.Μ. Χατζηφώτης (Εκδόσεις Παπαδήμα, 1996), 50.

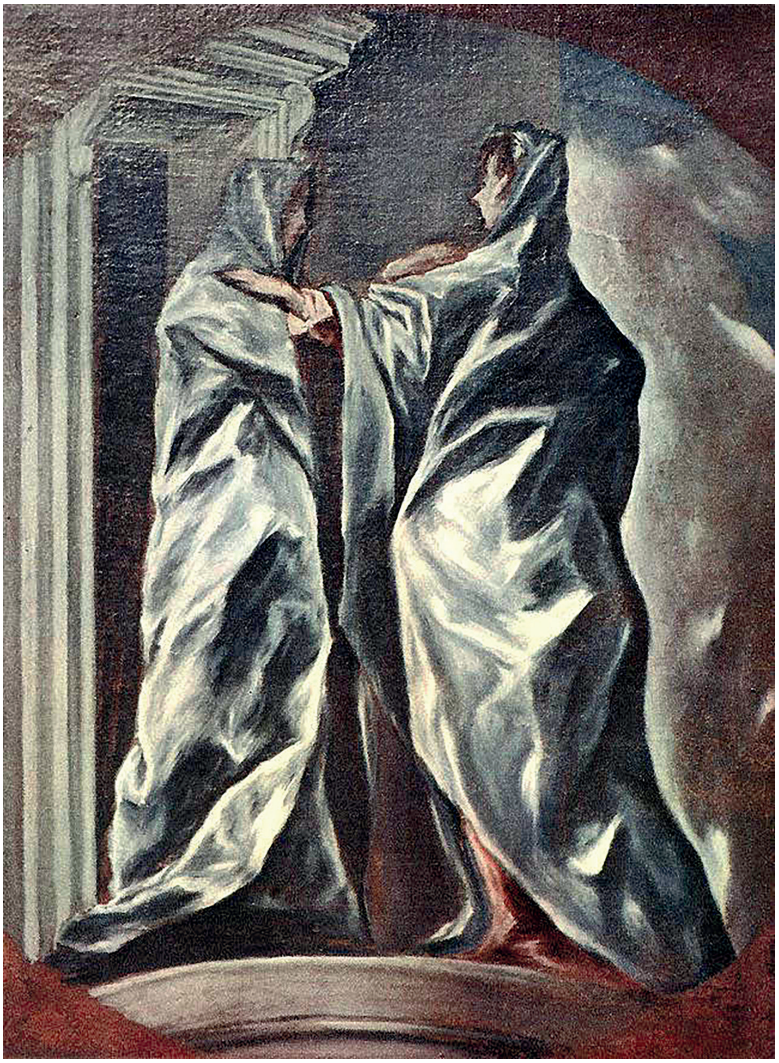
[104] After the death of Theophanes the Cretan in 1559, for more than two centuries, in the Orthodox world, the style of his painting was regarded in a certain sense as the official style of ecclesial painting. Thereafter, his style was pursued by monk painters until the 19th century.

where he developed a highly authentic Byzantine style of his own (Theophanes the Greek), could be regarded as the *El Greco* that went to Russia.[105]

The most basic conclusion of our discussion in this chapter is that in the Byzantine world there were a number of El Greco's predecessors whose work, at its best, for reasons which were discussed here, merits the same level of appreciation as El Greco's work of the later phase. Given that El Greco is considered to be a forerunner of the 20th century Modern and Abstract painting, such a conclusion should prompt a serious re-evaluation of how we perceive Late Byzantine and Post Byzantine painting from a contemporary perspective.

[105] In his book entitled *Byzantine and Russian Painting*, Kostas Papaioannou names Theophanes the Greek: "the El Greco of Russia." See: Κώστας Παπαϊωάννου, *Βυζαντινή και Ρωσική Ζωγραφική*. Μετάφραση: Ελένη Νάκου (Εναλλακτικές Εκδόσεις, 2007), 211.





**1.** Left: *The Meeting of Mary and Elizabeth*, fresco, 1191, church of St George at Kurbinovo, FYROM.

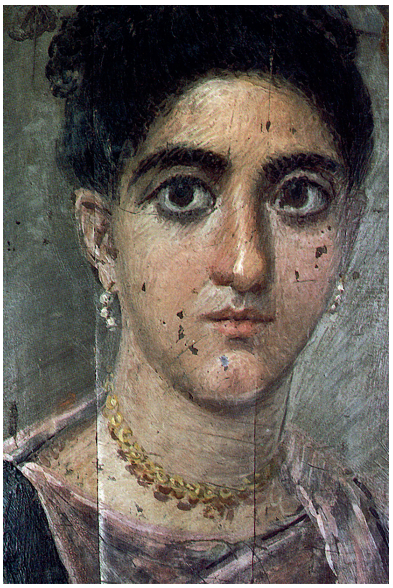
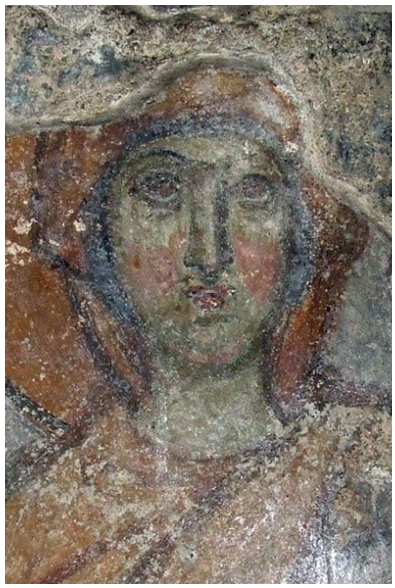
**2.** Right: El Greco, *Visitation*, oil on canvas, oval, 97.8 x 72.4 cm, c.1607–1614, Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington.

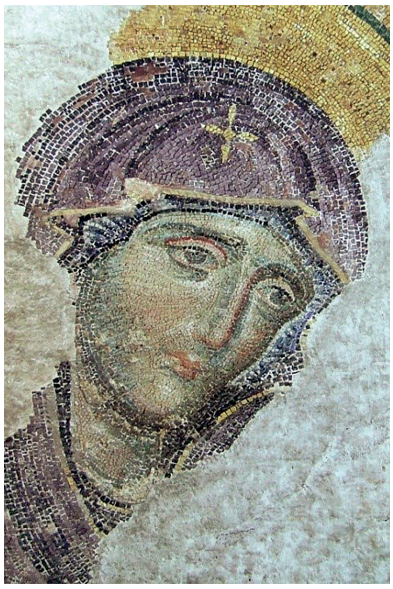
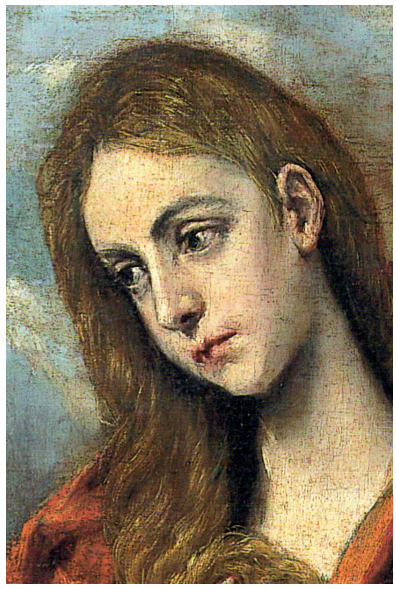


**3.** El Greco, *The Repentant Mary Magdalene with the Cross*,a oil on canvas, 109 x 96 cm, c.1587–1596, Musée du Cau Ferrat, Sitges.



**4.** *St Elizabeth with child* (?), fresco, late 7th – early 8th century, north wall of the chapel of St Nicholas – which is the oldest part of the church of Ekatontapyliani, Paros, Greece. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2009.)

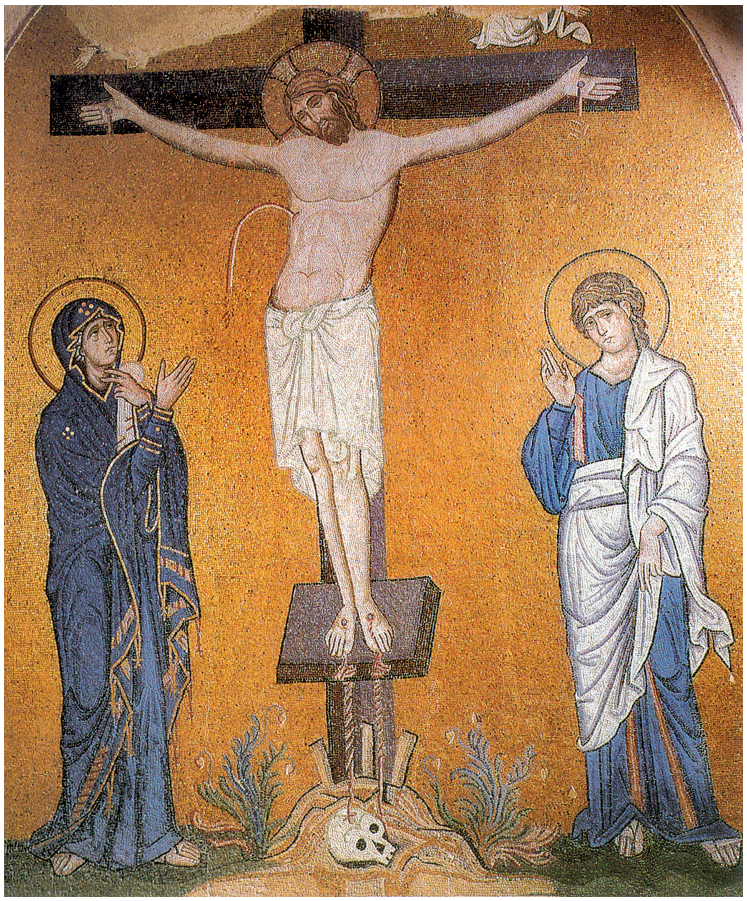
**5.** Above left: A female portrait from the Egyptian region of Fayum, egg-tempera, 117–138 AD.

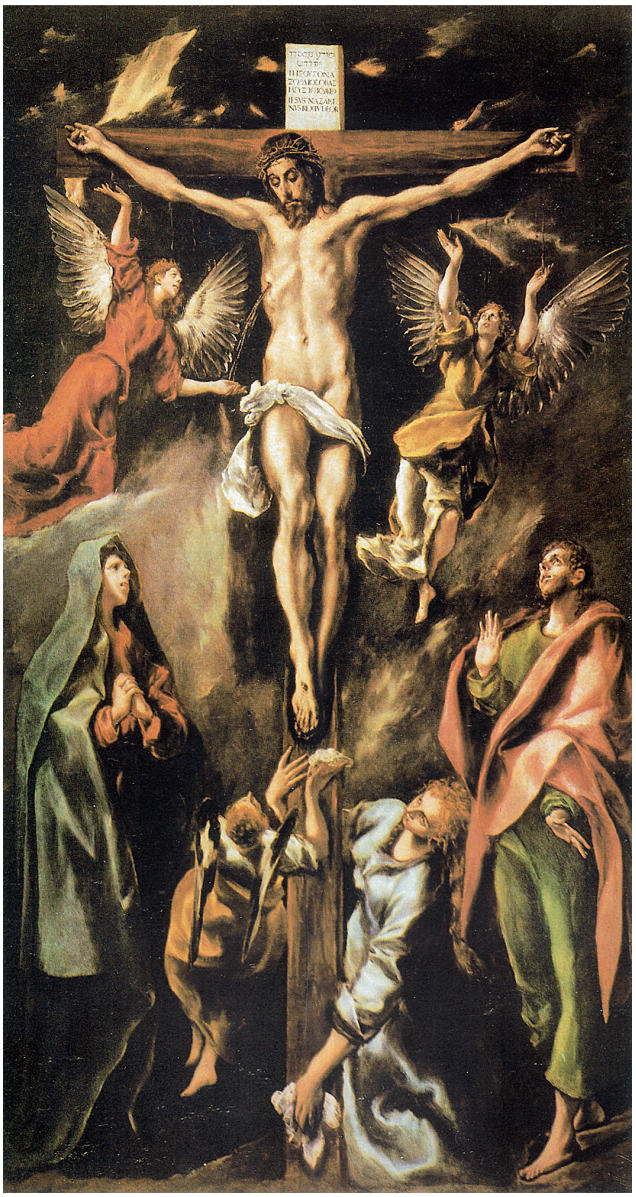
**6.** Centre: *St Elizabeth with child* (?) (detail), fresco, late 7th – early 8th century, north wall of the chapel of St Nicholas – which is the oldest part of the church of Ekatontapyliani, Paros, Greece. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2009.)

**7.** Above right: Mother of God (detail), 867, mosaic in the conch of the apse of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

**8.** Bottom left: Portrait of the Virgin from the late 13th century mosaic of *Deesis*, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople.

**9.** Bottom right: El Greco, *The Repentant Mary Magdalene with the Cross* (detail), oil on canvas, 109 x 96 cm, c.1587–1596, Musée du Cau Ferrat, Sitges.





**10.** Left: *Crucifixion*, mosaic, c.1080, the church of Daphni, near Athens.

**11.** Right: El Greco, *Crucifixion*, oil on canvas, 312 x 169 cm, c.1600–1605, Museo del Prado, Madrid.




**12.** Christ the Pantokrator in the dome of the church of Daphni, near Athens; mosaic, c.1080.



**13.** A detail of the Pantokrator in the dome of the church of Daphni, near Athens; mosaic, c.1080. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2009.)



**14.** El Greco, *Saint Ildefonso*, c.1600–1603, oil on canvas, 187 x 102 cm, Hospital of Charity, Illescas.

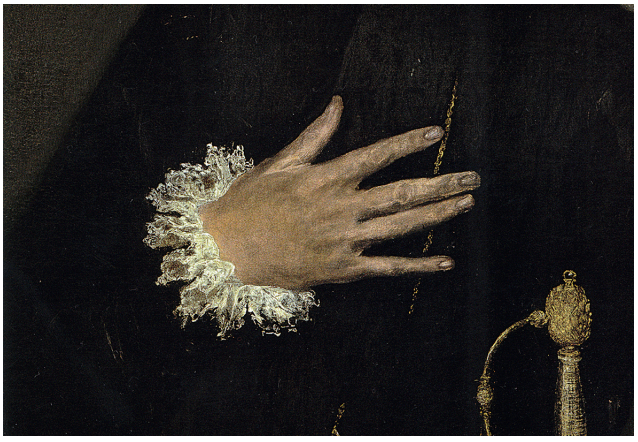


**15.** Top: A detail of the Pantokrator in the dome of the church of Daphni, near Athens; mosaic, c.1080.
(Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2009.)

**16.** Bottom: El Greco, *Saint Ildefonso* (detail), c.1600–1603, oil on canvas, 187 x 102 cm, Hospital of Charity, Illescas.



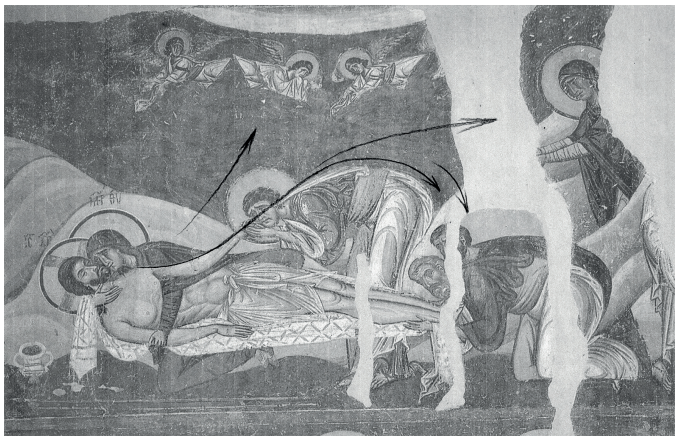




**17.** Top: A detail of the Pantokrator in the dome of the church of Daphni, near Athens; mosaic, c.1080. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2009.)

**18.** Middle: El Greco, *Mary Magdalene* (detail), oil on canvas, 157 x 121 cm, c.1577, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

**19.** Bottom: El Greco, *The Knight with a Hand on his Chest* (detail), oil on canvas, c.1580, 81.8 x 65.8 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



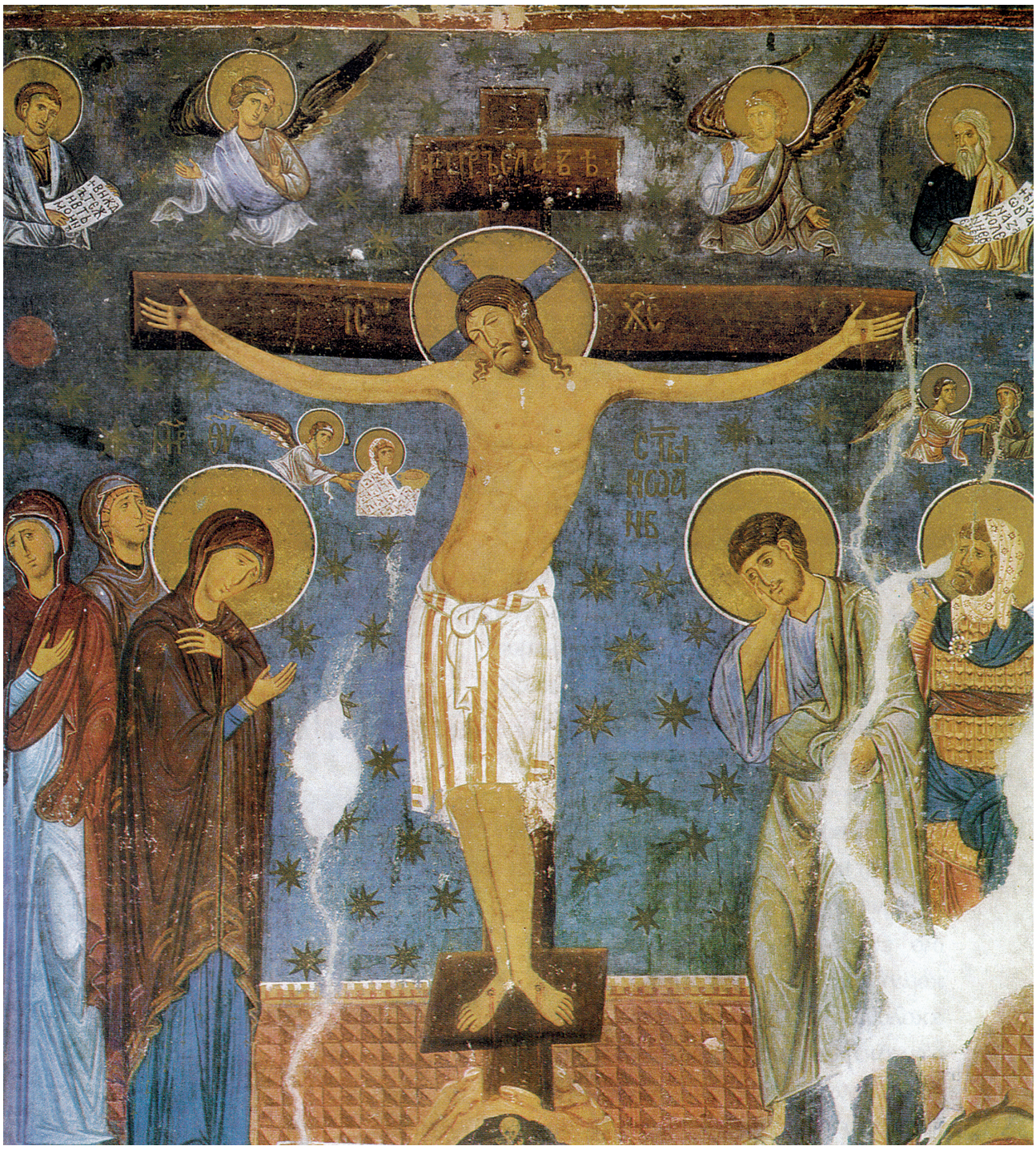




**20.** Top: Demonstration which explains the narrative character of the scene of *Nativity* at Nerezi in FYROM.

**21.** Middle: *Lamentation*, 1164, fresco, Church of St Panteleimon (founded by Alexios Komnenos), Nerezi, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

**22.** Bottom: El Greco, *Deposition*, oil on canvas, 120 x 145 cm, 1592–1595, Comtesse de la Béraudiére, Paris.



**23.** *Crucifixion*, fresco, 1208/9, Studenica Monastery, Serbia.



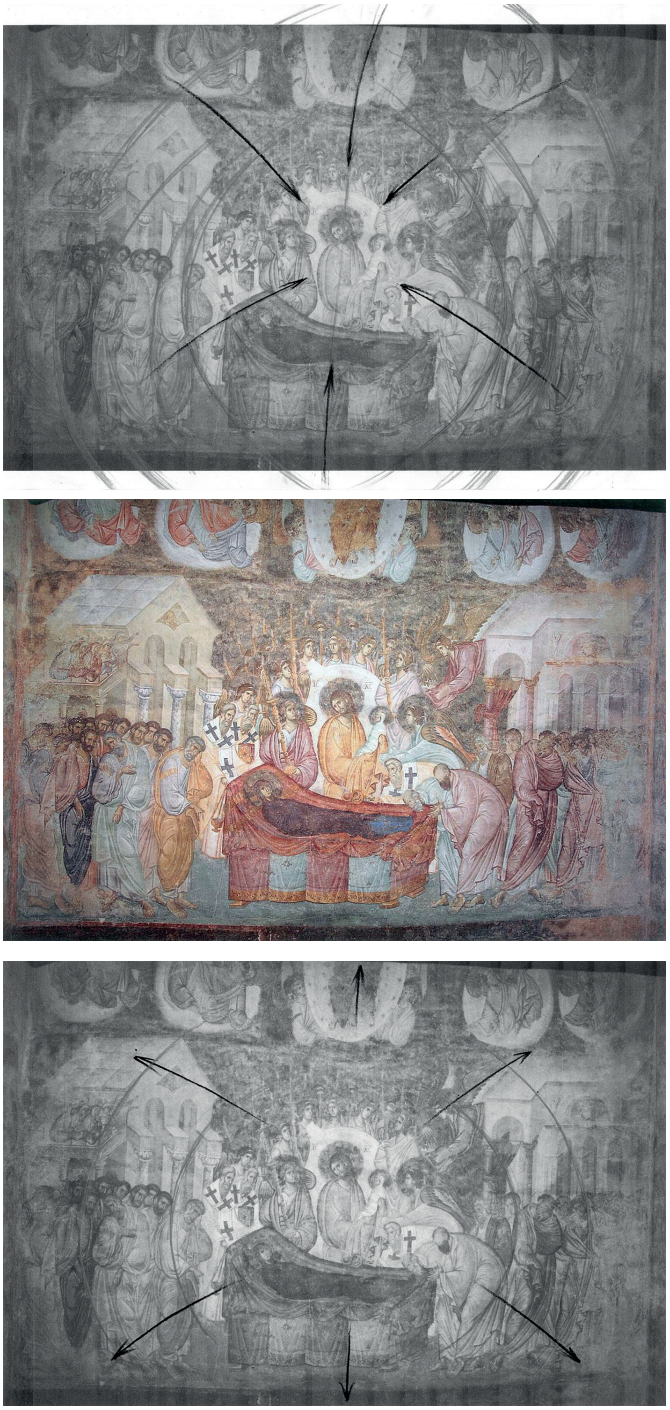
**24.** *White Angel seated on Christ's tomb* (detail), fresco, 1222–1228, Mileševa Monastery, Serbia.



**25.** *Dormition of the Virgin* (detail), fresco, c.1265,
Monastery of Sopoćani in Serbia.



**26.** Our demonstration concerning the tendency towards abstraction in the composition of the *Dormition of the Virgin* at Sopoćani (detail).

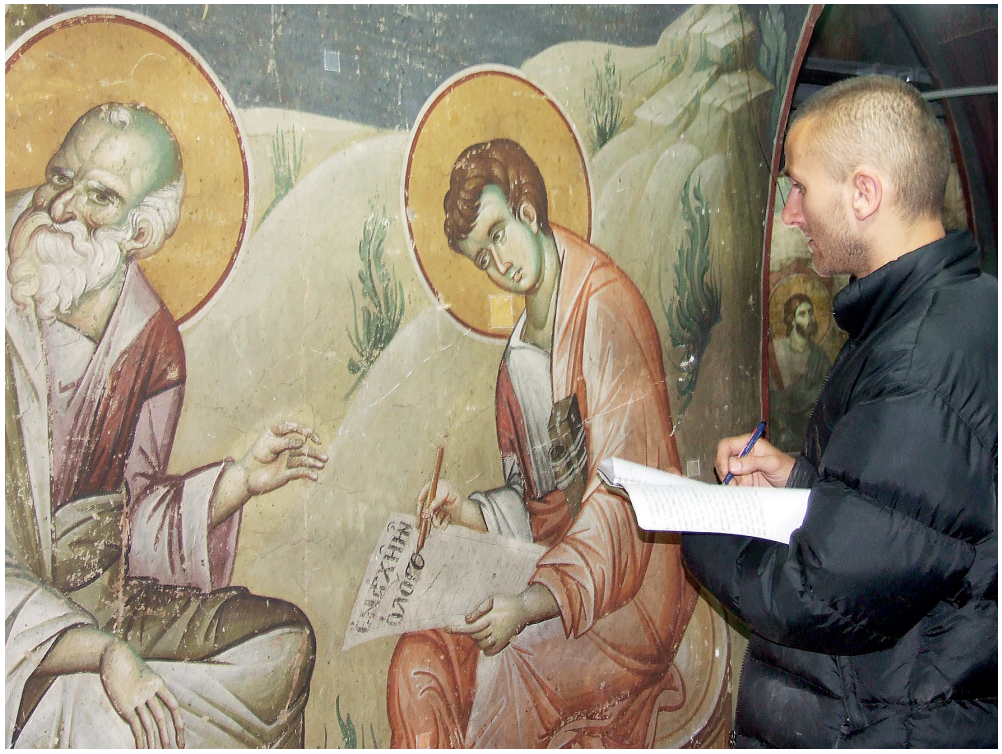


**27.** Top: Our demonstration concerning the tendency towards abstraction in the composition of the Dormition of the Virgin at Sopoćani.

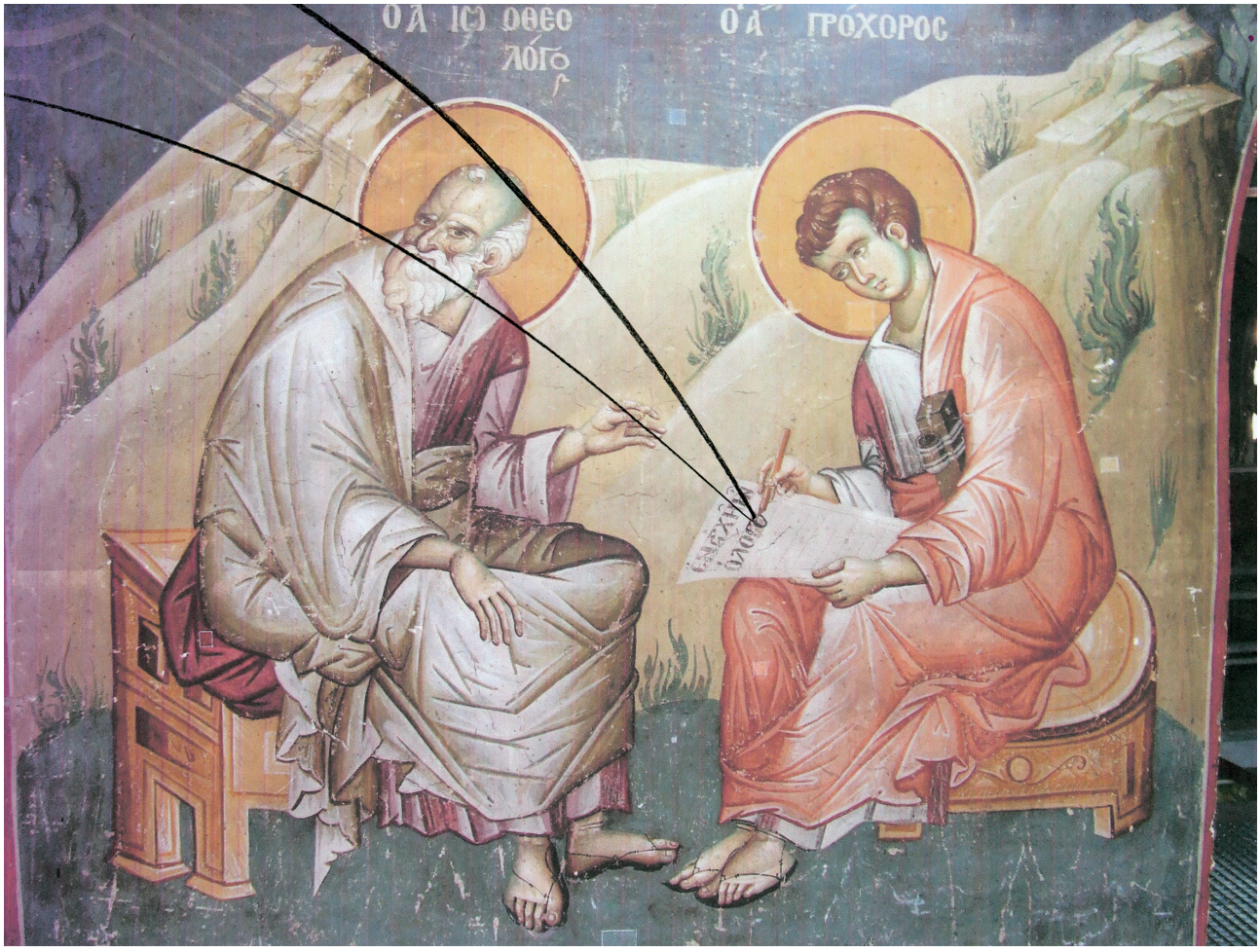
**28.** Middle: Dormition of the Virgin, fresco, c.1265, Monastery of Sopoćani in Serbia.

**29.** Bottom: Our demonstration concerning the tendency towards abstraction in the composition of the Dormition of the Virgin at Sopoćani.



**30 & 31.** In front of the fresco of *St John the Theologian and St Prohoros*; on scaffolding at Protaton, Mount Athos, 2007.




**32.** Our demonstration concerning the narrative nature of Manuel Panselinos' work.




**33.** Manuel Panselinos, *St John the Theologian and St Prohoros*, fresco, c.1290, Protaton, Mount Athos; photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2007.



**34.** Top: Manuel Panselinos, *Baptism*, c.1290, fresco, Protaton, Mount Athos, Greece.

**35.** Bottom: Our demonstration on the photograph of the fresco by Manuel Panselinos; *Baptism*, c.1290, fresco, Protaton, Mount Athos, Greece.



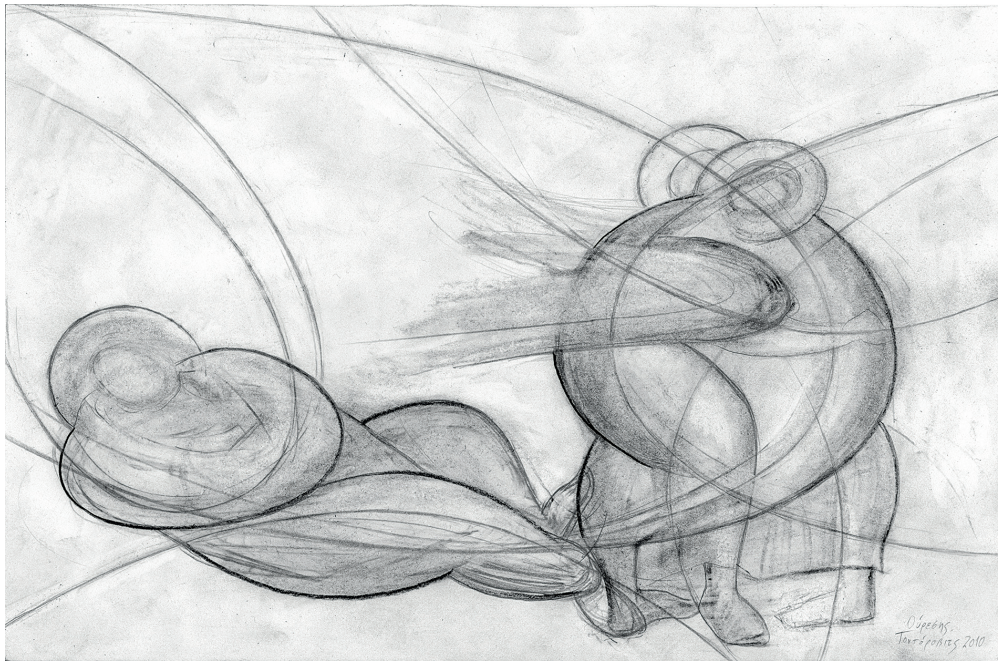
**36.** Top: Manuel Panselinos, *Resurrection*, c.1290, fresco, Protaton, Mount Athos, Greece.

**37.** Bottom: Our demonstration on the photograph of the fresco by Manuel Panselinos; *Resurrection*, c.1290, fresco, Protaton, Mount Athos, Greece.



**38.** Manuel Panselinos, *Crucifixion* (detail), c.1290, fresco, Protaton, Mount Athos, Greece; photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2007.





**39.** Top: Mihail Astrapas and Eutychios, *Jacob wrestles with an angel*, fresco, 1294/95, Perivleptos, Achrida, FYROM.

**40.** Bottom: Our drawing demonstration based on the fresco by Mihail Astrapas and Eutychios, *Jacob wrestles with an angel*, 1294/95, Perivleptos, Achrida, FYROM.




**41.** *Deposition and Lamentation* (two scenes rendered within a single composition), fresco, 1312, The Great and Holy Monastery of Vatopaidi, Mount Athos, Greece.



**42.** *Dormition of the Virgin* (detail), fresco, 1314–1316, chapel of Saints Joachim and Anna at the Monastery of Studenica, Serbia.



**43.** El Greco, *Agony in the Garden*, c.1590–1595, oil on canvas, 102.2 x 113.7 cm, The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio.



**44.** El Greco, *Agony in the Garden* (detail), c.1590–1595, oil on canvas, 102.2 x 113.7 cm, The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio.



**45.** The work of George Kallierges: *Dormition of the Virgin*, fresco, 1315, Church of Christ the Savior in Veria, Greece.



**46.** *St George* (detail: torso area), fresco, 1315–1320, chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)

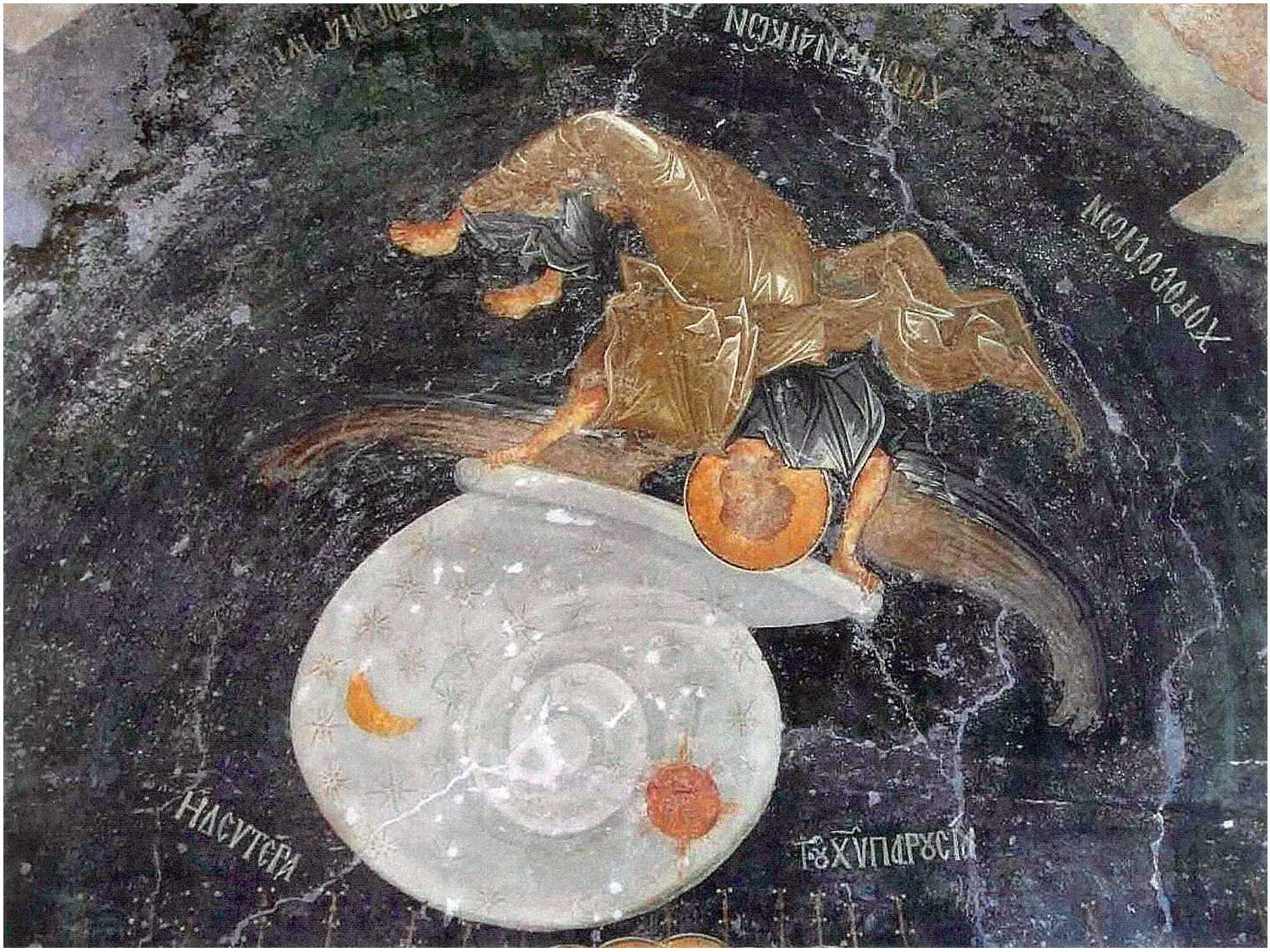



**47.** *The Resurrection*, fresco, 1315–1320, conch of the apse in the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)



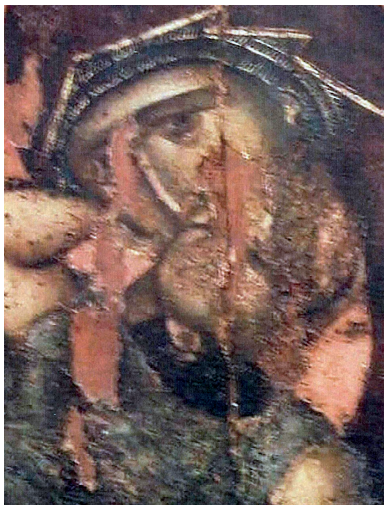
**48.** Top: The fresco of *The Second Coming*, 1315–1320, chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)

**49**. Bottom: A section of the fresco of *The Second Coming*, 1315–1320, chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)



**50.** The angel holding a scroll of time: detail from the fresco of *The Second Coming*, 1315–1320, chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)









**51.** Above left: Our demonstration on the photograph of the processional icon of the *Virgin Abramiotisa* (detail); 1345, at the Monastery of Chilandar, Mount Athos.

**52.** Above right: The processional icon of the *Virgin Abramiotisa* (detail), 1345, at the Monastery of Chilandar, Mount Athos. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2007.)

**53.** Below left: Our demonstration on the photograph of the processional icon of the *Virgin Abramiotisa*; 1345, at the Monastery of Chilandar, Mount Athos.

**54.** Below right: The processional icon of the *Virgin Abramiotisa*, 1345, at the Monastery of Chilandar, Mount Athos. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2007.)



**55.** *Christ the Pantokrator*, a fresco in the dome of the church of the Monastery of Gračanica in Serbia (Kosovo and Metochia), c.1321.



**56.** El Greco, *Concert of Angels*, c 1608–1614, oil on canvas, 112 x 205 cm, National Gallery, Athens.



**57.** Theophanes the Greek, *The Old Testament Trinity*, fresco, 1378, Church of the Transfiguration, Novgorod, Russia.



**58.** Theophanes the Greek, *St Macarius of Egypt* (detail), fresco, 1378, Church of the Transfiguration, Novgorod, Russia.



**59.** Top: The founder's inscription in the narthex, 1527, Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas, Meteora, Greece. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2008.)

**60.** Bottom: Detail of the founder's inscription in the narthex showing the signature of Theophanes the Cretan, 1527, Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas, Meteora, Greece. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2008.)



**61.** *The Second Coming*, fresco, 1527, Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas, Meteora, Greece; painted by Theophanes the Cretan. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2008.)



**62.** *The Second Coming* (detail), fresco, 1527; inside the narthex of the Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas, Meteora, Greece; painted by Theophanes the Cretan. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2008.)



**63.** *The Warrior Saints*, fresco, 1527; inside the naos of the Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas, Meteora, Greece; painted by Theophanes the Cretan. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2008.)





**64.** Left: Manuel Panselinos, *The Righteous Noah*, fresco, c.1290, at the church of Protaton, Mount Athos, Greece. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2007.)

**65.** Right: Theophanes the Cretan (and his son Symeon), *The Righteous Noah*, fresco, 1545–46, Stavronikita, Mount Athos, Greece.



**66.** Theophanes the Cretan, *The Second Coming*, fresco, c.1535–1541. The photograph shows the left side of the scene inside the refectory of the Monastery of the Great Lavra, Mount Athos. (Photograph: G. Millet.)



**67.** Theophanes the Cretan, *The Second Coming*, fresco, c.1535–1541. The photograph shows the right side of the scene inside the refectory of the Monastery of the Great Lavra, Mount Athos. (Photograph: G. Millet.)

# Chapter II

# The Relationship between Hesychasm and the Aesthetics of Late Byzantine Painting

## I

The initial purpose of this chapter was to detect and examine the ways in which Hesychasm influenced Byzantine fresco painting of the last phase. Due to the demanding nature of this topic, the research undertaken has led the author a number of times to change both the content and the title of the work presented here. Having said this, it should be noted that among the few significant things that have not changed, is the author's view that, collectively, the numerous publications relating to the hesychast spirituality do not provide a satisfying answer to a question of how is Hesychasm aesthetically manifest in Late Byzantine fresco painting.[1] Further, scarce and almost inexistent are the interpretations of the meaning that Hesychasm acquires once it is detected in Byzantine painting as a purely aesthetic phenomenon.

As implied in the title of this chapter, we argue that in Late Byzantine painting Hesychasm is manifest in distinct ways. However, the actual scope of the present chapter is not to discuss each of the possible manifestations individually, but primarily to examine the historical and aesthetic criteria according to which certain, scarcely examined manifestations of Hesychasm in Late Byzantine fresco painting could be confirmed and thus appreciated by the observer. Having said this, we note that a patient reader will be able to observe that our study begins with an enquiry, arrives at a detection, and ends with an interpretation of the relevant phenomena. Of course, the fact that the present study focuses on frescoes does not mean that Byzantine icons of the same period should not be

[1] Some of the noteworthy publications which relate to this topic are:

Mikhail Vladimirovich Alpatov, "Iskusstvo Feofana Greka i uchenie isikhastov," *Vizantiyskiy Vremennik* 33 (1972): 190–202. URL: http://www.vremennik.biz/opus/BB/33/52152

Nikita Kasyanovich Goleizovsky, "Isikhasm i russkaya zhivopis XIV–XV vv," *Vizantiyskiy Vremennik* 29, no. 54 (1968): 196–210. URL: http://www.vremennik.biz/opus/BB/29/52007

Aleksandr Ilich Klibanov, "K kharakteristike mirovozzreniya Andreya Rubleva," in *Andrei Rublev i ego epokha*, ed. Mikhail Vladimirovich Alpatov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), 62–103.

given the same level of attention in respect to the hesychast influences. That said, due to the difference in technique, it is to some extent appropriate that fresco painting and icon painting are examined separately, and our hope is that this work, which focuses on frescoes, might trigger further research of the hesychast influences in Byzantine icon painting.

The general hypothesis of this chapter is that the aesthetic manifestations of Hesychasm in Byzantine fresco painting should be seen as analogous to the intensity of the eschatological meanings in each painted composition. Of course, such meanings are subject to interpretation, and thus, a proper interpretation must be well grounded in historical facts and archeological evidence – a condition which has guided this research. In this context, one of the issues that we shall discuss is how the reason behind the phenomenon of Byzantine painters frequently turning towards the deep past of their heritage in search of aesthetic prototypes, has been harshly misconstrued by certain scholars.

In 1974, John Meyendorff stated that: "Art historians wonder whether the 'Paleologan Renaissance' in Byzantine art is connected with secular, 'humanist' trends or with hesychast spirituality. The first point of view seems to be widely accepted and implies that the triumph of palamite theology in the middle of the fourteenth century led to the end of the artistic 'Renaissance' as such. Meanwhile, the relationship between 'Hesychasm' and artistic developments in Slavic lands, particularly Russia, is generally recognized."[2] We shall demonstrate that contrary to the widely accepted view mentioned above, which still prevails, Palaiologan Renaissance is very much related to the influences of Hesychasm, which, given that it propagates the salvation of man through a visionary experience, can justly be attributed with theanthropism – which constitutes a humanism of its own kind. In other words, the painting of the Palaiologan Renaissance entails a non-secular kind of humanism, which is not at odds with the teachings of Hesychasm.

But why give so much attention to the work of a painter of the Late Byzantine period at all? The Bishop of Diokleia, Kallsitos Ware, unassumingly provides us with an ideal answer: "Again and again, not only in Palaeologan Byzantium but in many other periods and places as well, it is the men and women of inner stillness – not the activists but the quietists – who have in fact exercised the most far-reaching impact upon the world in

[2] See: John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Hesychasm: Historical, Theological and Social Problems. Collected Studies* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1974), 5. Note: in the introduction of this publication pages are not numbered. Meyendorff then continues: "Can then 'Hesychasm' be considered as 'anti-humanistic'? To answer this question a rather arbitrary assumption is often made – that it was the 'contemplative Hesychasm' of Gregory of Sinai, and not the 'scholastic,' or 'dogmatic,' formulae of Palamas, which inspired the Russian icon-painters (11). The assumption is in fact nothing but a truism: doctrinal 'formulae' as such hardly ever inspired artists, but the *content* of the formulae did. In fact, it is rather difficult to establish any significant differences in the *positive* teaching of the various groups of 'hesychasts' in the fourteenth century about man, about God, and about spiritual life. They certainly possessed a common set of cultural, social and religious values."

which they live. They have had a formative influence on contemporary history and culture even though – or perhaps precisely because – that was not their intention."[3]

However, whether painters, artists, philosophers or theologians, in Byzantine society, these "quietists" were not always heard with the same level of attention. As indicated by Professor Miloje M. Vasić in his famous book *Žiča and Lazarica: Studies in Mediaeval Serbian Art*,[4] seen as a virtue, in the Greek Eastern Orthodox Church, the hesychast experience was subject to fluctuation – subject to rising and declining.[5] Vasić argues that the fluctuations in the persistence of Hesychasm – as the ideal of monastic life – are related to a particular phenomenon in Byzantine art: the phenomenon of adhering to, and at a later stage even copying of the old models from the earliest Christian period, that is, the period known as that of the "old fathers."[6] In the introduction to his respective studies of Hesychasm in architecture, sculpture, and painting in Serbian art of the 13th and 14th centuries, Vasić states that the return to the oldest of artifacts, models, and types, a phenomenon also known as archaism, is encountered in the history of Byzantine art, there, where after a spiritual or political crises, Hesychasm makes a return and becomes again embraced by the Church.[7]

In our view, the clearest example which supports Vasić's conviction is the revival of the Hellenistic aesthetics which occurred in the painting of the Palaiologan period. After the death of Mihail VIII Palaiologos, who during his rule propagated the union with the Roman Catholic Church, his son, Andronikos II Palaiologos, restored Orthodoxy in all its social and cultural domains – contributing therein greatly to a spiritual revival today known as the Palaiologan Renaissance. Thus, during the Palaiologan period, in the domain of painting, the Hellenistic influences constituted primarily a spiritual kind of return to the past – and were as such paralleled by the new rise of Hesychasm. In this, the orientation towards the Hellenistic heritage was not seen by the Byzantine artists and patrons as a mere borrowing of forms. Rather, the vision of the past was exercised as the only proper insight – or in a manner of speaking as a prophetic kind of incision – into the sphere of the future. Seeing the past through the eyes of the present and seeing the present through the eyes of the future is related to the eschatological thought in Ortho-

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[3] Kallistos Ware, *'Act out of Stillness': The Influence of Fourteenth-Century Hesychasm on Byzantine and Slav Civilization* (Toronto: The Hellenic Canadian Association of Constantinople and the Thessalonikean Society of Metro Toronto, 1995), 20.

[4] Miloje M. Vasić, *Žiča i Lazarica: Studije iz Srpske Umetnosti Srednjega Veka* (Beograd: Izdavačka Knjižara Gece Kona, Knez Mihailova Ulica 1, 1928). In cyrillic: Милоје М. Васић, *Жича и Лазарица: Студије из Српске Уметности Средњега Века* (Београд: Издавачка Књижара Геце Кона, Кнез Михаилова Улица 1, 1928).

[5] Ibid., 204.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 205.

doxy. In fact, more precisely, according to Orthodox theology, the *eschaton* does not constitute the end of history but is actually 'located' before and beyond time and history as we know it. In this sense, the borrowing of the old models from the past in the realm of Byzantine art may likely be related to an attempt to come closer to a more holistic, eschatological perception of history and transcendental being.

Scholars who had overlooked this aspect of Orthodox eschatology have plainly attributed the style of Palaiologan painting with conservatism and introversion. For example, Cyril Mango has argued: "Instead of turning to the West, Byzantine painters went back to their own past and found models, largely, it would seem, among the classicising manuscripts of the tenth century which were themselves copies of much earlier manuscripts of the fifth and sixth centuries. To speak, therefore, of a Palaeologan Renaissance is rather misleading in that the term 'renaissance' implies an enlargement of horizons and a liberation of the spirit, whereas Palaeologan art bespeaks an antiquarian involution."[8]

We would argue that Mango has neglected to observe the parallel between the tendency of the Byzantine artists and architects to seek inspiration in the earliest of aesthetic models and the tendency of the Eastern Orthodox Church and society to turn to hesychast ideals after each period of spiritual or political crisis. As we stated earlier, Vasić has noted this parallel in his studies on Hesychasm, which were published more than half a century earlier. Further, as stated by Vasić, the revival of Hesychasm in Serbia occurred after overcoming the crises between the Serbian and the Greek Church in the period between 1374 and 1375.[9] Vasić observes that the choice of the very ancient three-conch plan of the church of Lazarica (built between 1377 and 1381, see *image 1*) most likely owes to the fact that its founder, Tsar Lazar of Serbia, due to the very strong influence of the Church, earnestly propagated the hesychast teaching and wanted to apply it in all domains, and wanted, in Vasić's words: "to dive into the deepest possible past, where, in the time of St Savvas the Sanctified, in Syria, the three-conch plan of the church is found, and thus the place in the heavenly kingdom most firmly assured."[10] In much the same manner, when at the beginning of the Palaiologan epoch (1261), Byzantine painters started to increasingly adhere to Hellenistic motifs and emphasise the classicism of the human figure, this had to do more with the embrace of a sacred – and indeed of the distinctly Greek – kind of archetype than with a mere borrowing of an old model.

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[8] Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 279.

[9] Miloje M. Vasić, *Žiča i Lazarica: Studije iz Srpske Umetnosti Srednjega Veka* (Beograd: Izdavačka Knjižara Gece Kona, Knez Mihailova Ulica 1, 1928), 218.

[10] Our translation. See: Miloje M. Vasić, *Žiča i Lazarica: Studije iz Srpske Umetnosti Srednjega Veka* (Beograd: Izdavačka Knjižara Gece Kona, Knez Mihailova Ulica 1, 1928), 218.

The restoration of Orthodoxy instigated by Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282–1328) was contemporaneous with the further blossoming of Hellenism in Byzantine painting. Subsequently, after the spiritual and political crises caused by the Hesychast Debate (1341–1352), as we shall see in more detail later, Byzantine painters again observed the images of their cultural past in a new light. Thus, contrary to Mango's earlier cited opinion, when Byzantine architects and artists turn towards their past, this should not be understood as an "antiquarian involution" but as a spiritual renewal within an orientation towards the archetypal, and above all towards that which is spiritual and mystagogical.

Therefore, as we shall demonstrate in this chapter, the phenomenon of the Palaiologan Renaissance need not be a subject of deception or confusion, but an object of a very particular kind of aesthetic appreciation. We shall elaborate on how in the domain of painting, Hesychasm exercised a distinct mystagogical influence, one which in the Palaiologan period amounted to a spiritual kind of renaissance. Thus, the author's hope is that the present study contributes to the wider understanding and appreciation of the paradoxical climax of Byzantine art at a time when the Byzantine world was being rapidly crushed by the Ottomans.

If in respect to Hesychasm, we agree with the relevant positive opinions of George Ostrogorsky, Miloje Vasić, John Meyendorff, and Kallistos Ware, then we ought to accept that the influence of Hesychasm in Byzantine society of the Palaiologan period can only properly be understood as culturally intrinsic – in a sense that irrespective of the fluctuations of its intensity throughout different periods, it existed uninterruptedly in both the consciousness and the subconscious of the Orthodox people. It is thus logical to assume that individual painters, or perhaps even entire ateliers, were influenced by Hesychasm in ways which would not have been comprehended by them on an entirely rational level – the way we approach and comprehend the state of our contemporary art in analytical seminar or symposium discussions.

On the contrary, the majority of these painters were most likely predominantly concerned with technical matters, as theological contemplation would have been regarded as a fundamental prerequisite to becoming a fresco-painter. This of course means that the hesychast influence in Byzantine painting can be manifest in more than one (stereotypical) way. To say the least, it can be manifest: not just in the compositional arrangement, not just in the drawing, and not just in the colour treatment.

Since hesychast teaching, as we shall see, is the teaching of the vision of the uncreated light, in the present chapter, it is necessary that we give special attention to the treatment of light in the painting of the Palaiologan period. Light, which throughout the entire history of Byzantine painting remains steadily within the human figure, appears to

distinctly alter not its position but its overall mood – especially in the period between 1290 and 1453. As we shall see, analogous changes are also noticeable in the drawing of the relevant compositions.

One of the more particular aims of this study is to demonstrate how the radiant layers of colour of the frescoes at the Monastery of Kalenić in Serbia, manifest a distinct relationship to the magnificent style of frescoes at the church of Perivleptos in Mistra. In our view, the nature of this connection projects a previously disregarded level of significance of the persistence of the hesychast influence in the painting of the last decades of the Byzantine Empire. We note that the connection between the frescoes in Mistra and the frescoes of the last phase of painting in Serbia has previously been briefly observed by David Talbot-Rice, in his book entitled *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase*.[11] However, as we have already indicated, the hesychast influence in Late Byzantine painting has so far not been examined exclusively as an aesthetic phenomenon – although a number of publications have contributed to a broader understanding of the latter.[12] Bearing in mind our previously made emphasis on the importance of the eschatological meaning entailed in the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting, we shall herein conduct an assessment that can be defined as both aesthetic and theological.

The research and fieldwork undertaken for the present topic has convinced us that in examining the influence of hesychast teaching in Byzantine painting, one should follow an unorthodox line of enquiry. Rather than starting from the frescoes where the phenomenon of concern is most evident, in particular, the frescoes of Perivleptos in Mistra, one should begin by observing both the period prior and subsequent to their making – and thereby gradually approach the climax of this influence.[13] Of course, this entails having at one's disposal, good-quality reproductions, or ideally, visiting the relevant monasteries and churches in person. The segment entitled *A Concise Historical Overview*

[11] In particular, Talbot-Rice states: "An approach somewhat similar to that which dominated at Mistra characterises the work of the last phase of painting in Serbia, which had its home in a number of monasteries in the Morava valley. Though the later years of the thirteenth and earlier ones of the fourteenth century, to which period these paintings belong, were by no means happy for Serbia, in that there were constant wars and troubles in face of the Turkish advance into Europe, which steadily progressed after the disastrous defeat of the Serbians at Kosovo in 1389, the art of the age is curiously delicate and tranquil." For this excerpt see: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 183.

[12] For example see: Dimitris Kalomoirakis, *Interpretational comments on the iconographic programme of the Protaton*, 197–219. This text is published in Greek: Δημήτρης Καλομοιράκης, «Ἑρμηνευτικές παρατηρήσεις στό εἰκονογραφικό πρόγραμμα τοῦ Πρωτάτου,» *ΔΧΑΕ* ΙΕ΄ (1989–1990):197–219.

[13] It is important to stress that the influence of the hesychast teaching continues to be evident even in Post Byzantine Painting. For example, David Talbot-Rice notes that the painting of a certain Anthony, who in 1544 decorated the nave of the old church of the Monastery of Xenophontos (Mount Athos), manifests the influence of the hesychast teaching. See: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 189.

*of the Hesychast Debate* is deliberately placed as a second third of this chapter, dividing it therein into two corresponding parts; the reader who is familiar with the relevant history of the Hesychast Debate will not be at loss if they skip our brief summary of it.

Great art is often produced in periods of wealth and security, and this is predominately the case with Byzantine art and architecture. However, although the last two centuries of the Byzantine Empire are characteristic for their political and economic crises, within the same period, Byzantine painting was simultaneously experiencing its climax. In 1389, at the battle of Kosovo, the Ottoman Empire defeated the army of the Serbian Tsar Lazar Hrebeljanović.[14] The Ottomans expanded greatly in the decades following this battle and the fall of Constantinople quickly became inevitable.

Prior to 1389, the already existing tension between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church heightened during the theological controversy known as the Hesychast Debate, which lasted between 1341 and 1352, and which ended with the affirmation of the Orthodox Church's belief that the uncreated light with which Christ shone on Mount Tabor, can be and is experienced by those who practice the Prayer of the Mind (Νοερά Ιροσευχή). Subsequently, approximately in the period between 1350 and 1375, the particularly bright, warm and atmospheric compositions of *Nativity*, *Baptism*, and *Transfiguration*, as well as other themes, were painted in the church of Perivleptos in Mistra. The equally bright, warm and atmospheric frescoes in the church of Kalenić were completed between 1418 and 1427, a few decades prior to the fall of Constantinople.

In 1968 David Talbot-Rice has, in a broader sense, noted the paradoxical revival of the Serbian medieval painting which can be observed in the frescoes of the Morava school, at a time of the ominous threat of the Ottomans, as well as pointed out the likelihood that the teachings of the hesychast philosophy might have played a significant role in the artistic developments of that period. He observes the following: "Perhaps it was the effect of an escapist mentality; perhaps the character of the principal patron, the Despot Stephen (*image 25*), was responsible, for he was himself a poet and he made of the Monastery of Manasija a centre of thought, writing and learning; or perhaps the teaching of the hesychast philosophy, which was flourishing on Athos and in Greece at the time, also exercised an effect here, for it advocated salvation by way of contemplation and visionary experience."[15]

[14] In 1459 Serbia was entirely conquered by the Ottoman Empire.

[15] See: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 183.

Besides the connection which can be observed between the painting of the Morava school and the style of painting that was to the fore in the early 14th century in Constantinople, Talbot-Rice also notes that there are certain similarities between the painting of the Morava school and the painting which was produced in various centers of Russia in the same period.[16] This should not be a cause for confusion in relation to the painting of Theophanes the Greek, who worked in Russia. In spite of their obvious belonging to the tradition of Byzantine painting, the frescoes painted by Theophanes the Greek in the Church of the Transfiguration in Novgorod (c.1378), should be appreciated as an entirely unique category in the history of Late Byzantine painting.

Equally unique in its style is the iconography of Theophanes' student, Andrei Rublev. Nevertheless, a comparison between Rublev's famous icon of *The Holy Trinity*, shown in *image 11*, and the three figures in the middle of the scene of *The Wedding in Cana* in Kalenić, shown in *images 12* and *13*, has most appropriately been made in previous scholarly literature. For example, in 1964, Svetozar Radojčić provided a particularly insightful observation of the analogies between these two compositions:

"Rublev's icon 'Holy Trinity' and the Kalenić group of the bridegroom, the bride and servant in the Wedding in Cana, two formally similar compositions of three figures, represent the two poles of the art of that time. Rublev paints a vision elevated to the sphere of ideas – the unattainable mystery of the Eucharist. The Kalenić artist paints the wedding of an angel-like young couple, ennobled by the symbols of sacrifice and blood bonds,[17] abandoning himself to a piety which is too free, almost sinful. Each line of Rublov's majestic figures radiates power and mystery. The Serbian fresco is an apotheosis of the earthy happiness of lovers. The strange lyrical sense of tragic times flourishes in Serbian literature in the same period as the paintings of Kalenić. *The Poem of Love* by the Serbian Despot Stefan Lazarević is the nearest counterpart to the Kalenić Bride and Bridegroom. Recited in front of their picture, *The Poem of Love* would sound like speaking with them."[18]

[16] Ibid., 183–184.

[17] Radojčić states that: "According to a very ancient non-Christian custom, the bridegroom and the bride drink blood mixed with wine out of the same glass, which is held between them by the bridegroom. The typically Serbian mixture of pagan and Christian rites is here brought into harmony by the power of the artistic execution." Also, in his analysis of the scene of *The Wedding in Cana* in Kalenić, Radojčić observes: "Only the bride and the bridegroom at the lower end of the table, with tenderly bowed heads, are performing a ceremony of their own, not mentioned in the Scripture: the bridegroom is about to prick the finger of his bride with the pointed tip of his knife. The play of gesture is admirably conceived to the minutest detail: the bride's hand is reposing gracefully on the richly embroidered tablecloth; it is being approached by the bridegroom's hand holding the knife like a surgeon's instrument and tense with concentration." See: Svetozar Radojčić, *Kalenić* (Beograd: Publishing House Jugoslavija, 1964), XV.

[18] Ibid., XXIV.

The last paragraph of the aforementioned poem, a poem which is possibly dedicated to the author's brother and whose title best translates to *The Word about Love*, entails a particularly eschatological message:

"And may we become gathered in one anew,
And may we see each other anew,
And through love may we unite,
In our God Christ Himself anew,
The glory to Whom is due,
Together with the Father,
And the Holy Spirit,
To the infinite ages,
Amen."[19]

It is important to mention that during the Ottoman rule, in order to protect the frescoes from being destroyed by the Ottomans, the faithful have actually covered all of the frescoes in Kalenić with a thin layer of lime. These frescoes were rediscovered in 1877 and then cleaned. We can only imagine the astonishment of the faithful when they saw these *revealed* frescoes in the 19th century. A valuable photograph preserved from that period informs us of the possibility that the earlier discussed detail of the composition of the *The Wedding in Cana* showing the bridegroom, the bride and the servant made a particular impression on the faithful. More particularly, our diptych shown in *image 15* compares this detail of the fresco (on the left) with a 19th century photograph (on the right). In this photograph a hieromonk from Kalenić, Makarije Davidović Todorović (c.1849–1897), who witnessed the rediscovery of the frescoes in 1877, sits with two of his relatives. More specifically, hieromonk Makarije, on the left of the photograph, sits next to his older relative in a manner which clearly shows that they intentionally aimed for a very symmetrical outcome of the photograph: they face the camera in the same way and they both have their hands calmly placed on their knees. Their younger relative is in a central position right behind them: the boy has his hands placed on their shoulders and he gazes directly at the camera. The overall posture and disposition of the three photo-

[19] Our translation. See: Деспот Стефан Лазаревић, *Слово Љубави: Слова и Натписи*. Избор и предговори: Миодраг Павловић. Текстове приредио: Димитрије Богдановић (Београд: Златоусти, 2009), 18.

graphed men entails an overt iconic quality. Although the three men in the photograph do not hold exactly the same posture as the three figures in the fresco, the resemblance between the two examples is quite clear and one may rightly wonder, to what extent is this photograph inspired or influenced by the detail of the composition of the *The Wedding in Cana* showing the bridegroom, the bride and the servant? Perhaps, together with his relatives, through this icon-like photograph, hieromonk Makarije wanted to share with posterity the experience of a living icon, the luminous experience of being made in the image of God, which characterizes the frescoes that he and his contemporaries re-discovered in Kalenić.

In the frescoes at Kalenić, the tendency towards the transcendental dominates over other aesthetic aspects. Accordingly, the serene stature and expression of the warrior saints in Kalenić is a novelty in the Serbian painting of the Morava school. In other monasteries of the Morava basin the warrior saints are portrayed as somewhat restless in their expectation of the enemy.[20] As noted by Svetozar Radojčić (1964), in Kalenić, only two warrior saints are painted with slightly livelier movements: "St Theodore Stratelates, who is drawing his sword from its scabbard, and St Procopius, who has drawn his sword and is holding it straight in a solemn way, as at some ceremony."[21]

Thus, we can rightly ask ourselves: is not the tranquil stance of the warrior saints in Kalenić an act out of stillness which takes place within the noise of the Ottoman armies? In interpreting the work of a fervent supporter of Hesychasm, Nicolas Cabasilas (c.1320 – 1397/8), Bishop Kallistos Ware states: "Inner stillness can exist even where there is little or no external silence; for the true flight from the world is not spatial but spiritual, and the true desert is always the desert of the heart."[22]

In our view, *St George*, shown in *image 22*, appears to be consumed in the contemplation of the things to come: his gaze is not directed towards the observer, but is directed slightly to the side – as if he is trying to simultaneously recollect the future and the past. This portrait of *St George*, as well as other portraits similar to it, such as that of *Saint Theodore Tiron* (*image 24*), can be understood to express the solemn spirit of all Eastern Christendom of the 15th century. Accordingly, bearing in mind the political circumstanc-

[20] This difference has originally been noted by Svetozar Radojčić. See: Svetozar Radojčić, *Kalenić* (Beograd: Publishing House Jugoslavija, 1964), XII.

[21] Ibid., IX–X.

[22] Kallistos Ware, *'Act out of Stillness': The Influence of Fourteenth-Century Hesychasm on Byzantine and Slav Civilization* (Toronto: The Hellenic Canadian Association of Constantinople and the Thessalonikean Society of Metro Toronto, 1995), 11.

es of that time, it could rightly be said that, through the portrayal of tranquil immovability of the majority of the warrior saints in Kalenić, the forthcoming, unavoidable Ottoman conquest of all Serbian land (1459), and the subsequent enslavement of its people, are events which are introspectively envisaged as impermanent.

In this particular sense, it can justly be concluded that the painting at Kalenić entails a distinct political dimension, one which is most closely associated to the eschatological experience of the Orthodox faith. This conclusion is also grounded in other both recent and older scholarly findings which concern the political dimension of the art at Kalenić. A noteworthy example is an insightful study entitled *Kalenić: Iconography And Political Theory*, written by Branislav Cvetković (2009), who states: "The unprecedented richness of architecture and a number of triumphal features in the painting and sculpture (*images 28* and *29*) reveal Kalenić as the commemorative church with powerful political statements."[23] We note that these triumphal features and the richness of architecture have as their base the same hesychast-inspired three-conch plan as the church of Lazarica, which is built approximately four decades before Kalenić.

In a number of fresco compositions in Kalenić, such as *The Numbering at Bethlehem* (*image 8* in the next chapter entitled *Modernism of the Frescoes of Mistra*), the earthy and distinctly bright palette appears to be in an immediate relationship with the deliberately extended space between the figures. It is as if the authors of the frescoes aimed at subduing the movement of the figures to an immovability of the otherworldly kind of light. In this, the discreet experimentations in the rendering of angular light appear to be well-balanced, as they do not come to contradict the sense of an atmospherically spread light.

The ethereal character of Kalenić frescoes is manifest even in the smallest details. While not losing its plastic quality, the human figure at points becomes almost vaporous in appearance, while the uniform facial physiognomies are differentiated by their expressions of inward feeling – more so than through the movement and gesture. Also, in view of the expression of some of these portraits, such as those shown in *images 17, 18, 20, 22* and *24*, we are once again unassumingly reminded of the expressiveness of the Fayum burial portraits (*image 19*) – which are aesthetic predecessors of Byzantine iconography.

[23] See: Branislav Cvetković, "Kalenić: Iconography and Political Theory," in *Symposium: Monastery Kalenić: On the Eve of the Six Hundred Years Anniversary*, ed. Kalić, J. Place and date of the Symposium: Kalenić, 5–6 October 2008 (Belgrade-Kragujevac: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Department of Historical Sciences, Diocese of Šumadija of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 2008), 66.

If we take into account Vasić's argument that, in Byzantine art, the return to the oldest of artifacts, models, and types is encountered there, where after a spiritual or political crises, Hesychasm makes a return and is again embraced by the Church,[24] the observed emphasised *Fayum aspect*, in the aforementioned portraits at Kalenić, acquires one particularly significant dimension. In particular, this reminiscence of Fayum portraits, or rather, the revival of the expressiveness of these, and the revival of the spiritual content manifested in their far-reaching contemplating gaze, are aspects which come in parallel with or are perhaps even triggered by the hesychast orientation towards the archetypal; and it is only logical that such orientation reoccurred at a time when the Ottoman Empire was making its final move in all of the Serbian land.

Thus, our interpretation is that in the portraits shown in *images 17, 18, 20, 22* and *24*, the emphasised Fayum-like gaze, however solemn, expresses a yearning for immortality, a yearning that sees Orthodox Christendom resurrect after the death brought by the Ottomans. In this sense we could imagine that while painting these portraits, besides referring to God, the painters were also instinctively referring to us today – as distant observers of the future.

Of course, to a varied degree, the *Fayum aspect* as one of the integral aesthetic features of Byzantine painting is encountered in most other examples and periods of Byzantine painting. Therefore, our claim is not that the painters who worked in Kalenić necessarily had the actual Fayum portraits in mind while painting. Instead, they could have relied to some extent on models of their choice, especially for portraits of warrior saints. In this regard, perhaps a particularly emphasised and somewhat majestic collar around the neck of Saint George (*image 22*) indicates that painters may have partially used Despot Stephen Lazarević (portrayed in a separate fresco: *image 25*) as their model, thereby arriving at the pronounced *Fayum aspect*. The comparison between the two portraits lends itself to such a speculation. That said, the portrait of Saint Theodore Tiron whose collar is not as pronounced (*image 24*) resembles the portrait of Despot Stephen even more (*image 25*). In fact, given that comparatively speaking, the portrait of Saint Theodore Tiron is far less idealised than that of Despot Stephen, one may wonder whether the former is a latent but truer depiction of Despot Stephen.

Having said this, we argue that in view of the depiction of the dead Christ at Kalenić, shown in *image 26*, the existence of what we can term as artistically emphasised *Fayum aspect* can perhaps be further confirmed. Here, the painter has firstly rendered the eyes as open, and then changed his mind and covered the eyeballs with the skin colour in an

[24] See: Miloje M. Vasić, *Žiča i Lazarica: Studije iz Srpske Umetnosti Srednjega Veka* (Beograd: Izdavačka Knjižara Gece Kona, Knez Mihailova Ulica 1, 1928), 204–205.

attempt to render the closed eyecups. As seen in *image 27*, the irises can still be discerned. However, in observing this phenomenon, we should not forget that in the early Christian period the crucified Christ was depicted with eyes open. Draginja Simić-Lazar states that the open eyes of the dead Christ in Kalenić could be explained firstly as an influence of Western models,[25] and less likely, as an influence of the early Christian models.[26]

Notwithstanding these two possibilities, in our opinion, it is also possible that due to the special attention which in rendering of portraits the artist at Kalenić gave to the gaze of the eyes, in rendering the dead Christ, he/she undermined or perhaps even temporarily *forgot* the fact that in this scene Christ is actually dead. If as an exercise of thought we imagine the latter scenario to be true, then the open eyes of dead Christ in Kalenić appear as an 'accidental' *Fayum aspect* – as the main characteristics of Fayum portraits are their burial purpose and the existence of life after death implied through the intense gaze of the eyes. Our exercise of thought is encouraged by the fact that Christ's irises which were initially painted are positioned in such a way that they seem to be conveying a particularly exalted state (*image 27*).

The iconographic similarities between the frescoes at Kalenić and the mosaics at the church of Chora in Constantinople, have long been noted.[27] Also, as mentioned earlier, the likelihood of the influence of certain trends from the painting of the early 15th century Russia on Kalenić's painters is undisputed.[28] Further, that which can be said with absolute certainty is that, judging by the maturity of their style, the unknown authors of the frescoes at Kalenić were not indecisive in respect of the variety of their influences, but have incorporated these into a uniform and distinct conception – one that was studiously envisaged and thereafter skillfully realised.

Having said this, in regards to Kalenić frescoes, our specific aim in this chapter is to gradually address their relationship to the otherworldly light manifest in the impressive frescoes of Perivleptos in Mistra. In order to do this, we must go back in time, by approximately half a century: we must go back from the time of creation of the Kalenić frescoes (c.1418–1427) to the time of creation of the frescoes at Perivleptos (c.1350–1375).



[25] In scenes of the Crucifixion in the Western tradition Christ's eyes could either be open or closed.

[26] Draginja Simić-Lazar, *Kalenić et la dernière période de la peinture byzantine* (Skopje: Matica Makedonska, 1995), 200.

[27] See: Svetozar Radojčić, *Kalenić* (Beograd: Publishing House Jugoslavija, 1964), X.

[28] For example, David Talbot-Rice notes the similarity between the paintings of the Morava school and those produced in various centres in Russia at the same time. See: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 183–184.

If we consider the Orthodox belief, that the vision of the uncreated Taborian Light (the light with which transfigured Christ shone on Mount Tabor), can be internally experienced through a particular practice of prayer (Prayer of the Mind),[29] in relation to the fact that, in Renaissance painting, light is not embodied within the figures but is depicted as cast from an angle, the theological dimension of the scene of *Nativity* in Perivleptos in Mistra becomes particularly clear (see *image 15* in the next chapter entitled *Modernism of the Frescoes of Mistra*). More specifically, this composition literally expresses the birth of Light into the world, where light radiates not only from within each depicted figure individually, as is the case in the style of the previous periods of Byzantine painting, but from the entire landscape, and from the entire painted surface. In view of this fresco, the observer is literally immersed in the otherworldly kind of light. Because of this, the most appropriate definition for the style of the composition of *Nativity* in Perivleptos would be *theological realism* – because, through the atmospheric radiance of the inner light, the theological reality of Christ's incarnation is given preference over the depicted narrative and its individual features. A very similar treatment of light is observed in the frescoes at Kalenić, which were painted approximately half a century later.

If after seeing the prime examples of Renaissance painting (such as that shown in *image 4*), one looks at the 15th century frescoes at the monastery of Kalenić (*images 5, 12, 13, 16* and *17*), they will undoubtedly come to a clear realisation that, contrary to a common inaccurate perception, Byzantine painting was not itself developing towards the kind of realism characteristic of Renaissance painting, and that, since its beginnings, Renaissance painting branched off the Byzantine experience and followed a rather different line of development. In particular, Duccio's (c.1255–c.1318) *maniera greca* already heralds the transition of Italian painting from Byzantine to Renaissance.[30] Subsequently, in his departure from *maniera greca*, Giotto (1277–1337) still adhered to a recognizably Byzantine arrangement of the composition,[31] but he did not produce a style that can be regarded as a natural continuation of the development of Byzantine aesthetics.

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[29] We are here referring to the teachings of Hesychasm, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

[30] Accordingly, Thomas Mathews states: "The rediscovery of the art, so central to European painting of subsequent centuries, was due to direct contact with painters from Byzantium. Duccio di Buoninsegna (c.1255–1316), regarded as the master of the *maniera greca* or Greek style, stands at the end of a century-long development of Italo-Byzantine painting." See: Thomas Francis Mathews, *The Art of Byzantium: Between Antiquity and the Renaissance* (London: Calmann & King, 1998), 157–158.

[31] Thus, for example, in discussing Giotto's *Lamentation* in Arena Chapel in Padua, Mathews points out: "He is the first to confront the problem of foreshortening figures; the grieving St John extends his arms into the depth of the picture (see *image 3*). The iconography of the picture, however, remains thoroughly Byzantine, introduced in the twelfth century. The compositions developed in Constantinople were the starting-point of Renaissance narrative art." Ibid., 159.

The Byzantine painters of the late period adhered to a depiction of a reversed or relative perspective which has its furthermost roots in Egyptian art. Giotto inherited the narrative disposition, a certain level of expressiveness, and certain structural norms of Byzantine painting. However, Giotto did not inherit the Eastern roots of the Byzantine artistic tradition. This is most obvious in his attempt to depict natural perspective – which is quite foreign to Byzantine painting.

Accordingly, a comparison of Giotto's *Lamentation*, painted around 1303–1305, with the Byzantine scene of *Lamentation* in Nerezi (1164), provides a particularly clear understanding of what was said above (*images 3* and *2*). In Giotto's composition, two of the figures have their backs turned towards the observer, while one of them blocks a part of the depiction of Christ. In the composition of *Lamentation* in Nerezi, like a piece of a written text, the entire scene is envisaged and rendered in relation to the observer. The composition of *Lamentation* in Nerezi, was completed in 1164, less than a hundred years before the commencement of the Palaiologan epoch (1261–1453), during which the concept of the inner light eventually acquired a new dimension.

More particularly, our view is that in the frescoes of Perivleptos in Mistra, as well as in those of Kalenić, the concept of inner light, which was nurtured throughout the entire history of Byzantine painting, is effectively transformed into the notion of the omnipresent light: as if the painters who experienced the uncreated Taborian Light through the Prayer of the Mind have passed that light on to the entire surface of the fresh mortar – therein transcending the singularity of individual forms.

The difference to the frescoes of the previous phase of the Palaiologan painting (1261–c.1295) becomes particularly clear when we compare the mid 14$^{th}$ century composition of *Baptism* in Perivleptos to the late 13$^{th}$ century composition of *Baptism* painted in Protaton by a painter known to us as Manuel Panselinos (Manuel Panselinos is most likely a later pseudonym for the main painter who painted at Protaton). In Panselinos' *Baptism*, shown in *image 7*, the palette is cooler and there is a stronger emphasis on the volumetric dynamism among the forms, which deliberately enhances the narrative character of the composition. As can be seen in *image 7*, the narrative starts systematically from the far left, where St John the Baptist is depicted to be addressing a group of figures, which includes a depiction of Christ in its centre. In the scene of *Baptism* in Perivleptos, shown in *image 6*, the analogous place (to the far left) hosts a far simpler depiction of Christ conversing with St John, whereas a small group of figures is depicted below them.

Also, it can be observed that in spite of the attention that it gives to detail, the narrative in the *Baptism* of Perivleptos is closer to insinuation than description. For example, unlike in Panselinos' *Baptism* (*image 7*), in the *Baptism* at Perivleptos (*image 6*), the two

hills of the landscape-setting join above Christ's head, in such a manner, that they insinuate a sudden angular turn of the Jordan River. In this way, the luminous Christ's body is encompassed within the contrasting blue colour of the river, whereas the landscape, being of similar bright-warm tones of colour to those used in the rendering of Christ's body, radiates a mystic unity of the entire painted surface. When we consider these aspects collectively, we discern that the tendency towards abstraction in the frescoes of Perivleptos is distinctly altered and perhaps even heightened when compared to its equivalent in Panselinos' frescoes. Of course, the specificities of the size and shape of the wall surfaces, and above all, the limitations of these, have played an essential role in the arrangement of figures within both compositions discussed here.

However, as can be observed in the scene of *Transfiguration* (*image 8*), irrespective of the specificities of the architectural setting, the authors of the frescoes at Perivleptos nurtured a very conscious liking of an abstracted line in their drawing, as well as of particularly earthy tones of colour. The analogous theme (*Transfiguration*) rendered by Panselinos in Protaton, shown in *image 9*, is comparatively different in this regard. In spite of these distinctions between the paintings of the two periods, it cannot be disputed that frescoes at Perivleptos constitute a continuation, as well as an enrichment of the style of the previous period.

From what has been said so far, it was particularly important to compare the mid 14$^{th}$ century frescoes in Perivleptos to the late 13$^{th}$ century frescoes in Protaton. This was conducted in order to introduce the reader to the specific nature of our further elaboration and analyses, which aim at demonstrating the diachronic significance of the hesychast connection between the frescoes of Perivleptos and those of Kalenić. Thus, we emphasise that the specific discussion which follows after the segment entitled *A Concise Historical Overview of the Hesychast Debate*, does not undermine the fact that the narrative nature, the classical sculpturality of form, the Hellenistic influences, as well as the general tendency towards abstraction, are the basic characteristics of the entire last phase of Byzantine painting.

# II

# A Concise Historical Overview of the Hesychast Debate

We are of the view that certain examples of Byzantine fresco painting preserve much of what still has not been said about the Eastern Orthodox theological experience and cultural trends in late Byzantium. At the same time, the Orthodox theological experience, as well as the history of the Hesychast Debate, entail much of what still has not been said about the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting.

The roots of the revival of humanism in the domain of theology, science and art of the last three centuries of the Byzantine world, should be sought in the work of an 11th century philosopher, Michael Psellos, who was influenced by ancient philosophy – especially by that of Plato and Aristotle. Although to a certain extent similar to the analogous contemporaneous movement in Italy, the humanistic movement in late Byzantium differed from the Italian in that it was generally not imbued by an anti-religious spirit. One of the noteworthy exceptions to this is the work of Michael Psellos' student, Ioannis Italos (or John Italus), who was condemned by the Orthodox Church for his teachings.

Admittedly, when compared to the hesychast ideals, the humanism of the late Byzantine period appears to give secondary importance to the divine revelation – but as such it certainly was not oriented against the idea and the experience of divine revelation. At the same time, there were Byzantine scholars who were inclined towards Italian – and comparatively far more secular – humanistic ideals, such as Maximos Planoudis (1260–1310), Demetrius Kidonis[32] (1325–1398) and Prohoros Kidonis (1330–1370); these were the propagators of Latin theology on Byzantine soil. Thus, in very basic terms we could say that two main currents in theology characterised the late Byzantine period: one which was firmly rooted in the teachings of the Church fathers, and another which at varied degrees and at different points manifested a more secular and philosophical spirit. However, it was not always easy to discern with which of the two currents a particular theologian identifies more, and thus, disputes often had to be resolved in a judicial manner.

The seemingly subtle differences between the Byzantine (Eastern) and Italian (Western) revival of humanism became crystallised during the period of the Hesychast Debate (1333–1351/52). It is our opinion that whilst reading the history of the Hesychast Debate, one should simultaneously bear in mind the aesthetic difference which was by then al-

[32] Also spelled: Demetrius Cydones.

ready well developing between the Renaissance and the Byzantine style of painting. In this way the parallel between the Hesychast Debate, which constitutes a rather abstract theological dispute, and the difference which exists between the characteristics of Byzantine and Renaissance painting, becomes particularly intelligible. Having said this, we note that the principle purpose of this short subheading is to provide a concise history of the Hesychast Debate. Therefore, the reader who is familiar with the historical events concerning the Hesychast Debate will not be at loss if they proceed to the last part of this chapter, entitled *Perivleptos and Kalenić: Sisters in Hesychasm.*

In the Orthodox Church, the term hesychast (ὁ ἡσυχαστής, literally "quietist") is very old, and it is mentioned even by the fathers of the Early Church.[33] However, the theoretical roots of the actual hesychast teaching, which was the subject of the Hesychast Debate in the 14th century, can be detected in the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (late 5th and early 6th century), and in those of Maximos the Confessor (c.580–662), who presented and legitimised the mysticism of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite in the Orthodox Church. The common characteristic of these two theologians is their enquiry into mystical methods of approaching the divine, methods which exceed the realm of the senses. As stated by Ostrogorsky, both of these theologians speak of the otherworldly light which is entered into by those who experience the vision of divinity.[34]

However, it is Symeon the New Theologian whom the hesychasts of the 14th century regarded as their official teacher. For Symeon, who lived in the late 10th and early 11th century, the vision of the divine light was the main aim of ascetic inclinations, while moral enlightenment, achieved through spiritual concentration and through entering into one's inner world, was the main purpose of his life.[35] Having said this, we shall now turn to the main events of the 14th century concerning the Hesychast Debate.

Grigorios, a monk from the Saint Catherine's Monastery of Mount Sinai had, whilst being on Crete, adopted the mystical teaching of Hesychasm from a monk called Arsenios, and traveled during the twenties and thirties of the 14th century throughout many regions of the Byzantine empire, visiting the more significant Greek monasteries.[36] Upon his visit to Mount Athos, Grigorios had concluded that the monks there were immacu-

[33] For example, in the 5th century in the Monastery of Saint Sava in Palestine, an ascetic named John lived "ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ" (in silence). His biography was written by Cyril of Scythopolis (525–558), Hieromonk and Greek historian of monastic life in Scythopolis (Palestine). See also: Георгије Острогорски, *О Веровањима и Схватањима Византинаца.* Наслов Оригинала: *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Bilderstreites.* Превела Др Љиљана Црепајац (Београд: Просвета, 1970), 208.

[34] Ibid., 208–209.

[35] Ibid., 209.

[36] Ibid.

late in their ascetic practice (πρᾶξις) but that theory (θεωρία), being pure contemplation, which is most exalted, was vastly unknown.[37] In spite of the resistance which his teaching encountered in some cases, Grigorios of Sinai found many passionate followers on Mount Athos, and the number of these followers multiplied very quickly.[38]

The hesychast movement, which was initiated by Grigorios of Sinai, would probably not have required a juridical kind of legalisation by the Orthodox Church, unless a well-educated monk, called Varlaam, arrived from Calabria (South Italy) to Constantinople in 1330, and later fervently tried to discredit the very core of the hesychast teaching. His arrival to Constantinople resulted in a succession of historical debates, the first of which, unrelated to Hesychasm, he lost to Nikephoros Gregoras.[39]

It is important to highlight that Varlaam was not Roman Catholic at the time, but was indeed an Orthodox Christian of Greek origin and a propagator of the Byzantine culture in the West. Thus, he commenced his campaign against Hesychasm as a member of the Orthodox Church. In fact, in the beginning, Varlaam was openly against the Roman Catholic Church, and had even written against its dogma of *filioque*.[40] However, shortly before his main struggle against the most eloquent defender of Hesychasm, Gregory Palamas, Varlaam was already negotiating in Avinion a possible union with the Roman Catholic Church – although such negotiations were inspired by Varlaam's Greek patriotism and intended to serve the Byzantine interests in the face of the growing Ottoman threat.[41]

The historic debate regarding Hesychasm, between Varlaam and Gregory Palamas (1341), was triggered by Varlaam's enquiry into the hesychast prayer method practiced by the Orthodox monks. In order to learn more about this method, during his stay in Thessaloniki, Varlaam became acquainted with some simple monks and learnt that they retreat into their cells to ceaselessly practice the Jesus prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me" / «Κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, Υἱέ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐλέησόν με»), and that in

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 209–210. Note: The fact that the teaching of Grigorios of Sinai was adopted so quickly is likely an indication that pure contemplation (θεωρία) was part of monastic life on Mount Athos long before the arrival of Grigorios of Sinai, having its roots, as already mentioned, in the experience of the Early Church. However, Grigorios of Sinai undoubtedly played a significant role in the affirmation of the hesychast teaching.

[39] See the doctoral thesis of Demetrius Moshos: Δημήτριος Μόσχος, *Πλατωνισμός ἤ Χριστιανισμός; Οἱ φιλοσοφικές προϋποθέσεις τοῦ Ἀντιησυχασμοῦ τοῦ Νικηφόρου Γρηγορᾶ (1293–1361)* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Παρουσία, 1998), 33–57.

[40] In Latin Filioque means "and the Son." The word *filioque* was added to the Creed at the Third Council of Toledo (589). Because of this, the Latin (Roman Catholic) text of the creed stipulates that the Holy Spirit proceeds "from the Father and the Son," whereas in its original Greek Orthodox form (First Council of Constantinople 381), the creed says that the Holy Spirit proceeds "from the Father." The Orthodox Church regards the dogma of *filioque* as heretical.

[41] Георгије Острогорски, *О Верованьима и Схватаньима Византинаца*. Наслов Оригинала: *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Bilderstreites*. Превела Др Љиљана Црепајац (Београд: Просвета, 1970), 219.

doing so, they tilt their head forward, touching the chest with their chin, whilst (apparently) facing their belly button.[42] Also, during the ceaseless repetition of the Jesus prayer, they withheld their breathing, and they explained to Varlaam that while doing so, an unearthly light is being revealed to them, the same light with which Christ shone on Mount Tabor at the point of His Transfiguration. This was the method that the earlier mentioned Grigorios of Sinai had been teaching and propagating during the twenties and thirties of the 14th century.

Varlaam considered this hesychast prayer method and its teaching as highly heretical, and he eventually succeeded in creating a public opposition against the hesychasts. Thus, the Hesychast Debate that followed, between 1341 and 1352, constitutes a historical point, where the mystical experience of the vision of the uncreated light, rooted deeply in the history of the Early Church, became the subject of questioning and theological quarrel. We shall not refer to all separate debates which took place. Rather, we shall limit this overview to those separate debates that were most significant.

In the historic council (debate) regarding the dogmatic appropriateness of the hesychast teaching and practice, held on the 10th of June 1341 in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, in the presence of emperor Andronikos III Palaiologos (1328–1341) and patriarch Ioannis XIV Kalekas,[43] the argument of Gregory Palamas, who represented the hesychasts, was that God in His essence is entirely transcendent of the world. Thus, Palamas argued that man can become close to God only through a process of irrational enlightenment.[44]

More particularly, Palamas claimed that God can only be approached through the internal Prayer of the Mind (νοερά προσευχή) – which is what the earlier described practice of the Jesus prayer essentially is. The core reason for Varlaam's inability to comprehend and accept this mystical prayer practice as dogmatically correct was that he based his theological arguments on Aristotle's dialectical syllogism,[45] and accordingly

[42] Ibid., 211–212.

[43] For a more detailed description of the related events see: Βλάσιος Φειδάς, *Εκκλησιαστική Ιστορία Β΄: Από την Εικονομαχία μέχρι τη Μεταρρύθμιση*. Τρίτη Έκδοση (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις «Διήγηση», 2002), 513–520.

[44] Георгије Острогорски, *О Вероваљима и Схватаљима Византинаца*. Наслов Оригинала: *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Bilderstreites*. Превела Др Љиљана Црепајац (Београд: Просвета, 1970), 213–214.

[45] We remind that according to Aristotle, from basic principles the demonstrative syllogism produces particular knowledge, whereas the dialectical syllogism is the logical enquiry into those basic meanings: only the first is properly employed in science, as it subjects the particular phenomena to general principles. In the following, we include an excerpt from an essay by Evelyn M. Barker entitled *Aristotle's Reform of Paideia*, which concisely explains the difference between the demonstrative and dialectical syllogism: "Instead of distinguishing an abstract syllogistic form from its material content, in the way of modern logic, Aristotle divides syllogistic premises into *demonstrative* and *dialectic* premises. He differentiates the two by their degree of certainty, and how a thinker actually propounds them. Demonstrative premises are necessarily true propositions known by infallible rational intuition, and always asserted. Dialectical premises, on the other hand, are supposed true without having the mark of certainty, and are either raised for the

proposed that the entity of the divine could be approached and understood through the application of rational thought alone. As stated by Demetrius Moshos (1998), through the dialectical syllogism Varlaam also attempted to disprove the legitimacy of the demonstrative syllogisms of the Latin theologians, and that, not by deconstructing these syllogisms, but by refusing to discuss their method and by aiming to replace it by his dialectical syllogism.[46]

In this, Varlaam was also adhering to the apophatic method in a rather distorted manner, without realising that the Church fathers adhered simultaneously to the apophatic and the cataphatic method. Thus, through the method of (a misunderstood) apophatic theology and Aristotle's dialectical syllogism, Varlaam was basically led to a perception that God's essence could be approached through human intellectual capability – that is, by gradually negating meanings that could be ascribed to God's essence. But, as we already stated, one of the crucial factors that Varlaam overlooked is that in the writings of the Church fathers the apophatic negation of meanings simultaneously entails an affirmation. For example, in the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite the negating meanings which refer to God can and should also be understood as affirmative, that is, they can and should be understood as an affirmation of the state of lacking, which is stressed by the negating letter *a* in the beginning of such words: such as *anengiktos* (ἀνέγγιχτος / ἀνέγγικτος) – meaning the one who lacks tangibility, therefore intangible, untouched and untouchable.[47] Thus, although it is a negating name, *anengiktos* simultaneously expresses an affirmation of the state of lacking tangibility. Therefore, according to Orthodox theology regardless of whether one adheres to the apophatic or cataphatic method, in each case, one implies the other. It appears that it did not occur to Varlaam that when understood properly, the apophatic method cannot lead to a perception that God's essence can be approached intellectually.

In Orthodox theology, which as we said adheres to the apophatic and the cataphatic method simultaneously, the perceptions of God which are formed do not refer to the

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purpose of questioning or asserted in a dialectical discussion. The distinction between demonstrative and dialectical syllogisms reflects the two kinds of substantive reasoning characterizing the life of theory and the life of action in ethics and politics. Aristotle makes the main goal of studying the syllogism demonstration, just as he gives priority to the life of theory in *Politics*. He promoted the stringent ideal of a science that organizes the truths of its subject matter through demonstrative syllogisms, so that a reasoner achieves rational certainty. A system of demonstrative syllogisms provides causal explanations of the essences and attributes of substances. This ideal of a science has been very influential in western intellectual history, and is said to have produced the deductive method of Euclidean mathematics." (For the entire essay see: https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Anci/AnciBark.htm)

[46] Δημήτριος Μόσχος, *Πλατωνισμός ἤ Χριστιανισμός; Οἱ φιλοσοφικές προϋποθέσεις τοῦ Ἀντιησυχασμοῦ τοῦ Νικηφόρου Γρηγορᾶ (1293–1361)* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Παρουσία, 1998), 181–182.

[47] The word *anengiktos* is used in the first chapter of the *Mystical Theology* by Saint Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite.

actual essence of God – the essence can neither be known nor approached. That which can be experienced are the energies of God's essence – through which the essence is expressed. Thus, according to Orthodox theology, while both God's essence and His energies are uncreated, man can come into contact only with God's energies, which are experienced as divine grace and power. Within this experience, man as a created being becomes sanctified through the uncreated energies of the uncreated God. It should be noted here that the differentiation between the uncreated and the created is the basic condition of Orthodox theology since the earliest history of the Church. In the period of the Hesychast Debate this differentiation simply underwent a further clarification.

The main question of the Hesychast Debate was whether the hesychast vision of the uncreated (Taborian) light is in agreement with the dogmatic teaching of the Orthodox Church or not. In this, Varlaam argued against the idea that the light with which Christ shone on Mount Tabor at the point of His Transfiguration was uncreated and eternal. He also argued against the possibility that the hesychasts could see that light almost fourteen hundred years after Christ's life on Earth. According to Varlaam, if we accept that the light on Mount Tabor is uncreated, we are forced to accept that such light is the deity itself, as, according to Varlaam, only the essence (ουσία) of God is uncreated. Of course, the idea of an essence of God which can be seen was regarded as blasphemous by both parties. Eventually, the entire debate was consumed by the question of whether there should be a differentiation between God's essence and His energies (In this context it is equally legitimate to use the term *energies* in the plural form as well as *energy* in the singular form). Varlaam claimed that no such differentiation is plausible, and that its acceptance contradicts the dogmatic belief in the singularity of the divine and introduces higher and lower deities, eventually leading to paganism.[48]

On the other hand, Gregory Palamas did not claim that the essence of God is revealed to the hesychasts, but that the act of the essence, as energy (ἐνέργεια), which is also uncreated, is experienced by the hesychasts as grace (χάρις) and power (δύναμις). Therefore, according to Palamas and the hesychasts, God's essence is entirely incomprehensible and unapproachable but His countless energies can indeed be experienced by man. Further, according to Palamas, if there is no difference between God's essence and his energies, then there is no relationship between God and the World – as in His essence God is entirely transcendent of the world.[49]

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[48] Георгије Острогорски, *О Вероваљима и Схватањима Византинаца*. Наслов Оригинала: *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Bilderstreites*. Превела Др Љиљана Црепајац (Београд: Просвета, 1970), 214.

[49] Ibid., 215.

We observe here that Aristotle's dialectical syllogism is insufficient when implemented (on its own) as a methodology in a discussion of the dogmatic teachings of the Orthodox Church, as from the foundation of the Church and throughout its history, these dogmatic teachings have always been antinomic.[50] Varlaam was unable to comprehend the essential nature of the Orthodox dogmatic teaching, and consequently, upon losing the debate against the hesychasts (10th of June 1341), Varlaam entirely changed his political and religious orientation, and having returned to Italy he became a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church.

Varlaam's subsequent departure from Byzantium did not constitute the end of the Hesychast Debate. The main anti-hesychast figure after Varlaam, was his student Gregory Akindynos[51] (who lost the debate in August 1341), and then, between 1351 and 1352, Nikiphoros Gregoras.[52] We shall not elaborate on all the particularities of the events after Varlaam's departure – as our aim here is mainly to explain the essential outcome of the Hesychast Debate and to make reference to its subsequent influence in the cultural domains of life in the last decades of the Byzantine Empire.

In 1351, the last significant council regarding the question of the legitimacy of Hesychasm was held,[53] where the representative of the opponents of Hesychasm was Nikiforos Grigoras. The following questions were all categorically resolved in favor of Gregory Palamas and the hesychasts:

Between the divine essence (οὐσία) and the divine energies (ἐνέργειες) there is not only a unity, but also a distinction.

Both God's energy and His essence are uncreated.

The distinction between the uncreated divine energies and the divine essence does not incur the acceptance of synthesis (plurality) in divinity.

The term deity (θεότης) is used in the writings of the Church fathers not only for God's essence but also for His energies.

According to the Church fathers, the essence is, in a certain sense, higher than its energy, and that, in the same way the cause is higher than the consequence.

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[50] More specifically, the Orthodox teaching is founded upon principles which negate one another, and, as Ostrogorsky observes, this teaching contemplates as theologically singular that which is logically plural, and vice versa, it contemplates as theologically plural that which is logically singular. Ibid., 220.

[51] Also spelled Gregorius Acindynus.

[52] Георгије Острогорски, *О Вероваљима и Схватањима Византинаца*. Наслов Оригинала: *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Bilderstreites*. Превела Др Љиљана Црепајац (Београд: Просвета, 1970), 217.

[53] Ibid.

A man can come into contact only with God's energy, and not with His essence, in spite of the fact that the energies are inseparable from the essence.[54]

As noted by Ostrogorsky, the result of the controversy manifested, once more, a negative attitude towards Western culture, an attitude which was simultaneously religious, philosophical, and political.[55] In fact, during the last two centuries of the Byzantine Empire, the more the supposed superiority of the Roman Catholic Church was imposed on the Orthodox Church, the more the entire Byzantine culture disassociated itself from the Latin West, and the Hesychast Debate constitutes a climax of that process.

As noted by Bishop Kallistos Ware, within Byzantine society in the last decades prior to the fall of Constantinople, in broad terms there were the following three main groups, not mutually exclusive but overlapping: "First, there were the imperial ideologists, who regarded the Empire as an enduring and unalterable element in God's providence, and who looked on Empire and Church as essentially interdependent. Secondly, there were those who, like George Gemistos Plethon, looked for inspiration to the pagan Hellenism of classical antiquity. Thirdly, there were the hesychasts, such as the anti-Unionist St Mark Eugenikos, Metropolitan of Ephesos, who were primarily interested not in the maintenance of the Empire or in Hellenic learning, but in the purity of the Orthodox faith."[56] As Bishop Kallistos concludes, it was indeed the third group – the hesychasts, who provided the oppressed Byzantines with the resources to survive the Ottoman oppression.[57]

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[54] Ibid., 218.

[55] Ibid., 219.

[56] Kallistos Ware, *'Act out of Stillness': The Influence of Fourteenth-Century Hesychasm on Byzantine and Slav Civilization* (Toronto: The Hellenic Canadian Association of Constantinople and the Thessalonikean Society of Metro Toronto, 1995), 21–22.

[57] Ibid.

# III

# Perivleptos and Kalenić: Sisters in Hesychasm

As in regards to the history of the Hesychast Debate, that which is of central significance for our present chapter is the information that in the 14th and 15th centuries the light of the transfigured Christ (who at the point of His Transfiguration shone in front of the apostles in the actual three-dimensional space) was internally and spiritually experienced by certain monks, and most plausibly also by painters – who themselves lived as monks. Consequently, the work of these painters, which in our view undoubtedly manifests the influence of the hesychast teaching, invites us to interpret their spiritual vision, both aesthetically and theologically, as well as to enquire into the relevance of that vision for the painting of our own epoch. As we shall demonstrate below, Hesychasm in Late Byzantine fresco painting is a phenomenon where art, without the immediate, activist-like concern for politics, absorbs both the political and the overall cultural experience into a higher sphere of meaning.

Two or three painters worked together in Kalenić, and they have successfully unified their individual inclinations and tendencies of expression into a harmonious whole.[58] In spite of the simultaneous use of cooler nuances, unassumingly, the considerably warm earthy palette, the evenness of the presence of an atmospheric light, and the weightlessness of figures, are the characteristics which speak of the connection between the frescoes at Kalenić (1418–1427) and those at Perivleptos (1350–1375) in Mistra. If the reader compares the scene of *Nativity* at Perivleptos in Mistra (see *image 15* in the next chapter entitled *Modernism of the Frescoes of Mistra*) to the scene of *The Wedding in Cana* at Kalenić, shown in *images 12, 13* and *14*, they will detect the similarity not only in the palette but also in the softness of the movement of figures, as well as in the elegance of form. More than anything, the mystic effect of the omnipresent light is a particularly noteworthy similarity here.

Vojislav Djurić (1974) argues that, no Byzantine artist, before the Kalenić painters, managed to give material quality to light through the means of the softness of modeling and a mist in the atmosphere.[59] However, such a claim would only seem correct had the

[58] This observation is originally made by Vojislav Djurić. See: Vojislav Djurić, *Vizantijske Freske u Jugoslaviji*. Drugo izdanje (Beograd: Jugoslavija, 1975), 101.

[59] Ibid., 103.

frescoes at Perivleptos in Mistra not been preserved to our day. In our view, the atmospheric and indeed material quality of light, achieved in part through the softness of modeling of form, is an experience which Kalenić painters had likely inherited from the frescoes at Perivleptos in Mistra. At the very least, we should accept that it is not impossible that the Kalenić painters, or the main painter on his own,[60] could have travelled to Mistra, in which case he (or they) would have seen the frescoes at Perivleptos, and managed to preserve the memory of the transcendental light as a prevailing experience. In such a scenario, one must appreciate how apperceptive a painter must be in order to adopt, in view of the frescoes at Perivleptos, that which cannot be copied or justly recorded in note-form:[61] the omnipresent, transcendental light.

Svetozar Radojčić's following observations indirectly support our view that it is due to its treatment of light and the heightened level of abstraction that the style of painting in Kalenić should be associated with the style of painting in Perivleptos. However, as can be gathered from the citation that follows, Radojčić neither relates these phenomena to the frescoes at Perivleptos in Mistra nor to the hesychast teaching:

"The light, transparent colouring of the Kalenić frescoes is an isolated phenomenon in the Serbian painting of the early 15th century. Light brown, light red, strong yellow, light green – all these favorite colours of the Kalenić artists were rare in other old Serbian paintings. Neither before Kalenić nor after it do we find similar frescoes in the despotic state of Serbia. Three conspicuously new features appear in the structure of the Kalenić style: light colours, subdued plasticity of the human face, and strongly emphasised lines. As a result of these novelties, a reverse relationship is established between the human figure and the landscape or architectural setting. In the earlier painting the human figure was dominant, and the architecture or landscape was represented in the background in diminished, toy-like forms; in the best frescoes in Kalenić, however, the human figure becomes suddenly ephemeral, almost negligible. The Magi pass hastily across the scene, almost like shadows, before the towering, massive architecture which forms the background. A new process begins in which inanimate objects and natural scenery becomes (sic) larger and more solid, while the human figure, represented by a nervous arabesque, becomes smaller."[62]

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[60] There is no written evidence about the authors of frescoes at Kalenić, but the comparison with certain miniature paintings, which were signed by a certain Radoslav, has led the scholars to conclude that this painter must have been the main of the painters who worked at Kalenić. Ibid., 104.

[61] Communicating new trends through small-scale manuscripts and drawings was the effective but also limited means for passing on new ideas and trends in painting, and thus, a visitation to an actual church would undoubtedly have constituted a more substantial experience for any painter.

[62] Svetozar Radojčić, *Kalenić* (Beograd: Publishing House Jugoslavija, 1964), XX–XXI.

In our view, this heightened level of abstraction, which, paradoxically, does not diminish the kind of Byzantine realism characteristic of the period preceding the Hesychast Debate, is a common feature of both Kalenić and Perivleptos frescoes. In the past, certain scholars have argued that the hesychast influence has also actually had a negative effect on the art and culture of Byzantium. A particularly noteworthy case is that of Delvoye Charles (1967), who argued that: "Under the influence of the hesychast reaction, Byzantine art receded into a closed world."[63] Another typical example is the opinion of a historian Apostolos Vacalopoulos, who argues: "Its eremitic and introspective outlook affected many who would otherwise have devoted themselves to the philosophy of ancient Greece. Hesychasm was therefore inimical to the development of a liberal spirit, which might have regenerated the Byzantine world."[64] Such perceptions owe to common misconstructions of the essence of the hesychast experience, which is why we have summarised the Hesychast Debate in the previous section.

From what has been said so far in this chapter, we can observe how the consequences of not properly understanding the context and the actual nature of the hesychast influence in Byzantine art are indeed immense, as they often lead to erroneous assumptions that Byzantine painters of the Palaiologan period aspired to follow, or even worse, that they should have followed the artistic currents which in Italy eventually led to the rise of Renaissance. We would argue that this is not the case. In spite of the range of influences, some of which came from the West, the tradition of Byzantine painting followed a steady course of aesthetic development, within which, its basic Greco-Eastern[65] character remained unmistakably recognisable.[66] The period of Post Byzantine painting, which lasted longer than two centuries, affirms this most unequivocally.

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[63] Our translation. The original excerpt in French reads as follows: "Sous l'effet de la réaction hésychaste, l' art byzantin s'est replié dans un monde clos." The Greek translation of the same excerpt reads as follows: «Υπό την επίδραση της ησυχαστικής αντιδράσεως, η βυζαντινή τέχνη αναδιπλώθηκε μέσα σ' ένα κλειστό κόσμο.» See: Charles Delvoye, *L'art Byzantin* (Arthaud, 1967), 352.

[64] Apostolos Vacalopoulos, *Origins of the Greek Nation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Byzantine Series, 1970), 58.

[65] It is often said that Byzantine art is a combination of a Greco-Roman and Eastern artistic heritage. However, we prefer to use the term Greco-Eastern, because the Roman element in Byzantine art cannot tangibly be conceived as distinct from the Greek – which was dominant in the last phase of the Byzantine painting. Accordingly, Panayotis Michelis states the following: "They have continuously influenced one another, but in the making of Byzantine art, an Eastern element was dominant, whereas in its decline, the Greek." Our translation of: «Αλληλοεπηρεάστηκαν συνεχώς, αλλά στη γένεση της βυζαντινής τέχνης κυριάρχησε το ανατολικό, ενώ στη παρακμή της κυριάρχησε το ελληνικό (στοιχείο).» See: Παναγιώτης Μιχελής, *Αἰσθητικὴ Θεώρηση τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Τέχνης* (Αθήνα: Ίδρυμα Παναγιώτη & Έφης Μιχελή, 2006), 278.

[66] Accordingly, David Talbot-Rice insightfully observes: "What may be termed the spiritual responsibility of art was never felt in the west to the same degree as in the Orthodox world, and therefore, with Giotto's experiments in the way of realism accomplished, art was free to develop along a course of realistic representation which was quite foreign to any possible line of development in the east." See: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 149–150.

It thus comes as a surprise that Delvoye argues, in an implicitly negative sense, that it was Hesychasm that inhibited the Byzantine art from following the path of the Renaissance painters in the West. He states: "In the domain of art, as well as theology, the movement of sensitivity and contemplation, whose most complete expression was Hesychasm, had resulted in the distanciation of Byzantium from the emancipation attempts of the West."[67]

Our understanding of the phenomenon of the hesychast influence in Late Byzantine painting is assisted significantly by an observation of Gabriel Millet. Millet insightfully associated the three overlapping rhomboid features, which often occur in the 14th century and thereafter within the mandorla in the scene of *Transfiguration* (*image 8*), with the hesychast movement. Millet has interpreted these features as a reference to the Holy Trinity by stating that the great defender of Hesychasm, Grigorios Palamas, writes in his homily no. 34, that the three persons of the Holy Trinity have the coalescent and unified light.[68] We observe that the motif of the overlapping rhomboid features did not remain strictly limited to the theme of Transfiguration but can also be encountered in other themes rendered in the 14th and 15th century. For example, we observe these features in *image 10* which shows a 15th century fresco of *The souls of the righteous in God's hand* in Resava: the three separate layers of the geometrically rendered light imply that the Triadic Light absorbs the righteous into one. In this, the hand of God, as well as the depictions of the souls as infants within this hand, constitute a symbolism which bespeaks a higher reality – the reality of the uncreated Light.

After Millet, David Talbot-Rice has also made observations of the likelihood of the hesychast influence in the frescoes of Perivleptos, as well as in Late Byzantine painting generally.[69] Moreover, Talbot-Rice analyses the scene of *Nativity* in Perivleptos and observes the following: "The same outlook is to the fore in the *Nativity*, which is mystical, even abstract, in treatment. The essential properties of the scene – the crib, the rocks, the

[67] Our translation. The original excerpt in French reads as follows: "Le courant de sensibilité et de pensée dont l'hésychasme fut l'expression la plus achevée eut pour conséquence, dans le domaine de l'art comme dans celui de la théologie, d'éloigner Byzance de l'effort libérateur de l' Occident." The Greek translation of the same excerpt reads as follows: «Το ρεύμα ευαισθησίας και στοχασμού, του οποίου η πιο ολοκληρωμένη έκφραση υπήρξε ο Ησυχασμός, είχε ως συνέπεια στον τομέα της τέχνης, όπως και της θεολογίας, να απομακρύνει το Βυζάντιο από την απελευθερωτική προσπάθεια της Δύσεως.» See: Charles Delvoye, *L'art Byzantin* (Arthaud, 1967), 351.

[68] «συμφυές καὶ ἐνιαῖον φώς» See: Gabriel Millet, *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Évangile aux XIVe, XVe et XVIe siècles, d'après les monuments de Mistra, de la Macédoine et du Mont Athos (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1960),* 230.

[69] For example, in his book entitled *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase*, Talbot-Rice states: "At times indeed it would seem that the idea of a mystic, uncreated light, which was at the basis of the religious teachings of a group known as the Hesychasts, was reflected in the art of the age, and the effects of their approach are to be seen not only on Mount Athos, where Hesychasm had its most ardent followers, but in the larger cities also, and not least in Constantinople." See: David Talbot-Rice, *Byzantine Painting: The Last Phase* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 150.

cave – have taken on the character of formal designs of an almost abstract character, and the light seems to emanate from within rather than to be cast from any natural source, so that the picture becomes almost a divine revelation. This is even truer of the scene of the *Transfiguration*, where the figure of Christ before a mandorla of unusually complicated geometric form is both wholly human and at the same time wholly divine." [70] It could be said that the painters who worked in Perivleptos and Kalenić, expressed the human presence on earth in relation to their spiritual experience of the uncreated light.

In conclusion, it is plausible to understand the influence of Hesychasm in the last phase of Byzantine painting as manifest in the reinvention of older artistic trends and models, such as those of the Hellenistic era, especially the emphasized classical rendering of human form. Generally speaking, the frequently made *dive into the past* by Byzantine artists, such as that possibly observed in the *Fayum aspect* of the portraits at Kalenić, is a phenomenon which commonly occurs after or in face of a spiritual or political crisis, and primarily constitutes an eschatological search for an exalted meaning of human existence. Most importantly, this *dive* into the past does not yearn for any particular golden era known to history, but seeks the Taborian Light of the transfigured Christ, a light which according to the hesychast teaching is uncreated and eternal.

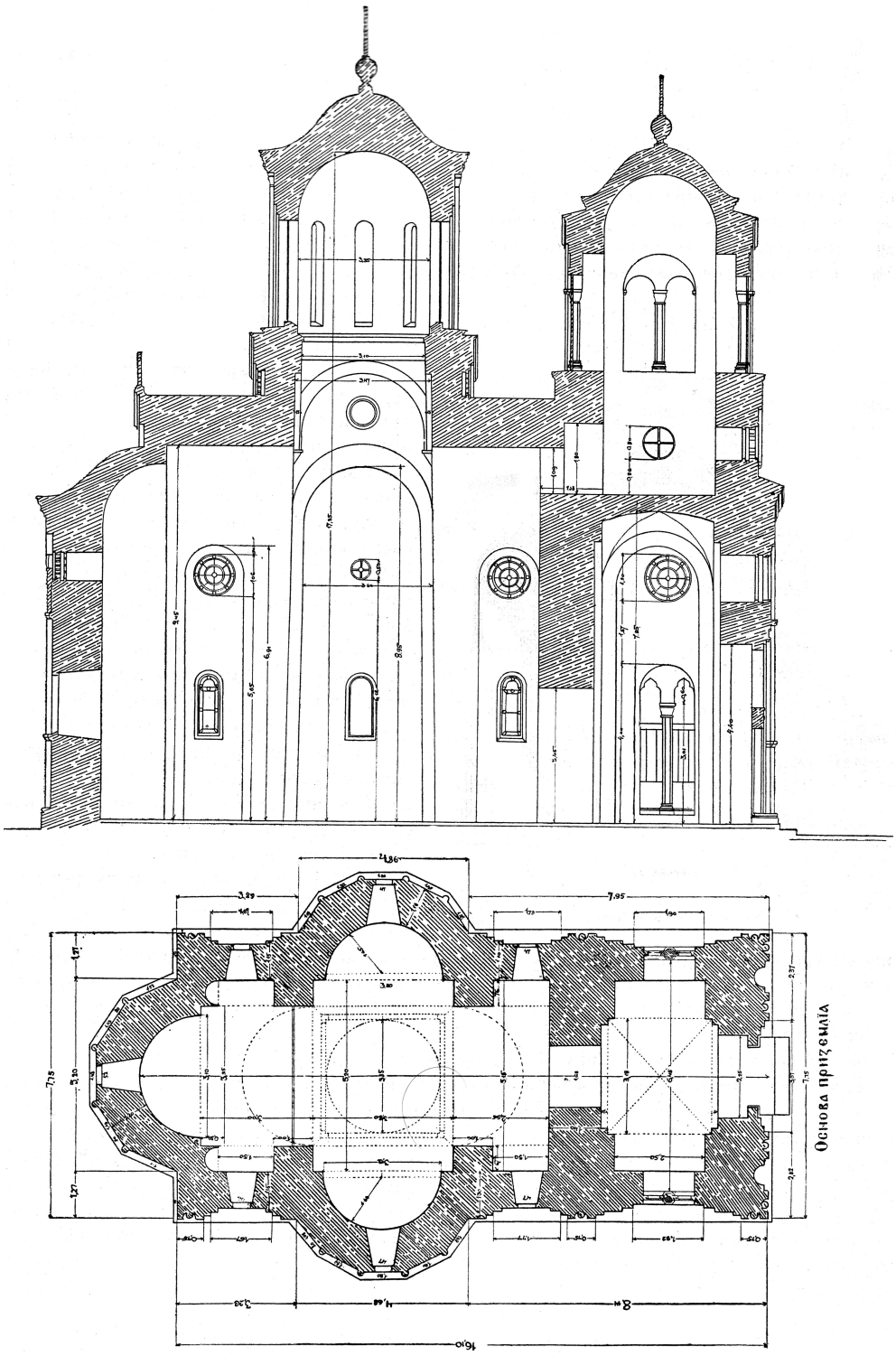
On the one hand, the hesychast influence in Late Byzantine painting is manifested formally, through the emphasised classical rendering of human form (i.e. Panselinos), as well as through formal symbolism – as seen for example in the mandorla encircling the figure of the transfigured Christ (*image 8*). On the other, according to our observations and analyses, in Late Byzantine painting, and especially in the frescoes of Perivleptos and Kalenić, there is a distinct understanding of colour as divine light, which most likely owes to the influence of hesychast teaching. This understanding of colour as divine and uncreated light constitutes the immaterial treatment of the material, a treatment which shows that the painters at Perivleptos, and those at Kalenić, have creatively shared the spiritual experience of their contemporaries (monks and artists alike), and therein authentically formulated their own vision of man within eternity.

In the following chapters, by virtue of analytical comparisons between examples of Late Byzantine painting and examples of 20th century abstract painting, as well as by virtue of visual demonstrations, we shall aspire to show how the achievement of the Late

[70] Ibid., 178–181.

Byzantine painters has outlived our Modernism, while their Modernism seems to challenge our current state of art. Accordingly, in view of Hesychasm as a spiritual but also artistic experience, the period of Byzantine painting known in relevant literature as Palaiologan Renaissance should be regarded as a spiritual renaissance whose protagonists continuously received new light form the internal vision of the transfigured Theanthropos. In this *renaissance*, the Late Byzantine painters have understood that man is not called to invent or depict the light, but is invited to become transfigured by the eternal light, because, in the words of Socrates: "it appears that within eternity, a man either lives as a man or he has not yet been born."[71]

[71] Plato, *Meno*, 86a. Our translation of: «δῆλον γὰρ ὅτι τὸν πάντα χρόνον ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος.» Ours is admittedly a free translation of this sentence by Plato, which is otherwise often translated as follows: "For clearly he has always either been or not been a human being." That said, by saying that a human being "*always* either *is* or *is not* a human being" (πάντα χρόνον *ἔστιν* ἢ *οὐκ ἔστιν* ἄνθρωπος) Socrates places an emphasis on the state of being of the human being within eternity, as opposed to his/her state of being as it commonly appears to us in this transitory, earthly life. This is why we deliberately offered a more loose translation (interpretation) which includes the '*is* or *is not*' notion of a human being who in eternity either lives as a human being or has *not yet been born*.




*96, 97. — Основа и уздужни пресек Лазарице.* (Снимак М. Рувидића.)

**1.** The side view and the plan of the church of Lazarica in Serbia (recorded by M. Ruvidić).





**2.** Top: *Lamentation*, 1164, fresco, Church of St Panteleimon (founded by Alexios Komnenos), Nerezi, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

**3.** Bottom: Giotto, *Lamentation*, 1303–1305, fresco, 200 x 185 cm, Padua, Arena Chapel (north wall), Italy.



**4.** Detail from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, painted by Michelangelo between 1508 and 1512.



**5.** Frescoes inside the church of the Monastery of Kalenić (south apse), 1418–1427, Serbia.





**6.** Top: *Baptism*, 1350–1375, fresco, church of the Mother of God Perivleptos, Mistra, Greece.

**7.** Bottom: Manuel Panselinos, *Baptism*, c.1290, fresco, church of Protaton, Mount Athos, Greece.



**8.** Top: *Transfiguration*, 1350–1375, fresco, church of the Mother of God Perivleptos, Mistra, Greece.

**9.** Bottom: Manuel Panselinos, *Transfiguration*, c.1290, fresco, the church of Protaton, Mount Athos, Greece.



**10.** *The souls of the righteous in God's hand (The hand of God between Solomon and David)*, soffit of arch above tympanum of west door, Manasija (Resava), monastery church, nave, Serbia; not later than 1418.



**11.** Andrei Rublev, *The Holy Trinity*, 1410, icon, 142 x 114 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



**12.** *The Wedding in Cana* (detail), 1418–1427, fresco,
in the south apse of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.



**13.** Top: *The Wedding in Cana* (detail), 1418–1427, fresco,
in the south apse of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.

**14.** Bottom: *The Wedding in Cana*, 1418–1427, fresco,
in the south apse of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.



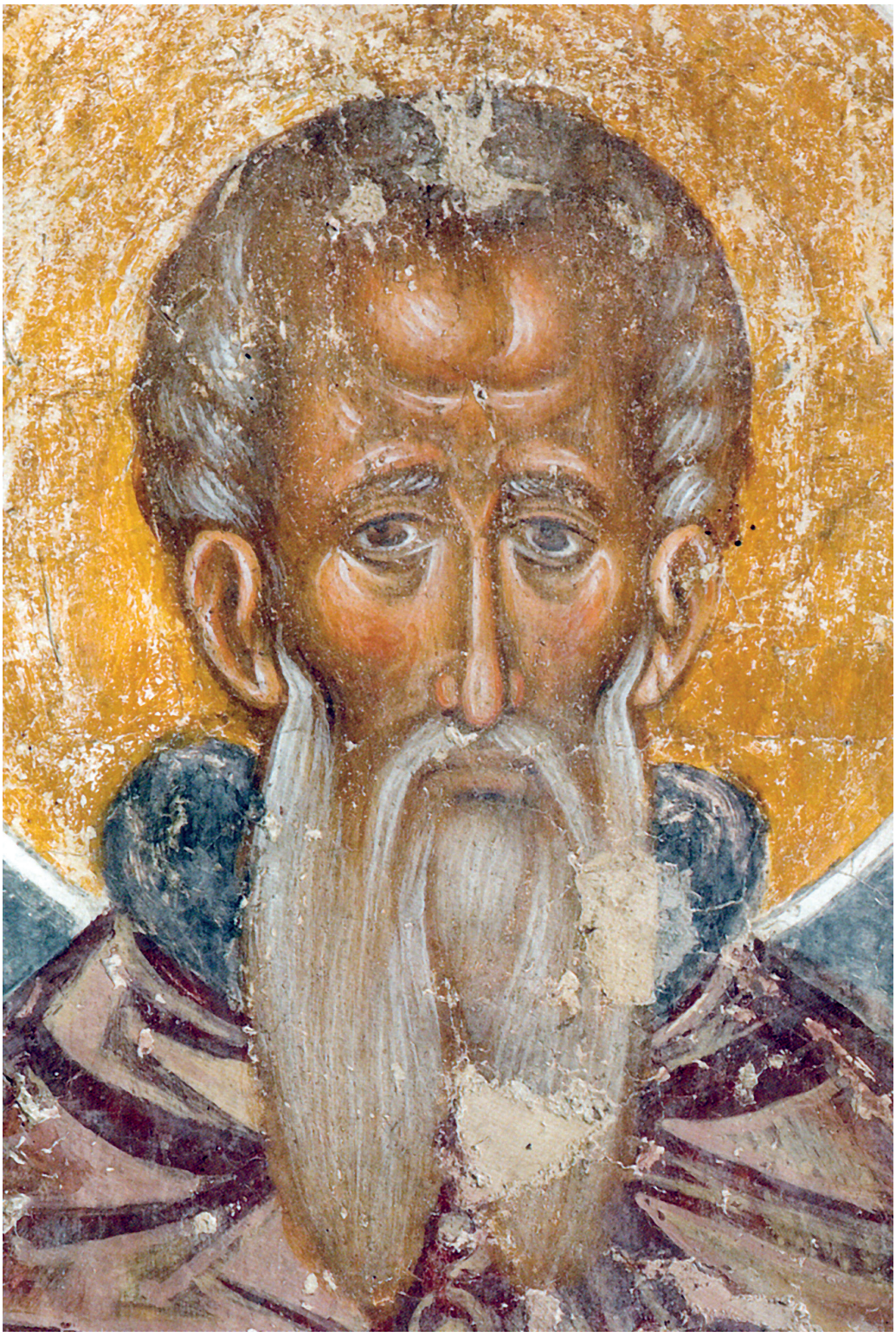
**15.** Diptych featuring a comparison between a detail of the 15th century fresco of the *Wedding in Cana* in Kalenić (on the left) and a 19th century photograph of a hieromonk from the Monastery of Kalenić, Makarije Davidović Todorović (c.1849–1897), who witnessed the rediscovery of the frescoes in Kalenić, in 1877. Hieromonk Makarije is photographed with two of his relatives.



**16.** *The Flight into Egypt* (detail), 1418–1427, fresco,
north wall inside the narthex of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.



**17.** *Saint Arsenius* (detail), fresco, 1418–1427,
south wall inside the narthex of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.



**18.** *Saint Theodosius* (detail), fresco, 1418–1427,
west wall inside the narthex of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.





**19.** Left: Portrait of a man, encaustic on linen, 50.5 x 30 cm, c.225–250 AD, found in Antinopolis (near the region of Fayum in Egypt); Benaki Museum, Athens.

**20.** Right: Saint Gobdelas (detail), fresco, 1418–1427, at the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.



**21.** *Saint Demetrius and Saint George*, fresco, 1418–1427, south apse of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.



**22.** *Saint George* (detail), fresco, 1418–1427, south apse of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.



**23.** *Saint Theodore Stratelates and Saint Theodore Tiron*, fresco, 1418–1427, north apse of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.





**24.** Left: *Saint Theodore Tiron* (detail), fresco, 1418–1427,
north apse of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.

**25.** Right: *Despot Stephen Lazarević* (detail), fresco, 1418–1427,
north wall inside the narthex of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.



**26.** *The Dead Christ* (or *Pieta*), fresco, 1418–1427,
inside the sanctuary of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.



**27.** Detail of the *Dead Christ* (or *Pieta*), fresco, 1418–1427,
inside the sanctuary of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia.



**28.** One of the windows of the church of the Monastery of Kalenić with triumphal features, in the eastern part of the south façade, completed approximately in 1418.



**29.** The church of the Monastery of Kalenić in Serbia, completed approximately in 1418.

# Chapter III

# Modernism of the Frescoes of Mistra

Located six kilometres northwest of the modern-day town of Sparta, Mistra is a hill which stands like a cut-off fragment of the Taygetos mountain range in south Peloponnesus. The height of the hill of Mistra reaches 621 metres. On its top there are still remnants of the medieval fortress, while beneath the fortress are the Byzantine churches, as well as remnants of the Byzantine city of Mistra.

In order to provide a brief chronological context for our present discussion, which will mainly focus on the aesthetics of the preserved frescoes, we shall here concisely refer to the main churches of Mistra: The metropolitan church of St Demetrius was built approximately between 1263 and 1271. The monastery of Vrontochi (Vrontochion) was built around 1290 and within it the church of Saints Theodore, and later also the church of Hodigitria (c.1310), also known as Afentiko. Then there is St Sophia and Perivleptos, both built during the reign of Despot Manuel Kantakouzenos (1348–1380). A small church of Euangelistria, probably dating to the early 15th century,[1] is the only church in Mistra without any evidence of its history, with only a few preserved sections of its fresco decoration. Finally, there is the monastery of Pantanassa, founded in 1428 by Ioannis Frangopoulos who held the presiding position in the Despotate of Morea (Peloponnesus). There are also more than twenty smaller funerary chapels, in some of which, sections of frescoes, mainly from the 14th century, are still preserved. The noteworthy church of St Nicholas dates to the 17th century.

Among the preserved frescoes from the Late Byzantine period, those at Mistra collectively embody a stylistic variety most representative of the main currents and innovations which occurred between the late 13th and early 15th century. Today, in quite a mystagogical way the preserved sections of frescoes at Mistra initiate a careful contemporary observer to a particular, Byzantine worldview which did not cease to exist because it exhausted its inspirations or because it was surpassed by the Enlightenment of the late 17th and 18th century. Rather, this celestial worldview entailed in the aesthetics of Late

[1] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005), 93.

Byzantine painting (13th to mid 15th century) became comparatively constrained in Post Byzantine painting (mid 15th to late 17th century) due to the Ottoman conquest, whilst remaining misunderstood in the West until the beginning of the 20th century.

What this chapter will primarily address is the deeper aesthetic significance and the diachronic character of the frescoes at Mistra. Given that in the early 20th century a great scholarly interest in Byzantine heritage emerged, until now frescoes of Mistra have been discussed many times in various publications.[2] However, concerning the more recent period, while the existent publications which relate to the art of Mistra include to a limited extent aesthetic considerations of frescoes,[3] they do not elaborate adequately on their deeper artistic significance and their diachronic character. Further, there are no publications that interpret the aesthetics of the frescoes at Mistra in terms of their relationship specifically to the artistic achievement of great abstract painters of the 20th century: Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Mark Rothko. Our view is that besides the context of the ecclesial tradition, the diachronic character of the frescoes at Mistra can be observed in view of the fact that the aforementioned great Modern painters of the 20th century creatively adopted in their abstract work certain aspects of the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting, including those that particularly characterise the frescoes at Mistra.

Over the years, the studious in situ examination of the frescoes at Mistra has allowed us to consider these simultaneously within as well as beyond their archaeological context. By virtue of such a consideration, while observing a fragment of a fresco that preserves the grace and freshness of the Byzantine painter's brush, a contemporary viewer is essentially reading a historical and aesthetic *text*, which directly testifies to a diachronic kind of enlightenment and a yet to be appreciated medieval modernism which occurred much before the Modernism of the 20th century.

Within a different historical context and due to different circumstances, some of the 20th century abstract painters have aesthetically formulated their vision of human presence in a manner which significantly relates to the experience of painters who worked at Mistra and elsewhere in the Byzantine Empire. Even if we were to ignore that a number of Modernist painters were very much interested in Byzantine aesthetics, the aes-

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[2] The most notable of these are the following: Robert Byron & David Talbot-Rice, *The Birth of Western Painting. A History of Colour, Form, and Iconography* (Routledge Revivals / Routledge, 2013). This book was originally published in 1930 under a title *The Birth of Western Painting. A History of Colour, Form and Iconography Illustrated from the Paintings of Mistra and Mount Athos, of Giotto and Duccio and of El Greco.* Steven Runciman, *Μυστράς* (Καρδαμίτσα, 2003).

[3] Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005). Μυρτάλη Αχειμάστου-Ποταμιάνου, *Μυστράς: Ιστορικός και Αρχαιολογικός Οδηγός* (Αθήνα: Έσπερος / Κλειώ, 2003). Μαίρη Άσπρα-Βαρδαβάκη, Μελίτα Εμμανουήλ, *Η Μονή της Παντάνασσας στον Μυστρά: Οι τοιχογραφίες του 15ου αιώνα* (Αθήνα: Εμπορική Τράπεζα της Ελλάδος, 2005).

thetic affinities observed between their work and frescoes at Mistra are quite striking and they seem to be vividly implying that Modernism could in fact be understood as a centuries-long phenomenon which is historically both discontinuing and continuing, under different circumstances.

In this sense, purely from the point of view of aesthetics, we may look at the phenomenon of Modernism as something that we humans have broken into various historical timeframes and academic categories, which in themselves deceptively project a picture of a discontinued, fragmented experience. This seeming fragmentation of the notion of Modernism throughout history can effectively be surpassed by appreciating a fragment of a fresco at Mistra as part of an aesthetic experience which became replanted and remerged anew as transubstantiated in the ateliers of some of the major 20th century abstract painters.

## The Byzantine reality of seeing versus the notion of seeing reality

In order to begin understanding the relationship of frescoes at Mistra to 20th century abstract painting, we must firstly clarify the multifaceted relationship of the so called 'inverse perspective' (also known as 'reverse perspective') in Byzantine painting to the question of realism.[4] In this task, while there will inevitably be overlapping aspects with the classic explanation of reverse perspective offered by Pavel Florensky in his essay *Reverse Perspective*,[5] our topic at hand entails a novel approach, which presupposes that the phenomenon of the inverse perspective in Late Byzantine painting pertains to a very specific kind of *reality of seeing*, as distinct from, to use Florensky's words, "a special system for the representation and perception of reality as it is represented in icons."[6] This has hitherto not been sufficiently explained, especially in relation to the most representative examples of Late Byzantine painting.

The non-realistic perspective is of course an early phenomenon in Byzantine art but the overtly rendered inverse perspective is a phenomenon which became a common place in Late Byzantine painting. Of course, these and other similar terms, such as rela-

[4] We have elaborated on inverse perspective in the first chapter of this book and our reference to it in this chapter has a different scope.

[5] Although this essay was written in 1919 it was first published (in Russian) in 1967. For the English translation of *Reverse Perspective* see: Pavel Florensky, "Reverse Perspective" in *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler (London: Reaktion, 2002).

[6] Pavel Florensky, "Reverse Perspective" in *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler (London: Reaktion, 2002), 202.

tive perspective, were not used by the Byzantines themselves and they are useful only as our own reference to a particular aesthetic phenomenon.

That said, the inverse perspective in the painting compositions of the Late Byzantine period opens a visual and notional space which is notably different from the one we observe around us in nature. However, this space opened by the inverse perspective is not entirely contradictory to the space observed in nature. The three dimensional space in nature is endless with countless points of reference upon which it simultaneously both commences and ends. In nature, every point of reference is relative and relationship-based in a sense that it can be conceived of only in relation to the collective system of references to which other similar points belong.

In Byzantine compositions, especially of the late period, there is a different kind of *relativity*, wherein the first point of reference is the viewer himself/herself, towards whom the lines of the so called inverse perspective close in (as demonstrated in *image 2*). More precisely, the viewer is considered and understood as a point from which the vision is projected towards infinity and it is because of this concept that when the viewer is in front of a composition of Late Byzantine painting the lines of the inverse perspective essentially begin to implicitly open up and expand from the viewer's eye lens towards the infinity of the background depth of the painted composition (*image 2*). The second and equally important *point* of reference which is aesthetically implied in the Byzantine composition is the space of transcendental infinity, which is implied in the overall background of the composition by virtue of the fact that its perspective expands in the distance rather than closes in towards the distance.

In this way, as seen in *image 3* each depicted theme is essentially 'placed' between the infinity which continuously expands in the background of the composition and the smallest point of reference being the eye of the observer. Therefore, the viewer is absorbed by the depicted theme into a tangibly different dimension which alludes to a different and more substantial reality than the one we are accustomed to call 'nature.' In this higher reality of the Byzantine painting experience one can observe a light which, theologically speaking, precedes the created world and therefore dynamically exists within all its elements.

But before we consider further the question of light, it is quite noteworthy that the so called inverse perspective in Byzantine painting reveals an extraordinary relationship to the humanity's gaze and orientation towards the Universe. To understand this we must firstly imagine two adjacent perfectly straight lines drawn from the surface of our Planet at a right angle towards the outer Universe. The drawing shown in *image 4* is deliberately exaggerated for the sake of clarity. As seen in *image 4*, because the surface of the

Earth is not flat but spherical, in other words, because these two lines start from a spherical convex surface they gradually separate from one another rather than remain parallel to one another. Much like the actual manner in which the vision generally expands from our eyeballs rather than keeping a straight linear direction, our two hypothetical lines expand towards the infinity. This means that, although objects do seem smaller in the distance, the reality of the human vision is such that it expands into the distance rather than closes at a point in the distance. It is not coincidental that this is practically realised when humanity's gaze towards the Universe is considered, as opposed to considering the gaze towards a landscape or within an interior.

In other words, the fact that our vision, projected both from our eyes and from our Planet naturally expands towards the Universe, is alluding to a more substantial, higher reality which we are called to understand precisely through the act of our seeing. In this particular sense, philosophically speaking, the so called inverse perspective in Byzantine painting is in fact closer to what might be called *the reality of seeing* than the regular naturalistic (linear) perspective taught in the discipline of realistic painting.

The point of this is to show that, despite its stylistic inconsistencies observed in a broader variety of examples, through its methods, such as the inverse perspective, Byzantine painting not only did not try to move away from reality and realism but it indeed tried to infiltrate deep into the essence of reality. As we shall see later in this book, certain 20th century Modernists, such as Kazimir Malevich, were concerned with precisely the same problem, of infiltrating into a deeper reality of existence beyond that which is apparent.[7] Therefore, it is understandable that for different reasons the Byzantine artists and the Modern artists of the 20th century grappled with similar kind of notions pertaining to the *real*, notions which in both cases were not similar to the Renaissance kind of realism.

As demonstrated in *image 3*, it could be said that in Late Byzantine painting the vision of the viewer expands as invisible light towards the depicted World/Universe, thereby producing the effect of the so called inverse perspective. Similarly to the contemporary practices of Cosmology and Astronomy, the way of Byzantine seeing is projecting vision as light towards the depths of the Cosmos. It is noteworthy that the slightly curved lines of the Byzantine inverse perspective (*image 2*) also correspond to the fact that, as a phenomenon, an entirely straight line does not exist in nature and is a purely human invention.

[7] We discuss Byzantine influences in Malevich's painting in the fifth chapter of this book.

# From the Byzantine frescoes of Mistra to the 20th century abstract painting

In Byzantine compositions the light is embodied within the forms, first and foremost because the colour is perceived as a carrier of light and not as a reflection of it. Secondly, as we have discussed in the first chapter, not only the human figure, but also other features in Byzantine compositions are rendered as forms that dynamically embody light within them. Rooted in a centuries-long artistic tradition and simultaneously rooted in the experience of Byzantine theology, the characteristic aesthetic concept of light embodied within the form in Byzantine painting does not constitute merely a canon of symbolic meaning. Also, neither the concept of the embodied light nor the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting could sufficiently be explained as merely technical or merely painterly means for encouraging the viewer to engage in an aesthetic interaction with the image.

For a byzantine painter, during the process of rendering of each composition, this embodied light constitutes both the point of commencement and the objective of the simultaneous theological contemplation and aesthetic conception of the visual theme. In most representative examples of the byzantine painting tradition, the theological contemplation and the aesthetic conception constitute a unified experience rather than two distinctive experiences. For example, in some of the best examples of Late Byzantine painting, we can find details of the robes of the depicted figures to resemble swirling galaxies that embody and carry light in rhythmic, cosmic kind of motion. With his/her paintbrush the painter renders the drapery folds in a musicalised manner, which effortlessly radiates with rhythm and harmony. The *galaxy analogy* and the *music analogy* are only two of many that could be made but the basic point of such notional departures from what is being depicted is precisely the fact that tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting is very much associated with a transcendental experience rooted in the overall Byzantine artistic tradition, or more generally rooted in the overall worldview of the Byzantine civilisation.

As the viewer engages with a Byzantine composition, the features of the robes as well as other elements often allude to abstract notions and introspective experiences. It would be hard to imagine that such or similar contemplative processes were not also part of the

experience of Byzantine painters. This is even more obvious when we consider that certain Modernists of the 20th century delved into the contemplative experience of Byzantine painters and found inspiration precisely in some of the transcendental aspects of the aesthetics of Byzantine art. This relationship between the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting and the 20th century abstract painting constitutes an important realisation which significantly informs our contemporary reception of Byzantine painting: Byzantine painting is diachronic not least because aspects of its contemplative, visionary experience were relived through Modernism.

Contrary to the opinion according to which the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting is not related to the analogous tendencies of 20th century modern painting[8], in recent years studies have shown in a systematic manner the significant manifold relationship between the modern abstract painting of the 20th century and the Byzantine painting tradition.[9] The following aesthetic comparisons, as well as the visual demonstrations included in the last three chapters of this book, go a significant step further as they practically demonstrate how this relationship may in fact be visually appreciated.

As shown in *image 6*, when we take out the human figures from the byzantine composition of *Transfiguration*, that which remains is simply a vision of the uncreated light with which Christ shone on Mount Tabor. Moreover, we observe that the result of our experiment is peculiarly reminiscent of the abstract paintings of Kandinsky, such as that shown in *image 7*. This is neither a one-off nor an accidental instance, as many more analogous comparisons between Byzantine and 20th century abstract painting could be made. For example, as shown in *image 9*, while deliberately keeping the depiction of the curtain and the architectural motifs, we have extracted the human figures from the composition of *The Numbering at Bethlehem* in Kalenić, and arrived at a result which is unassumingly reminiscent of Rothko's paintings, such as those shown in *image 10*.

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[8] For example, in the conclusion of his book entitled *The Character and the Reason of the Abstraction in Byzantine Painting*, George Kordis argues that: "The observed abstract mood (in Byzantine painting) does not seem to relate to the analogous tendencies of Modern painting, where the attrition of the natural form serves by rule the expressionistic inquiries and expresses beyond the form some spiritual, ideological or emotional content." Our translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: «Ἡ παρατηρούμενη ἀφαιρετική διάθεση δὲ φαίνεται νὰ ἔχει σχέση μὲ ἀνάλογες τάσεις τῆς μοντέρνας ζωγραφικῆς, ὅπου ἡ φθορὰ τῆς φυσικῆς μορφῆς ὑπηρετεῖ, κατὰ κανόνα, ἐξπρεσσιονιστικές ἀναζητήσεις καὶ ἐκφράζει κάποιο ἐπέκεινα τῆς μορφῆς πνευματικό, ἰδεολογικό ἢ συναισθηματικὸ περιεχόμενο.» See: Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ὁ Χαρακτῆρας καὶ ὁ Λόγος τῶν Ἀφαιρετικῶν Τάσεων τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Ζωγραφικῆς* (Εκδόσεις Άρμός, 2007), 76.

[9] Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000). Andrew Spira, *The Avant Garde Icon: Russian avant-garde art and the icon painting tradition* (Lund Humphries, 2008).

Uros T. Todorovic, "The Diachronic Character of Late Byzantine Painting: The Hermeneutics of Vision from Mistra to New York" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012).

Accordingly, when we compare the theme of *Transfiguration* without human figures (*image 6*) to the theme of *The Numbering at Bethlehem* without human figures (*image 9*), we observe that by excluding the human forms depicted within these compositions, we arrive at a visual result which strikingly reminds us of the prime examples of 20th century abstract painting. Of course, the outcome of our demonstration does not in itself constitute a proof that Kandinsky and Rothko necessarily had Byzantium in mind when they rendered their earlier mentioned works. Rather, this demonstration primarily implies that these two significant painters of the 20th century attempted, through their abstract contemplations, to reconstruct the human presence and they have therein arrived at a result which is reminiscent of a Byzantine-like absolute treatment of colour. That said, our visual demonstration constitutes an indication that the Byzantine influences which these modern painters have in fact noted in regards to their work, were deeply rooted in their artistic experience, which is why it was plausible for these influences to appear in a creative manner in their abstract painting. We extensively discuss the Byzantine influences in the works of Kandinsky and Rothko in separate chapters of this book.

Kandinsky's knowledge and appreciation of Byzantine and Russian iconography is very well known. Also, in 1931 Kandinsky visited Egypt, Turkey, Greece, and Italy,[10] where he had an opportunity to see many representative examples of Byzantine art. Given this, one cannot dismiss the likelihood that such possible experiences have significantly contributed to Kandinsky's already existent Russian-Byzantine experience transubstantiating and becoming one of the key aesthetic idioms in the abstract language of his painting. We do not know whether Kandinsky visited Mistra during his stay in Greece. Nevertheless, we shall visually demonstrate how one of the last of Kandinsky's works aesthetically relates to the tendency towards abstraction observed in a 14th century fresco in Mistra. The comparison at hand aims at exemplifying how that which Kandinsky inherited specifically from the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting and embodied within his abstract style, is precisely the inner desire to transcend the merely material realm of existence.

Among Kandinsky's scientific and artistic interests were studies of microorganisms. The biomorphic forms depicted in his painting *Sky Blue* (*image 12*) appear to be floating on the surface of the canvas; there is no comprehensible perspective, nor a sense of gravity. These forms are decorative not because Kandinsky aspired to simply decorate the blue background, but rather, their decorative character is only one of the externally most

[10] Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Kandinsky* (Taschen, 2007), 195–196.

obvious aesthetic results of his pictorial contemplation. Importantly, these forms discreetly recall the real but do not narrate about it. In fact, here, there is no narrative whatsoever, and what is kept in the memory of an apperceptive spectator after observing this composition, is the otherworldly atmosphere alone.

We shall now compare the above observed phenomena to the two segments extracted from the fresco of *Baptism* at Perivleptos in Mistra, shown in *images 11* and *13*. In these two segments we observe the simplified and notably decorative renderings of naked people and fish. Similarly to the forms in *Sky Blue*, these features, irrespective of what they externally represent, as if floating on the actual surface of the fresco, appear to be weightless and seem to radiate an otherworldly kind of provenance. This comparison exemplifies a very particular phenomenon: if our perception is not captive solely by the formal aspects and the narrative character of a Late Byzantine composition, its otherworldly aura, which stems from the distinct tendency towards abstraction, excels to a level of hypertextual meaning, and as such, becomes the more exalted, theological content of the depicted theme.

The painters who worked at Perivleptos understood very well that the whole of the painting decoration was more important than the separate details. As *image 14* shows, even when we look at the mutually bordering themes of *Nativity* and *Baptism* collectively, from a deliberately 'wrong' angle, there is the same if not even a more pronounced sense of transcendence of the dimension of the sensory world. Even though the authors of the frescoes at Perivleptos would certainly not have used terms such as 'abstract mood' to describe their work, it is undoubtable that they did understand that a deeper reason for this tendency of their expression is to be found in the theological worldview of the collective Byzantine culture to which they belonged.

Having said that, it is not a coincidence that before proceeding gradually to abstract visual language, in 1896 at an exhibition of French art in Moscow, Kandinsky was impressed by the fact that in one of the paintings of Monet he could not entirely discern the depicted theme. Consequently, it did not matter which side of the painting was up and which side was down or whether the painting was in fact turned upside down. Much later, when his style was already entirely abstract, he recalled this liberating experience as something which was very significant on his journey towards what he would call the 'spiritual in art.'

Of course, from a historical point of view, the phenomenon of the transcendental artistic experience is not limited to only one style of painting or one kind of art. We gradually start acknowledging and appreciating the diachronic character of Late Byzantine

painting from the moment we observe that certain aesthetic characteristics of the transcendental experience of that painting also exist, to an extent, in other artistic traditions of various periods, both those before and those after the Byzantine era. In other words, the diachronic character of Late Byzantine painting exists to an extent to which in its aesthetic conception certain analogous experiences of other artistic traditions are embodied.

Accordingly, from the aesthetic point of view, besides the Byzantine *icon*, one could just as well perceive the theological truth or a transcendental content in Altamira prehistoric cave-paintings, shown in *image 16*, and for example, compare that content, which is beyond the form, to the 14th century Byzantine fresco of *Nativity* in Perivleptos, shown in *image 15*. The similarity between these two examples speaks for itself. In other words, in the category of what might be called *theological art*, it is the Truth that gives birth to a transcendental style and not the other way around. Truth is capable of finding ways to express itself, whether through a purely abstract or through a representational visual language, while iconographers, artists and theorists simply interpret the Truth throughout its historical manifestations.

The prehistoric cave-paintings in Altamira and the 14th century fresco of *Nativity* at Mistra should be understood as transcendental because the truthfulness of their visionary aura of otherworldliness transcends the mere depiction of their respective themes and elevates the observer from a visual to a spiritual, revelatory experience. To ignore the creative act of the authors of these two historically unrelated examples of painting and to say that this perceived transcendental effect was not their intention, would be as misleading as saying, for example, that with his symphonies and sonatas, Ludwig van Beethoven did not intended to influence his listeners in a profound and visionary way.

As it can be observed, just like in the prehistoric cave-painting shown in *image 16*, the design of the narrative of *Nativity* in Perivleptos is so abstracted, that it can be read not only from left to right, but also from top to bottom, diagonally, and in all other directions – both are truly archetypal images with distinct musical qualities of both rhythm and harmony. The animals depicted in the prehistoric cave-painting are rendered with the child-like innocence and immediacy and yet their form is made sublime and ethereal to a point where one is not convinced that their authors were in fact primitive. Each animal-form is like a translucent 'stamp', which as if some kind of a galaxy is suspended in air among other stamps within a highly harmonious, luminous composition where the slow movement is implied through rather calm, almost static features.

That which is projected and which dominates is not the narrative which concerns the depicted animals, but a sense of unification of the individual features at the level of

spiritual experience – such as for example the theological experience that the entire Universe was created by an unknown revelatory light and is in its entirety on its course towards that light. Of course, other analogous interpretations could also be offered. Judging by the overall transcendental effect, in a sense, the authors of this prehistoric painting surpass the achievements of the 20th century Modern painters, while at the same time the above described characteristics of their work can indeed be compared to the fresco of *Nativity* in Perivleptos shown in *image 15*.

Evidently, in the composition of *Nativity*, through the particular abstract mood reminiscent of prehistoric cave-painting, the transcendental content dominates over the aspects of form and colour, as well as over the narrative nature of the theme. In this regard, this fresco manifests analogies to the abstract painting of great 20th century painters who nurtured distinct theological and philosophical aspirations, such as Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Mark Rothko.

The 20th century Modern painters mentioned in this chapter (as well as certain others) did not borrow byzantine forms nor did they make some kind of creative versions of byzantine forms. Yet, as we shall discuss more systematically in the last three chapters of this book, their work is deeply inspired by the transcendental content of Late Byzantine painting. Because of this, although their work does not constitute ecclesial art, the contribution of these 20th century abstract painters can even become useful in efforts towards innovation of ecclesial painting, which is undertaken in our time especially by contemporary Orthodox painters around the World. Most importantly, the aesthetic connection between the achievement of the 20th century abstract painters and the frescoes at Mistra allows us to tangibly observe the timeless overarching unity of the human creative experience.

Through his following words written in 1964, Odysseas Elytis, a major representative of Romantic Modernism, shows to the inheritors of the byzantine tradition and to the entire world the mystagogical path towards an eschatological Mistra: "Each time I enter one of those small, half-ruined, and half-painted churches, which like rocks, remained embodied within the Greek countryside, and I get hit by the smell of the dampness of the walls, it seems that I come into immediate, almost skin contact with my kind, and it is as if I thus have the evidence that it leads back directly to Byzantium. And then, an entire world, with the mauve and gold of its decoration, is offered to me within the mystic communion. One should respect their senses greatly, and tremble in awareness of their sanctity, in order to arrive therein, from the opposites, to the very Christian outcome. But perhaps the same thing occurs in the opposite direction? Even the most secular

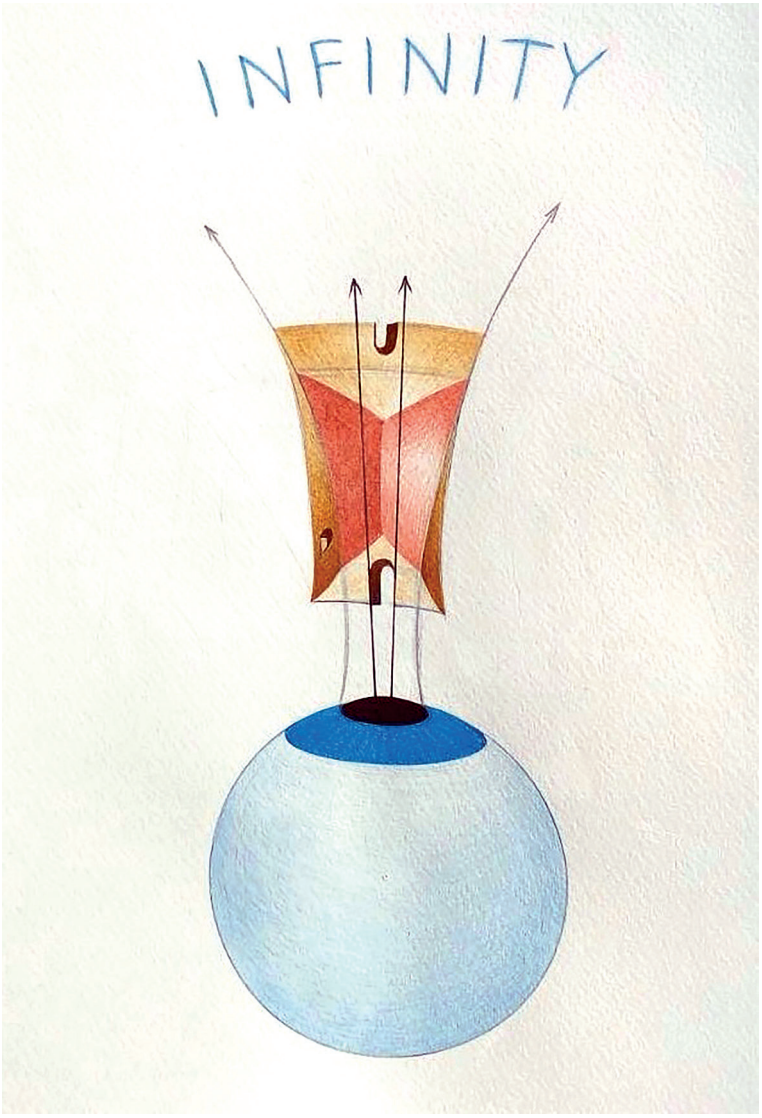
painting – if it is exalted enough – partakes in sanctity. How else could it be, since after a certain point and thereof, in its own way, it too, by death tramples on death; since it contains a message from life, which was and which – when our vanity vanishes – will again become a sacrament."[11]

[11] Our translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: «Κάθε φορά που μπαίνω σε μίαν από τις μισογκρεμισμένες και μισοζωγραφισμένες εκείνες μικρές εκκλησίες που απόμειναν ενσωματωμένες, ίδια βράχια, μέσα στο ελληνικό ύπαιθρο, και με χτυπήσει η μυρωδιά της υγρασίας των τοίχων, μου φαίνεται ότι έρχομαι σε άμεση, σε δερματική σχεδόν επαφή με το σόι μου, λες και έχω αποδείξεις ότι αυτό κρατάει ολόισα από το Βυζάντιο. Και ένας κόσμος ολόκληρος τότε, με τα μωβ και τα χρυσά του διακόσμου του, μου προσφέρεται σε κοινωνία μυστική. Πρέπει να σέβεται κανείς πολύ τις αισθήσεις, να τρέμει στη συνείδηση της αγιότητάς τους, για να μπορεί να φτάνει έτσι, από τους αντίποδες, στο ίδιο χριστιανικό αποτέλεσμα. Αλλά μήπως και από τον αντίστροφο δρόμο δεν συμβαίνει ακριβώς το ίδιο; Ακόμη κι η πιο κοσμική ζωγραφική – αν είναι αρκετά υψηλή – μετέχει στην ιερότητα. Πώς αλλιώς αφού, από ένα σημείο και πέρα, με τον τρόπο της κι εκείνη πατεί τον θάνατο θανάτω. Κι αφού συγκρατεί ένα μήνυμα από τη ζωή που ήταν και που θα ξαναγίνει – όταν η ματαιοδοξία μας φυλλοροήσει – μυστήριο». See: Οδυσσέας Ελύτης, «Γιάννης Τσαρούχης,» στο *Γιάννης Τσαρούχης: ὡς στρουθίον μονάζον ἐπὶ δώματος*. Επιμέλεια έκδοσης: Θανάσης Θ. Νιάρχος (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Καστανιώτη, 1987), 212.

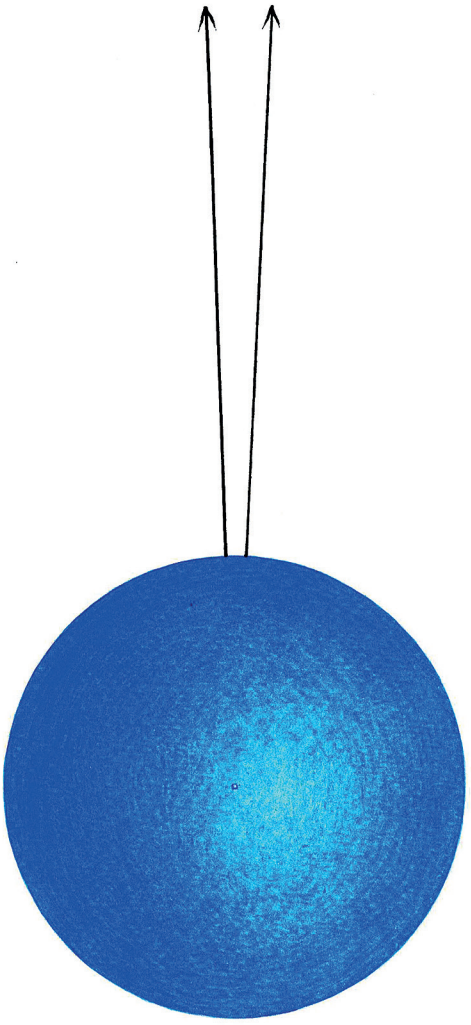


**1.** Top: *The Birth of the Virgin*. Fresco in the southeast chapel of the church of Saint Sophia at Mistra. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović.)

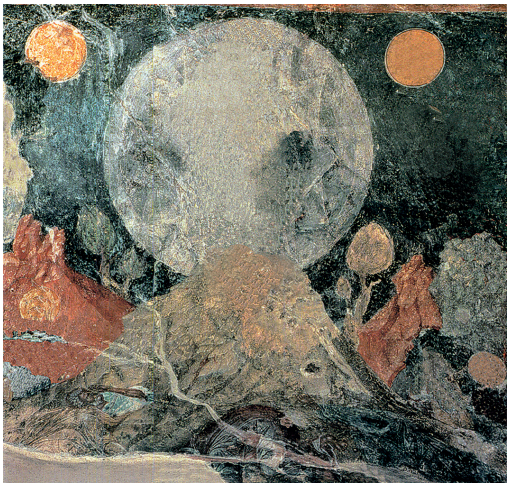
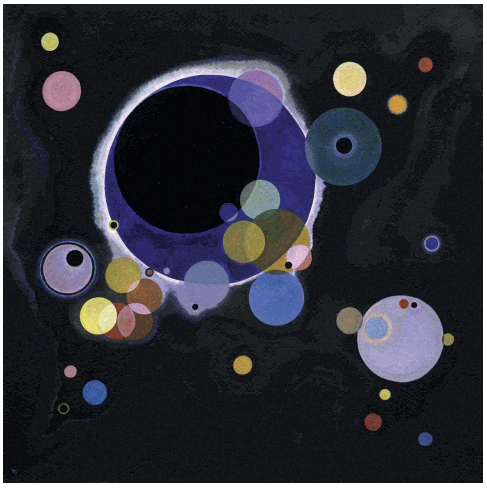
**2.** Bottom: *The Birth of the Virgin*. Fresco (with a drawing demonstration on top of the photograph) in the southeast chapel of the church of Saint Sophia at Mistra.
Author of the visual demonstration: Uroš T. Todorović.




**3.** Drawing demonstration related to the topic of inverse perspective. Author: Uroš T. Todorović.



**4.** Drawing demonstration with a deliberate exaggeration for the sake of clarity, related to the topic of inverse perspective. Author: Uroš T. Todorović.

**5.** Left: *Transfiguration*, 1350–1375, fresco, church of the Mother of God Perivleptos, Mistra, Greece.

**6.** Centre: Our visual demonstration: we have extracted the human figures from the 14th century composition (fresco) of *Transfiguration* at Perivleptos in Mistra, Greece.
Author of the visual demonstration: Uroš T. Todorović.

**7.** Right: Vasily Kandinsky, *Several Circles*, 1926, oil on canvas, 140.3 x 140.7 cm,
New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.



**8.** Top: *The Numbering at Bethlehem*, 1418–1427, fresco, south wall inside the church of the Monastery of Kalenić, Serbia. (Photograph: Uroš T. Todorović.)

**9.** Middle: Our visual demonstration: while deliberately keeping the depiction of the curtain and of the architectural features, we have extracted the human figures from the 15th century composition (fresco) of *The Numbering at Bethlehem in Kalenić*, Serbia. Author of the visual demonstration: Uroš T. Todorović.

**10.** Bottom: The Rothko Room, Phillips Collection, Washington, DC. Photograph source: Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Taschen, 2003).







**11.** Left: Detail 1 of the composition (fresco) of *Baptism* at Perivleptos in Mistra, Greece; second half of the 14th century. Photograph source: Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005).

**12.** Middle: Vasily Kandinsky, *Sky Blue*, 1940, oil on canvas, 100 x 73 cm, Paris, Musée National d' Art Moderne. Photograph source: Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Kandinsky* (Taschen, 2007).

**13.** Right: Detail 2 of the composition (fresco) of *Baptism* at Perivleptos in Mistra, Greece; second half of the 14th century. Photograph source: Μανόλης Χατζηδάκης, *Μυστράς: Η Μεσαιωνική Πολιτεία και το Κάστρο* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Αθηνών, 2005).



**14.** Fresco compositions of *Nativity* (left) and *Baptism* (right)
in the church of the Mother of God Perivleptos (1350–1370), Mistra, Greece.
(Photograph: Uroš T. Todorović.)





**15.** Left: *Nativity*, fresco, 1350–1370, in the church of the Mother of God Perivleptos, Mistra, Greece. (Photograph: Uroš T. Todorović.)

**16.** Right: Prehistoric cave-painting, 15000–10000 BC, the Cave of Altamira, Spain.

# Part II

# Chapter IV

# Byzantine Influences in the Abstract Painting of Vasily Kandinsky

## I

The Byzantine element in Kandinsky's painting is a phenomenon which is frequently noted by the researches of his work. However, it is a phenomenon which hitherto has not been given the attention it truly merits. In both recent and older bibliographies we find no comprehensive or any particularly methodological enquiries into the "Byzantine Kandinsky." Whereas, for example, with regards to Malevich there is an insightful publication entitled *The Byzantine Malevich*, written by Yannis Ziogas and published in 2000.[1] Undoubtedly, one of the main reasons for this shortcoming of the existing relevant literature is the puzzling complexity that one encounters when attempting to provide a precise answer to the following question: How exactly is the Byzantine element apparent in Kandinsky's purely abstract compositions?

In this context, on a cursory glance, it may appear overly ambitious that we aim to examine the nature and extent of the influence that the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting has exercised on Kandinsky's artistic development. In completing this immense task, we shall be primarily aided by our collective reference to the selected visual material. Kandinsky is one of the enigmatic founder-figures of Modernism and is regarded as the father of abstract painting. In light of this fact, we shall systematically examine in this chapter those aspects of his art which, in our view, appear to discreetly conduct a significant aesthetic dialogue with Late Byzantine painting.

It is common knowledge among scholars that Kandinsky's abstraction emerged as a result of his complex, theoretical inquiry into painting, ethnography, music, art theory, art history, and other disciplines. Notwithstanding the various influences in his work,

[1] This book is written in Greek and has not yet been translated to English.
See: Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000).

our present assessment of the Late Byzantine element in Kandinsky's abstraction shall be limited to a very specific scope. Specifically, it is our aim, in this chapter, to demonstrate that aspects of Late Byzantine painting in Kandinsky's abstraction do not constitute a mere theoretical hypothesis, but are in fact observable visual phenomena. This shall be the common purpose of the three case-studies which comprise the second part of this chapter. In the first part, we shall proceed with a concise outline of Kandinsky's biography and a discussion of the relevant contemporary perceptions of his lifework respectively.



It was in 1896 when Kandinsky, despite the fact that his formal studies at the Moscow University were in fields of law, economics and ethnography, decided to become a painter. Thus, his life as a painter and his struggle for a new vision in art began in 1896 when, at the age of thirty, he moved to Munich in order to study painting. The influences of Symbolism, Fauvism, Neo-Impressionism, as well as his awareness of the significance of Cubism, have undoubtedly played their role, yet more than anything else he was profoundly inspired by his own, personal vision. Thus, he did not become absorbed by any of the artistic movements and trends which were active in his formative years and thereafter. Instead, he was guided throughout his entire life by a force of a distinctly esoteric experience. For example, when at the exhibition of French art in Moscow Kandinsky saw Monet's Haystacks series, in one of the paintings he did not comprehend the subject, and it was this, essentially liberating experience, that he was to recall upon renouncing representation in his own painting.

We note that in 1896 there was already an atmosphere in Munich imbued with a tendency towards radical changes in art. The Munich Secession, founded in 1892, and Jugendstil, are the two prominent art movements which gave platform to new aesthetic directions. During the first two years in Munich, Kandinsky studied under Anton Ažbe and then under Professor Franz von Stuck, a co-founder of the Munich Secession.[2] As stated by Becks-Malorny, we have almost no tangible evidence of Kandinsky's work during the first four years of his stay in Munich.[3] That which we do know is that within that period Kandinsky established contact with artists such as Ernst Stern, Waldemar Hecker (the puppeteer) and sculptor Wilhelm Hüsgen, who were members of "Die Elf Scharfrichter" (The Eleven Executioners) – a pro avant-garde literary and artistic cabaret.[4]

[2] Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Kandinsky* (Taschen, 2007), 14–15.
[3] Ibid., 15.
[4] Ibid.

In 1901, together with Rolf Niczky, Waldemar Hecker, Gustav Freytag and Wilhelm Hüsgen, Kandinsky established the Phalanx artists' exhibiting society, as well as The Phalanx School of Painting – of which he was elected director.[5] Due to a lack of students The Phalanx School of Painting was closed after a year, but by then Kandinsky had already met his new partner, Gabriele Münter, who was to accompany him in his various travels in the following years.[6]

Kandinsky's works created between 1900 and 1908 do not represent a unified style. Nevertheless, a gradual transfiguration of his creativity was by then silently taking place. Russian folksong and legend inspired a significant number of these early paintings. A dreamlike world dissolved in intense colour is observed in compositions such as *Motley Life* (*image 1*) and *Russian Beauty in a Landscape* (*image 2*). In this early period Kandinsky also mastered the woodcut medium and produced a number of woodcuts (*images 3* and *4*) through which he explored a parallel with lyric poetry as well as began a process of the "musicalisation" of painting. More particularly, he believed that painting could acquire the abstract qualities equivalent to those that exist in music. It was this rather mystical vision that gradually led him towards the realisation of that which can be termed as a superlative composition. The theme of *The Blue Rider* (*image 5*) emerges in this early period and follows Kandinsky all the way into his purely abstract phase.

In 1908, Kandinsky's partner Gabriele Münter purchased a house in the small town of Murnau. For a few years, Murnau was a place of creativity where Kandinsky and Münter gathered other artists, such as Alexei von Jawlensky and Marianne Werefkin.[7] The Murnau years constitute a significant period in Kandinsky's artistic development. He wrote poetry, devised abstract stage-productions and inquired studiously into the idea of the synthesis of all art disciplines. As noted by Becks-Malorny, the paintings of this period manifest influences from Cézanne.[8]

In spite of living in an era of tumultuous cultural and political changes, it was difficult to deceive Kandinsky when it came to matters relating to innovation in art. For example, as stated by John Golding, Kandinsky recognised that Constructivism was in certain respects associated to the positivist and materialistic tendencies. It was these tendencies that he, together with Mondrian and Malevich, had been in revolt against.[9] Kandinsky

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[5] Ibid., 192.

[6] Shortly before meeting Gabriele Münter, Kandinsky had separated from his first wife Anya and given up the apartment which they had shared in Munich (they officially divorced in 1911). Later, in 1917, Kandinsky married a daughter of a general, Nina Andreevsky.

[7] Ibid., 23.

[8] Ibid., 24.

[9] John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), 107.

stated in his book *On the Spiritual in Art*: "The artist must be blind to distinctions between 'recognised' or 'unrecognised' conventions of form, deaf to the transitory teaching and demands of his particular age."[10]

In spite of spending most of his life away from his homeland, Kandinsky always carried Russia in his heart. However, he was not entirely immune to the occultist aspirations which were popular at that time in Western Europe. For example, after attending a lecture delivered in Berlin by Rudolf Steiner, who was the founder of both the Anthroposophical movement and the German Theosophical Society, Kandinsky showed personal interest in Steiner's teachings.[11]

The influences of Arthur Schopenhauer and Goethe's ideas, were also significant for the formation of Kandinsky's aesthetic theories. In particular, Kandinsky's book *On the Spiritual in Art* reflects the influences from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818).[12] Accordingly, Goethe's theories of colour (Farbenlehre) constituted an area of Kandinsky's absorbed intellectual interest. However, his own aesthetic convictions led him to reject some of the colour symbolism of both Goethe and Steiner.[13]

The period between 1908 and 1911 was crucial for the formation of Kandinsky's abstraction. During this period, objects from nature were being gradually dissolved into abstract shapes. For example, in *Murnau Garden I* (*image 6*) a section towards the right side of the composition is rendered in a two-dimensional manner and is almost completely abstract. The same transitional character can be observed in *Murnau-Landscape with Tower* (*image 7*) and *Murnau with Church I* (*image 8*).

In 1911, together with Franz Marc, Gabriele Münter and Alfred Kubin (1877–1959), Kandinsky resigned from *The New Artists' Association of Munich*. Prior to this, this association had rejected Kandinsky's painting *Composition V* (*image 19*) on the grounds that it was too large. However, the real cause for the rejection of this painting was the high level of its abstraction. Soon after, together with Franz Marc, Kandinsky established *The Blue Rider* exhibiting society, whose first exhibition took place in the Thannhauser gallery of Munich. These events were contemporaneous with the pivotal phase of change in the artistic climate of the 20th century Europe. Thereafter, the orientation towards the abstract became irreversible.

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[10] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael T. H. Sadler (Tate Publishing, 2006), 69.

[11] John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), 87.

[12] This is also noted by Golding in: John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), 87.

[13] Ibid., 87.

It is important to note that, at the time, the revolutionary ideas expressed in the book entitled *Abstraction and Empathy*, written by Wilhelm Worringer and published in 1907, were regarded as highly significant by *The Blue Rider* artists. In his book, Worringer argued that each work of art is an autonomous organism and that abstraction is the primary means by which art could assimilate reality.[14] Kandinsky himself wrote prolifically. His three major theoretical accomplishments are: *On the Spiritual in Art*, first published in 1911, *Point, Line to a Plane* (1926) and *Art and Artists*. In May of 1912 the first *Blue Rider Almanac* was published. It was at this point that Kandinsky assumed the position of a leader of the Munich avant-garde. Although the members of *The Blue Rider* group were few, the group attained an international scope. Thus, sixteen years after abandoning his law career and immersing himself into the world of painting, Kandinsky's mission started to acquire a historic dimension.

Kandinsky openly spoke of his appreciation of the primitive arts and their aesthetics. For example, in his book *On the Spiritual in Art*, he states:

"The similarity of the inner mood of an entire period can lead logically to the use of forms successfully employed to the same ends in an earlier period. Our sympathy, our understanding, our inner feeling for the primitives arose partly in this way. Just like us, those pure artists wanted to capture in their works the inner essence of things, which of itself brought about a rejection of the external, the accidental."[15]

Two years later, in 1913, he stated in his *Reminiscences*:

"My book *On the Spiritual in Art*, as well as *The Blue Rider*, in essence aimed to awaken this, in future absolutely indispensable capability of infinite partaking in the Spiritual through material and abstract means. My desire to develop this blessed capability in Man, capability which he never had, was the end and the Cause of those publications."[16]

On the one hand, in his book *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky analytically instructs

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[14] For instance, in the very first chapter of *Abstraction and Empathy*, Worringer states: "Our investigations proceed from the presupposition that the work of art, as an autonomous organism, stands beside nature on equal terms and, in its deepest and innermost essence, devoid of any connection with it, in so far as by nature is understood the visible surface of things. Natural beauty is on no account to be regarded as a condition of the work of art, despite the fact that in the course of evolution it seems to have become a valuable element in the work of art, and to some extent indeed positively identical with it." See: Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997), 3.

[15] See a translation of this excerpt in: Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Kandinsky* (Taschen, 2007), 171.

[16] We have translated this excerpt from the Greek translation of *Reminiscences*. The Greek version of the excerpt reads as follows: «Το βιβλίο μου Περί του Πνευματικού στην Τέχνη καθώς και Ο Γαλάζιος Καβαλάρης αποσκοπούσαν κατά βάση να ξυπνήσουν αυτήν την απολύτως αναγκαία στο μέλλον ικανότητα για άπειρη βίωση του Πνευματικού στα υλικά και τα' αφηρημένα πράγματα. Η επιθυμία ν' αναπτύξω αυτήν την ευλογημένην ικανότητα μες στον Άνθρωπο, ικανότητα που δεν είχε ποτέ, ήταν το τέλος, ο Σκοπός, αυτών των δύο εκδόσεων.» See: Wassily Kandinsky, *Αναδρομή 1901–1913: Σύντομη Αυτοβιογραφία*. Μετάφραση: Γιώργος Κεντρωτής (Εκδόσεις Διάττων, 1988), 65.

as to how abstract painting as such ought to be comprehended. On the other hand, these instructions in themselves constitute a guide to the specific journey of his own, very subjective experience. In his Cologne lecture of 1914, he stated: "I immersed myself more and more in the manifold value of abstract elements. In this way, abstract forms gained the upper hand and softly but surely crowded out those forms that are of representational origin."[17]

In 1922 Kandinsky accepted an appointment to a professorship at the Bauhaus, where his contribution until the final closing of the school in 1933 was immense. Malevich's *Suprematism* influenced Kandinsky between 1919 and 1921, but only to a very limited extent. Also, while Malevich's *Black Square* in a sense presents Malevich as a victor against the problems and challenges of his theoretical enquiries, or as he called himself "the president of the Universe," Kandinsky's own engagement with the theory of aesthetics did not lead him to create one or more works in which his philosophy concludes itself as a final aesthetic meaning. On the contrary, the meaning in Kandinsky's painting remained more open-ended than that in the artistic practice of any of the 20th century European abstractionists. This is most evident in the works he created in the last years of his life, such as *Around the Circle* (*image 37*), *Twilight* (*image 40*), *Division-Unity* (*image 43*), *White Figure* (*image 46*) and *Tempered Elan* (*image 42*). It is also noteworthy that Kandinsky's understanding of the colours white and black seems to be almost theological. For example, in his book *On the Spiritual in Art* he had stated: "White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age. A totally dead silence, on the other hand, a silence with no possibilities, has the inner harmony of black."[18]

It should be noted that, in spite of their common affinities, Kandinsky's path to abstraction was more complicated than that of Malevich. In a certain sense, Kandinsky never ceased to be inspired by impressions from nature. In his work he made a distinction between *Impressions*, as immediate impressions of external nature, and *Improvisations*, as expressions of an internal, nonmaterial nature that was mainly unconscious.[19] It is through his *Improvisations* that he eventually managed to gradually "musicalise" the canvas surfaces. Thus, he named them *Compositions* – associating them therein deliberately to the art of music.[20]

[17] See: Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Kandinsky* (Taschen, 2007), 113.
[18] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael T. H. Sadler (Tate Publishing, 2006), 77–78.
[19] Ibid., 111.
[20] Ibid., 112.

## The Musicalisation of Compositions as a Byzantine Parallel

Kandinsky himself was an amateur musician. His experiences with music were of immense significance throughout the course of developments in his formation as a painter. In his book *On the Spiritual in Art*, he refers to Arnold Schoenberg's *Theory of Harmony*, and cites him: "Every combination of notes, every advance is possible, but I am beginning to feel that there are also definite rules and conditions which incline me to the use of this or that dissonance."[21]

One can observe, in the above citation, how the problems encountered in the theory of music correspond to the kind of problems encountered by Kandinsky in his search for a purely abstract visual language. Such theoretical analogies have undoubtedly inspired Kandinsky in his pursuit of the spiritual in art. In his book entitled *Kandinsky*, Hans K. Roethel has argued that there is a significant analogy between the way in which Kandinsky, during his Bauhaus years, had intentionally reduced his formal vocabulary to the circle, triangle, and square, and his palette to primary colours, and Schoenberg's new sound language where he developed a "grammatical style" by limiting his basic musical material to the twelve-tone technique –i.e., a scale of twelve equidistant semitones of the chromatic style.[22]

It is also important to mention that Arthur Schopenhauer, whose thought constitutes a tremendous influence on Kandinsky, had stated: "to become like music is the aim of art."[23] Kandinsky's interest in music, specifically the influence it had on his artistic development, is a phenomenon which has been frequently addressed in relevant scholarly literature. Roethel most insightfully outlines the two main aspects of music that encouraged Kandinsky's artistic practice and theoretical enquiry: "first, the conviction that the musician was able to create his art without object and without having to tell a story, and second, the idea that music had its accepted laws of harmony which, even if not 'objective,' were at least practicable in their own well-tempered fashion."[24]

The question that shall concern us in the following paragraphs is, how does Kandinsky's "musicalisation" of painting relate to a Byzantine experience and Kandinsky's Orthodox heritage? In all Orthodox cultures, frescoes and icons are experienced as being in an immediate relationship with the Divine Liturgy and thus with the chanting which

[21] Ibid., 35.

[22] Hans Konrad Roethel and Jean K. Benjamin, *Kandinsky* (Phaidon Press, 1979), 19.

[23] This citation is from: John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), 87.

[24] Hans Konrad Roethel and Jean K. Benjamin, *Kandinsky* (Phaidon Press, 1979), 19.

takes place within the church. Moreover, within the realm of Orthodox (ecclesial) arts, Byzantine chant is considered to be by far the most profound discipline. According to the liturgical experience of the Orthodox Church, the external architecture of the Byzantine church, followed respectively by its interior, its various decorative furnishings, its frescoes, icons, chandeliers, and the smell of the burnt incense, constitute different levels of expression which could collectively be seen to form a hierarchical pyramid where the Byzantine chant is at the very top – or rather, hovering above it. In fact, Byzantine chant is not only unified with other ecclesial arts, but in a sense, it musicalises them.

In this way, we can understand Byzantine painting as an anagogical practice which aspires to *musicalise* its imagery into the Byzantine chant, which, being primarily a method of worship, is emitted towards the invisible Triadic God. In her study entitled *The Performative Icon*, Bissera V. Pentcheva gives a slightly different but no less relevant explanation of the relationship between the Byzantine (portable) icon and the sound of prayer:

*"The Sound of Prayer: The Circuit*

While all five senses are engaged in the *poikilia* of paradise, this sensorial agitation is created by ineffable stimuli. By contrast, the icon replicates this experience through material, tangible means. Its lush decoration and epigrams demonstrate a desire to imagine the ineffable. Both being a *graphe*, letter and image form a prayer. While the image visualises the performance of prayer, the epigram reinforces this action by sonorously replacing it. The poetic inscription contributes a visceral, material presence of sound, transforming the icon into a sonorous body."[25]

The above citation contributes to our insight into how the Russian Orthodox heritage might have functioned as a co-stimulus in Kandinsky's "musicalisation" of painting. In fact, it cannot be plausibly imagined that Kandinsky did not, at least to a certain extent, associate his continuous inspiration from Russian icons and frescoes to the chanting of the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus, we suggest that due to his Russian Orthodox culture and heritage, the dialectic relationship between the image and the sound was part of Kandinsky's experience much before he became familiar with musical theories such as those of Schoenberg.

As early as during his time as a student in Moscow, and in particular during a performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin*, it became clear to Kandinsky that, to use his own words:

[25] Bissera V. Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4 (December 2006): 648.

"painting could develop just such powers as music possesses."[26] Our view is that the parallel between this perception of Kandinsky and the previously discussed Orthodox experience of the Byzantine image being musicalised into the Byzantine chant, is undoubtedly revealing. This particular parallel has not been previously noted – whereas the significance of Kandinsky's interest in music for his painting is common knowledge.

For example, Roethel states: "Like painting, music was, to his mind, the most appropriate vehicle for the communication of metaphysical messages. Through the medium of psychophysical 'vibrations' a definite if not definable *Stimmung* could be evoked which made the beholders participants in a spiritual communion."[27] The above cited observation shows that Kandinsky's process of "musicalisation" of painting constitutes a conscious quest for a functional visual language, one which was to be designed to speak explicitly of the spiritual, on a universal level. Even as early as 1904 Kandinsky wrote: "If destiny will grant me enough time I shall discover a new international language which will endure forever and which will continually enrich itself."[28] In relation to this emphasis on the universal functionality of sought visual language and the overt inclination towards non-naturalistic form, there is little difference between Kandinsky's mindset and that of a Late Byzantine painter; more particularly, through their artistic practice they both consciously strive to surpass the notions relating to the material world, in order to make the presence of the divine intelligible for the observer. Further still, in both of their artistic experiences music plays a crucial role.

Consequently, it is our view that Kandinsky's "musicalisation" of painting and his experience of the dialectic relationship between the image and the sound are phenomena which have their deepest roots in the Orthodox liturgical experience – where the Byzantine image becomes absorbed by the sound of the chanted prayer. Schoenberg's theories, Arthur Schopenhauer's thought, and similar sources of music-related inspiration, were destined to be capitalised on by the Orthodox Kandinsky.

Deeply rooted in the Orthodox, and in particular Russian-Byzantine experience, the process of the "musicalisation" of his canvases had in time provided Kandinsky with an apocalyptic *inter-historical* insight into painting. As we shall discuss further in the second part of this chapter, this apocalyptic insight led Kandinsky to selectively borrow from Late Byzantine as well as from other Eastern arts, such as those from Egypt and Persia. Within the process of "musicalisation," Kandinsky's figures and landscape-features gradually became aspects of pure rhythm and harmony. Thus, paradoxically, silent

[26] Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Kandinsky* (Taschen, 2007), 25–28.
[27] Hans Konrad Roethel and Jean K. Benjamin, *Kandinsky* (Phaidon Press, 1979), 20.
[28] Ibid., 13.

canvas surfaces appear as musical compositions, which mysteriously speak of the hidden connection between all arts and epochs. For example, *Composition V* (*image 19*) painted in 1911 is even reminiscent of prehistoric cave-painting. This work in many respects represents the first objectification of the "spiritual" in Kandinsky's painting.

## II

## Introduction to Case-Studies

We note that there is an insufficiency in respect to literature commenting on Kandinsky's Byzantine influences, as this discussion merely refers to explicitly Russian icons and frescoes. For example, Roethel states: "…there can be no doubt that his religious paintings such as *Composition VI* and *Composition VII* (*images 22* and *23*) are deeply rooted in the iconography of the Russian Orthodox church. In addition to using some figurative motifs from frescoes in Moscow in his paintings of 1913, the timeless and spaceless qualities of the Russian icons undoubtedly formed an undeniable heritage for him."[29] However, in the same book Roethel acknowledged that: "In fact, a great number of Kandinsky's paintings have not yet been interpreted satisfactorily."[30]

Thus, what is also missing in the existing bibliography is the methodological explanation of why, and of how in particular, the previously mentioned "timeless" and "spaceless" qualities of the Russian icons, as well as of the examples of Late Byzantine painting outside Russia, relate to Kandinsky's abstraction. Another, relatively more recent publication of immediate relevance, is the insightful book entitled *Kandinsky and old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman,* written by Peg Weiss. Weiss discusses how Kandinsky's ethnographical enquiry into his Russian heritage influenced the entire course of his artistic career. Still, in Weiss' book there is no in-depth enquiry into the influence of Late Byzantine painting on Kandinsky's work. Neither is there an enquiry into his likely inspiration from those examples of Late Byzantine art that he may have encountered during his 1931 travels to Egypt, Turkey, Greece and Italy. However, as our last two case-studies in this chapter shall demonstrate, it is not without consequence that Weiss observes a Byzantine element in Kandinsky's last works.[31]

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[29] Ibid., 10.

[30] Ibid., 15.

[31] In particular, Weiss states: "It is perhaps not too much to say that in the entire Byzantine-Scythian cast of his last paintings, Kandinsky was thinking in mythological terms of time out of mind." See: Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 208.

In the following segments of this chapter we shall gradually elaborate on the specific relationship between the abstraction in Kandinsky's work and the tendency towards abstraction in Late Byzantine painting. This is by no means a simple task, because in abstract art, not all influences are always unambiguously apparent. Moreover, Kandinsky's visual language constitutes a prime example of this phenomenon. It should therefore be stressed that the influences in his work cannot be decoded and comprehended solely through the assessment of the outer appearance of his paintings – their surface. This occurs due to Kandinsky's absorbed theoretical, as well as practical commitment to the research of the explicitly inner content which can be expressed through colour and form. As stated by Roethel: "In order to evaluate Kandinsky's life and art as a whole, it is important to realise that it was not the problem of form as such that was of prime interest to him but the question of how to express new content in adequate terms."[32]

To the best of our knowledge, the publication entitled *The Character and the Reason of the Abstraction in Byzantine Painting*, written in Greek by Georgios Kordis is the only book which, while using Kandinsky as one of the main references to abstract painting, analytically discusses the possibility of a relationship between the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting and the abstraction in Modern painting of the 20th century. We shall discuss Kordis' views in the second of our three case-studies in this chapter. The common aim of the following case-studies is to visually demonstrate that the painting of Vasily Kandinsky, besides its other achievements, entails an objectification of a significant and hitherto underappreciated artistic dialogue with the numinous in Late Byzantine painting.

## The Blue Rider and the Musicalisation of Painting

The aim of this first case study is to demonstrate, primarily by visual means, that in Kandinsky's work the Byzantine experience continues to exist even after he proceeded to pure abstraction. To the best of our knowledge, no study has been written on how in particular the aesthetics of Byzantine painting became transubstantiated within Kandinsky's abstract language. Our premise here is that, through the process of the "musicalisation" of painting, Kandinsky thoughtfully incorporated the inspiration from Byzantine icon and fresco painting into his abstraction – which in turn retained a distinct iconic as well as fresco quality.

[32] Hans Konrad Roethel and Jean K. Benjamin, *Kandinsky* (Phaidon Press, 1979), 13.

Kandinsky's works which are formally most evocative of a Byzantine icon are certainly the depictions of *The Blue Rider*. The enigmatic theme of *The Blue Rider* occurs very early in Kandinsky's work and it escorts him – so to speak – all the way into absolute abstraction. His numerous sketches of this theme and designs for the cover of *The Blue Rider Almanac* (*image 9*) were to a great extent undoubtedly inspired by the depictions of Saint George (and other military saints) in Russian icons. We have placed one of such sketches (*image 11*) amidst two Russian icons in order to demonstrate the particular similarities: frame-like border around the composition, depiction of a white horse, carefully balanced arrangement of features within the composition, and the warm colour-palette.

In the upper right corner of the *image 11* we observe a semi-circular blue area – a place where traditionally either God's blessing hand or a figure of Christ who blesses is depicted (see *image 12*). Further, in this sketch of *The Blue Rider*, it is of outmost importance to note the experimentation with curved black lines – as these have most likely been rendered in or are inspired by the rhythm of a piece of music. We observe the same type of lines in *Composition V* (*image 19*) where the "musicalisation" is complete and thus there are no longer readily recognisable forms.

The fact that the sketch of *The Blue Rider* (shown in *images 11* and *13*) and *Composition V* (*image 19*) date to the same year, leads us to speculate that Kandinsky's inspiration from Byzantine iconography was not simply succeeded by his process of the "musicalisation" of painting but continued to develop during that process. In other words, although in 1911, through a process of "musicalisation" Kandinsky had reached pure abstraction, the experience of the Byzantine icon continued to exist in his work. In order to test this speculation we shall implement a visual experiment which aims at gradually turning Kandinsky's icon-inspired sketch of *The Blue Rider* shown in *image 13* into his work entitled *Composition V* shown in *image 19*.

Our first step is shown in *image 14*, where we have simply turned the sketch of *The Blue Rider* on its side and excluded its yellow border. Next, as shown in *image 15*, we have excluded the actual depiction of the blue rider from this composition. In *image 16* we have then added with black ink a curved black line similar to the most dominant black line in Kandinsky's *Composition V* (*image 19*). Then, as shown in *image 17*, we continued adding thinner lines in a rhythmic manner which corresponds to the existing lines of the sketch. Finally, as can be seen in *image 18*, we have intervened with egg-tempera – while respecting the existing colour-palette of Kandinsky's original sketch.

When the outcome of this experiment, shown in *image 18*, is compared to Kandinsky's *Composition V* (*image 19*) it becomes intelligible how Kandinsky's inspiration from Russian-Byzantine iconography exemplified in the sketch of *The Blue Rider* shown in

*image 13* is incorporated within his process of the "musicalisation" of painting, where the reference to the material world irreversibly fades away. It is not without consequence that the works of the previous year (1910) are remembered by Kandinsky as characteristically transitional:

"Thus, I dissolved objects to a greater or lesser extent within the same picture, so that they might not all be recognised at once and so that these emotional overtones might thus be experienced gradually by the spectator, one after another. Here and there, purely abstract forms entered of their own accord, which therefore had to produce a purely pictorial effect without the above-mentioned coloration. In other words, I myself was not yet sufficiently mature to experience purely abstract form without bridging the gap by means of objects. If I had possessed this ability, I would already have created absolute pictures at that time."[33]

Therefore, it was in 1911 that Kandinsky's gradual pursuit of pure abstraction, for which the Byzantine-inspired theme of *The Blue Rider* is effectively a synonym, was finally accomplished. His other characteristically transitional works of the same period also allude to a distinct Byzantine element. For example, when we compare Kandinsky's *All Saints I* (*image 20*) to the detail of the scene of the *Resurrection* in the chapel of the church of Chora (*image 21*), we detect an unassuming similarity in the structure and in the general dynamics of composition.

Image *24* shows a 1913 photograph of a contemplative Kandinsky in his Munich studio. Among his works which are hung on the wall, we observe three Orthodox crosses; the wall in itself appears as a modern version of the traditional icon corner in Russian dwellings. In view of this photograph one cannot help posing a question: is Kandinsky perhaps quite consciously contemplating a Modern Byzantine painting? In the following paragraphs, we shall assess the Byzantine influences in Kandinsky's 1932 work entitled *Fixed Flight* (*image 31*) and therein we shall visually demonstrate how even at this later stage his concept of the "musicalisation" of painting remained closely related to the Byzantine experience of the image being musicalised into the Byzantine chant.

When inside the chapel of the church of Chora (in Constantinople) the vision of the observer gradually moves upwards, the depiction of Archangel Michael is encountered above the scene of the *Resurrection* (*images 25* and *26*). Image *26* shows this transition from one wall-surface to another – from the concave setting of the scene of *Resurrection* to a wide arch-like semicircular (ceiling) surface in the middle of which *Archangel Michael* is depicted. In comparison to the scale of the figure of Christ in the scene of *Resurrection*,

[33] This citation is from: Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Kandinsky* (Taschen, 2007), 39.

the bust of *Archangel Michael* is notably bigger in size, and of course, at first glance this seems to be of little consequence – as the two figures belong to separate compositions.

However, the observer's perception of how these compositions connect within the specific space of the church interior is indeed significantly influenced by the noted change of scale. The upward passing of the vision from the scene of *Resurrection* to the depiction of *Archangel Michael* is an experience which in itself may amount to abstraction: the change of scale can be experienced purely as a change of mode of one's vision, and accordingly, within such an experience the depicted figures surpass their merely representational quality and meaning – and in effect become abstract. In this sense the decorative red border which separates the two wall surfaces both divides and unites these compositions. When we add to this perception the complimentary effects caused by the Byzantine chant, we become immersed by an exalted experience which by far surpasses the formal and narrative meanings of the two discussed compositions in Chora.

For example, while listening to Byzantine chant, the faithful who are in a prayerful mood tend to open and close their eyes at particular moments in response to what is being heard. When one's eyes are closed, in synchronisation with the melody of the chant, the image (of a fresco or an icon) which was viewed just a moment earlier is gradually dispersed into the rhythm of music.

With this in mind, as shown in *image 27*, we have covered a small section of the photograph shown in *image 26* with dark blue colour, and then continued – as seen in *image 28* – to cover larger sections, including the dividing red border. Thus, the experiment in *image 28* shows how while hearing Byzantine chant the Byzantine image is melodically dispersed into its musical counterpart. Therefore, within this experience, the content is most important while the observed abstraction is simply a visual consequence – which is precisely the claim often made by Kandinsky.

As shown in *image 29*, in continuation of our experimentation we have turned the same photograph on its side and thus arrived at a composition notably similar to Kandinsky's work entitled *Fixed Flight*, shown in *image 31*. We have then covered (eliminated) some more features in our experimental composition (*image 30*). This led us to detect a connection between Kandinsky's *Fixed Flight* and some of Mark Rothko's dark-blue compositions. Accordingly, as seen on the left of *image 32*, on top of which we have initially commenced our experimentation, we have painted a Rothko-like composition, while we have left the right side untouched, as a demonstration of how, when turned on its side, a segment of a weather-affected Late Byzantine fresco can be easily mistaken for Kandinsky's abstract work. Consequently, *image 32* visually demonstrates how Rothko and Kandinsky share the experience of the Late Byzantine influence. We shall discuss in

the following case-study how in Kandinsky's later works, although the Late Byzantine element became seemingly less evident, it simultaneously played a significant role in producing a distinct numinous effect.

## *Twilight* and *Tempered Elan* through Byzantine eyes

Our main hypothesis in this case-study is that the abstraction of Kandinsky's last works relates to the tendency towards abstraction in Late Byzantine painting to an extent which is much greater than what is currently acknowledged in the domains of art theory and Byzantine aesthetics. In order to practically explain the relevant phenomena we shall again necessarily adhere to a methodology of aesthetic comparison and visual demonstration.

In Byzantine painting the tendency towards abstraction does not constitute only an external quality of its style. Rather, this tendency is an aesthetic consequence of the consistent desire of the Byzantines to transcend the material realm of existence and objectify, through art as a form of liturgy, their culturally and spiritually specific, Biblical perception of the created world. Therefore, any methodological assessment of the specific reason behind – as well as of the aesthetic effect of – the aspect of abstraction in Late Byzantine painting owes to carefully consider this historical reality.

This is of particular importance when the possible relation between the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting and the abstraction of 20th century Modern painting is discussed. A noteworthy publication on the related topic is the book entitled *The Character and the Reason of the Abstraction in Byzantine Painting* written in Greek by Georgios Kordis.[34] While using Vasily Kandinsky and Paul Klee as his main references to Modernist abstraction, in continuation, Kordis offers his understanding of abstraction in Modern painting, as well as discusses its difference to the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting. For example, in discussing a 16th century portrait (fresco) from the Asteriou monastery in Attica (*image 33*) Kordis states that if we were to extract a segment from it in order to observe it on its own, we would then easily encounter an abstract work of art.[35]

In spite of this insightful observation, Kordis concludes his book by expressing some

[34] Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ὁ Χαρακτῆρας καὶ ὁ Λόγος τῶν Ἀφαιρετικῶν Τάσεων τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Ζωγραφικῆς* (Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 2007).

[35] Ibid., 25–27.

rather explicit beliefs in regards to the relationship between the aspect of abstraction in Byzantine painting and the abstraction in 20th century Modern painting. For example, he states in the conclusion: "The observed abstract mood (in Byzantine painting) does not seem to relate to the analogous tendencies of Modern painting, where the attrition of the natural form serves by rule the expressionistic inquiries and expresses beyond the form some spiritual, ideological or emotional content."[36]

In our view, conclusions such as the one cited above should by no means be accepted without methodological re-examination. It requires no reminding that Kandinsky's close relationship with the heritage of Byzantine art is historically undisputable. Moreover, in the introduction of the previously mentioned book, Kordis himself makes a reference to Kandinsky's frequently repeated claim that the profound impression which the Russian medieval icons evoked in him had influenced his entire artistic development.[37]

As already demonstrated in the previous two chapters, in relation to prime examples of Late Byzantine painting: If one's perception is not captive solely by the formal aspects and the narrative character of a Late Byzantine composition, its otherworldly aura, which stems from the distinct tendency towards abstraction, excels to a level of hypertextual meaning, and as such, becomes the more exalted, and often also a theological content of the depicted theme.

A typical example of this phenomenon is the composition of *The Second Coming* (*images 35* and *36*) at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople, where the weightlessness, the sublime simplicity of the composition, the non-naturalistic rendering of form, and the non-naturalistic colour-palette, are aspects which, when considered as a whole, project mystagogical levels of meaning – ones which exceed the formal purpose of the depicted narrative. This means that the viewer can contemplate and participate in the transcendental reality of the event of *The Second Coming*: by participating in its mystagogical mood. This is a participation which at its highest levels amounts to a purely abstract experience. The comparison between Kandinsky's painting *Composition X* (*image 34*), which was completed just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and the Byzantine scene of *The Second Coming* (*image 35*), reveals a similarity in respect to both weightlessness and the rhythmical arrangement of forms – which at first glance are in

[36] Our translation. The original excerpt in Greek reads as follows: «Ἡ παρατηρούμενη ἀφαιρετική διάθεση δὲ φαίνεται νὰ ἔχει σχέση μὲ ἀνάλογες τάσεις τῆς μοντέρνας ζωγραφικῆς, ὅπου ἡ φθορὰ τῆς φυσικῆς μορφῆς ὑπηρετεῖ, κατὰ κανόνα, ἐξπρεσσιονιστικές ἀναζητήσεις καὶ ἐκφράζει κάποιο ἐπέκεινα τῆς μορφῆς πνευματικό, ἰδεολογικό ἢ συναισθηματικὸ περιεχόμενο.» See: Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ὁ Χαρακτῆρας καὶ ὁ Λόγος τῶν Ἀφαιρετικῶν Τάσεων τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Ζωγραφικῆς* (Ἐκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 2007), 76.

[37] Ibid., 8.

both compositions observed as primarily abstract features. A similar observation could be made when the scene of *The Second Coming* is compared to Kandinsky's work entitled *Around the Circle* (*image 37*).

Thus, our view is that, besides his other influences, his conscious quest for the "spiritual" in art had led Kandinsky to selectively borrow and reinvent not the actual style of Late Byzantine painting, but the transcendental worldview entailed in that painting. Many subsequent Modern and Postmodern painters failed to understand what truly lies beneath the surface of the compositions painted by Kandinsky, and thus, as observed by Yannis Ziogas in his discussion about Malevich, such painters inherited only the surface and not the process.[38]

Whether or not during his 1931 travels Kandinsky indeed saw the frescoes at Chora or those at Mistra, is an academic question which remains open. There is however little doubt that during these travels Kandinsky would have sought the representative examples of Byzantine painting. For example, perhaps he did not manage to visit the church of Chora in Constantinople but instead had visited the church of the Holy Apostles or the church of St Nicholas Orphanos (both are in Thessaloniki). Such a likelihood does not change the main point of our argument, as both in the church of the Holy Apostles (where significant mosaics are also preserved) and in St Nicholas Orphanos there are representative examples of Late Byzantine fresco painting where similar connections to Kandinsky's work may be detected.

In his earlier mentioned book entitled *The Character and the Reason of the Abstraction in Byzantine Painting*, Georgios Kordis argues that: "The abstraction in Byzantine painting is mainly a *functional enrichment* of the visual form. Therefore, the departure from the natural form and the simplification of the hypostatical characteristics, do not occur in order for the theological meanings to be expressed, but aim at connecting the visual form – therefore the depicted person or event – with the observer."[39]

In respect to the above cited view, our position is considerably different, which can be gathered from the previous chapters of this book. We argue that first and foremost, the deeper cause of the aspect of abstraction in Byzantine painting is the historically and culturally specific, transcendental worldview of its civilisation. Of course, the practical

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[38] See: Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000), 88.

[39] Γιώργος Κόρδης, *Ὁ Χαρακτῆρας καὶ ὁ Λόγος τῶν Ἀφαιρετικῶν Τάσεων τῆς Βυζαντινῆς Ζωγραφικῆς* (Εκδόσεις Ἁρμός, 2007), 76–77. (Our translation). The cited text reads as follows in Greek: «Ἡ ἀφαίρεση στὴ βυζαντινὴ ζωγραφικὴ εἶναι κυρίως *λειτουργικὸς ἐμπλουτισμὸς* τῆς εἰκαστικῆς μορφῆς. Ἡ ἀπομάκρυνση, δηλαδή, ἀπὸ τὴ φυσικὴ μορφὴ καὶ ἡ ἁπλοποίηση τῶν ὑποστατικῶν χαρακτηριστικῶν, δὲν γίνεται προκειμένου νὰ ἐκφραστοῦν θεολογικὲς ἔννοιες, ἀλλά ἀποσκοπεῖ στὴ σύνδεση τῆς εἰκαστικῆς μορφῆς – καὶ ἄρα τοῦ εἰκονιζόμενου προσώπου ἢ γεγονότος – μὲ τὸ θεατή.»

implications of the aspect of abstraction in Byzantine painting indeed do mainly concern the functionality of a depicted theme in relation to the observer. However, contrary to Kordis' above cited view, these practical implications cannot sufficiently explain the core reason for the specific kind of abstraction in Byzantine painting. For example, the same concern with practical functionality can be observed in relation to the lack of realism in Egyptian painting and relief, which are also characterised by a related yet distinctly different tendency towards abstraction.

Furthermore, our analyses hitherto have demonstrated that it is precisely through the tendency towards abstraction that in Late Byzantine painting the content which is beyond the form is insinuated. Accordingly, contrary to Kordis' conclusion of his book, there are numerous examples of a manifold relationship between the abstract mood in Byzantine painting and the abstraction in 20th century Modern painting. This will also be demonstrated in the next two chapters of this book. If we compare Kandinsky's painting *Twilight* (1943) (*image 40*) to the fragment of the scene of *Baptism* shown in *image 39* and then to the fragment of the scene of *The Second Coming* shown in *image 41*, we acknowledge yet again the existence of a tangible aesthetic nexus. In effect, the combination of these three images visually demonstrates how Kandinsky's *Twilight* conducts an aesthetic dialogue with the transcendental content of Late Byzantine painting – which stems precisely from the tendency towards abstraction.

*Sky Blue* (1940; discussed in the previous chapter) and *Twilight* (1943) belong to a group of Kandinsky's aesthetically most mature works, and together with the last painting which he recorded in his list of completed works, *Tempered Elan* (1944) (*image 42*), inform us of a previously unexamined level of influence of Late Byzantine painting on Kandinsky. Essentially, Kandinsky insightfully selected and absorbed that which in Late Byzantine painting is aesthetically most delicate and mature, and artistically most profound: the culturally and spiritually specific, transcendental perception of the created world.

## *Division-Unity* – A Historical and Artistic Reading

Our premise in this short case-study is that through his last paintings, Kandinsky acts not simply as an artist but also as an art-historian and an enigmatic art-theorist, and that he therein unassumingly alludes to the so far insufficiently observed significance of the influence which the aesthetics of Byzantine painting exercised on his abstract painterly language. We shall examine this premise by discussing firstly Kandinsky's painting entitled *Division-Unity* shown in *image 43*. Next to this work we have placed a segment from the 16th century Post Byzantine fresco (*image 44*) painted by Theophanes the Cretan in the church of the Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas at Meteora: a strict geometrical division of surfaces is the most obvious similarity.

Of course, the overt use of geometrically structured compositions and an inclination towards simplified geometrical rendering of features can be encountered in a number of ancient artistic traditions. Thus, for example, we can conceive of an aesthetic parallel between Kandinsky's *Division-Unity* and a detail from an Egyptian mural. A copy of one such mural is shown as a whole in *image 45*. If we look at the geometrically arranged areas in this mural, we can easily find a number of segments which are strikingly reminiscent of Kandinsky's *Division-Unity* (*image 43*).

Throughout the history of Byzantine painting, significant aesthetic developments did indeed occur but they mainly occurred at a slow and unassuming pace and they were not inclined towards breaking away from the course of the tradition, but rather, they remained an integral part of it. In the case of Egyptian art, we have an even more austere adherence to conventions of the tradition.

Furthermore, neither of the two traditions are concerned with either faithful realism of form or with art for the mere sake of decoration or beauty. In both cases, the predilection for abstraction aspires to conceive of beauty as of something exalted rather than externally beautiful. Of course, between the Egyptian and the Byzantine artistic experience there is the significant mediation of the Ancient Greek and the Greco-Roman experience. The mediation of the Ancient Greek experience in particular is addressed by Wilhelm Worringer in his book *Abstraction and Empathy* which was deemed by Kandinsky and a number of his contemporaries as insightful. We include here a relevant citation from this book:

"Compare a Byzantine relief of the good period with an Ancient Egyptian relief, and finally with a Greek vase decoration. Despite the fact that the purely geometric-abstract setting and the markedly abstract tendency bring the Byzantine work quite close to the Egyptian, we nevertheless notice at once, by the elegance and beauty of the linear-orna-

mental construction, by the gracefulness of arrangement, often amounting to delicacy, that the course of development has passed through Greek art, as we see it, for example, in any random vase decoration."[40]

Our view is that in his painting entitled *Division-Unity* (*image 43*) Kandinsky in a certain sense builds upon Worringer's theories stipulated in *Abstraction and Empathy*. In particular, he artistically brings the aforementioned Worringer's understanding of the connection between Byzantine and Egyptian art to a higher level. As we shall elaborate below, Kandinsky therein reveals certain connections which, to the best of our knowledge, have not previously been observed in his work.

Firstly, if we consider the entire history of art and then focus exclusively on the epochs of absolutely major artistic achievements, then it becomes obvious that, as a consequential aesthetic parallel, the numinous simplicity of Egyptian art and architecture pulsates with variable intensity in all epochs of the art and architecture of the Greco-Roman world but also in the painting of Byzantium. It also becomes apparent that it is through the experience of Renaissance painting that this subtle Egyptian parallel is lost in the domain of painting. In this sense, the rejection of the *Egyptian element* is one of the most significant causes of the "aesthetic schism" which through the Renaissance experience occurred between Eastern and Western painting traditions: the Renaissance painters disassociated themselves from the *Egyptian element* – which as part of an inherent tendency towards abstraction exists within the aesthetics of Byzantine painting, notwithstanding the fact that the tendency towards abstraction in Byzantine painting is distinct from the analogous tendency in Egyptian art.

This effect of the emergence of Renaissance, although only in general terms, has been noted by Kostas Papaioannou, one of the most significant 20th century philosophers. In particular, in his book entitled *Apotheosis of History*, Papaioannou states: "Since the Renaissance and thereafter, the world can no longer be perceived as a consistent and cohesive whole, and its meaning always remains fragmented."[41]

We note that one vastly accepted view is that, besides its other characteristics, Renaissance art constitutes a reinvention of Ancient Greek aesthetics. While this observation is correct, it does not necessarily mean that the Renaissance revival of the Ancient Greek element played a decisive role in the irreversible departure of Renaissance paint-

[40] Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997), 104–105.

[41] Κώστας Παπαϊωάννου, *Η Αποθέωση της Ιστορίας* (Εναλλακτικές Εκδόσεις, 1992), 29. (Our translation). The cited excerpt reads as follows in Greek: «Από την Αναγέννηση και μετά, ο κόσμος δεν μπορεί πλέον να γίνεται αντιληπτός ως ένα όλον συγκροτημένο και συνεκτικό, η δε σημασία του μένει πάντα μερική.»

ing from the Byzantine experience, for throughout the history of Byzantine painting we encounter a frequent revival of the classical and of the ancient. In this particular sense, El Greco's painting can be understood as the only Renaissance and yet truly ecumenical Christian art, as due to its pronounced Byzantine element the Egyptian parallel is not entirely lost and the sense of unbroken historical continuity is therefore preserved. We are pictorially informed of the above addressed phenomena through Kandinsky's work *Division –Unity* (*image 43*). It is our view that through a visual language, this work exemplifies the inter-historical connection between major Eastern artistic traditions, with strong emphasis on the aesthetics of Byzantine and Egyptian art. Abstraction was in this sense the means through which Kandinsky achieved an enigmatic-kind of insight into the connection between the arts of different periods.

Experimentations are particularly significant for understanding Kandinsky's work. In this context, we have placed Kandinsky's work entitled *White Figure* (*image 46*) next to a photograph showing a segment of the interior of the 9th century Byzantine church of Panagia Scripou at Orchomenos in Boeotia, in Greece (*image 47*). In this photograph we observe how the light from a window falls on a fresco which depicts saintly figures. The effect in this photograph notably corresponds to the enigmatic effect of Kandinsky's *White Figure* (*image 46*). Similarly to the impression created by a combination of various abstract features observed in *White Figure*, in the presented photograph, it is apparent that neither the fresco nor the strange light coming from the window can produce alone the characteristic impression which they produce when they are combined. Were observations of this kind part of Kandinsky's spiritual experience?

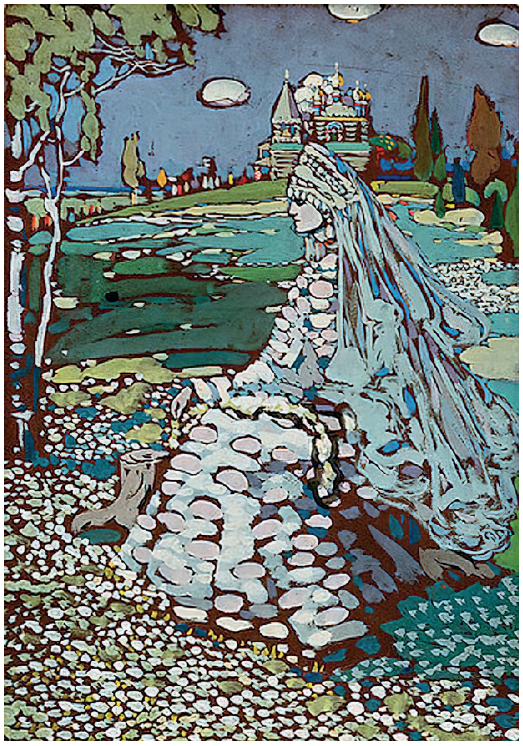
In conclusion, based on our research, it can be said that the observed Late Byzantine element in Kandinsky's work reflects his appreciation of the truthfulness and of the numinous meaning which can be shared through art – aspects which are characteristic not only of Byzantine, but also of Egyptian, Oriental, and Primitive art.

Furthermore, Kandinsky's Russian Orthodox heritage and his inspiration from Late Byzantine painting, have significantly contributed to the forming of his abstract style of painting. More importantly, as demonstrated through our case-studies, within that abstraction the phenomena which he collectively branded with the term "spiritual," find their most specific historical counterpart precisely in the transcendental content which is expressed through the tendency towards abstraction in Late Byzantine painting.

Finally, Kandinsky's case informs us of an important, and in the domain of art theory hitherto insufficiently demonstrated fact: The crucial developments in art history of the

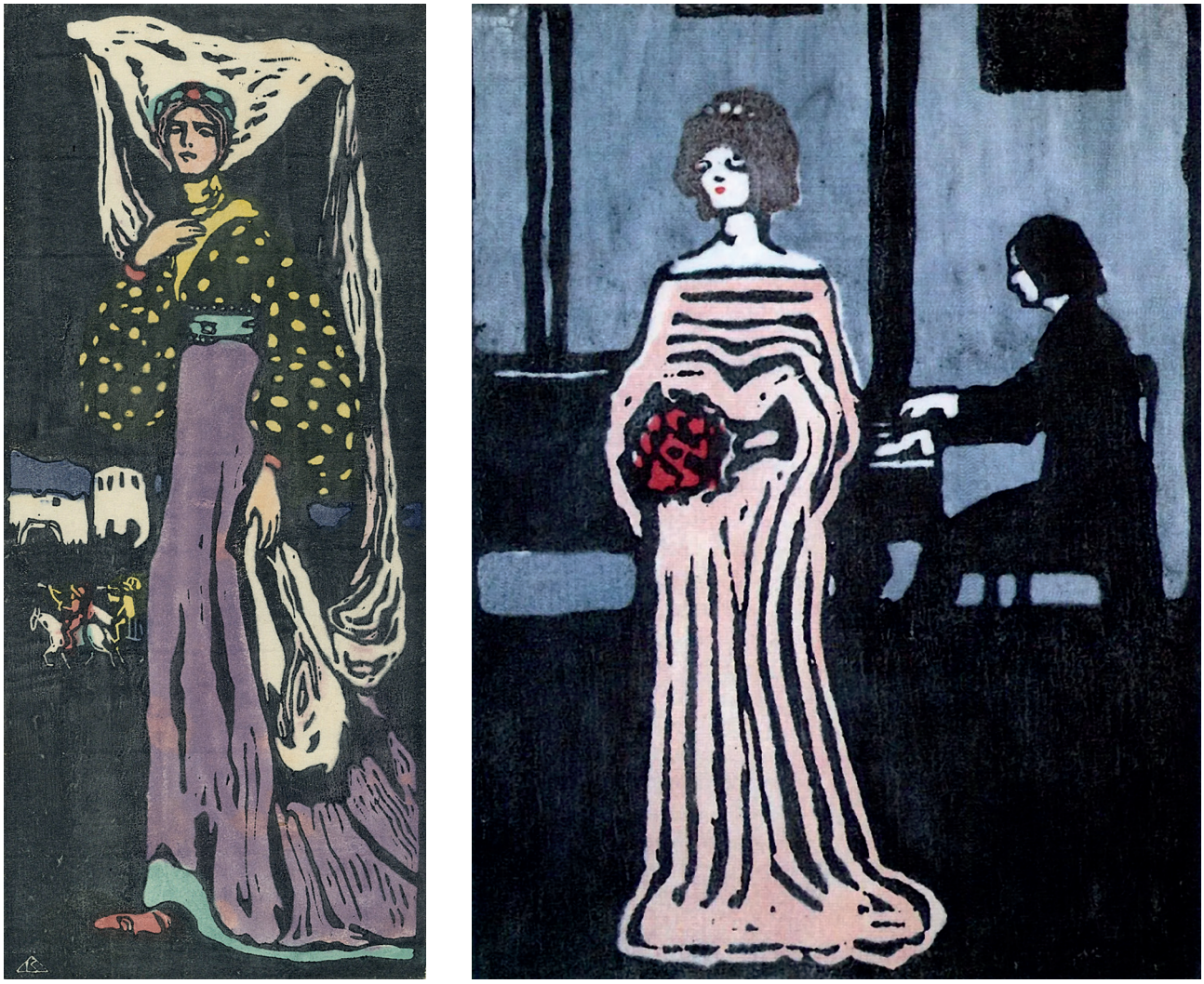
20th century, in particular, the liberation from the naturalistic and representational form, as well as the subsequent rise of Modernism, are related to the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting in the most profound way. Thus, Kandinsky's overall creative experience can indeed be seen as contributory to the understanding of the diachronic character of Late Byzantine painting.





**1.** Above: Vasily Kandinsky, *Motley Life*, 1907, tempera on canvas, 130 x 162.5 cm, Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus.

**2.** Below: Vasily Kandinsky, *Russian Beauty in a Landscape*, c.1904, tempera, card, lined in dark grey, 41.5 x 28.8 cm, Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus.

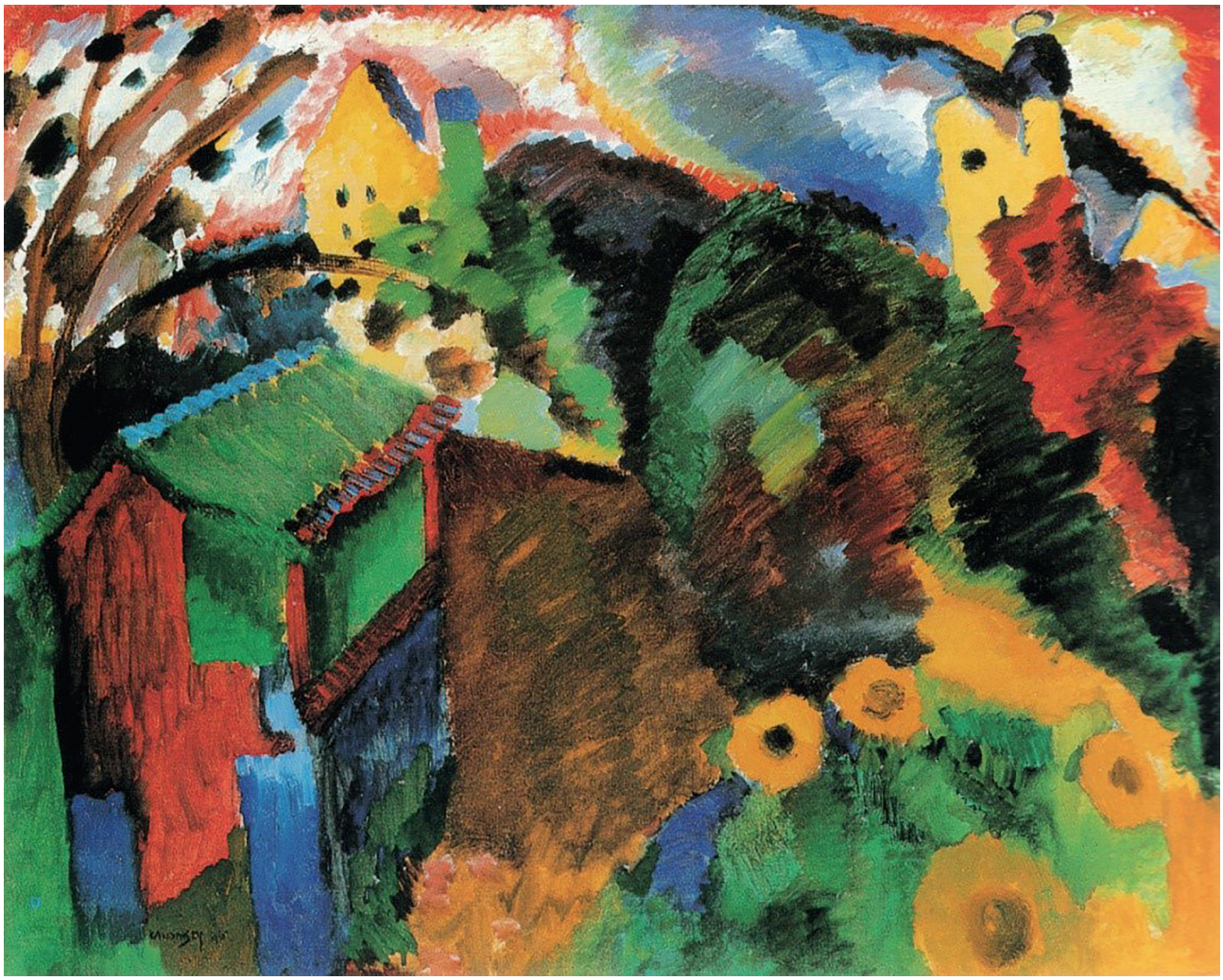


**3.** Left: Vasily Kandinsky, *Night (Large Version)*, 1903, colour woodcut, 29.4 x 12.5 cm, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus.

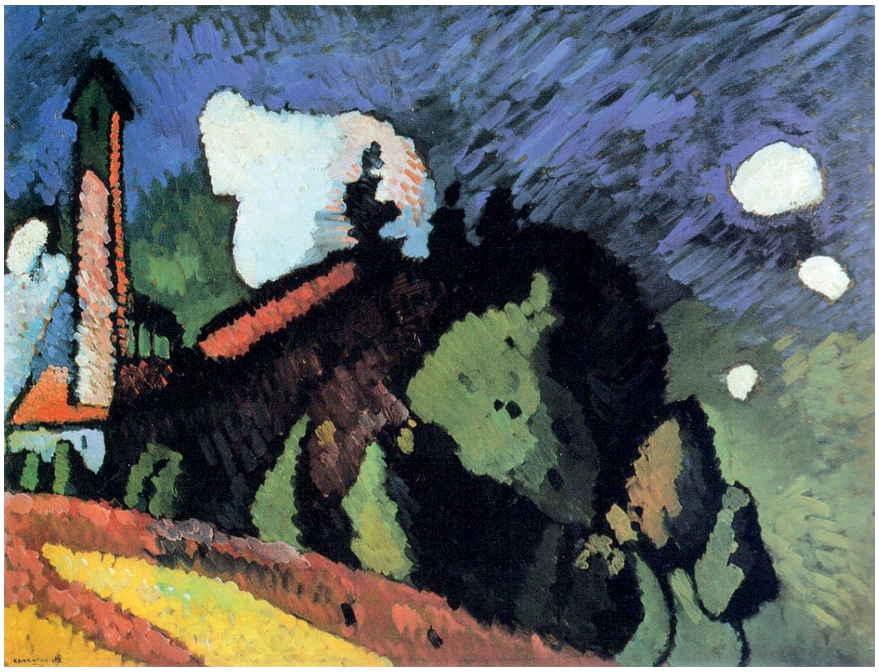
**4.** Right: Vasily Kandinsky, *The Singer*, 1903, wood cut.

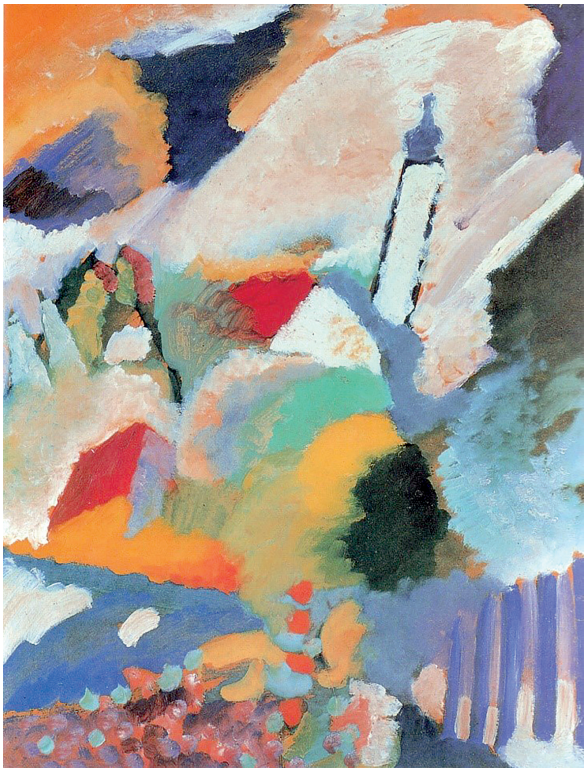


**5.** Vasily Kandinsky, *The Blue Rider*, 1903, oil on canvas, 55 x 65 cm, Zurich, private collection.



**6.** Vasily Kandinsky, *Murnau Garden I*, 1910, oil on canvas, 66 x 82 cm, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus.





**7.** Above: Vasily Kandinsky, *Murnau – Landscape with Tower*, 1908, oil on card, 75.5 x 99.5 cm, Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou.

**8.** Below: Vasily Kandinsky, *Murnau with Church I*, 1910, oil on cardboard, 64.7 x 50.2 cm, Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus.




**9.** Vasily Kandinsky, Designs for the cover of *The Blue Rider Almanac*, 1911. Above left: Watercolour over pencil, 27.5 x 21.8 cm. Above right: Watercolour over pencil, 28 x 21.7 cm. Below left: Ink brush and watercolour over pencil, 30.6 x 23.9 cm. Below right: Watercolour and ink brush over pencil and blue crayon, 27.7 x 22.3. Location: Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus.







**10.** Left: *St George*, icon, first half of the 14th century, 89 x 63 cm, St Petersburg, Russian Museum.

**11.** Middle: Vasily Kandinsky, Design for a cover of *The Blue Rider Almanac*, 1911, ink, watercolour and opaque white over pencil, 27.7 x 21.9 cm, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus.

**12.** Right: *Archistratig Mihail*, icon, beginning of the 18th century, Karelia, 57 x 44.8 cm, The Republic of Karelia Museum of Fine Arts, Petrozavodsk, Russia.



**13.** Vasily Kandinsky, Design for a cover of *The Blue Rider Almanac*, 1911, ink, watercolour and opaque white over pencil, 27.7 x 21.9 cm, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus.



**14.** Top: Experiment, stage 1: Kandinsky's 1911 design for a cover of *The Blue Rider Almanac* (shown in image 13) turned on its side and without the yellow border, 20 x 28 cm, Athens, private collection (2010).

**15.** Middle: Experiment, stage 2: Kandinsky's 1911 design for a cover of *The Blue Rider Almanac* (shown in image 13) turned on its side, without the yellow border and without the actual depiction of the Blue Rider, 20 x 28 cm, Athens, private collection (2010).

**16.** Bottom: Experiment, stage 3: Ink over image 15, 20 x 28 cm, Athens, private collection (2010).







**17.** Top: Experiment, stage 4: Ink over image 15, 20 x 28 cm, Athens, private collection (2010).

**18.** Middle: Experiment, stage 5: Ink and egg tempera over image 15, 20 x 28 cm, Athens, private collection (2010).

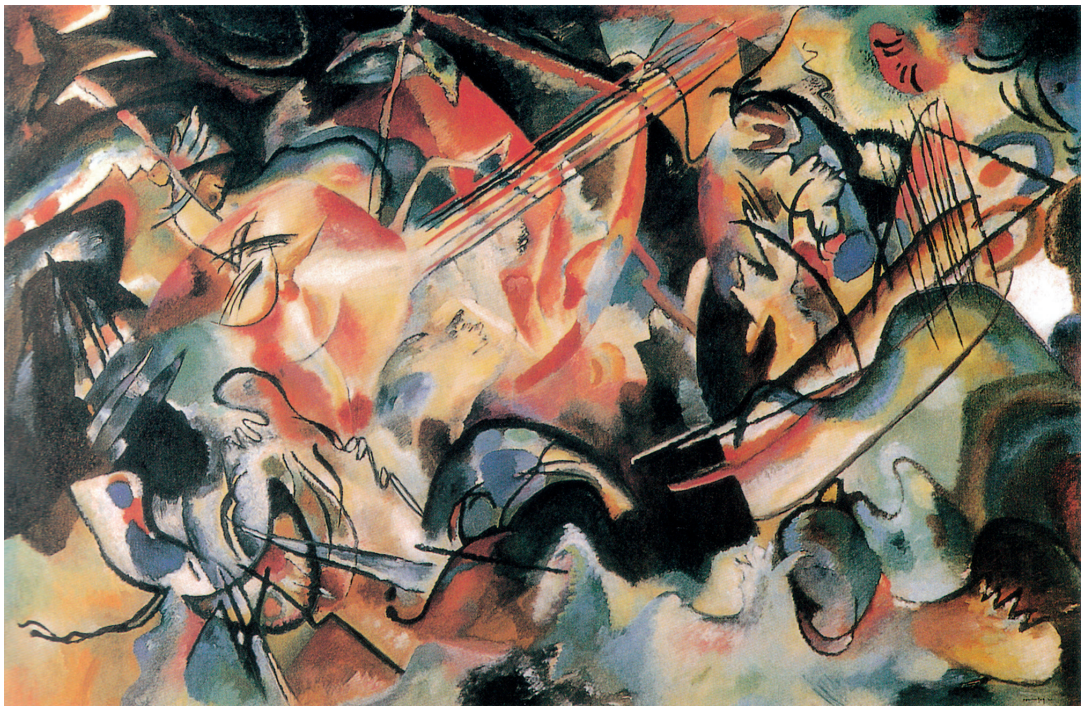
**19.** Bottom: Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition V*, 1911, oil on canvas, 190 x 275 cm, Switzerland, private collection.





**20.** Above: Vasily Kandinsky, *All Saints I*, 1911, oil on card, 50 x 64.5 cm, Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus.

**21.** Below: Detail from the fresco of *Resurrection* at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople, 14th century. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)





**22.** Above: Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition VI*, 1913, oil on canvas, 195 x 300 cm, St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum.

**23.** Below: Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery.




**24.** Photograph by Gabriele Münter: Kandinsky in his studio at 36 Ainmillerstraβe, Munich, 1913. (Photograph: Gabriele Münter and Johannes Eicher Foundation).





**25.** Above: *The Resurrection*, fresco, 1315–1320, in the conch of the apse of the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)

**26.** Below: A photograph of the connection between the composition of *The Resurrection* and the depiction of *Archangel Michael*, 1315–1320, at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)




**27.** Experiment over a photograph of the connection between the composition of *The Resurrection* and the depiction of *Archangel Michael* at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople; 20 x 28 cm, Athens, private collection. (Author of the experiment: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)



**28.** Experiment over a photograph of the connection between the composition of *The Resurrection* and the depiction of *Archangel Michael* at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople; 20 x 28 cm, Athens, private collection. (Author of the experiment: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)



**29.** Experiment over a photograph of the connection between the composition of *The Resurrection* and the depiction of *Archangel Michael* at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople; 20 x 28 cm, Athens, private collection. (Author of the experiment: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)




**30.** Above: Experiment over a photograph of the connection between the composition of *The Resurrection* and the depiction of *Archangel Michael* at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople; 20 x 28 cm, Athens, private collection. (Author of the experiment: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)

**31.** Middle: Vasily Kandinsky, *Fixed Flight*, 1932, oil on panel, 49 x 70 cm, Paris, Collection M. and Mme. Maegh.

**32.** Bottom: Experiment over a photograph of the connection between the composition of *The Resurrection* and the depiction of *Archangel Michael* at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople; 20 x 28 cm, Athens, private collection. (Author of the experiment: Uroš Todorović, 2010.) This experiment demonstrates how through the Byzantine experience Kandinsky's work can relate to Rothko's abstraction; the right side demonstrates how, when put on its side, the weather-affected depiction of *Archangel Michael* can be reminiscent of abstract features in Kandinsky's work.



**33.** Portrait (fresco) of an unknown ascetic,
Monastery of Asteriou (16th century), Attica, Greece.



**34.** Above: Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition X*, 1939, oil on canvas, 130 x 195 cm, Düsseldorf, Kunstsammlung Nordhein-Westfalen.

**35.** Below: The composition (fresco) of *The Second Coming*, 1315–1320, at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)



**36.** Above: The composition (fresco) of *The Second Coming*, 1315–1320, at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)

**37.** Below: Vasily Kandinsky, *Around the Circle*, 1940, oil and enamel on canvas, 97 x 146 cm, New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.









**38.** Above: the composition (fresco) of *Baptism* at Perivleptos in Mistra, Greece; second half of the 14th century.

**39.** Below left: detail of the fresco of *Baptism* at Perivleptos in Mistra, Greece; second half of the 14th century.

**40.** Below middle: Vasily Kandinsky, *Twilight*, 1943, oil on card, 57.6 x 41.8 cm, New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

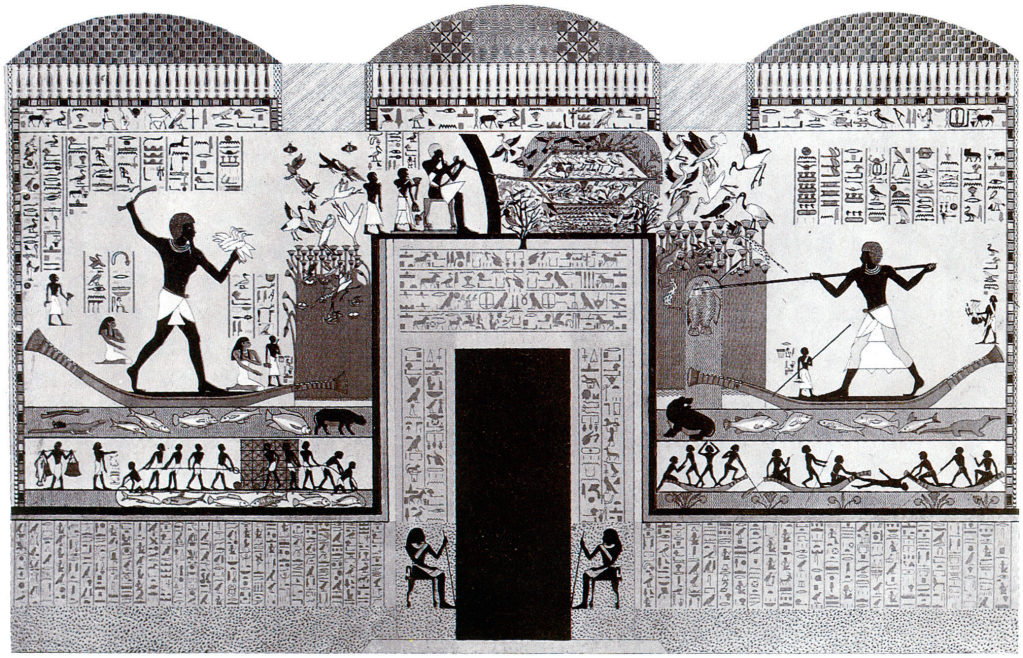
**41.** Below right: detail from the fresco of *The Second Coming*, 14th century, at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2010.)



**42.** Vasily Kandinsky, *Tempered Elan*, 1944, oil on card, 42 x 58 cm, Paris, Musée National d' Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou.







**43.** Above left: Vasily Kandinsky, *Division-Unity*, 1943, mixed media, 58 x 42 cm, London, private collection.

**44.** Above right: Detail from the composition (fresco) of *The Second Coming* at the narthex of the church of the Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas (1527), Meteora, Greece; painted by Theophanes the Cretan. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović, 2008.)

**45.** Below: A copy of an Egyptian mural from the tomb of Khnumhotep (c.1900 BC).





**46.** Above: Vasily Kandinsky, *White Figure*, 1943, oil on card, 58 x 42 cm, New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, gift of Solomon R. Guggenheim, 1947.

**47.** Below: A photograph of a window light falling on a fresco inside the 9th century church of Panagia Scripou at Orchomenos in Boeotia, Greece. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović 2009.)

# Chapter V

# Visualising the 'Byzantine Malevich'

More than fifty years ago, a Russian theologian and thinker Paul Evdokimov (1901–1970) stated: "Without being able to prove it, one has an intuition that contemporary abstract art springs from Christian iconography, from the Islamic arabesque, from the panhuman nostalgia for the transcendental."[1] This statement was quite groundbreaking at the time it was published. As we shall discuss, today we are much closer to being able to tangibly demonstrate – if not prove – the existence of a highly pertinent aesthetic connection between the abstract painting of the 20th century and Late Byzantine painting. In this chapter we shall aspire to gradually visualise the cryptically encoded Late Byzantine aspects of the painting of Kazimir Malevich. To this end we shall adhere to a number of visual comparisons, visual demonstrations, as well as experimentations.

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the invention of the photographic and later cinematic technologies had suffocated any objective need for "authentic" realism in the domain of visual art.[2] Prior to this period, the phenomenon of art-making was comprehended and interpreted through the thought of German Idealism and Neo-Kantianism, both of which pertain to a kind of Neo-Platonism where the creation of an artwork is understood as a process in which the idea becomes alienated within its material encasement. Important German aesthetic thinkers regarded Byzantine art as decadent and until the early 20th century many scholars considered Byzantine art to be barbarous – a perception which originally occurred in the post-Renaissance period. As observed by Andrei Nakov, at the beginning of the 20th century, "the new ontological

[1] Our translation of: «Χωρίς να μπορεί κανείς να το αποδείξει, διαισθάνεται ότι η σύγχρονη αφηρημένη τέχνη πηγάζει από τη χριστιανική εικονογραφία, από το μουσουλμανικό αραβούργημα, από την πανανθρώπινη νοσταλγία για το υπερβατικό.» Paul Evdokimov, "L'art Moderne ou la Sophia Désaffectée," in *Περί Ύλης και Τέχνης*, ed. Philip Sherrard (Αθήνα: Σειρά "σύνορο," 1971), 117.

[2] The question of how and why the Western tradition arrived at a dead-end of representational art could undoubtedly be a topic of a separate comprehensive study.

state of painting is most precisely expressed by the Russian leading artists and by the meaning of the non-objective art."[3]

The rejection of visual art, which characterises the early 20th century, created a critical climate within which Russian artists, such as Kazimir Malevich, Vasily Kandinsky, Natalia Goncharova and others, created artworks of immense artistic and aesthetical significance. These artists entered the world history of painting by shifting its orientation away from the naturalistic and away from the representational, therein directing it towards the abstract. The path towards abstraction which was followed by these artists has in each individual case been a subject of comprehensive theoretical research, and the existence of the Byzantine influences in their work has been long detected – but these influences have not hitherto been sufficiently interpreted.

In this respect, the life-work of Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1878–1935), especially its phase known as *Suprematism*, is of particular interest to our aesthetic inquiry. In spite of his Polish background, Malevich's development as a painter was mainly conditioned by the Russian culture in the midst of which he grew up. However, throughout his artistic development he was influenced by a number of different painting orientations, such as Russian Symbolism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, the painting of Paul Gaugin, Henri Matisse, as well as by a variety of philosophers and thinkers, such as a Polish writer Stanislaw Przybyszewsky[4] (in 1908), Arthur Schopenhauer[5] (in 1908), G.W. F.Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, P.D. Ouspensky and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (founder of the Theosophical Society).[6]

In spite of the distinct Byzantine influences in Malevich's work, certain scholars do not note these and often argue that the peculiarity of Malevich's abstraction is rooted elsewhere, and therein, by consequence the significance of the Byzantine element in Malevich's contribution to the emergence of Modernism is undermined. For example, Golding argues that Malevich's disparate intellectual sources can be best apprehended if we consider them as hiding under Malevich's own characteristically eccentric Hegelian umbrella.[7] In specific regards to Malevich's intellectual sources, our premise is that, notwithstanding the variety of influences, Malevich's theoretical aspirations should primar-

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[3] Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 33–34. (Our translation) «Η νέα οντολογική κατάσταση της ζωγραφικής εκφράζεται σαφέστατα από τη ρωσική πρωτοπορία και την έννοια της μη-αντικειμενικής τέχνης.»

[4] Ibid., 12.

[5] Ibid.

[6] John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), 62.

[7] John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), 74.

ily be related to diverse theological sources and trends, with certain emphasis on *The Mystical Theology* of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, as well as agnostic teachings.

Due to the specific aims of this book, in this chapter we shall exclusively examine the aesthetic relationship of Malevich's work to the principles, as well as to the distinct transcendental quality of Late Byzantine painting. Therefore, we shall not conduct an exhaustive assessment of each particular phase of Malevich's artistic development. More particularly, our aim is to address the two following questions: firstly, what kind of *post-physics* has Malevich's work embodied in its mature aesthetic phase, and secondly, at what level does his *post-physics* relate to the aesthetic principles of Late Byzantine painting.

Our hypothesis is that Malevich's work relates to Late Byzantine painting not at the level of meaning but at the level of inter-textual references. With the term "inter-textuality" we refer to the dialogic potentiality which can exist within the particular elements comprising a distinct aesthetical view. This primarily means that, in the same way that tendency towards abstraction in Late Byzantine painting alludes to and communicates a transcendental meaning which exceeds the mere description of the sacred history, Malevich's abstract expression alludes to *something* which is beyond the visuality of his compositions. Most importantly, this inter-textual quality of Malevich's abstraction triggers an aesthetic "short-circuit" – so to speak, where the observer of Malevich's work is unassumingly led to the *post-physical* qualities of Late Byzantine painting. We should stress that in the Byzantine (Orthodox) worldview and its painting tradition, there is no such thing as "metaphysics" but there is simply a belief in the existence of invisible dimensions of reality. Because of this, in this chapter, in reference to certain aspects of Byzantine painting we shall be adhering to the term "post-physical," as opposed to "metaphysical" – which has a different meaning in the contemporary philosophical discourse. This adjustment of terminology is also aimed at clarifying the relationship between Malevich's abstraction and Late Byzantine painting. In light of this, the ultimate aim of our present enquiry into Late Byzantine aspects of Malevich's art is to provide an additional practical insight into the previously underexplored significance of the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting for the emergence of Modernism.

## Introduction to Case Studies

Throughout the following case-studies, we shall examine how, although Late Byzantine painting concerns itself with experiencing the Gospel events it is describing, Malevich succeeded in selecting from the *post-physical* aspects which exist in its aesthetic articulation. We shall also corroborate how through his artistic practice, Malevich presents a novel form of human nature, reconstructing through it the perception of the human presence.

If we compare Malevich's *Suprematist* works, which are completely abstract, to various examples of Late Byzantine painting, and if in doing so we disregard the form in the latter – in order to detect the actual intertextual relationship between them, we can then readily understand that the *post-physics* of Malevich's painting of the *Suprematist* period is in a tangible dialogic relationship with the *post-physics* of Late Byzantine painting. This relationship is most evident at two following levels respectively: (a) the geometric configuration of pictorial space, and (b) the deliberate projection of the form towards the infinite. In Late Byzantine painting, the latter characteristic is generally manifested through the inverse perspective, whereas in Malevich's *Suprematism*, since there is no representational form, each abstract feature is the fragment of "infinity accomplished."

Consequently, in the following case-studies we aim to elaborate on a relationship between Malevich's work and Late Byzantine painting which is more than just visual. We shall explain how Malevich, in a peculiar esoteric manner, through the formation of his *Suprematist* expression, as if psychologically flying over the last centuries of Byzantine art with feet on modern ground, selected and condensed the experience of the *post-physical* in Late Byzantine painting and reinvented that experience by inscribing it in his intellectual concerns and artistic influences. Besides comparing aspects relating to composition, form and colour, our methodology shall entail an interpretation of how Malevich's theoretical ideas relate both to Late Byzantine painting and in part to certain aspects of Orthodox theology relevant to the understanding of Byzantine aesthetics.

Before proceeding, we note that the two assisting factors to our research aims are, firstly, the fact that Malevich himself wrote extensively on the topics which concern both the practice and the theory of his art, and secondly, the fact that since the beginning of the 21st century new and introspective insights about his work have emerged in the

field of art theory.[8] A remarkable example of this is a concise book entitled *The Byzantine Malevich*, by Yannis Ziogas, who states that "it would be impossible for the modern aesthetics, a product of the most savage cultural aggressiveness of the Western-European domain, to accept that one of its main symbols (*Black Square*) is a product of a chain of complexities which to a high degree also relate to Malevich's Byzantine roots, and not only to a linear development of Western painting."[9]

Thus, as also stated by Ziogas, even art theorists who recognised the similarities between Modern and Byzantine art, such as Clement Greenberg, hesitated "to recognise the umbilical cord which connects Malevich (as well as the Russian art elite generally) to Byzantine art."[10] In the case-studies that follow, we aim to provide an adequate perspective on the specific relationship between Malevich's painting and the painting of the Late Byzantine period.

## Case Study 1: Reinventing the Late Byzantine iconographic tradition

We shall firstly address some of Malevich's works which precede his abstract or as he termed it *Suprematist* – "non-objective" style of painting. Our main argument in this first case-study is that Malevich's obsession with the mystic properties of geometry and the fact that he achieved abstraction, as noted by Golding, through his apprehension of the human body,[11] reveal his inspiration from Russian Orthodox iconography as well as his borrowing from the geometric approach to both composition and figure in Late Byzantine painting.

This becomes especially intelligible when in some of his early works, which entail anthropomorphic presentations, one considers the religious themes, the geometric in-

[8] Also, as clarified in the introductory remarks of this book, our present work has been available as a PhD dissertation at several university libraries since 2012. Uros T. Todorovic, "The Diachronic Character of Late Byzantine Painting: The Hermeneutics of Vision from Mistra to New York" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012).

[9] Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000), 85. (Our translation) «Η μοντέρνα αισθητική, το προϊόν της πιο άγριας πολιτισμικής επιθετικότητας του δυτικοευρωπαϊκού χώρου, θα ήταν αδύνατο να δεχτεί ότι ένα από τα κύρια σύμβολά της (Black Square) είναι προϊόν μιας σειράς προβληματισμών που σχετίζονταν σ΄ ένα μεγάλο βαθμό και με τις βυζαντινές καταβολές του Μάλεβιτς και όχι μόνο με τη γραμμική εξέλιξη της δυτικής ζωγραφικής.»

[10] Ibid., 85. (Our translation) «…αδυνατούν να αναγνωρίσουν τον ομφάλιο λώρο που συνδέει τον Μάλεβιτς (αλλά και τη ρωσική πρωτοπορία γενικότερα) με τη βυζαντινή αισθητική.»

[11] John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), 47.

ner-structure, and at instances a strict adherence to symmetry of composition, all of which are exemplified in his work *The Triumph of Heaven: study for a fresco* (1907, tempera on cardboard, *image 1*). Andrew Spira has compared this work to a 15th century Russian icon of *The Shroud of the Virgin* shown in *image 2.*[12] In this comparison, we immediately begin to detect that within Malevich's development, the tradition of Russian iconography and the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting were deeply embedded in his artistic consciousness.

More particularly, in *The Triumph of Heaven: study for a fresco*, Malevich places a depiction of a deity in the strict center of the upper part of the composition, and, below this depiction he assorts to each side the two groups of saintly figures which stand on clouds – therein deliberately creating a sense of strict balance. In the lowest part of the same composition he also places another group of saintly figures – again in the very center. Thus, in this work there are three horizontally constructed levels which allude to a process of ascension towards Heaven and there is a strictly central axis according to which this ascension functions. As seen in *image 2*, similar characteristics are found in the 15th century icon of *The Shroud of the Virgin*: the three distinct horizontal levels of the composition, the Virgin depicted to be standing in the strict center of the middle level as well as of the entire composition, a balanced arrangement of the figures of apostles which are standing on clouds and are assorted in two lateral groups, and a separate depiction of another group of figures in the lower part of the composition– foregrounding the figure in the centre (the figure of St Roman the Melodist). Both the theme and the structure of composition in Malevich's work *The Triumph of Heaven: study for a fresco* also relate to another Byzantine icon, entitled *The Victory of Orthodoxy*. As seen in *image 3*, in this 14th century icon similar analogies can be observed.

Having noted these similarities, we pose the following question: what could this relationship between a work of Late Byzantine iconography and Malevich's relatively early work actually mean in view of Malevich's later development? Or more precisely, could Malevich's other influences which manifested after that period, such as the influence of Futurism, also be seen as related to his Byzantine iconographic experience? With this question we suggest that throughout Malevich's development as a painter, the Late Byzantine element in his work did not undergo a process of fading away, but rather, this element was "struggling" – so to speak, to find a new form of pictorial existence.

[12] Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2008), 53.

Thus, we argue that it was the peculiar process of reinventing the Russian iconographic tradition as well as the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting that drastically influenced the ultimate formation of Malevich's abstract expression. It is worth noting that in spite of reproving the Futurists for being interested in the external appearance of natural objects or even cultural artifacts, Malevich approved of the way the Futurists have succeeded through their depiction of movement, in destroying the "wholeness of things."[13]

That said, if we take into consideration the second of the four basic aspects of the aesthetics of Byzantine art formulated by Gervase Mathew, in particular, the fact that the Byzantines developed "an essentially mathematical approach to beauty, which led to an emphasis not only on exact symmetry but on the eurhythmos and balanced movements,"[14] the relationship between Malevich's rather sudden progress towards abstraction and the aesthetic principles of Late Byzantine painting becomes theoretically plausible. For example, in his work *The Knife Grinder: Principle of Flickering* completed in 1913 (*image 4*), Malevich places the emphasis on rhythmical and balanced movement through a mathematical-like and geometric fragmentation of the human figure. Certainly, in this work, through the particularly cinematic depiction of motion the impact of Futurism on Malevich's artistic practice and development is strongly felt, but simultaneously, a sense of Byzantine aesthetics is inconspicuously retained.

Before we proceed with our next case-study, we note that the 15th century icon of *The Shroud of the Virgin* which we have discussed earlier in relation to Malevich's work, was one of the favorite and often repeated themes of the icon painters of the Novgorod school.[15] This iconographical theme, as also observed by Angelina Smirnova, depicts the appearance of the Virgin as well as the ideal image of Orthodoxy: a heavenly temple, Heavenly Jerusalem, where everyone stands in front of the Virgin while She prays to Christ for all.[16] The various versions and reproductions of this theme are often seen in Russian churches as well as private houses. Therefore, this theme is one of those which are deeply embedded within the Russian religious consciousness.

We are of the view that the fact that Malevich had a predilection for Byzantine iconographical stereotypes would not in itself constitute a phenomenon of major significance had he not reinvented these archetypal images according to his originality, which, con-

[13] John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), 60.

[14] Gervase Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics* (London: John Murray, 1963), 1.

[15] Jevsjejeva Lilija, Natalija Komaško, Mihail Krasilin, Luka Golovkov, Jelena Ostašenko, Olga Popova, Angelina Smirnova, Irina Javzikova i Ana Jakovljeva. *Istorija Ikonopisa od VI do XX Veka.* (Beograd: Akademija SPC za Umetnost i Konservaciju, 2007), 151.

[16] Ibid., 152.

trary to certain opinions, was dynamically evolving until the end of his life. Also, in the course of his artistic development Malevich explored a variety of intellectual sources. Thus, it is because of this engagement with theory that throughout the course of Malevich's artistic development, Byzantine elements, and most particularly Late Byzantine elements, become radically reinvented in his painting: they become in themselves a new visual language – the language of abstraction. This abstract language of Malevich's expression requires an equally abstract approach in order for the analogies with the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting to be deciphered. This deciphering will be the main aim of the four case-studies that follow.

## Case Study 2: A dissimilar similarity

Malevich's work *The Knife Grinder: Principle of Flickering,* (*image 4*) is not the only example of the inconspicuously retained sense of Byzantine aesthetics. There are a number of his paintings from this particular period (1912–13) where one feels that although the Byzantine element seems innate in the structure of the work, it is difficult to define how this element actually exists visually. This is where Malevich's engagement with theory and a variety of his philosophical and theological influences begin to conceal the inner content which exists behind the visible surface of the work.

Malevich's works created between 1912 and 1913 which are reminiscent of the Cubist and Futurist styles of painting are very much inclined towards abstraction. Notwithstanding the strong Futurist affinities in the period of 1912–13[17] and the fact that Malevich's works of this period, such as *Woman with Pails: Dynamic Arrangement* (*image 7*), allude to certain rudimental characteristics of the Russian traditional (naïve) painting, we observe that what prevails in them is an emphasis on the abstractly implied movement, a movement which, unlike in Palaiologan painting, is not conveyed through *eurhythmos* but through a dynamic repetition of intersecting crystalline abstract shapes (uneven rectangles, triangles etc.) which only when viewed collectively allude to forms in nature.

Thus, as we shall shortly demonstrate visually, both in Late Byzantine and in Malevich's painting of this period, there is a noteworthy expression of movement, a movement which is depicted through a rhythmical and mathematical repetition of distinctly static forms, in former case the figural and in latter the abstract, amounting to a comparable aesthetic result: the notion that the observer participates in the theme and its in-

[17] Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 14.

sinuated (abstracted) movement. Later in this chapter we shall observe how this paradoxical unison of motion and stillness finds its highest point of expression in the white phase of Malevich's *Suprematism*.

Even in his works which precede the *Suprematist* phase, such as *Woman with Pails: Dynamic Arrangement* (*image 7*), Malevich's rendering of movement is different from that of the Cubists. More particularly, although through their attempt to depict the wholeness of objects they in part also turned to certain aspects of Byzantine aesthetics, the Cubists' particular interest in the phenomenon of movement was focused on its external manifestation and not on any metaphysics behind its phenomenality in nature. On the other hand, in regards to the notion of movement there is a significant commonality between Late Byzantine and Malevich's painting: in both cases the deceivingly simplistic depiction of movement is conveyed paradoxically through a repetition of rather static features, expressing therein a monumental and profound inner content, a content which is "concealed" behind the painted surface.

Accordingly, if one compares the detail of the 13th century fresco from Sopoćani shown in *image 6*, to Malevich's work entitled *Woman with Pails: Dynamic Arrangement* (*image 7*), the first impression is that in both cases the harmonious arrangement of forms mainly serves as a visual guide to the narrative theme, whereas in actual fact the narrative theme itself is in both cases subdued to the observer's contemplation of that harmony.

Further, the emphasis on the cylindrical effect of form in *Woman with Pails: Dynamic Arrangement* owes to a Cubist influence, whereas in the aforementioned detail of the 13th century fresco from Sopoćani, the cylindrical effect owes to an inspiration from Greek Classical sculpture and more generally from Hellenistic art, as we have discussed previously in this work. Thus, at the level of inter-textuality, through the cylindrical effect, both of these examples relate to a Cubist style of painting. Based on our comparative analyses and in view of Malevich's works which precede his *Suprematist* phase, such as *The Triumph of Heaven /study for a fresco* (1907, *image 1*), *Morning after the Storm* (1912–13, *image 5*), *Woman with Pails: Dynamic Arrangement* (1912, *image 7*) and *The Knife Grinder: Principle of Flickering* (1912–13, *image 4*), it can be concluded that Malevich's predilection for geometry and a tendency to convey balance through the depiction of motion are very close to the basic aesthetic principles of Late Byzantine painting.

## Case Study 3: Malevich's final return to the Byzantine iconographical tradition as a retrospective iconological enquiry into theological dimensions of his own painting

In our consideration of Malevich's artistic development, instead of proceeding chronologically, we shall here deliberately proceed by firstly noting one instance of Byzantine inspiration which occurred before the particularly distinct manifestations of the influences of Fauvism, Cubism and Futurism occurred, and then we shell address Malevich's Byzantine influences which were manifested after his completely abstract phase, known as *Suprematism*, has ended (after the year of 1926). This will be conducted in order to propose that the in-between period of *Suprematism*, which will be discussed separately in the subsequent case-study, entails a concealed continuation of Malevich's enquiry into the *post-physical* and mystagogical properties of the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting.

In view of the examples of his early figurative works, Malevich's borrowing from the aesthetics of Byzantine painting entailed more than just compositional and structural aspects. Thus, Yannis Ziogas compares Malevich's *Self Portrait* (1908–09 or 1910–11) shown in *image 8* to the late 11th century depiction of Christ in the dome of the church of Daphni, and states: "A comparison with depictions of Pantokrator (such as that at the Church of Daphni) provides us with the possibility to detect the same intensity in the gaze, the same drawing of the eyebrows and of the area underneath the eyes, the same schematised modeling of the nose, mouth and clothes. The gaze of the Pantokrator at Daphni and the gaze of Malevich's self-portrait (1908–09) are especially related both from a formal and a notional point of view, as they give out the same sense of a distant austerity."[18]

In addition, we note that the fact that half of Malevich's *Self Portrait* shown in *image 8* is of a distinct green colour while the other half is yellow as well as earthy red, might also entail a latent Byzantine influence, among other, more likely influences, such as the painting of Paul Gauguin. For example, *image 9* shows a comparable colour treatment of the portrait of *St John the Theologian* rendered in Protaton by a painter known to us as "Manuel Panselinos." In fact, this particular aspect of the colour treatment where, in one part of the portrait, earthy red nuances can be discerned, while the other part is distinct-

[18] Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000), 46. (Our translation). «Μια σύγκριση με απεικονίσεις του Παντοκράτορα (όπως εκείνης της Μονής Δαφνίου) μας δίνει τη δυνατότητα να διακρίνουμε την ίδια ένταση στο βλέμμα, το ίδιο γράψιμο των φρυδιών και της περιοχής κάτω από τα μάτια, το ίδιο σχηματοποιημένο πλάσιμο της μύτης, των χειλιών και των ενδυμάτων. Ειδικά το βλέμμα τόσο του Παντοκράτορα του Δαφνίου όσο και της Αυτοπροσωπογραφίας (1908–09) του Μάλεβιτς είναι ταυτόσημα τόσο από φορμική όσο και από εννοιολογική άποψη αφού αναδίδουν την ίδια αίσθηση απόμακρης αυστηρότητας.»

ly green is very common in Byzantine painting of the late 13th and early 14th century. Admittedly, the portrait of *St John the Theologian* is not the most characteristic example of this phenomenon.

Our view is that, at the time he completed this self-portrait (1908–09 or 1910–11),[19] and in part because of his artistic influences such as Cubism and Futurism, Malevich was about to accomplish an authentic and radical reinvention of the aesthetics of Byzantine painting of the 14th and 15th century. He was about to step over Cubism and Futurism into the completely abstract world of *Suprematism*. This "step" was manifested in his artistic practice somewhat suddenly, and as a result, its precise cause remained largely an enigma for contemporary art theorists.

Accordingly, because of this predominately concealed artistic experience, long after 1915, the year in which his abstract painting (*Suprematism*) blossomed, Malevich was able to return to figurative themes – which are closely associated to Byzantine iconography. Thus, as indicated by Gilles Néret, in the last years of his life it was not because of the *diktats* of the State that Malevich turned to "real" portraiture.[20] Néret also observes that Malevich's work *Woman Worker* painted in 1933 (*image 10*) depicts a maternity from which a child has been omitted, and that this is implied by a gesture similar to that of the Byzantine iconographic theme of Hodigitria.[21] The most interesting of Néret's observations concerns Malevich's other *Self Portrait* completed also in 1933 – two years before Malevich's death: "The generously opened hand sketches the outline of the absent square, signaling all that Malevich knew that he had brought to the history of painting. And he leaves us with the message that the entire life of man can thus be reduced to a single gesture."[22]

In our view, in spite of the fact that in his *Self Portrait* made in 1933 (*image 12*) Malevich is shown to be standing in a Renaissance garb of a reformer, he has deliberately depicted himself in a position of the *Virgin Hodigitria* (*image 11*). Also, it is not at all accidental that the gesture of his hand, which sketches the outline of the absent square, is depicted near the heart area and below an intensely black segment of clothing. In fact, as we shall explain, the hand gesture is related to the intensely black area in a very particular way. The Byzantine portrayals of the *Virgin Hodigitria* – which in Greek means *The Indicator of the Path*, most often depict the Virgin to be holding Christ with her left hand. In this way, the depiction of Christ is located in the area of the Virgin's heart,

[19] There is an uncertainty regarding the year in which this work was completed, 1908–09 or 1910–11.
[20] Gilles Néret, *Kazimir Malevich 1878–1935 and Suprematism* (Taschen, 2003), 86.
[21] Ibid., 89.
[22] Ibid.

while she points to Him with her right hand, thereby indicating that the path of one's heart should continuously lead towards Christ as the ultimate embodiment of Truth. Accordingly, in 1915 Malevich wrote: "Only the shortsighted and incapable painters hide their art under honesty. In art, the truth is required and not the honesty."[23]

Further, if we compare the predominately expressionless gaze of Malevich's *Self Portrait* shown in *image 12* to the slightly pensive yet rather neutral gaze of the *Virgin Hodigitria* (*image 11*), our argument at hand becomes even clearer. Also, the robes of Christ in the icon *Virgin Hodigitria* are of distinctly warm and inviting, earthy-orange colour – which emphatically alludes to the state of the Virgin's heart. Contrary to this, the black surface of the chest area in Malevich's self-portrait (above his gesturing hand) could be understood to evoke the mysterious notion of the non-meaning of both life and art. We note that in 1920, thirteen years before he painted the above discussed *Self Portrait*, Malevich wrote: "Therefore, all of the human references which lead to the meaning of God are characterised by a non-meaning."[24]

The difference between our last observation and that of Gilles Néret is subtle but significant. Néret rightly observes the inspiration from the traditional theme of *Hodigitria* in Malevich's *Woman Worker*, as well as the fact that the depiction of the open hand in the *Self Portrait* (1933) sketches the outline of the absent square: "Above all, there is the Self Portrait, which presents him in the Renaissance garb of a reformer, indicating with a gesture expressive of the grave humor that pervades his entire oeuvre, that he is there to show us the way forward."[25]

Building on this, we can claim that in comparison to his *Woman Worker* (*image 10*), Malevich's *Self Portrait* (*image 12*) makes a more deliberate retrospective reference not only to his *Black Square* (*image 26*) but also to the Byzantine iconographical tradition of the *Virgin Hodigitria*. In fact, in this particular *Self Portrait* Malevich deliberately assumes the place of the Virgin: he assumes the sacred place of the *Path-indicator* (Hodigitria). This is especially evident in view of the characteristic hand gesture in Malevich's self portrait of concern (*image 12*) and its similarity to the hand gesture in the icon of the *Virgin Hodigitria* shown in *image 11*. It is noteworthy that the female figure depicted in his work *Woman Worker* does not indicate with a hand but simply "holds" the invisible child.

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[23] Our translation of: «Μόνον οι κοντόφθαλμοι κι ανίκανοι ζωγράφοι κρύβουν την τέχνη τους κάτω από την ειλικρίνεια. Στην τέχνη χρειάζεται αλήθεια και όχι ειλικρίνεια.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 64.

[24] This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *God is not Cast Down: Art, Church, Factory*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 192. Our translation of: «Έτσι, όλα τα ανθρώπινα νοήματα που οδηγούν στην έννοια του Θεού χαρακτηρίζονται από το μη-νόημα.»

[25] Gilles Néret, *Kazimir Malevich 1878–1935 and Suprematism* (Taschen, 2003), 89.

If we compare these aspects to those addressed in the first case-study of this chapter, in particular, those relating to Malevich's reinvention of the iconographical theme of *The Shroud of the Virgin* (*image 2*) which is exemplified in his work *The Triumph of Heaven: study for a fresco* (*image 1*), we observe that Malevich continuously nurtured a distinct liking of the way in which Orthodox theology is manifested through Byzantine iconographic tradition.

Yannis Ziogas' insightful book, *The Byzantine Malevich* entails an original elaboration on the Byzantine aspects in Malevich's *Black Square.* Ziogas' interpretation, as we shall later discuss, allows us to comprehend the last black layer of colour applied in *Black Square* as a layer analogous to that which is commonly applied as the first (and darkest) layer of colour in the traditional practice of Byzantine iconography.

More importantly, Ziogas elaborates on how the *Black Square* is an authentic reinvention of a Byzantine iconographic theme of the *Virgin and Child* (Hodigitria). It should be noted that it is perhaps due to the fact that Ziogas' work (2000) has not yet been translated from Greek, that Néret (2003) observes a stronger association between the *Woman Worker* and *Hodigitria* than between the *Self Portrait* made in 1933 and *Hodigitria* – where according to our earlier made observation the aspect of the hand gesture is crucial.

We can theoretically argue that the four works which form a diagram across Malevich's Byzantine experience are: his *Self Portrait* (1908–09 or 1910–11), the 11$^{th}$ century portrait of *Christ the Pantokrator* in Daphni, the traditional iconographical theme of the *Virgin Hodigitria* – common to the period of Late Byzantine painting, and finally, Malevich's *Black Square* painted around 1913 and exhibited for the first time in 1915. As shown in *image 13*, when these four examples of art are presented as separate points in history on a diagram depicting a spiral progression of time, one extraordinary phenomenon is observed.

The diagram mentioned forms two intercommunicating triangles where the size of the one which is much smaller could be understood analogically as the seeming extent of Malevich's interest in Byzantine art, whereas the second and larger triangle could represent the extent of his actual, concealed and esoteric engagement with the *post-physical* qualities of Late Byzantine painting. Quite coincidently, these two triangles presented in the diagram are rather reminiscent of the abstract features in Malevich's Suprematist paintings, such as his painting entitled *Dynamic Suprematism, Supremus No.57*, shown in *image 20*. If we were to colour these two triangles of the diagram, the resemblance to Malevich's painting would be even more compelling.

It should be noted that this Ancient Greek notion of the spiral-kind of unfolding of time (presented in the diagram) does also occur in Late Byzantine painting. For example,

*image 14* shows a detail of the fresco of the *Second Coming* in the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople: The angel of the eschaton is depicted to be simultaneously both unfolding and rolling up the scroll of time. We deem that Byzantine artists who painted the angel with a scroll made a deliberate effort to convey the simultaneous unfolding and rolling up of the scroll of time, precisely in order to depict the theological reality that the eschaton is not "located" at the end of history, but rather, that it is to be found *before* and *after* history, therein encompassing the overall human experience within time and eternity. By virtue of his heightened intuition and his outstanding creativity, Malevich seems to show us how we can appreciate the eschatological aspects of his Suprematist paintings through the prism of the Late Byzantine experience, exemplified in the angel of the eschaton.

In conclusion of this third case-study, we argue that aspects such as the mysterious black surface to which the right hand in Malevich's *Self Portrait* (painted in 1933) is indicating and the earlier noted theological kind of connection to the Byzantine iconographic theme of *Hodigitria*, point to a significant and hitherto unexplored depth of the influences of Late Byzantine painting in Malevich's work.

## Case Study 4: Malevich's *Suprematism* and its indicative theological aspects

It is very important that Malevich relates his *Suprematist* expression mainly to an experience of a metaphysical space and "free flight." The *Suprematist* movement was launched by Malevich in December 1915, when at *0.10–The Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting* held in the Nadezdha Dobychina gallery in Saint Petersburg, he exhibited forty six works which were all completely abstract.[26] The paintings of this exhibition were accompanied by a booklet entitled *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting*. By that stage, as he states in the text of this booklet, Malevich had transformed himself "into the zero of form."[27]

We should acknowledge here that historically Cubism opened avenues which necessarily led further away from the depiction of realistic and naturalistic form. Thus, for example, contrary to Golding's view[28] it is not ironic at all, that being concerned with

[26] Ibid., 49.

[27] Our translation of: «μεταμορφώθηκα σε μηδέν των μορφών.» Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 87.

[28] John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), 57.

depicting perceived reality in a new, fuller way, Cubism was the threshold over which Malevich stepped into abstraction, as through that very tendency to depict reality in a fuller way, Cubism pertained to a dynamic kind of simplification and therein by consequence also pertained to abstraction. Of course, this is not to imply that all simplification necessarily leads to the loss of figural form and to completely abstract results.

That said, it was Malevich's unique experience of human reality that led him towards abstraction. In 1920 he indirectly described the genesis of his abstraction by saying: "Thus, to whichever thing we ascribe the name 'reality' it will be an infinite which has neither weight, nor measure, neither time, nor space, neither absoluteness, nor relativity, which never got locked into form."[29] In addition, the advent of the powered flight and the "mythology of flight" in early 20th century Russian art have had a significant effect on the formation of Malevich's *Suprematism*.[30]

In *Suprematism*, the quadrilateral and geometrical shapes are rough-hewn and this denotes a humanistic kind of spontaneity. By virtue of their immediacy, Malevich's paintings of the *Suprematist* phase prefigure a new kind of human selfhood. Unlike in Cubism, most of Malevich's *Suprematist* works cannot be logically reconstructed to a form which can be found in nature, they can only be decoded to purely pictorial meanings. A square in the *Suprematist* phase of Malevich's painting is the actual object, however, it is an object with layers of concealed meanings. In this sense Malevich's work partly relates to the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. More particularly, in Dionysius' writings, as emphasised by Moshe Barasch, "the symbolon, while never negating the difference between symbol and symbolised, represents mainly what they have in common. Symbolon, in his view, is not only a sign, but is actually the thing itself."[31]

We could draw a more exploratory comparison between Malevich's artistic practice and the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting, and take into consideration the tendency towards abstraction noted in the X structure of the two fresco compositions at Protaton, that of the *Resurrection* and that of *Baptism*, which were analysed earlier in this work. Our observation is that a significant number of Malevich's *Suprematist* works can be related to the basic X structure in the compositions of the two frescoes at Protaton (*im-*

[29] Our translation of: «Έτσι, σε οποιοδήποτε πράγμα κι αν δώσουμε το όνομα «πραγματικότητα» θα είναι το άπειρο πού δεν έχει ούτε βάρος, ούτε μέτρο, ούτε χρόνο, ούτε χώρο, ούτε απολυτότητα, ούτε σχετικότητα, που δεν κλείστηκε ποτέ σε μορφή.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *God is not Cast Down: Art, Church, Factory*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 180.

[30] Gilles Néret, *Kazimir Malevich 1878–1935 and Suprematism* (Taschen, 2003), 65.

[31] Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 167.

*ages 35* and *37* of the first chapter of this book). More particularly, Malevich's *Suprematist* works share a similar sense of abstract weightlessness and can be compared not only to these frescoes but also to other examples of Late Byzantine painting.

In other words, when we ignore the figural form in the two aforementioned compositions at Protaton, we then acquire a sense of free flight characteristic of Malevich's *Suprematist* works. This is not to imply that Malevich was necessarily familiar with the two particular frescoes at Protaton, as a different kind of relationship is more plausible: Malevich consciously abandoned representational art in favor of the *post-physics* in which there is no mediation of form. In doing so, he appears to have drawn inspiration from *post-physical* qualities of Late Byzantine painting, such as the sense of abstract weightlessness.

Thus, in Malevich's compositions *Magnetic Construction* (1916, *image 15*), *Suprematist Composition* (1915, *image 16*), *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying* (1915, *image 17*), *Magnetic Composition, motif* (1916–1917, version 1929, *image 18*), *Composition of Combined Suprematist Elements Expressing the Sensation of Metallic Sounds – Dynamic / Pale, Metallic Colours* (c.1920, *image 19*), and most clearly in *Dynamic Suprematism / Supremus No. 57* (1916, *image 20*) and *Supremus No. 56* (1916, *image 21*), the abstract features intercross into each other and collectively emanate a sense of otherworldly harmony and ethereal balance, a quality which occurs as analogous to that in the overall impression of the two aforementioned frescoes at Protaton (*Resurrection* and *Baptism*), as well as reminds of many later Byzantine depictions of the same two themes rendered either as portable icons or as frescoes.

It is not without consequence that Malevich argues that "all of the human notions which lead to the meaning of God are characterised by non-meaning."[32] This distinctly agnostic understanding of the divine is only to a degree reminiscent of an early 6th century text entitled *The Mystical Theology*, written by an author known to us as Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite,[33] as it corresponds exclusively to its apophaticism and ignores the implied cataphatic meanings. More particularly, in Dionysius' theology the apophatic and the cataphatic methods are not mutually exclusive but are always applied simultaneously and thus when understood properly they do not lead to agnostic formulations

[32] See Malevich's text entitled *God is not Cast Down: Art, Church, Factory*. Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 192.

[33] The real name of this author is not certain, as he signed his writings with a pseudonym "Dionysius the Areopagite," which is a name of a 1st century biblical figure converted by Apostle Paul in Athens (Acts 17:34). Because of this, the author of *The Mystical Theology* is most often referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius. We prefer to refer to him as Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, as there is some indication that his name was in fact Dionysius, in which case he should be properly referred to as Pseudo-Areopagite and not Pseudo-Dionysius.

such as that cited above. For example, in the *Mystical Theology*, when in reference to the *divine* the term intangible (ἀνέγγικτο) is applied it means that the *divine* cannot be touched, which is the apophatic approach, but it also confirms that the divine is intangible and untouchable, which constitutes a cataphatic approach. The negation and affirmation are implied simultaneously by Dionysius, and Orthodox theology adheres to this method. In spite of certain inconsistencies that Malevich's theological ideas manifest in this regard, they have undoubtedly encouraged him in his articulation of an abstract visual language – which he so fittingly termed *Suprematism*.

Further, Malevich comprehended Nature as an infinity of phenomena which are derived from his creative perception. He comprehended art as his collective activity (existence) inside that Nature. In his text entitled *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting* he states: "Nature is a painting which is alive and which we can admire. We are the nature's heart which is alive. We are the most precious structure of that gigantic painting. We are its brain which is alive and which makes the life of nature bigger."[34] For Malevich, life meant living entirely through optic and pictorial means, which was a distinctly theological experience. He states in *God is not Cast Down*: "In reality, it is not necessary to reach God somewhere in heavenly space, because He is found in each of our senses, but simultaneously each of our senses is also a non-sense."[35]

By 1918, *Suprematism* matured and entered into its white phase,[36] and here, we should stress the significance of Malevich's philosophical and theological understanding of the colour white, in both his artistic practice and his theoretical work. In the text entitled "Suprematism I" he claims that "the blue of the sky has been defeated by the Suprematist system, it has been pierced through and has entered into white, which is the genuine representation of the infinite and, due to this fact, it became free from the coloured setting of the sky."[37] This, as unintelligible as it may seem at first, is a concept which is in an

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[34] Our translation of: «Η φύση είναι ένας ζωντανός πίνακας τον οποίο μπορούμε να θαυμάσουμε. Είμαστε η ζωντανή καρδιά της φύσης. Είμαστε η πιο πολύτιμη κατασκευή αυτού του γιγάντιου πίνακα. Είμαστε ο ζωντανός εγκέφαλός του που κάνει τη ζωή της φύσης μεγαλύτερη.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 70.

[35] Our translation of: «Στην πραγματικότητα, δεν χρειάζεται να φτάσουμε τον Θεό κάπου στους ουράνιους χώρους γιατί βρίσκεται σε καθεμιά από τις αισθήσεις μας, αλλά ταυτόχρονα καθεμιά από τις αισθήσεις μας είναι επίσης το μη-νόημα.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *God is not Cast Down: Art, Church, Factory*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 193.

[36] See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 19.

[37] Our translation of: «Νικημένο από το σουπρεματιστικό σύστημα, το γαλάζιο του ουρανού τρυπήθηκε και μπήκε στο λευκό, γνήσια αναπαράσταση του απείρου και, εξ αιτίας αυτού του γεγονότος, απελευθερώθηκε από τον χρωματιστό φόντο του ουρανού.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *Suprematism I*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 100.

indirect relationship with the Byzantine system of illumination where figures radiate with an *unnatural* light located within them. In Byzantine painting, this concept of the inner light "breaking out" from the human form, is practically accomplished through the gradual application of layers of colour, where white is gradually added to each of the succeeding layers – the last one being applied as almost entirely white calligraphic accentuations of emphasised features.

The example of Malevich's work which manifests this connection most clearly is the painting antedated to 1908 entitled *Women Bathers* (c.1930) shown in *image 22,* where three female figures are depicted as purely white and with almost no anatomical detail within their outer contours. These three figures are depicted against a much more realistic landscape in the background; through this, Malevich wanted to symbolically emphasise how they embody something which is not perceivable in external nature. In effect, these three figures are but one light embodied in separate representations of human form. They even strikingly remind of the hesychast teaching of the uncreated light, discussed in the second chapter of this book. Thus, it could be argued that Malevich was a kind of a Neo-Byzantine painter who eventually abandoned the anthropomorphic form in search of more unmediated pictorial significations. In 1919 he stated: "I have defeated the blue lining of the sky, I tore it apart, I placed the colour inside of the pocket which was thereby created and I made a knot. Fly! In front of us unfolds the white and free abyss."[38]

Malevich's instruction to "fly" into the white space of his *Suprematist* works, implies that through their visuality, his works of art take part in nature itself, and thus, inevitably, although they possess a nature of their own, they remain in an undisputable relationship with nature manifest. The following two excerpts from Malevich's poetry (1913) define best how he saw both himself and his practice in regards to God and Nature.

"*I search for God, search for my face*
*I have already drawn its contour and I'm trying to enter into it*
*And my logic is the pathway towards it*
*Which is drawn by the intuition*
*The smile illuminates my face and that smile means wisdom*"
(...)

[38] Our translation of: «Νίκησα τη μπλε φόδρα του ουρανού, την ξέσκισα, τοποθέτησα το χρώμα στο εσωτερικό της τσέπης που δημιουργήθηκε με αυτόν τον τρόπο κι έκανα έναν κόμπο. Πετάξτε! Μπροστά μας απλώνεται η λευκή κι ελεύθερη άβυσσος.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *Suprematism I.* See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 102.

"*There, that's how I settle my accounts with Nature.*
*Because it does not smile… it is perfect.*"[39]

We observe in Malevich's both theoretical and practical work, especially in the white phase of *Suprematism*, that his concern with space is in essence an attempt to transcend beyond the third dimension and therein become spaceless, or rather, transfigured in new dimensions.

Therefore, in consideration of the white phase of *Suprematism* we firstly attain two distinct notions: geometry and absolute treatment of colour, where white plays a crucial role. White is associated to a free abyss. In effect, here we have a step into a "fourth" dimension where only one "foot-print" is visually detectable, more particularly, the abstract and geometrical appearance of compositions. The other "foot" is in actual motion towards the abyss – which is conveyed through white colour. This colour white, through the self-referentiality of the manner in which it is employed vanishes into an otherworldly kind of non-depicted space.

Here is where we encounter the paradoxical unison between motion and stillness at its most refined point of expression. White itself becomes the embodiment of both the movement and the stillness. It becomes the absolute *being*. It becomes the manifestation of God's creative act – which at the same time is his "face" of meditating stillness. Works which are most representative of this aesthetic phenomenon are: *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918, *image 23*), *Spheric Evolution of a Plane* (1917–1918, *image 24*) and *Dissolution of Construction* (1918, *image 25*).

In the manifesto of his white *Suprematism*, a text entitled *Declaration: White Manifesto*, written on the 15th of June 1918, Malevich describes his experience of the otherworldly space: "The skull has opened by the power of intuition and the consciousness dives its stare into the abyss of the space."[40] In his later text entitled *God is not Cast Down*, written

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[39] Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 45–46. Our translation of:

«Ψάχνω τον Θεό, ψάχνω το πρόσωπό μου
Σχεδίασα ήδη το περίγραμμά του και προσπαθώ να μπω μέσα
Και η λογική μου είναι το μονοπάτι προς αυτό
Που είναι σχεδιασμένο από τη διαίσθηση
Το χαμόγελο φωτίζει το πρόσωπό μου κι αυτό το χαμόγελο σημαίνει σοφία
(…)
Να πως κανονίζω τους λογαριασμούς μου με τη Φύση.
Γιατί δεν χαμογελάει… είναι τέλεια.»

[40] Our translation of: «το κρανίο ανοίχτηκε από τη διαισθητική δύναμη και η συνείδηση βυθίζει το βλέμμα της στην άβυσσο του χώρου.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *Declaration: White Manifesto*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 96.

in 1920, he also states: "Existence is action, but 'I act' does not necessarily mean 'I am': 'I am' means that I make objects which have a certain destination, whereas an action without a destination can be regarded as a zero."[41]

Thus, besides the geometric structure, there are three most dominant aesthetic characteristics in Malevich's *Suprematism*, which also exist in Late Byzantine painting: the colour incorporated as light within (abstract) forms, the sense of the otherworldly dimension, and within the latter, the coexisting notions of motion and stillness. Consequently, we observe how, though adhering to purely abstract means, in his painting practice Malevich made creative shortcuts to the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting.

In the paintings of the white phase of *Suprematism*, Malevich applied the white colour as a non-colour, as a negation of colour in higher levels of existence. In *Declaration/ White Manifesto* (1918) he states: "long live the suprematist federation of the colourless."[42] Of special interest is the fact that not only his paintings, but also the theoretical ideas of Malevich's *Suprematism*, are to an extent relatable to Orthodox Christian theology. Although some 20th century art historians and theorists have briefly referred to the relationship between Malevich's theories and the theology of the Orthodox Church, a problematic but nevertheless conceivable connection between Malevich's *post-physics* and the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite has been mainly overlooked.

For example, in the introduction he wrote for a publication of Malevich's texts entitled *Writings: Kazimir Malevich*, Andrei Nakov relates Malevich's rejection of logical reasoning as well as his frequently reoccurring reference to a "non-objective thought," to the mysticism of the Christian West (Meister Eckhart, Jakob Boehme and Jan van Ruysbroeck) and the mysticism of the East (Lao Tse).[43] However, further on, Nakov does observe that the last paragraph of Malevich's text *God is not Cast Down* constitutes "one of the most eloquent proofs of the close relationship of the creator of Suprematism to the thought of the Russian Orthodox Church."[44]

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[41] Our translation of: «Η ύπαρξη είναι δράση, αλλά δρω δεν σημαίνει υποχρεωτικά και είμαι: είμαι σημαίνει φτιάχνω αντικείμενα που έχουν κάποιο προορισμό, ενώ η δράση δίχως σκοπό μπορεί να θεωρηθεί σαν το μηδέν.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *God is not Cast Down: Art, Church, Factory*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 206–207.

[42] Our translation of: «ζήτω η σουπρεματιστική ομοσπονδία του άχρωμου.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *Declaration: White Manifesto*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 95.

[43] Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 46–47.

[44] Ibid., 51. Our translation of: «Η τελευταία παράγραφος του κειμένου του *«Ο Θεός δεν είναι έκπτωτος»* αποτελεί μια από τις πιο εύγλωττες αποδείξεις της στενής συγγένειας του δημιουργού του σουπρεματισμού με τη σκέψη της ρωσσικής Ορθόδοξης Εκκλησίας.»

In addition, it is our observation that, especially in section 5 of his text *God is not Cast Down*, Malevich clearly reveals his philosophical and theological understanding of art, and in those particular pages almost reminds us of the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. In order to exemplify this partial yet noteworthy similarity, we include here a short excerpt from Malevich's aforementioned text:

"And all of the things which we see and which seem to us as separate, are but a lie, everything intertwines and untangles simultaneously, nothing exists on its own, therefore objects and things do not exist, they cannot exist, and it is a ludicrous attempt to want to approach these."[45] The analogy is to a certain degree detected in the following contemplation of God by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, written in his *Mystical Theology*: "Again, ascending yet higher, we maintain that it is neither soul nor intellect; nor has it imagination, opinion, reason or understanding; nor can it be expressed or conceived, since it is neither number nor order; nor greatness nor smallness; nor equality nor inequality; nor similarity nor dissimilarity;"[46]

However, to which degree was Malevich familiar with the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite remains disputable. It is nonetheless an unquestionably light-shedding phenomenon that a discernible similarity exists between Malevich's theories and the theological text upon which Orthodox Christianity constructed its dogmatic teachings – which in turn constitute the main inspiration in the aesthetics of (Late) Byzantine painting. In light of this, it might not be a coincidence that in his text *God is not Cast Down* Malevich discusses the term "essence" almost (yet not quite) as an Orthodox theologian: "Thus, the disappearance of a form does not mean that everything has disappeared. Forms are destroyed in such a way, but not the essence, as essence, according to the definition ascribed to it by man himself, is absolutely indestructible: since the essence is indestructible, God too is indestructible. Therefore, God is not cast down."[47]

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[45] Our translation of: «Και όλα αυτά πού βλέπουμε και μας φαίνονται χωριστά, απομονωμένα, δεν είναι παρά ψέμμα, τα πάντα πλέκονται και ξεπλέκονται ταυτόχρονα, τίποτα δεν υπάρχει μόνο του, έτσι ώστε τα αντικείμενα και τα πράγματα δεν υπάρχουν, δεν μπορούν να υπάρξουν, και είναι μια ανόητη προσπάθεια να θέλουμε να τα προσεγγίσουμε.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *God is not Cast Down: Art, Church, Factory*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 174.

[46] For the English translation of *Mystical Theology* see: http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/MysticalTheology.html For the original in Greek see:

*Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*: *Corpus Dionysiacum*, II. *De mystica thelogia*, hrsg. von G. Heil und A. M. Ritter, Patristische Texte und Studien 36, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1991, 139–150 (= PG 3, 997–1064).

[47] Our translation of: «Έτσι, η εξαφάνιση της μορφής δεν σημαίνει ότι όλα εξαφανίστηκαν. Με αυτόν τον τρόπο καταστρέφονται οι μορφές αλλά όχι η ουσία, γιατί η ουσία, σύμφωνα με τον ορισμό που την έδωσε ο ίδιος ο άνθρωπος, είναι εντελώς άφθαρτη: αφού η ουσία είναι άφθαρτη, και ο Θεός είναι άφθαρτος. Έτσι, ο Θεός δεν είναι έκπτωτος.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *God is not Cast Down: Art, Church, Factory*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 220.

## Case Study 5: A discussion with Ziogas' *Byzantine Malevich*

One of the most significant of Malevich's *Suprematist* works is *Black Square* (1915) shown in *image 26*. The studious examination of its external surface, as well as the X-rays, have confirmed that *Black Square* is a composition resting on a number of previous ones, which further validates Ziogas' argument that the Byzantine system of application of colours in distinct layers has been reinvented by Malevich's *Suprematism*. According to Ziogas: "In 1913–14, Malevich had started to construct the painting surface with overlapping layers, turning his painting into an icon whose layers have been re-assorted."[48]

In the same book, entitled *The Byzantine Malevich*, Ziogas employs pictorial criteria in order to assess the aesthetic *genesis* of *Black Square*, and arrives at a conclusion that Malevich had, on both the conscious and the subconscious level, disconnected the colour-layers of the figural features which comprise the traditional Byzantine icon of the *Virgin and Child* (Hodigitria) and fused them differently into their one final black appearance. More particularly, Ziogas argues that in *Black Square*, the last (black) layer of colour is analogous to the layer which in Byzantine iconography is applied as first, and that underneath this layer, there is another *Suprematist* composition analogous to the layer of colour which in Byzantine iconography is applied as last. According to this view, as pointed out by John Panteleimon Manoussakis, Malevich's technique employed in *Black Square* is not exactly a technique of abstraction but rather that of negation. Manoussakis also points out that this technique of negation is something that makes the *Black Square* the visual analogue of negative theology.[49]

According to Ziogas, the white border of *Black Square* is painted with the procedural logic with which the Byzantines were painting a red border around the completed icon compositions of the theme of the *Virgin and Child*.[50] Further, Ziogas states that the white border around the *Black Square* is "one illogical frame which encompasses one non-icon, which becomes a non-icon precisely because its placement suggests a Virgin that doesn't exist."[51]

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[48] Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000), 64. Our translation of: «Το 1913–14 ο Μάλεβιτς έχει αρχίσει να κατασκευάζει τη ζωγραφική επιφάνεια με επικαλυπτόμενα επίπεδα, μετατρέποντας τον πίνακά του σε μια ανακατεμένη εικόνα.»

[49] John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetic* (Indiana University Press, 2007), 33.

[50] Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000), 80–81.

[51] Our translation of: «Είναι ένα Ά-λόγο πλαίσιο που περικλείει μια μη-εικόνα, που γίνεται μη-εικόνα ακριβώς επειδή η τοποθέτηση υπονοεί μια Παναγία που δεν υπάρχει.» Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000), 81.

In the above citation, Ziogas refers to the fact that, although Polish by birth, having a Russian heritage as a cultural and aesthetic habitat in which he grew up, Malevich took into consideration the traditional placement of the icon of the *Virgin and Child* in Russian private dwellings, placement against the very corner of the room, and in December of 1915, at the exhibition *0.10 – The Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting*, positioned his *Black Square* also in the very corner of the room (*image 27*). In our view, by doing that, Malevich ascribed to the *Black Square* a hierophantic kind of spatial dominance.

Ziogas observes that at the same exhibition, Malevich, "by placing the paintings away from one another, and by excluding their frames, attributed to them a more intense, internal kind of cohesion. This cohesion stemmed from the formal relationship of the painted surfaces, the absence of frames, and the distances which separate the painted surfaces."[52]

In effect, at the exhibition 0.10 – *The Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting*, Malevich carefully negotiated the distances between the abstract canvases, and therein treated the walls of the exhibiting space as a surface of his own work. Together with the hung canvases, the wall-surface contributed to a specific kind of ambience (*image 27*). Thus, at this exhibition, the actual exhibiting space itself became an integral part of Malevich's work. To some extent, this could be creatively compared to the way the concave, flat, and other characteristic surfaces of the Byzantine church-interior constitute significant aesthetic aspects when Byzantine frescoes are observed in situ. The Byzantine church is regarded as a *microcosm* that mimics the Kingdom of God, while Malevich's exhibition aspired in its own way to transfigure human existence. As shown in *image 27,* together with the wall-surfaces, Malevich's works exhibited in *0.10 – The Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting* collectively open towards us as a single and undivided space. In other words, these canvases, though exhibited as separate abstract compositions, are consumed in their unified view of infinity. In this respect, this exhibition can also be regarded as an early example of installation art.

Ziogas concludes his book insightfully by referring to *Black Square* and stating that "it will function as an object, within a new visual reality without reflections, and it will be a compass which will show us the technique with which we will be able to break each time the endless visual sequence of silken surfaces that surround us, and distinguish

[52] Our translation of: «με το να ξεχωρίζει τους πίνακές του και να τους αφαιρεί τις κορνίζες, τους προσέδωσε μια εντονότερη, εσωτερική, πλέον, συνεκτικότητα. Αυτή η συνεκτικότητα προέκυπτε από τη μορφική συγγένεια των επιφανειών, την ανυπαρξία κορνιζών και από τα διαστήματα που διαχωρίζουν τις ζωγραφικές επιφάνειες μεταξύ τους.» Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000), 39.

those which are contours of entities from those which are but distracting reflections."[53] Thus, *Black Square* constitutes both a critical and a critique-imbued aesthetic recapitulation of the history of painting until the Modernist period, as well as a presentiment of the ineffectuality of the art of posterity. Through *Suprematism*, Malevich attempted to disperse all notions of the singular and the autonomous into the infinite, and thus, by purely pictorial means he attempted to bring the infinite into the realm of human consciousness.

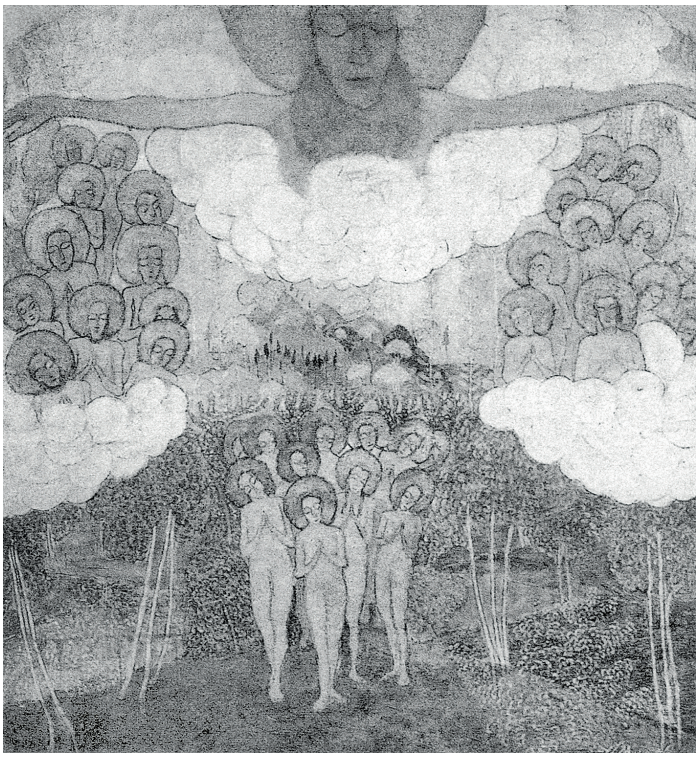
Finally, the argument put forward by Ziogas allows us to venture even further and conceive of an adequation between the abstract form in Malevich's *Suprematism* and the anthropomorphic form in Late Byzantine painting. This is exemplified in the comparison between *images 28* and *29*. We placed Malevich's work entitled *Black Circle* (1915) next to a 14th century Russian icon of *The Not-made-by-hands Savior*. In this icon we observe how to a significant extent the lighter layers of colour have eroded, and thus, the dark tone which prevails on Christ's face is actually the tone of the firstly applied layer of colour – the *proplasmos*. Therefore, building on Ziogas' argument, we can say that the passing of time has had an effect on this icon similar to the visual outcome of Malevich's iconographic experimentation with colour-layers in *Black Square*. This means that, Malevich's orientation towards Byzantine aesthetics which is exemplified in works such as *Black Square* and *Black Circle*, could be understood both as an esoteric recapitulation of the history of art and as a cryptic visualisation of the contemporary significance of the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting.

As part of our iconological experimentation, we have cut out the head area from the 14th century icon of *The Not-made-by-hands Savior (Aheiropoiitos)* and placed it over Malevich's *Black Circle* – while retaining the original contours of the latter. As shown in *image 30*, this experiment resulted in an aesthetic impression which visually demonstrates the extent and significance of the influence of Late Byzantine painting in Malevich's work, and perhaps even reflects unassumingly his theological theories.

In *images 31* and *32* our experimentation continued: *Image 31* shows Malevich's *Black Circle* – but only with Christ's eyes included. *Image 32* also shows *Black Circle* – but only with Christ's mouth included. These features of a 14th century Russian-Byzantine icon come to mind when observing this abstract painting, more than a century after it was

[53] Our translation of: «θα λειτουργεί σαν ένα αντικείμενο πλέον, σε μια καινούργια εικαστική πραγματικότητα χωρίς αντανακλάσεις, και θα είναι η πυξίδα που θα μας έχει δείξει την τεχνική με την οποία θα μπορούμε να διαρρηγνύουμε κάθε φορά τον απέραντο εικαστικό σωρό στιλπνών επιφανειών που μας περιβάλει, και να ξεχωρίζουμε αυτές πού είναι περιγράμματα οντοτήτων από εκείνες πού δεν είναι παρά ενοχλητικοί αντικατοπτρισμοί.» Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000), 92.

created. More generally, as we have demonstrated in this chapter, while viewing simultaneously Late Byzantine icons/frescoes and Malevich's abstract paintings with contemporary eyes, we are tempted to view the former through the prism of the latter, and we are also tempted to view the latter through the prism of the former. To say the least, through this kind of creative reception of Malevich's artistic experience we attain an even deeper understanding of the diachronic significance of the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting.







**1.** Above: Kazimir Malevich, *The Triumph of Heaven* (study for a fresco), 1907, tempera on cardboard, 72.5 x 70 cm, The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg, Russia.

**2.** Below left: *The Shroud of the Virgin*, 15th century Russian icon, 107 x 83 cm.

**3.** Below right: *The Victory of Orthodoxy*, 14th century Byzantine icon, British Museum, London.



**4.** Kazimir Malevich, *The Knife Grinder: Principle of Flickering*, 1913,
oil on canvas, 79.5 x 79.5 cm,
New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery.



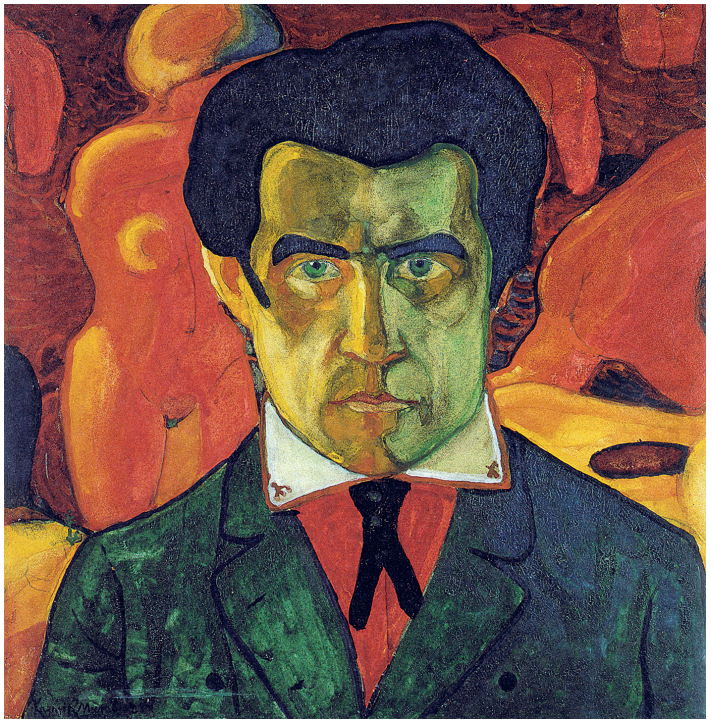
**5.** Kazimir Malevich, *Morning after the Storm*, 1912–13, oil on canvas, 80 x 79.5 cm, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.





**6.** Left: detail of the 13th century fresco of the *Dormition of the Virgin* in the church of the Monastery of Sopoćani, Serbia.

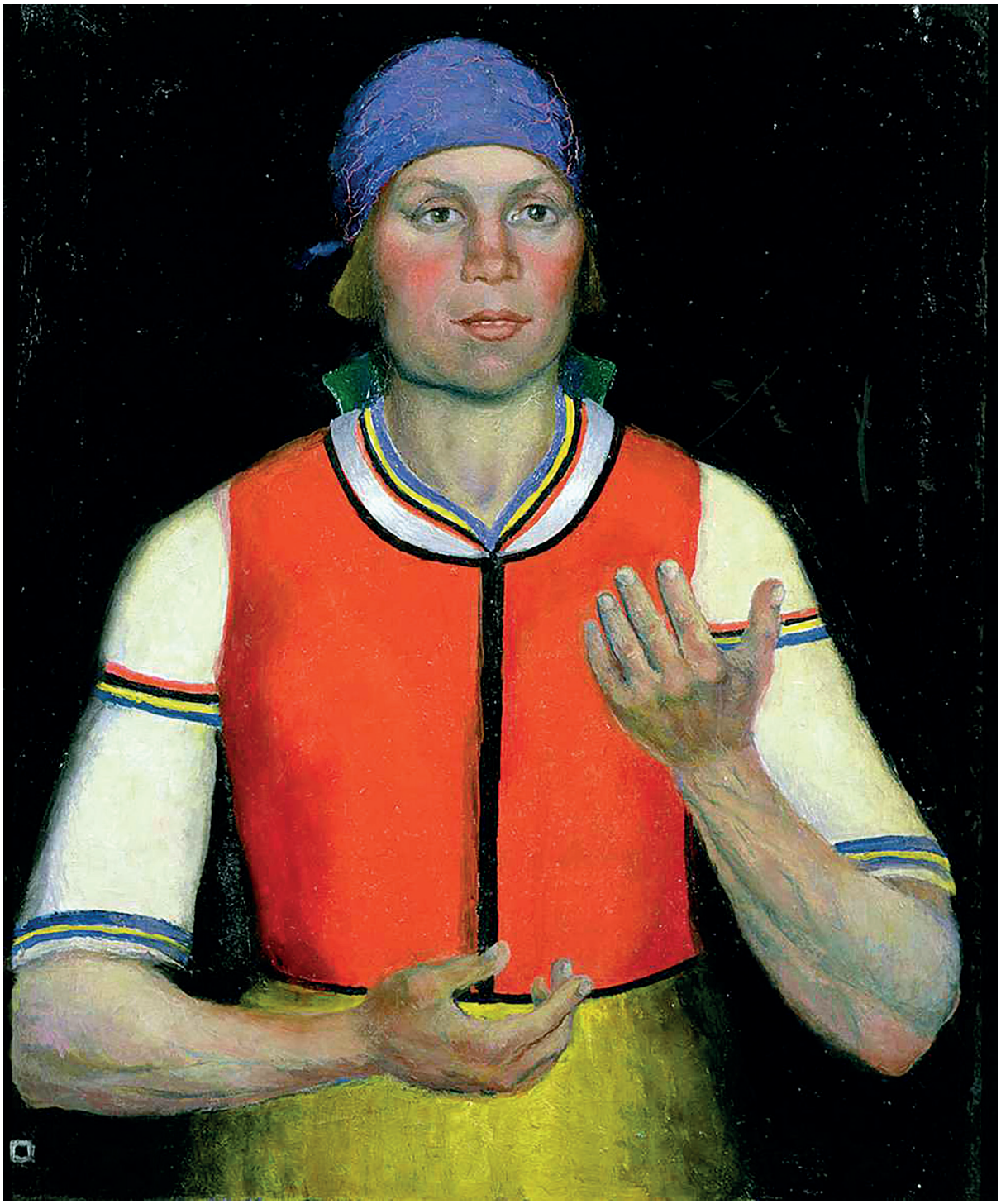
**7.** Right: Kazimir Malevich, *Woman with Pails: Dynamic Arrangement*, 1912, oil on canvas, 80.3 x 80.3 cm, New York, Museum of Modern Art.





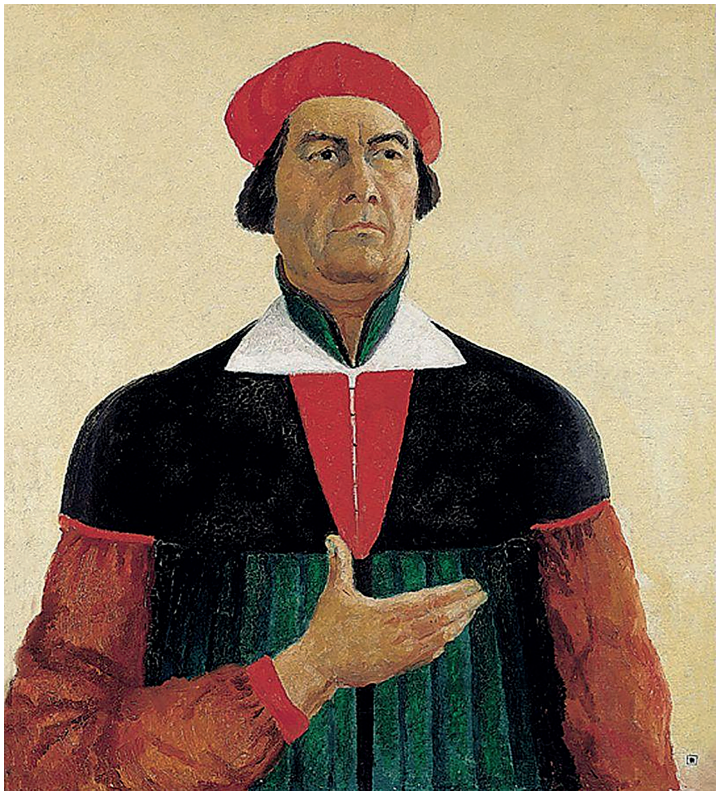
**8.** Left: Kazimir Malevich, *Self Portrait*, c.1910, gouache on paper, 27 x 26.8 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

**9.** Right: Detail of a late 13th century fresco (portrait of *St John the Theologian*) rendered by a painter known to us as 'Manuel Panselinos' at the church of Protaton, Mount Athos, Greece. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović.)



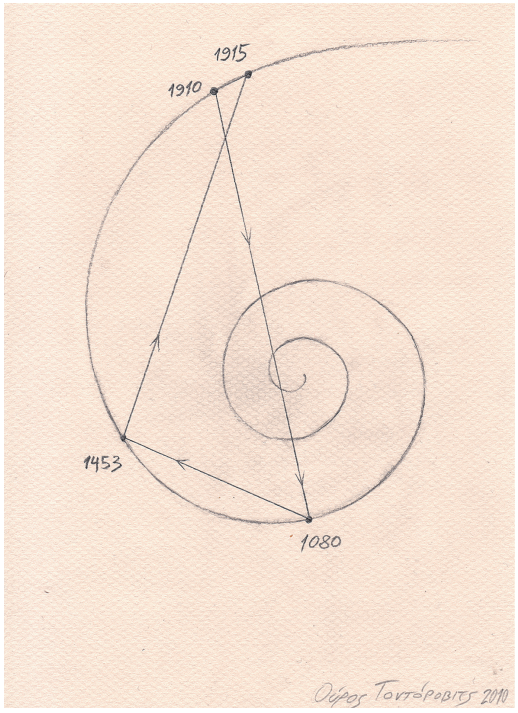
**10.** Kazimir Malevich, *Woman Worker*, 1933, oil on canvas, 71.2 x 59.8 cm, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

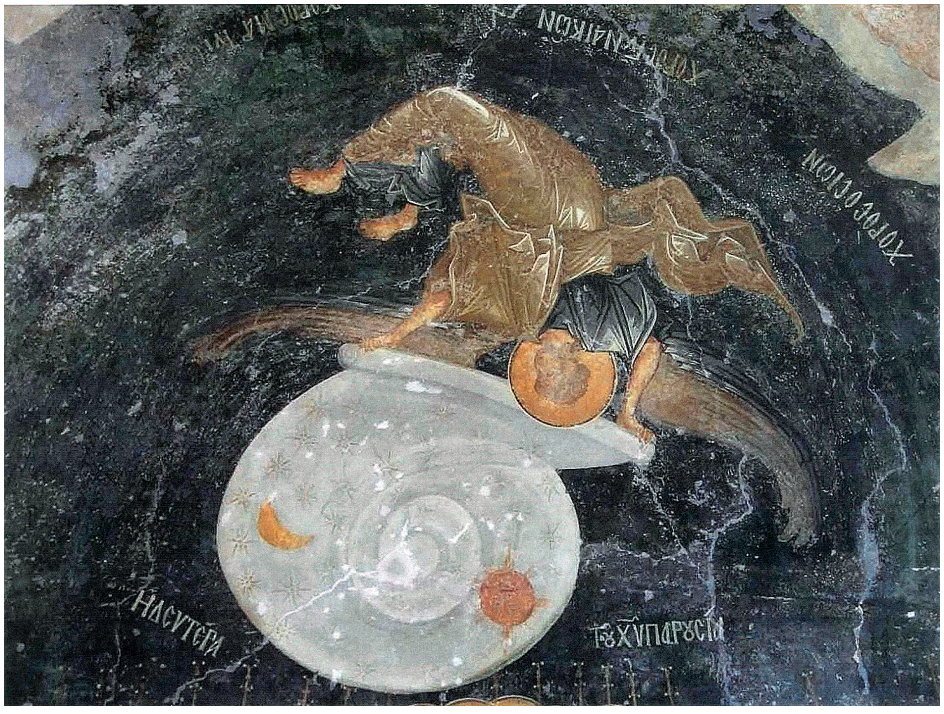




**11.** Left: *Virgin Hodigitria*, late 16th century Belorussian icon, 120 x 85 cm, National Museum of the Republic of Belorussia.

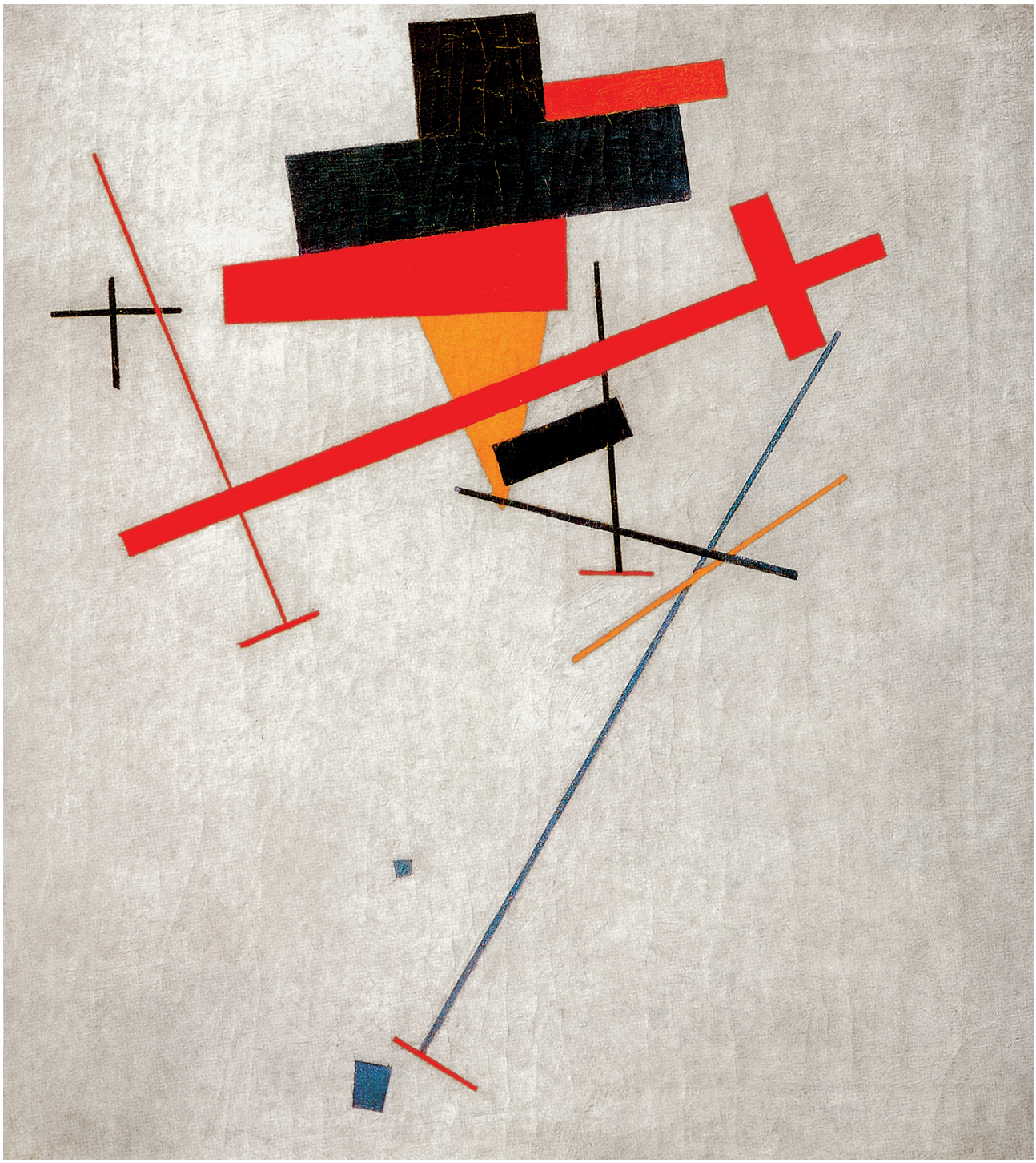
**12.** Right: Kazimir Malevich, *Self Portrait*, 1933, oil on canvas, 70 x 66 cm, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg.



**13.** Left: *Spiral Diagram*, pencil on paper, 23 x 16 cm. Author: Uroš T. Todorović (2010). The diagram represents Malevich's Late Byzantine experience by interconnecting four particular points of art history: Malevich's *Self Portrait* (c.1910), *Christ the Pantokrator* at Daphni (c.1080), the traditional iconographical theme of the *Virgin Hodigitria* – common to the period of Late Byzantine art, and Malevich's *Black Square* (1915).

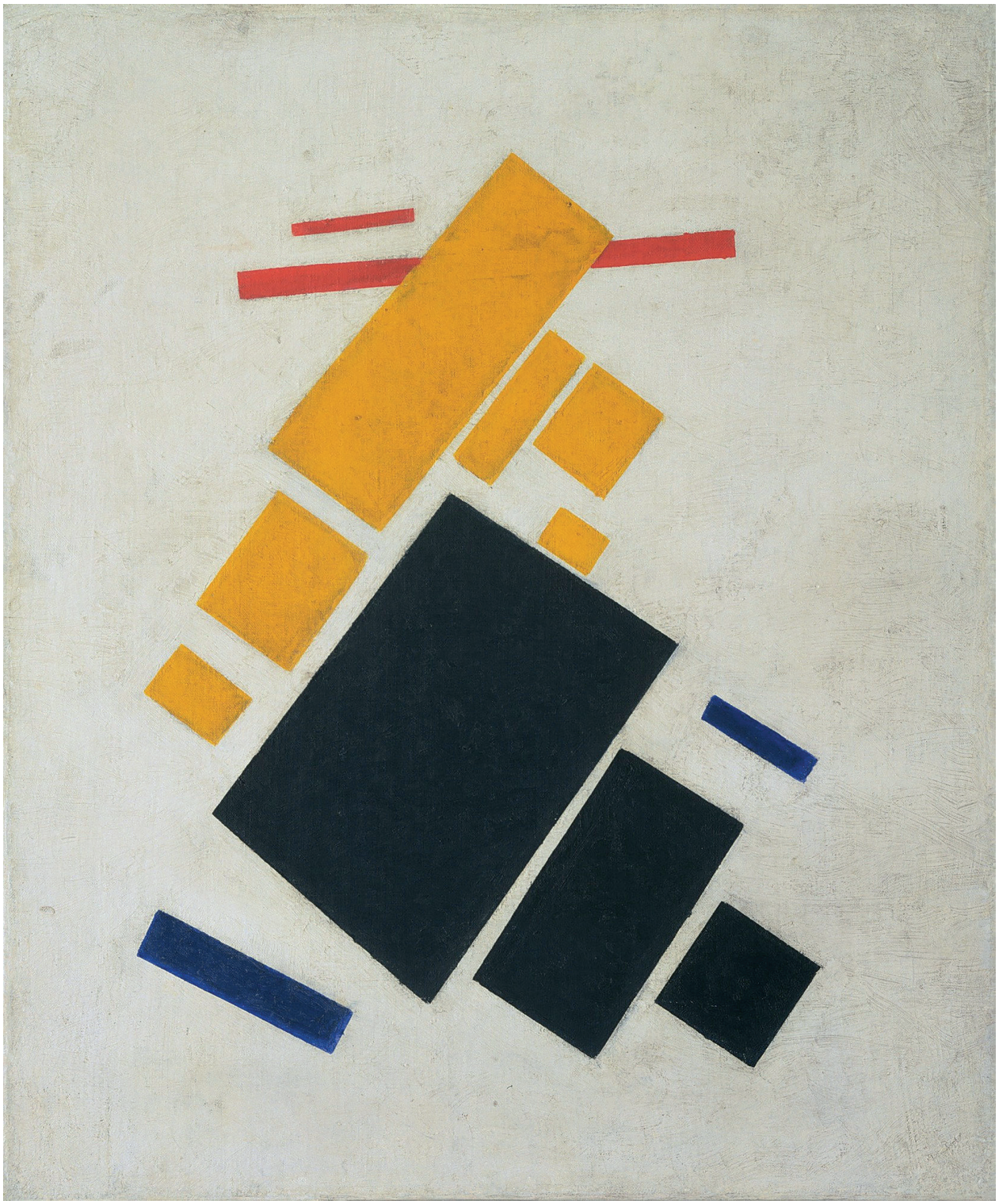
**14.** Right: Detail from the 14th century fresco of the *Second Coming*, at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople: The angel of the eschaton is depicted to be both unfolding and rolling up the scroll of time.



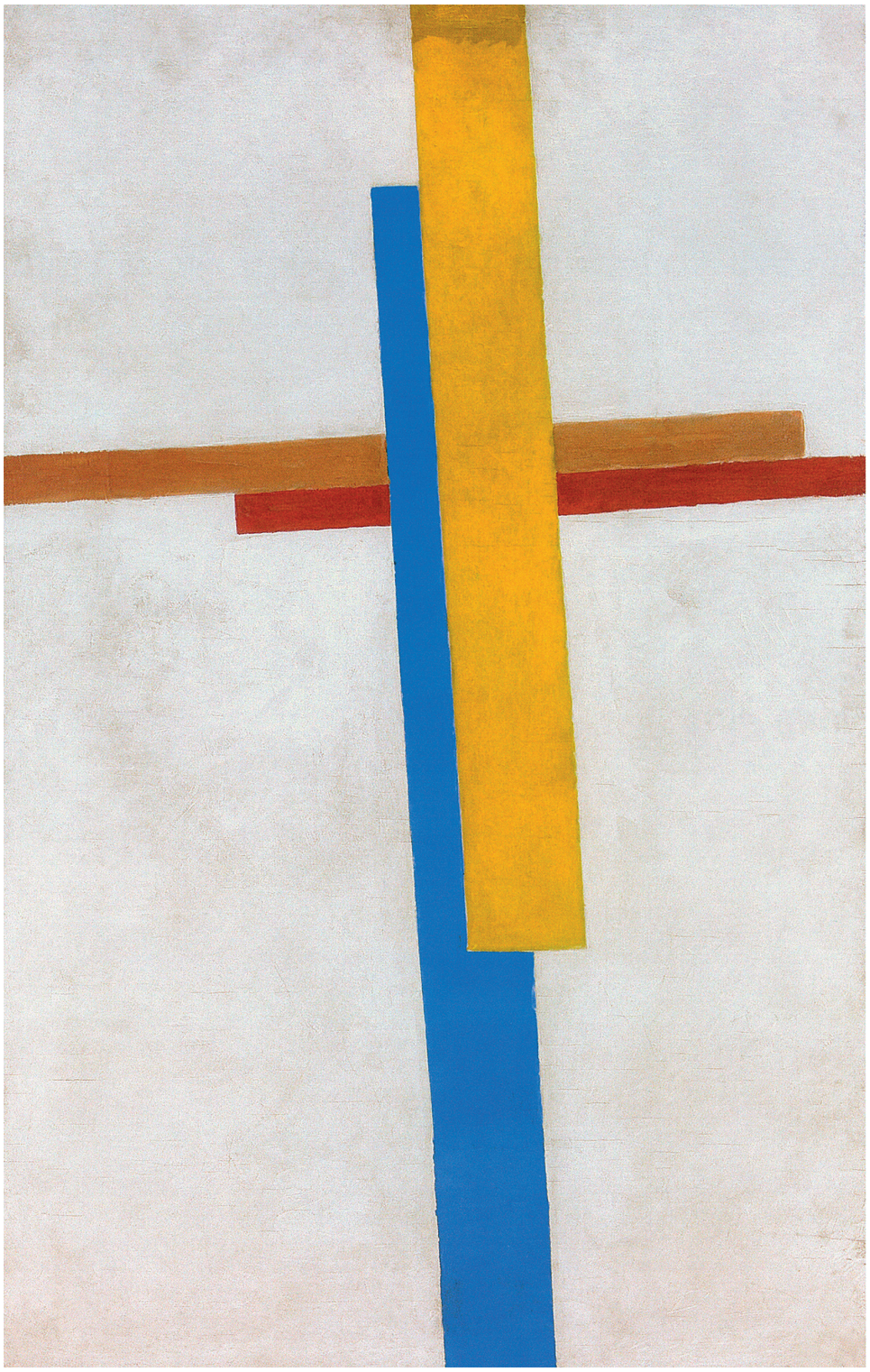
**15.** Kazimir Malevich, *Magnetic Construction*, 1916, oil on canvas, 49 x 44 cm, Wilhelm Hack Museum, Ludwigshafen.



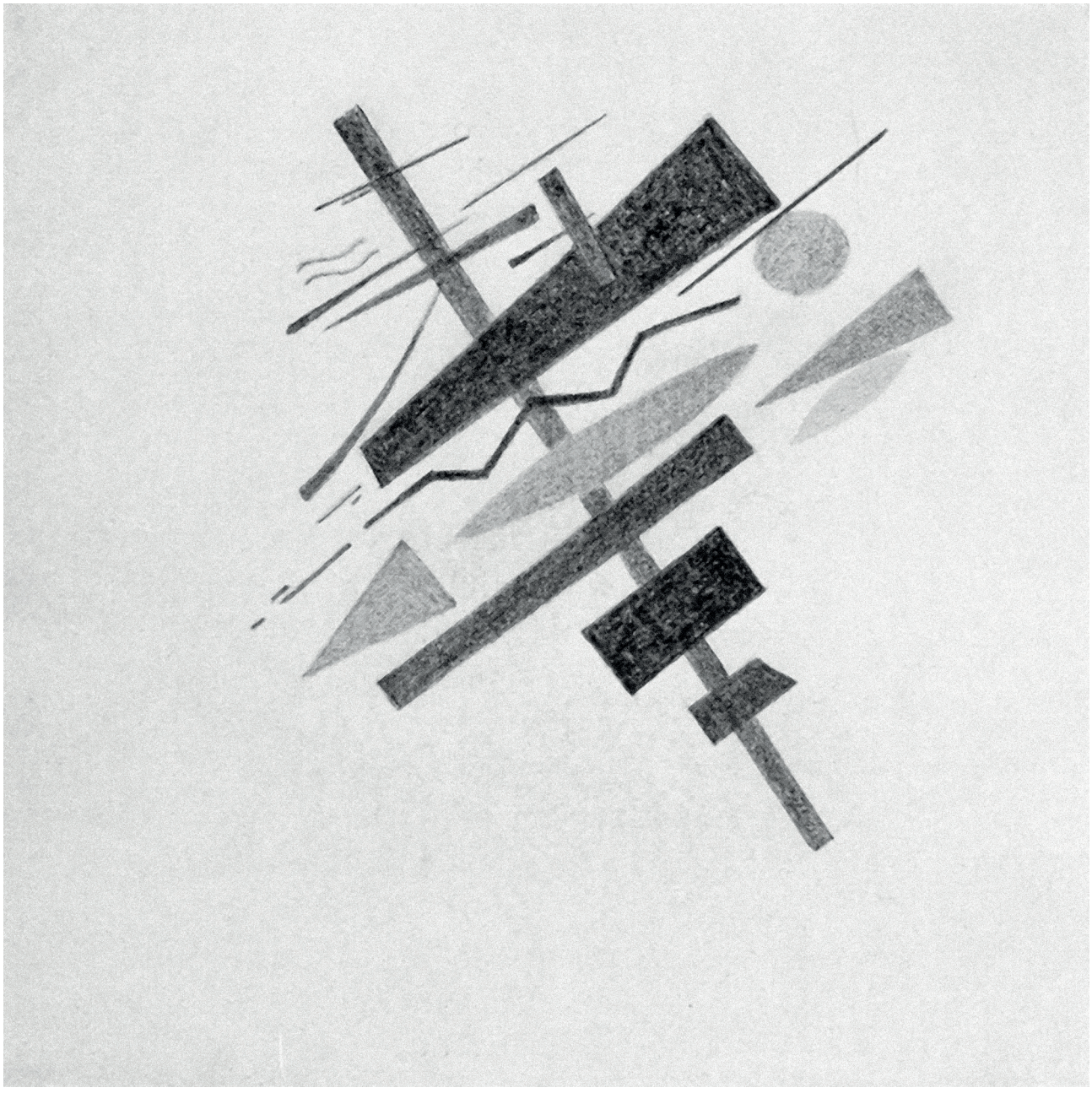
**16.** Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1915, oil on canvas, 80 x 70.5 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



**17.** Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, 1915 (dated on reverse 1914), oil on canvas, 57.3 x 48.3 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



**18.** Kazimir Malevich, *Magnetic Composition, motif*: 1916–1917, version: 1929, oil on plywood, 71.1 x 44.8 cm, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



**19.** Kazimir Malevich, *Composition of Combined Suprematist Elements Expressing the Sensation of Metallic Sounds – Dynamic (Pale, Metallic Colours)*, c.1920, pencil on paper, 20.9 x 16.4 cm, Offentliche Kunstmuseum, Basel.



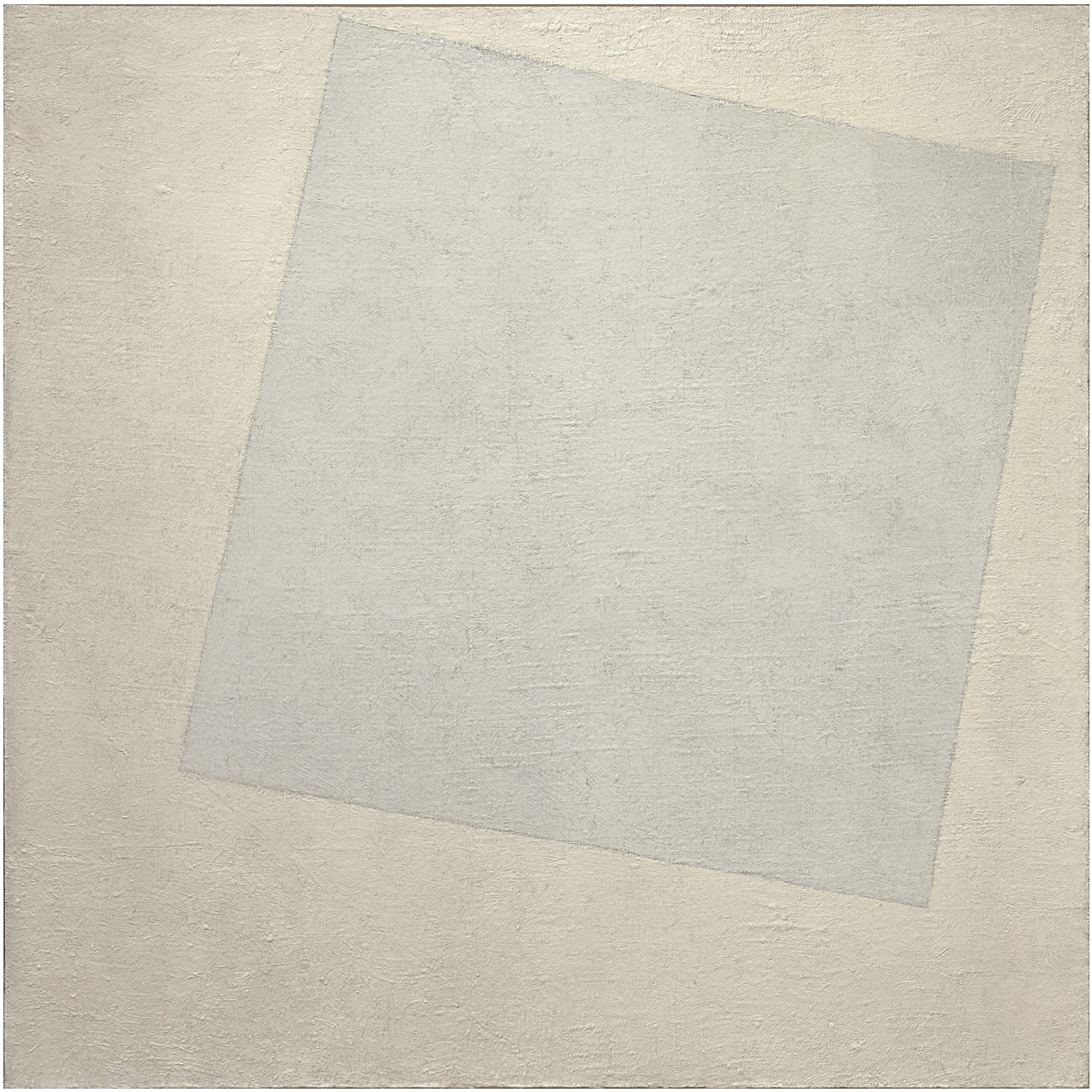
**20.** Kazimir Malevich, *Dynamic Suprematism, Supremus No. 57*, 1916, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, Tate Gallery, London.



**21.** Kazimir Malevich, *Supremus No. 56*, 1916, oil on canvas, 80.5 x 71 cm, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



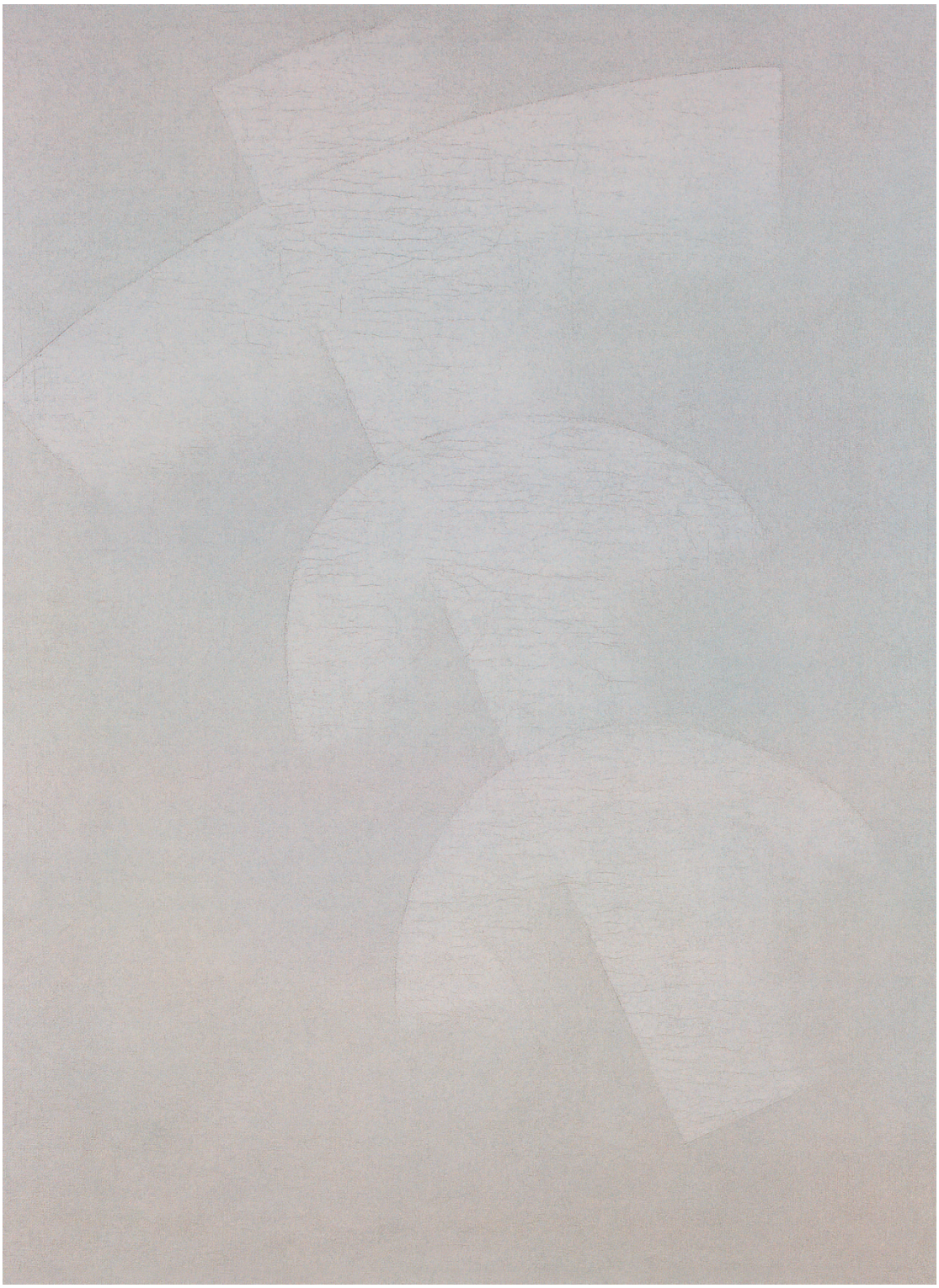
**22.** Kazimir Malevich, *Women Bathers*, c.1930 (antedated to 1908), oil on canvas, 59 x 48 cm, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



**23.** Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 78.7 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



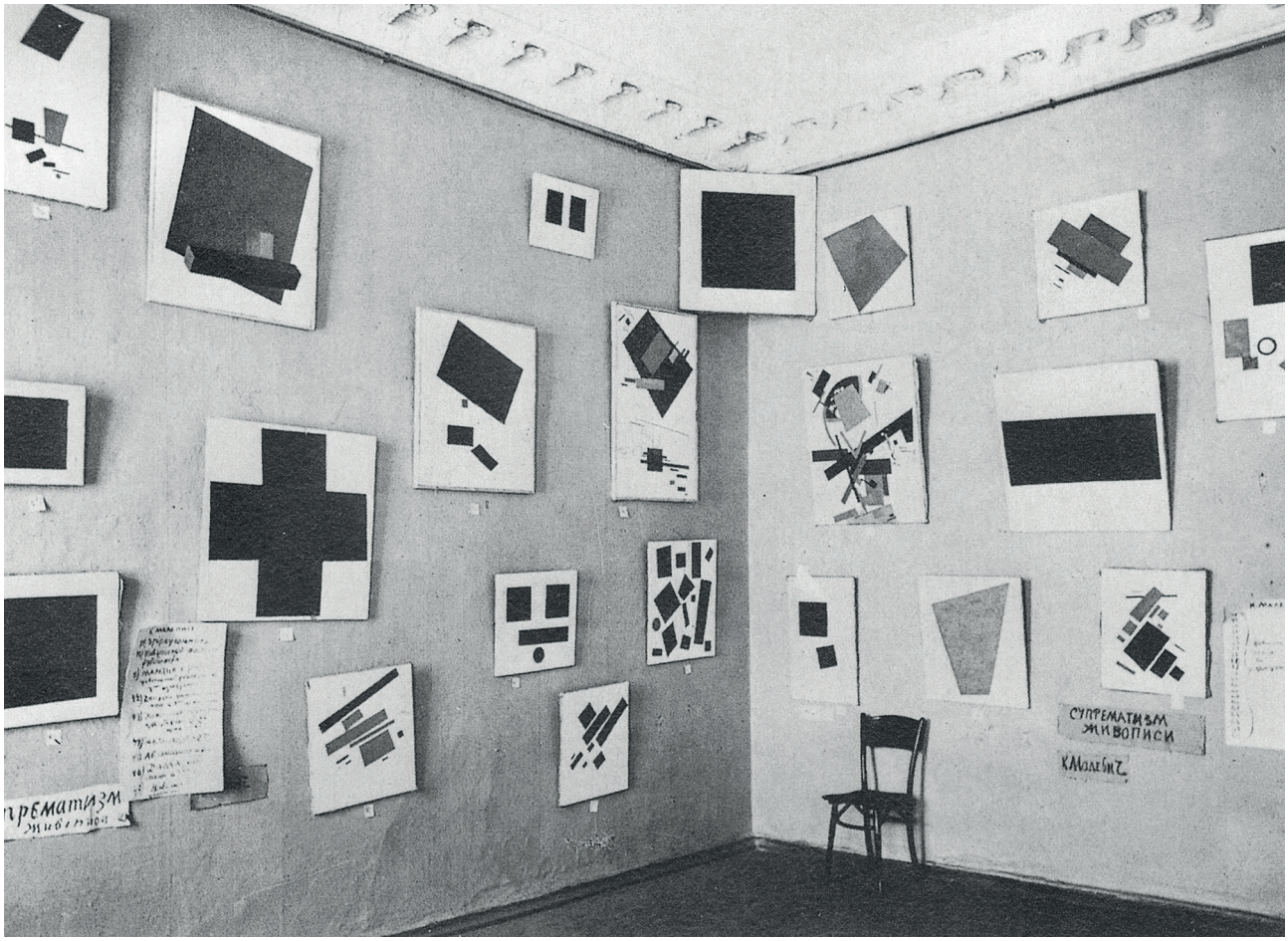
**24.** Kazimir Malevich, *Spheric Evolution of a Plane*, 1917–1918, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 74.5 cm, private collection.



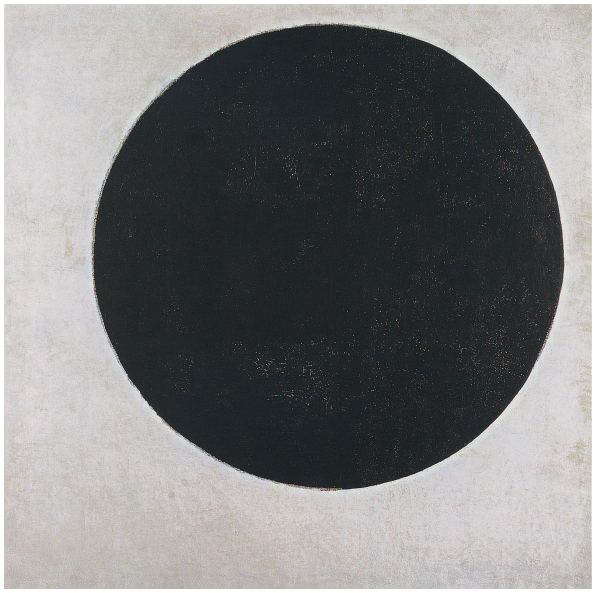
**25.** Kazimir Malevich, *Dissolution of Construction*, 1918, oil on canvas, 97 x 70 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



**26.** Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on canvas, 79.9 x 79.9 cm, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.




**27.** Photograph of *0.10-The Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting*, at the Gallery Nadezdha Dobychina, Saint Petersburg (opening date: 30 December 1915).






**28.** Left: Kazimir Malevich, *Black Circle*, 1915, oil on canvas, 79 x 79 cm, private collection.

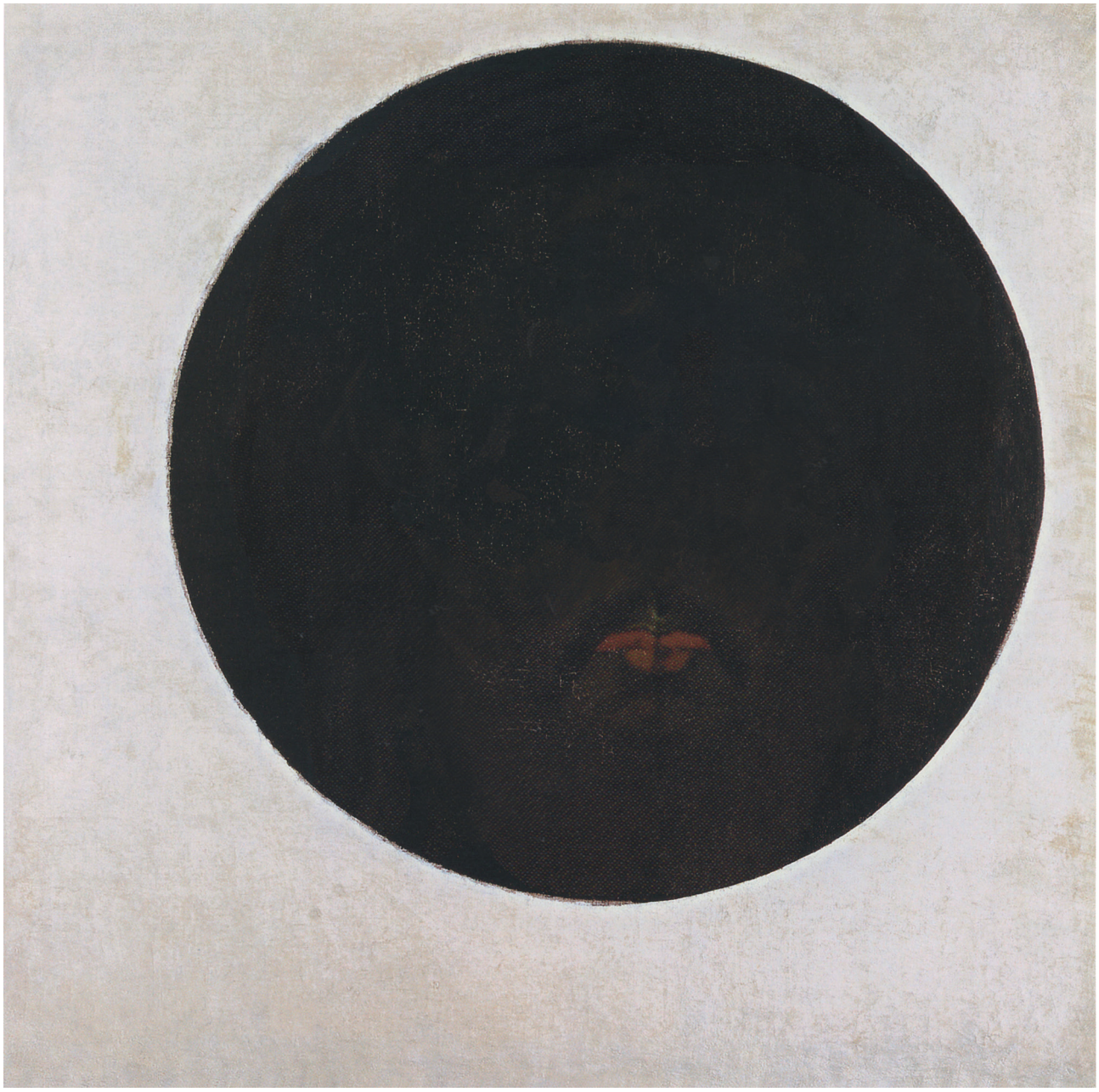
**29.** Right: Russian icon of *The Not-made-by-hands Savior*, late 14th century, 131.5 x 113 cm, Moscow.



**30.** Experiment: the face of Christ from the 14th century icon of *The Not-made-by-hands Savior* is placed over Malevich's work entitled *Black Circle* (1915).



**31.** Experiment: the segment (eyes) from the 14th century depiction of Christ's face (icon: *The Not-made-by-hands Savior*) is placed over Malevich's work entitled *Black Circle* (1915).



**32.** Experiment: the segment (mouth) from the 14th century depiction of Christ's face (icon: *The Not-made-by-hands Savior*) is placed over Malevich's work entitled *Black Circle* (1915).

# Chapter VI

# MARK ROTHKO
# and
# the Late Byzantine Experience

"Why paint at all?" – is a question which Rothko poses at the very beginning of his short text indicatively entitled *Art as a Natural Biological Function*.[1] He then continues: "A question well worth asking all those thousands who, in the catacombs or the garrets of Paris and New York, in the tombs of Egypt or the monasteries of the East, have throughout the ages covered millions of yards of surface with the panoramas of their imaginings."[2]

In his classic phase, Mark Rothko painted as a man out of time, which is why his artistic achievement remains diachronically relevant. To approach a large painting by Rothko closely, such as the one shown in *image 14*, is to encounter and enter a new kind of space. The viewer feels that they are notionally invited to expand into the mist before them, as they become absorbed by the dimmed light which is delicately embodied in the layers of colour. The painters of the Late Byzantine period (13th–15th century) experienced their monumental frescoes in a very similar way, though they were additionally relying in their compositions on the inverse perspective, a perspective that expands the viewer's vision towards infinity.[3]

Like late Byzantine fresco painters, Rothko always carefully thought of and even worried about the lighting conditions of the space where his works were to be observed. Similarly to portable icons in Late Byzantine churches, Rothko's works were typically installed rather than merely hung within the exhibition space. These Late Byzantine analogies do not ignore the multitude of previous interpretations of Rothko's work. On the

[1] This text can be found in Rothko's posthumously published book: Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, edited by Christopher Rothko (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 6.

[2] Ibid.

[3] We have discussed this phenomenon in our third chapter entitled *Modernism of the Frescoes of Mistra.*

contrary, they point to the aesthetic breadth as well as creative depth of Rothko's artistic experience. That said, the purpose of this chapter is to examine and interpret primarily those aspects of Rothko's work that may be regarded as aspects of the Late Byzantine experience.

More specifically, in this chapter we shall attempt to demonstrate the existence of significant inspirations from Late Byzantine painting in the classic works of Mark Rothko. To this cause we shall be assisted by a number of visual demonstrations and paradigms. The three main questions that we shall be addressing in this chapter are: What are the particularities of the notion of the *divine* in Rothko's work? What is the likely provenance of the otherworldly light in Rothko's colour? Why should we understand the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting as Rothko's unassuming yet profoundly revealing legacy to posterity?

The present chapter is divided into following nine segments: (1) From Migration to Clairvoyance, (2) Rothko the Mystic, (3) On the Sacral Dimension of Rothko's Work, (4) On the Influence of Nietzsche, (5) A Late Byzantine and Theological Hypothesis, (6) On the Hybrid-Byzantine Light in Rothko's Colour, (7) Introduction to Visual Demonstrations, (8) Visual Demonstrations, and (9) The Late Byzantine Rothko.

## From Migration to Clairvoyance

Mark Rothko, a pioneer of Abstract Expressionism, was born as Marcus Rothkowitz[4] in 1903, in Dvinsk, Russia (today Daugavpils, part of Latvia), as a fourth child of a pharmacist and intellectual Jacob Rothkowitz and Anna Goldin Rothkowitz. Like other Jewish families at that time, being intimidated by the Russian Czarist regime, the Rothkowitz family decided to leave Dvinsk. Therefore, in 1910, in order to create conditions for the settling of the rest of the family, Rothko's father was the first to arrive in the United States, and in 1913 the whole family was finally reunited. Marcus Rothkowitz arrived in the United States on the 17th of August with his two sisters, Anna and Sonia. Many years later, in 1940, the artist shortened his name to Mark Rothko, but by that time many other things had also changed in his life.

In particular, by the year of 1940, Rothko was beyond the so called realist years of his artistic development, which formally began in January 1924 when he enrolled in George

[4] In relevant literature, Rothko's original surname is also spelled: Rothkovich.

Bridgman's life drawing class at the Art Students League (ASL) in New York.[5] Previously to this, he had studied at Yale University, but in 1923 he left Yale without graduating and without having taken any art classes. From October 1925 until May 1926 at ASL Rothko studied still-life under Max Weber, under whose recommendation he worked in the manner of Cézanne at the time.

These years of both artistic and intellectual enquiry gradually transfigured Rothko into a spiritual erudite, rather than merely a painter. In his mature years he became widely read, and, approximately within the period between 1936 and 1941, he was himself writing a book concerning art. The writings which comprise this truly engaging book were lost for a time, and then rediscovered after Rothko's death in the mid 1980s and were subsequently edited by Rothko's son, Christopher Rothko, who also wrote an introduction for the publication.[6] Like Kandinsky, when Rothko spoke of his work he referred much more to content than form.[7] In Rothko's 45-year long artistic career we distinguish four periods: the Realist period (from 1924 to 1940), the Surrealist period (from 1940 to 1946), the Transitional period (from 1946 to 1949), and the Classic period (from 1949 to 1970).

In the first two periods he painted landscapes, interiors, still-life, the scenes from the New York subway, as well as other city-related themes. The subway paintings reflect the loneliness of an outsider-migrant and a depressive estrangement within modern urban life (*image 3*). In his Surrealist phase, coinciding with the unsettling atmosphere of the Second World War, Rothko's painting became symbolic, as he found inspiration in Greek Mythology, primitive art, and Christian tragedy (see *images 4* and *5*).

Prior to this, for five years, between 1935 and 1940, Rothko was showing his work with a group of independent artists called The Ten[8] – of which he was a cofounder. Rothko's

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[5] We note that our reference to Rothko's biography is necessarily shortened in this chapter. Thus, for example in our discussion of this particular period we do not refer to the fact that in 1924, having returned from New York to Portland for a brief period, Rothko studied acting in a theater company run by Josephine Dillon: it is noted in his biography that later in life Rothko liked to recount how Clark Gable was his understudy there. This detail, as well as other valuable information about Rothko's life are recorded by Rothko's biographer James Breslin (1993), as well as by other scholars, such as Jessica Stewart in: Jeffrey Weiss, et al. *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 334.

[6] Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, edited by Christopher Rothko (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

[7] This can be understood from Rothko's various statements and writings, which shall be discussed in this chapter.

[8] Members of this group shared "a distaste for conservatism and a desire for experimentation;" they were: Marcus Rothkowitz, Ben Zion, Adolph Gottlieb, Louis Harris, Jack Kufeld, Louis Schanker, Joseph Solomon, Nahum Tschacbasov and Ilya Bolotowsky. As they were only nine, in their exhibitions, members of this group filled the tenth place with a guest artist and thus came to be known as "The Ten Who Are Nine." The group was dissolved in 1940. See Rothko's Biography compiled by Jessica Stewart and included in: Jeffrey Weiss, et al. *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 337.

Transitional period (1946–1949), transitional in the sense that it bridges his earlier mythological and surrealist work with his classic abstract painting, is marked by an increased reduction to abstract forms. This transition occurred through the rise of the so called *multiforms* – a term that was ascribed to the works of this period after Rothko's death. Organically arranged, blurred colour blocks, which characterise the paintings of this period are rendered with transparency by applying distinct thin layers of paint (see *images 6, 7* and *8*).[9]

Interestingly, as observed by John Gage, Rothko's myopia, which like Matisse he had from an early age, is likely to have affected Rothko's attitude toward viewing distance.[10] In this respect, it does not come as a surprise that Matisse's painting entitled *The Red Studio* (*image 9*) was a modern painting to which Rothko felt most deeply attached. Rothko recalled studying this painting of Matisse for months – upon its acquisition by the Museum of Modern Art (New York) in 1949.[11] Therefore, perhaps even more than the effects of Rothko's acute case of myopia, the absolute treatment of colour by Matisse might have influenced Rothko's subsequent conviction that his own work should be viewed at a distance of no more than eighteen inches. Thus, from 1949, the Classic and most important period of Rothko's work had begun, where his blurred vision was turned into a clairvoyant seeing.

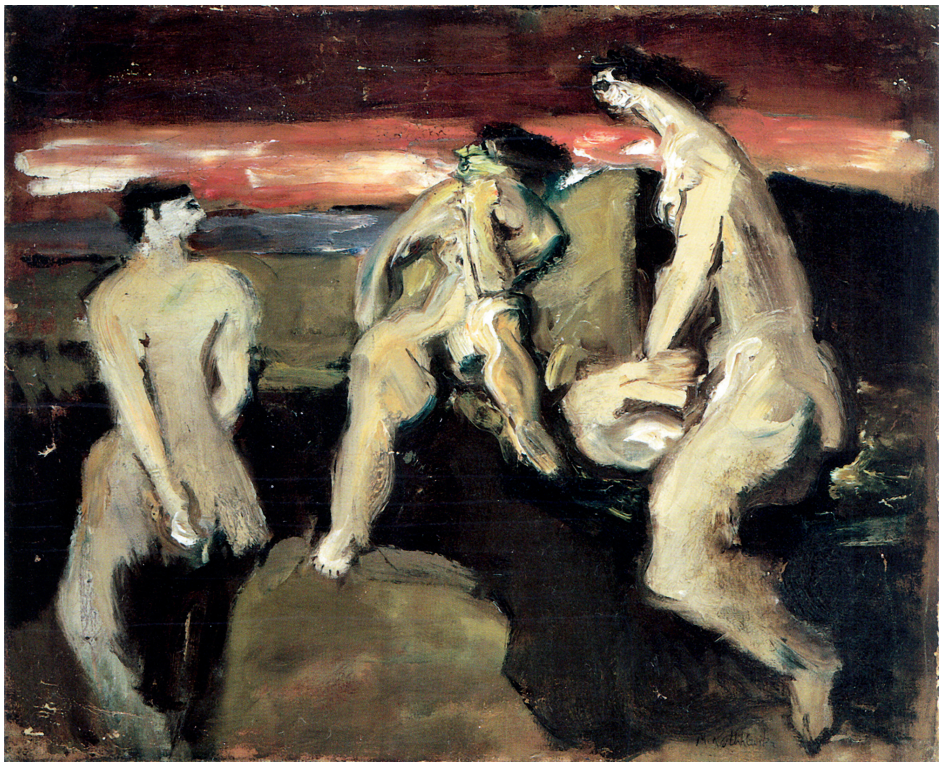


**1.** Mark Rothko, *Self-Portrait*, 1936, oil on canvas, 81.9 x 65.4 cm (32.¼ x 25.¾), Collection of Christopher Rothko.

[9] This is noted by many researchers of Rothko's work. See: Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Taschen, 2003), 45.

[10] John Gage, "*Rothko: Color as Subject*," in *Mark Rothko*, ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 254.

[11] Ibid, 261.



**2.** Mark Rothko, *Bathers or Beach Scene (Untitled)*, 1933/34, watercolour on paper, 53.3 x 68.6 cm, Collection Christopher Rothko.



**3.** Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Subway)*, 1933/34, oil on canvas, 51.1 x 76.2 cm, Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art.



**4.** Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1941–1942, oil and graphite on linen, 61 x 81 cm (23 x 31.7/8), National Gallery of Art, Washington.



**5.** Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1941–1942, oil on canvas, 76 x 91.3 cm (29.7/8 x 36), National Gallery of Art, Washington.



**6.** Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1948, oil on canvas, 127.6 x 109.9 cm, Collection Kate Rothko Prizel.



**7.** Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1948, oil on canvas, 98.4 x 63.2 cm, Private collection.



**8.** Mark Rothko, *No. 18*, 1948, oil on canvas, 116.6 x 141 cm, Tel Aviv, Collection Joseph Hackney.



**9.** Henri Matisse, *The Red Studio*, 1911, oil on canvas, 181 x 219.1 cm (71.¼ x 86.¼), The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



**10.** Mark Rothko, *No. 15*, 1949, oil on canvas, 170 x 104.4 cm, Private collection.

## Rothko the Mystic

Given that Rothko himself rejected the label of an "abstract expressionist" as well as that of an "abstract painter," there is sound basis to assess certain phenomena of his classic works independently from the broader context of Abstract Expressionism. Accordingly, we note that our present enquiry was initially inspired by a perception that through the works of his classic period, Rothko exalted his painting practice to a level of philosophy, one which is paired with a particularly theological experience.

As we shall see, the seeming simplicity of his canvases is but a transparent veil covering the tragic infinity of the dark universe, in which, on the other hand, light is never totally lost. Of course, we are referring here to Rothko's seemingly somber works, such as the one shown in *image 36*. To an extent, this "veil effect" of Rothko's work is indirectly comparable to Malevich's *Black Square* (*image 37*). In our view, among the Abstract Expressionists, Rothko's work, in particular that of his classic period, is the most relatable to Malevich's abstraction, not least by virtue of a distinct Byzantine connection.

A point could also be made that, if based on the achievements of Malevich and Kandinsky we had to formulate in one sentence an understanding of the 20th century abstract painting, it would be that in spite of its visuality, this painting has little to do with what we see in nature or imagine outside of it, but has more to do with how we understand that which we do not see, and how we reconcile with that which we are not able to fully imagine. As we shall later demonstrate, it cannot be doubted that these are also the critical parameters for understanding Rothko's classic works.

In view of Rothko's intellectual inclinations, his interest in psychology and philosophy,[12] and his gradual and profound dissatisfaction with earthly life, we can broadly brand his overall way of life and his alchemist personality, with *modern asceticism* – in as much by asceticism we refer to a systematic enquiry into the higher levels of truth regarding human existence. Accordingly, we should not feel that Rothko's drinking and smoking habits, which increased towards the end of his life, cast a picture entirely dissimilar to asceticism. In fact, we dare say that in Rothko's particular case, drinking, as

[12] Rothko was inclined towards philosophical thinking from his early youth, possibly due to the influence of his father, a highly spiritual man, who is recalled to have read Dostoyevsky to his children. Further, Rothko's subjects at the Yale University include: French language, European history, elementary mathematics, physics, biology, economics, history of philosophy and general psychology. The fact that he read Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche is widely known. For example Barbara Novak and Brian O' Doherty make mention of these facts in their essay entitled *Rothko's Dark Paintings: Tragedy and Void*, which is included in: Jeffrey Weiss, et al. *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 265.

well as heavy smoking, were a kind of collateral consequence of an immensely demanding and thus for him unbearable ascetic mission.

But why is it important to studiously consider Rothko's systematic enquiry into the ineffable levels of truth regarding human existence? Yannis Tzavaras, the translator of Heidegger's book *The Origin of the Work of Art* (from German to Greek) notes that on the copy of the 1960 publication of this book, next to the question "But how does truth occur?"[13] there is a handwritten note by Heidegger which says: "The answer does not exist, because the question remains: What is that which occurs through the ways of existence?"[14] This note written by Heidegger seems to imply that we can only speak of truth in relation to a human experience of existence – and not independently from it. Therefore, it is the way in which particular humans 'pass through' this world in search for a higher meaning, that projects the picture of what humanity really is and what it could possibly become. Accordingly, in view of its overall uniqueness and authenticity, we can say that the classic style of Mark Rothko's painting, entails a projection of a hidden-kind of potentiality of man: a potentiality to contemplate the higher meaning of his/her existence, a potentiality to converse with and about the *divine*. This kind of potentiality is reminiscent of the liturgical purpose of Byzantine art.

When approaching the lightness, darkness, simplicity, absoluteness, and the numinous in Rothko's abstraction, the observer reconciles, or in any case contemplates, the antithetic and delicate relationships which exist between the equivalent qualities of their inner, psychological world. But if a merely subjective self-reflection was all that Rothko's painting had to offer to its observers, then a case for a Byzantine interpretation would have much poorer grounds, and the experience of observing his work would have little difference to the concept of the Rorschach test.[15] On the other hand, it should be mentioned that the transcendental dimension of Rothko's work has in the past been bluntly disputed by certain critics as well as admirers of his work.[16] As we shall elaborate in the

[13] Our translation of the question in Greek: «Αλλά πώς συμβαίνει η αλήθεια;»

[14] Our translation of the following sentence in Greek: «Δεν υπάρχει απάντηση, γιατί το ερώτημα παραμένει: Τι είναι αυτό που συμβαίνει μέσα σε τρόπους (ύπαρξης);» See: Μάρτιν Χάϊντεγγερ, *Η Προέλευση του έργου τέχνης*, μετάφραση και εισαγωγή του Γιάννη Τζαβάρα (Δωδώνη, 1986), 92.

[15] The Rorschach or inkblot test was developed by a Swiss Freudian psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Herman Rorschach (1884 – 1922). For the purposes of this test, a small amount of ink is poured on one side of a sheet of paper, and then, the same sheet is folded in half – thereby pressing the ink in the middle and creating a symmetrical, abstract inkblot. Subsequently, subjects' perceptions of the inkblot are analysed and psychologically interpreted. This test is employed especially in cases where patients are reluctant to describe their thinking process openly.

[16] One particularly clear example of this is cited below. The citation below is an excerpt from a published interview conducted on May the 8th 1997, where Jeffrey Weiss is interviewing the abstract artist Robert Ryman.
Weiss: "The idea that there was a metaphysical side to abstraction and to Rothko's kind of abstraction is, you think, an overinterpretation, or simply the wrong way to look at the picture?"

following segment of this chapter, the peculiar uniqueness of Rothko's art, and more specifically the uniqueness of the transcendent in his work of the classic period, cannot be a subject of a one-sided interpretation.

## On the Sacral Dimension of Rothko's Work

Among the other Abstract Expressionists, Rothko's work is easily discerned. However, the painting of other leading protagonists of Abstract Expressionism, in particular, that of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman, is also particularly distinct. Nevertheless, in retrospect, it seems that Rothko's Jewish background and education,[17] but also the years of his early childhood spent in Russia, constitute an experience that might have significantly contributed to the distinction of his later artistic development and style from other American artists of his time. He once stated that: "A painting is not about experience. It is an experience."[18]

The mystery behind the earthly existence, or behind the absurdity of living, is inseparably embodied within the creative experience of a religious artist. For a religious artist, the core of life's tragedy is not the temporality of life, but life's impenetrable non-meaning. Thus, in a manner of speaking, authentic religious painters could be perceived as rare 'professionals of living,' whose main task is to employ their inner vision in order to overcome the countless deceptions about earthly life – which are imposed on them by the sensory and emotional experience.

Over a number of decades, Rothko's religious background was combined with his overall life experience, and thus, in his classic paintings, this religious background became objectified as a highly idiosyncratic spirituality. Therefore, in view of the paintings of his transitional period (*images 6, 7* and *8*) one should attempt to enter the peculiar and convoluted thought process of the mystic that Rothko was in order to conceive how the

Ryman: "Yes. That's just in the mind of the viewer. It's not Rothko's intention. It strictly had to do with composition, colour, plane, and presence, working with the wall plane. I don't believe it represents anything. It has no symbolic meaning. People can read all kinds of things into it." From the interview conducted by Jeffrey Weiss, included in: Jeffrey Weiss, et al. *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 369.

[17] The fact that Rothko's father insisted that Rothko, starting at the age of five, receives a strict religious education at the cheder (a religious school run by the synagogue) is noted in Rothko's biography, but also in related scholarly literature. For example see: Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Taschen, 2003), 20.

[18] This statement by Rothko is cited in: Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Taschen, 2003), 57.

suppressed and almost persecuted existence of the Rothkowitz family during their years in Russia, but also the experience of migration, the subsequent years of adapting and learning, and of course the war, were collectively transformed by Rothko from memory into blurred forms, and then from blurred forms into a present experience (*image 10*), and then, in the classic period, transubstantiated into pure acts of the will (i.e. *images 13* and *14*).[19]

Also, the immense influence that one of Rothko's favorite books, Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, had on Rothko's painting, can clearly be discerned in view of Rothko's above described process of objectifying his classic expression. For example, an overt connection to that process can be observed in Nietzsche's following words:

"We prefer to say that all of that opposition which Schopenhauer uses as criteria in order to evaluate the arts, the opposition between the subjective and the objective, is generally foreign to aesthetics, as the subject – the person that desires and attempts their egoistical aims, can only be regarded as the opposition to art and not its source. In as much however the subject is the artist, he has already become liberated from his personal desire, and has become the medium, through which the only truly existent subject celebrates its liberation into phenomenality."[20]

Accordingly, in order to understand Rothko on a deeper level, in order to comprehend the classic period of his art as an objectification of a primarily spiritual experience, we must engage in deeper and more demanding interpretations of his work. We must certainly forget labels such as "abstraction" and "Abstract Expressionism." Besides, in an interview with Selden Rodman, Rothko himself stated: "You might as well get one thing straight. I'm not an abstractionist… I'm not interested in the relationship of color to form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on. And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when con-

[19] For example, Jeffrey Weiss points out that "in a manner of speaking, Rothko's paintings can resemble acts of the will, objects that have sprung forth fully formed." See introduction written by Jeffrey Weiss in: Jeffrey Weiss, et al. *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 10. Here, Weiss argues that the profound devotion to grand themes such as tragedy, ecstasy, and death, is alluded to in Rothko's early use of figures and symbols.

[20] Our translation of the following excerpt in Greek: «Προτιμάμε να πούμε ότι όλη αυτή η αντίθεση που ο Σοπενχάουερ χρησιμοποιεί σαν μέτρο για να αξιολογήσει τις τέχνες, η αντίθεση του υποκειμενικού και του αντικειμενικού, είναι γενικώς ξένη προς την αισθητική, αφού το υποκείμενο, το άτομο που βούλεται και που επιδιώκει τους εγωιστικούς σκοπούς του, μόνο ως αντίπαλος της τέχνης μπορεί να εννοηθεί και όχι ως πηγή της. Στο μέτρο όμως που το υποκείμενο είναι καλλιτέχνης, έχει λυτρωθεί ήδη από την ατομική του βούληση, και έχει γίνει το μέντιουμ, μέσα από το οποίο το μοναδικό όντως υπάρχον υποκείμενο γιορτάζει τη λύτρωσή του μέσα στη φαινομενικότητα.» Φρίντριχ Νίτσε, *Η Γέννηση Της Τραγωδίας: Ή Ελληνισμός και Απαισιοδοξία*, μετάφραση, σχόλια: Μαρσέλλος, Χ. Εισαγωγή: Φαρακλάς, Γ. Επίμετρο: Τσέτσος, Μ., Όσμο, Π. («Βιβλιοπωλείον της Εστίας», 2009), 83.

fronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions… The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationship, then you miss the point."[21]

Notwithstanding the existent variety of interpretations of Rothko's work, this sacral understanding of his work and the relationship of that understanding to the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting is the main topic in this chapter. It should here be noted that our choice to focus on Rothko's works of the classic period was made after our systematic examination and a subsequent observation of the following: From the early 1950s, having passed its so-called Transitional years (1946 to 1949), Rothko's style of painting became strikingly comparable to the particular aesthetic notions characteristic of Late Byzantine painting, in particular, to the notion of the exalted and to that of the *harmolypi* – simultaneous joy and sorrow.[22]

A Buddhist thinker, Nagapriya Wright in his short text entitled *Rothko and Byzantine Art*, states the following: "Rothko's paintings have a sacral quality that leads to a sense of awe and humility, a sense of heightened awareness and clarity of emotion and purpose. For these reasons, Rothko's work for me has an iconic quality, opening up a series of portals on to the transcendent, which ultimately reveals the depths of our own imaginative potential."[23]

Nagapriya Wright's above mentioned text constitutes the closest and, in our view, the so far most insightful connection made between Rothko's classic paintings and the aesthetics of Byzantine art. Further, although the theological dimension of Rothko's classic paintings has been sporadically discussed in the past,[24] to the best of our knowledge, our

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[21] This statement by Rothko is cited by Jacob Baal-Teshuva. See: Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Taschen, 2003), 50–57.

[22] In the tradition of Byzantine chanting the term 'harmolypi' (χαρμολύπη) is used to describe the tone which is simultaneously joyful and sorrowful. The same term can also be used in regards to Byzantine iconography, in cases where notions of joy and sorrow are deliberately combined.

[23] Nagapriya Wright, "Rothko and Byzantine Art," initially accessed in 2011, last accessed 17 August 2022: http://subflaneur.tumblr.com/post/19392575266/rothko-and-byzantine-art

[24] One example is a text written by David E. Anderson where he states:

"The poet Stanley Kunitz once told artist Mark Rothko he was 'the last rabbi in Western art.'

Critic Robert Hughes described Rothko as belonging to the 'theological' wing of the New York School of abstract artists in mid-twentieth-century America, while the headline of a *New York Times* review by Hilton Kramer of a major Rothko retrospective in 1978 read 'Rothko: Art as Religious Faith.'

As curator and editor Glenn Phillips notes in *Seeing Rothko*, a collection of essays on the artist and the act of seeing 'Rothko's work has variously been described as transcendental, tragic, mystical, violent, or serene; as representative of the void; as opening onto the experience of the sublime; as exhilaratingly intellectual; or as profoundly spiritual—to mention just a few examples.'

At the very least, Rothko and his paintings beg to be seen to some degree in religious or spiritual terms. This isn't always easy for many viewers, especially with his signature paintings of stacked rectangles and pure abstractions that,

particular hypothesis in the present chapter, that there is a tangible connection between the theological dimension in Rothko's classic paintings and the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting, has so far not been the subject of an extensive methodological enquiry, certainly not until 2012 when the content of the present book in its entirety became available as a PhD dissertation.[25]

## On the Influence of Nietzsche

Given that Nietzsche's writings significantly influenced Rothko (especially *The Birth of Tragedy*), in the following paragraphs we shall discuss that influence in Rothko's works of the classic period. In his book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche argues that tragedy is the synthesis of the Dionysian and Apollonian poles. Traditionally, Apollo is associated with principles such as order, reason, structure, moderation and clarity, whereas Dionysus is associated with principles such as frenzy, intuition, passion, ritual, imagination, excess and feeling.

According to Nietzsche, the Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy presupposes a complex kind of interdependence. On the one hand, Dionysus, the god of "the ineducable Art of music" (but also God of wine, ecstasy, fertility, theatre and intoxication) is associated with the flood of passion and the ecstatic primeval experience of ancient cults – phenomena which exceed man's experience of individual existence; while on the other, Apollo, the god of the Art of the sculptor, is identified with a will to form, which comes to depict the otherwise amorphous Dionysian state. In spite of the seeming simplicity, this is not a mere case of phantasmagoric dialectics.

As it has been noted by experts of the field, throughout his life Nietzsche's own understanding of the Dionysian is characterised by ambiguous fluctuations – a phenomenon which, in our view, might have profoundly affected the very way in which the highly apperceptive Rothko was influenced by Nietzsche's writings. We shall here cite a seg-

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while so easily identified as 'a Rothko,' eschew all painterly narrative, even in their titles. They are simply called 'No. 18' or 'Untitled (Violet, Black, Orange on Gray).'"

See: David E. Anderson, (2010) "Anecdotes of the Spirit," accessed 11 March 2012 from:
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/by-topic/art/anecdotes-of-the-spirit/6500/

[25] Uros T. Todorovic "The Diachronic Character of Late Byzantine Painting: The Hermeneutics of Vision from Mistra to New York" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012). Note: The photographic material in this book, including the authentic visual comparisons and visual demonstrations created by the author, is the same as in the doctoral dissertation defended in 2012. Also, the printed colour version of the doctoral dissertation has been available at university libraries since 2012. Therefore, authentic visual comparisons and visual demonstrations included both in this book and in the doctoral dissertation entail author's rights since 2012.

ment from a conclusion of the relevant study written by Robert Luyster, entitled *Nietzsche/ Dionysus: Ecstasy, Heroism, and the Monstrous*:

"Throughout Nietzsche's philosophy, under the same rubric, two – and finally three – distinctively different conceptions of the Dionysian alternate. The first, Dionysus as representative of immediate and sensuous embrace of and joy in the flux of phenomena, which we termed the ecstatic Dionysian, is properly Dionysian in the Greek-historical sense, and may in that sense with the most justice be called Dionysian. The second, Dionysus as the individual ego with the strength to impose its own form upon that flux, which we described as the heroic Dionysian, is properly not Dionysian at all (at least, according to the classical, and Nietzsche's earliest understanding of Dionysus), but, on Nietzsche's own terms in *BT*, Apollonian. The third and last, Dionysus as savage scourge of nature, whose chief pleasure consists in the pitiless slaughter of countless 'failures,' while identified under the same name is very much the antipode of his original version of Dionysus. The conflict or connection between the three and, it appears, the appeal of each to Nietzsche personally, he was never in any significant way able to settle or resolve, although in his last years of sanity delight in the brutalisation of the masses – the monstrous epiphany of Dionysus – became a hypnotically attractive image."[26]

In view of Luyster's analysis, one may begin to tangibly conceive how Rothko's immensely creative mind experienced and even thrived on the fluctuating conceptions of the Dionysian, which were discussed by Nietzsche in his writings. Beyond the problem of Nietzsche's fluctuations, there is the factor of Nietzsche's extremely engaging style of writing displayed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, or rather, there is the convincing plasticity with which he has presented his views; views which in part coincidently concern the plasticity present in visual art (by virtue of reference to Apollonian, sculptural art). This convincingness of his argument, and again, its plasticity, is born from Nietzsche's personal, dramatic vision of human tragedy.

Most importantly, in our view, it is because his vision of human tragedy is literal, and not symbolic or simply theoretical, that the plasticity of Nietzsche's argument in *The Birth of Tragedy* was in itself very attractive for Rothko, as it corresponded to Rothko's own, personal vision of the tragedy of life.

Rothko was probably inspired by the compelling ways in which Nietzsche's claims are formulated; he was inspired by their overall believability, and their overall aesthetics. It seems that this reality of the *tragic* was introspectively experienced by Rothko as an in-

[26] Robert Luyster, "Nietzsche / Dionysus: Ecstasy, Heroism, and the Monstrous," initially accessed in 2011, last accessed 9 June 2021, from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20717751?seq=1

evitability of the *tragic* within his personal existence,[27] and as such was manifested in his so called somber works as a kind of Tragic Realism – but not as absolute pessimism.

While elaborating on the Dionysian excitation, Nietzsche points out that the dithyramb[28]is essentially different from any other dance in Greek Antiquity.[29] In his argumentation he speaks of the "abandoning of individuality through the escape to a foreign nature," as well as of the experience of "transfiguration," as phenomena which occur during the dithyrambic dance.[30] For example, he states: "The virgins that walk into the temple of Apollo while holding the *daphne* branches in the hand and singing hymns, preserve their personality and their name in the world, whereas the dithyrambic dance is the dance of the transfigured, who have entirely lost the memory of their worldly past and their political situation. They have become the servants of their god, who live outside of any epoch and any social sphere."[31]

In view of the above excerpt, the connection between Nietzsche's vision of the Dionysian spirit and Rothko's abstraction can be observed in the common notions, such as: the state of being transfigured, timelessness and otherness. It could be argued that Rothko introspectively borrowed Nietzsche's vision of the Dionysian transfiguration, but only as an inspiring epiphany, and therein, through his painting, conveyed a transfiguration of a deeper kind. In a certain peculiar sense, if we were to understand Rothko's transparently applied layers of colour as nuances of meaning, then the nuance related to Nietzsche and his sense of the dark and tragic becomes most easily observed. However, as Rothko's

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[27] It is noteworthy that in Nietzsche's writing, there is a perpetual desire for an egoless kind of transcendence – within which man exceeds his individual existence in order to merge with the primal and eternal being.

[28] Dithyramb (διθύραμβος), which is considered to be the forerunner of Greek Tragedy, was a celebrative song and subsequently became a *dance-poetry* of an enthusiastic kind; followed by the flute, it was sung by the dancers (men or boys) as part of Dionysian worship. Initially, the dithyramb comprised themes from the life of Dionysus. In his 1872 book entitled *The Birth of Greek Tragedy*, Nietzsche identifies Greek tragedy with the Dionysian dance: "Such thoughts lead us to consider Greek tragedy as a Dionysian dance, whose overflowing psychological outbursts evaporate again and again in a world of Apollonian imagery. Therefore, within the (Greek) tragedy, the scattered *dance* segments are, to a degree, a natal channel of each *self-proclaimed* dialogue, therefore of the entire world of the scene – of the true drama." Our translation of: «Οι σκέψεις αυτές μας οδηγούν να θεωρήσουμε την ελληνική τραγωδία ως τον διονυσιακό χορό, που οι υπερχειλίζουσες ψυχικές του εκρήξεις ξεθυμαίνουν ξανά και ξανά σε έναν κόσμο απολλώνειων εικόνων. Τα διάσπαρτα, μέσα στην τραγωδία, χορικά κομμάτια είναι επομένως σ' ένα βαθμό ο μητρικός κόλπος κάθε αυτοαποκαλούμενου διαλόγου, ολόκληρου του κόσμου της σκηνής δηλαδή, του αληθινού δράματος.» See: Φρίντριχ Νίτσε, *Η Γέννηση Της Τραγωδίας: Ή Ελληνισμός και Απαισιοδοξία*, μετάφραση, σχόλια: Μαρσέλλος, Χ. Εισαγωγή: Φαρακλάς, Γ. Επίμετρο: Τσέτσος, Μ., Όσμο, Π. («Βιβλιοπωλείον της Εστίας,» 2009), 100.

[29] Ibid, 99.

[30] Ibid, 99–100.

[31] Ibid. Our translation of: «Οι παρθένες που τραβάνε στον ναό του Απόλλωνα κρατώντας κλωνιά δάφνης στο χέρι και τραγουδώντας ύμνους διατηρούν την προσωπικότητά τους και το κατά κόσμον όνομά τους, ενώ ο διθυραμβικός χορός είναι χορός μεταμορφωμένων που έχουν χάσει ολοκληρωτικά την ανάμνηση του κοσμικού παρελθόντος τους κατάστασης. Έχουν γίνει οι υπηρέτες του θεού τους, που ζούνε έξω από κάθε εποχή και κάθε κοινωνική σφαίρα.»

daughter Kate Rothko Prizel had once noted, "many of his bright paintings he would view as the reflection of the tragic"[32] – a case which affirms that his darker pieces should not be identified with pessimism but with an exalted kind of seriousness.

Shortly after the earlier cited excerpt from *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche explains the essential functioning of the Dionysian dance within the Greek Tragedy: "In successive waves, that primal cause of tragedy (the Dionysian or dithyrambic dance) radiates out the vision of the drama, which, as a dream-like appearance, is of epic form. On the other hand however, as an objectification of the Dionysian state, it does not represent the apollonian release into phenomenality, but it crashes the individual and it makes him one with the primal being."[33] In accordance to Nietzsche's view cited above, one could conclude that the genesis of tragedy has the abstract, non-representational and consequently non-thematic hypostasis. In this particular sense, beyond the Dionysian dance itself, there is no traceable source (explanation) of tragedy; the tragedy thus has no reason, it stems from its own self, whereas drama, according to Nietzsche, is "the Apollonian representation of Dionysian ideas and influences."[34]

Our view is that, partly due to Nietzsche's influence, Rothko's works of the classic period, especially his so called somber paintings, discreetly surpass pessimism by psychologically adjusting to it, and even further, by turning it into a natural state of mind in order to see beyond it more objectively, in order to *see* the inner Light – no matter how dim it may appear. This is achieved by Rothko most effectively through his gradual reduction to a calmer – somber palette. Therein, Rothko's somber works of the classic period authentically project both the subtle presence and the seeming absence of what might be called *uncreated light,* a Byzantine term for describing the visionary hesychast experience.[35] As we shall discuss later in this chapter, the influence that Nietzsche's vision of tragedy exercised on Rothko's classic works, was wondrously paired with Rothko's idiosyncratic usage of colour – particularly with his usage of white.

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[32] This statement by Kate Rothko-Prizel is recorded in a television interview: Teresa de Vito, M. (2007) Kate Rothko: About my father Mark. Part two. Accessed 12 March 2012: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Nr7Mo-3EFA&translated=1. In the same interview, Kate Rothko Prizel states: "One of the greatest misconceptions regarding Rothko's very latest group of paintings, ones he painted just before his death in 1970, is to associate the dark colour palette with his mood at the time."

[33] Νίτσε, Φ., 100. Our translation of: «Αυτή η πρωταρχική αιτία της τραγωδίας ακτινοβολεί προς τα έξω, σε διαδοχικά κύματα, το όραμα του δράματος, που, ως ονειρική εμφάνιση, είναι επικής μορφής, από την άλλη όμως, ως αντικειμενοποίηση διονυσιακής κατάστασης, δεν αντιπροσωπεύει την απολώνεια λύτρωση μέσα στη φαινομενικότητα, παρά θραύει το άτομο και το κάνει ένα με το πρωταρχικό ον.»

[34] Ibid.

[35] We have discussed the influence of Hesychasm on Late Byzantine painting in the second chapter of this book.

## A Late Byzantine and Theological Hypothesis

In 1964 Rothko was commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil to do a series of large paintings, intended for a yet to be built chapel at St Thomas Catholic University in Houston. Rothko told his friends that this project was to become his most important artistic statement. Also, wishing them a happy new year in 1966, he is cited to have written to the de Menils as follows:

"The magnitude on every level of experience and meaning of the task in which you have involved me, exceeds all my preconceptions, and it is teaching me to extend myself beyond what I thought was possible for me. For this I thank you."[36]

Rothko's artistic achievement indeed culminates in the paintings exhibited inside The Rothko Chapel in Houston, and we shall later elaborate on their specific relationship to the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting. However, before our comparative analyses commence, we should emphasise that there is a plethora of meaning in Rothko's works of the classic period, and the observed Late Byzantine aspects in this chapter should be understood as one important facet of a highly multifaceted artistic achievement.

The first significant scholarly mention of the relationship of Rothko's work to Byzantine aesthetics was made by Clement Greenberg in his essay entitled *Byzantine Parallels*, which was written in 1958 and included in Greenberg's *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* – published in 1961.[37] At the end of the *Byzantine Parallels*, which since its publication made history in Modern art criticism, Greenberg points out the fact that both in Byzantine and in modernist art, the distinction between the literal and the transcendent tends to get blurred:

"The Byzantines dematerialised firsthand reality by invoking a transcendent one. We seem to be doing something similar in our science as well as art, insofar as we invoke the material against itself by insisting on its all-encompassing reality. The Byzantines excluded appeals to literal experience against the transcendent, whereas we seem to ex-

[36] Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Taschen, 2003), 73.

[37] In this essay Greenberg states: "Neither Byzantine nor modernist art has rested with the mere dismantling of sculptural illusion. Byzantine painting and mosaic moved from the beginning toward a vision of full color in which the role of white-and-dark contrast was radically diminished. In Gauguin and in Late Impressionism, something similar had already begun to happen, and now, after Cubism, American painters like Newman, Rothko and Still seem almost to polemicize against value contrasts. They attempt to expel every reminiscence of sculptural illusion by creating a *counter-illusion of light alone* – a counterillusion which consists in the projection of an indeterminate surface of warm and luminous color in front of the actual painted surface." Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, (Beacon Press, 1961), 169.

clude appeals to anything but the literal; but in both cases the distinction between the firsthand and the secondhand tends to get blurred. When something becomes everything it also becomes less real, and what the latest abstract painting seems to harp on is the questionability of the material and the corporeal. A radically transcendental and a radically positivist exclusiveness both arrive at anti-illusionist, or rather counter-illusionist, art. Once again, extremes meet."[38]

Upon its publication, Greenberg's view that the experience of the transcendent in Byzantine art is detectably related to the experience of the literal in modern art, was regarded as revealing. In more recent years, other scholars have also linked Rothko's work to medieval and early Christian art. For example, John Gage points out that it is likely that Rothko was influenced by the 8th century manuscripts which contain the commentary by the Spanish priest Beatus.[39] More particularly, Gage observes that it is likely that Rothko was among the New York painters who looked at the Beatus manuscripts[40] with particular interest, and that he adapted "their stacked coloured bares (see *image 11*) as a background for his own figurations in his surrealist works and their highly saturated palette of reds and yellows, greens and purples, for his mature style."[41] Additionally, in one of the footnotes of the same essay, Gage points out that: "There is an even more Rothko-like treatment of banded color, this time with soft contours, in the image of Chaos in a twelfth-century Byzantine Octateuch in the Vatican Library (Vat. Gr. 746 fol. 19v)."[42]

Also, there is a possibility that Rothko, in spite of the fact that he migrated from Russia to United States when he was barely ten, kept a vivid memory of the exuberant colours of Russian (Byzantine-style) icons, as well as of their geometric simplicity, and that, combined with his subsequent influences, over the decades of his maturing, this memory gradually surfaced in his painting and reached its climax in the works of his classic period.

Another, somewhat more probable hypothesis would be that, due to the contact with Medieval art, which he certainly had during his travels to Europe, Rothko became particularly inspired by its non-naturalistic forms, its non-naturalistic colour-palettes, its liking of the geometrical arrangement, and its overall tendency towards abstraction. Of course, the reality might have it that it was Rothko's childhood memories of icons from

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[38] Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, (Beacon Press, 1961), 169–170.

[39] John Gage, "Rothko: Color as Subject," in *Mark Rothko,* ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 259–260.

[40] Two of the surviving Beatus manuscripts are in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.

[41] John Gage, "Rothko: Color as Subject," in *Mark Rothko,* ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 260.

[42] Ibid, 261.



**11.** Folio from the Beatus of Liebana Commentary on the Apocalypse, *The Great Whore of Babylon*, c.950, The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, m.644, fol.194v.

Russia and his later mature interest in Byzantine art, that have together significantly contributed to the forming of his classic style. In any case, whatever the precise proportion between the Medieval, Russian-Byzantine and Byzantine inspirations may be, we undoubtedly have substantial grounds to undertake an assessment of a deeper and less concerned with formalistic aspects parallel between Rothko's abstraction of the classic period and the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting.

Moreover, we should note here that the significance of individual formal elements in Rothko's work has been quite studiously addressed in a publication by the National Gallery of Art (Washington) and Yale University Press.[43] Therefore, through the visual demonstrations and analyses included in the second part of this chapter, and with respect of the formal elements being already addressed at considerable depth, our enquiry into the Late Byzantine aspects of Rothko's work aspires to bring to light certain phenomena which have not been studiously addressed in the past.

We must mention here one of Rothko's truly revealing claims. As noted by Gage, the objective of creating scarcely definable tones in depth by the layering of several paints,

[43] Jeffrey Weiss, et al. *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998). This publication includes the following four essays: *Rothko: Color as Subject* by John Gage, *Rothko's Dark Paintings: Tragedy and Void* by Barbara Novak and Brian O' Doherty, *Material and Immaterial Surface: The Paintings of Rothko* by Carol Mancusi – Ungaro, and *Rothko's Unknown Space* by Jeffrey Weiss.

was defined by Rothko as the creation of "inner light."[44] Gage also states that in this particular respect Rothko was almost alone among his contemporaries.[45] Our view is that the above mentioned process of creating fine tones in depth by the layering of several paints is a phenomenon in Rothko's painting whose origin is at least in part Byzantine. In Byzantine painting, the gradual application of the various fine tones of colour, as well as the concept of inner light, are standard features, and thus, Rothko's definition of "inner light" in his own work might easily be a borrowed one – or one that owes to a Byzantine influence.

When we consider Greenberg's reference to a relationship between Rothko and Byzantine art, as well as his earlier cited observations of the similarity between Byzantine and Modern art, Rothko's Jewish upbringing in Orthodox Russia,[46] his later fondness of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the fact that he read Dostoevsky, arguably the most prominent of all Christian Orthodox writers of the more recent past, and then look at The Rothko Chapel[47] shown in *image 71,* or *The Rothko Room* in the Tate Gallery (*image 74*), we begin to understand just how necessary a particularly theological reading of Rothko's aesthetics is.

Undoubtedly, as a prerequisite for a well-grounded theological reading, on the one hand, we must not drift away from the visuality, and even tactility, of Rothko's work, while on the other, we are required to gradually distance ourselves from its purely formal aspects. Therefore, our main hypothesis in the following part of this chapter is that within such a process of the observer's disengagement with the strictly formal aspects, the parallel between Rothko's classic works and the numinous effect in examples of Late Byzantine painting, acquires a distinct theological dimension. This theological dimension to a notable extent corresponds to the mysticism of the Orthodox Christian theology, as well as to the hesychast experience in particular.

In order to proceed and expand on these phenomena, in respect to methodology, besides the comparative analyses of composition, form, and colour (of examples of Late Byzantine painting and those of Rothko's classic style), as well as visual demonstrations, our overall approach in this chapter could be defined as the approach of *theological aes-*

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[44] John Gage, "Rothko: Color as Subject," in *Mark Rothko,* ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 249.

[45] Ibid.

[46] It is noted in Rothko's biography that during his childhood in Russia, he attended *cheder* (the Hebrew school at a synagogue). See the chronology of Rothko's life compiled by Jessica Stewart and included in: Jeffrey Weiss, et al. *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 333.

[47] Rothko committed suicide on the 25th of February 1970, and one year later, on the 27th of February 1971, the Rothko Chapel was dedicated as an interdenominational chapel.

*thetics* – in many ways similar to that defined by John Panteleimon Manoussakis in his doctoral thesis.[48] More particularly, Manoussakis deliberately avoids the conventional usage of the term "aesthetics" and uses the word in its original Greek sense: *aisthanomai*.[49] However, given that this is the meaning that the term "aesthetics" has in Kant's first *Critique*, Manoussakis provides the following explanation of the way in which his theological aesthetics differs from Kant's aesthetics:

"In the very beginning of that section of *The Critique of Pure Reason* entitled 'Transcendental Aesthetics,' Kant defines 'aesthetics' as 'sensibility,' that is, 'the capacity (receptivity) for receiving representations through the mode in which we are affected by objects' (A19). Following Kant's definition, then, we could describe Theological Aesthetics as precisely that field which Kant's 'Transcendental Aesthetics' had always excluded: that field that would consider God as a *possible* 'object' of experience (B73). A field that would explore the possibility of God to be given; an 'intuition' of God, if you like – be it maximalistic or minimalistic – an intuition that would not be immediately paired with understanding to produce concepts, but rather, it will leave behind whatever concepts understanding has formed in order to relocate the encounter with God in this *capacity* to *receive* – a capacity performed by our senses."[50] Thus, through the adherence to the above formulated *theological aesthetics*, in continuation of this chapter we shall aim to interpret a deeper level of a Byzantine-like theological content of Rothko's paintings of the classic period.

## On the Hybrid-Byzantine Light in Rothko's Colour

"In Byzantium, for a period of one hundred and eighteen years, the exercise of plastic realisations was forbidden by Christian law, and the destruction of – that is, vandalism against – the great artistic productions of that era, as well as the destruction of the Hellenistic sculptures which previous emperors had revered and enshrined, was considered an act in the service of God. The Turks, from another quarter, whitewashed the beautiful frescoes and pulled down the mosaics in the great church of Sophia."[51]

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[48] John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetic*, (Indiana University Press, 2007).

[49] The term aesthetics is of Greek origin: *aisthisi* (αίσθηση) translates to sense, whereas *aisthanomai* (αισθάνομαι) literally means: I feel – by the means of the senses. See: John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetic*, (Indiana University Press, 2007), 2.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, edited by Christopher Rothko (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 7.

The above citation, from the chapter entitled *Art as a Natural Biological Function*, is one of numerous well-informed references that Rothko made to Byzantine art in his posthumously published book, entitled: *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*. In this book he also makes frequent mention of Giotto – a big inspiration throughout his entire development. Further, Rothko's three trips to Europe (1950, 1959, 1966) were realised during the classic period of his artistic career, and during each of these trips, besides other European countries, Rothko visited Italy. In his second trip (with his wife Mell and daughter Kate) he traveled to Pompeii, where he felt a deep affinity between the wall-paintings in the Villa of Mysteries and his own works.[52] During the same trip he also stopped at Paestum, Rome and Tarquinia and viewed the Etruscan murals, and was also impressed in Florence by Michelangelo's Laurentian Library and Fra Angelico's murals in the convent of San Marco.[53] In view of the knowledge of Byzantine art that Rothko displayed in his earlier mentioned book, and in view of the deep affinity that he felt between his work and the Pompeian paintings in the Villa of Mysteries, in the following paragraphs we shall discuss the possible influence that the Byzantine concept of inner light might have had on Rothko's classic works.

Firstly, the transcendent in Rothko's work can most immediately be understood as a Byzantine influence if we focus on how, in his classic pieces, the light is insinuated through colour. Still, colour is the least explored area of Rothko's work, but also the most demanding of all. The fact that throughout his artistic development Rothko reduced his canvases to that which can conditionally be termed as absolute colour, is by no means an indication that colour was his focal concern. Rothko himself repeatedly claimed that he is "no colourist."[54]

As pointed out by Gage, Max Doerner's book entitled *The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting, with Notes and Techniques of the Old Masters* (1921) had been published in an English translation in New York, in 1934, and became popular in the circle of abstract expressionists.[55] Rothko's use of traditional materials and techniques, such as the grinding of his own pigments and the use of a variety of egg tempera, is thought by

[52] See the chronology of Rothko's life compiled by Jessica Stewart and included in: Jeffrey Weiss, et al. *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 342–349.

[53] See the chronology of Rothko's life compiled by Jessica Stewart and included in: Jeffrey Weiss, et al. *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 346.

[54] Rothko is quoted to have said this by many scholars. For example, see John Gage's citation of Rothko's statement in his essay entitled *Rothko: Color as Subject*, included in: Jeffrey Weiss, et al. *Mark Rothko* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 247.

[55] John Gage, "Rothko: Color as Subject," in *Mark Rothko,* ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 249.

Gage to be influenced by Doerner's aforementioned book.[56] It is of particular interest that Doerner discusses the concept of the "inner light" by examining Titian's technique, where he also associates Titian's gradual buildup of many glazes with Rembrandt.[57]

As we have mentioned earlier in this chapter, Rothko claimed that in his own work, the objective of creating scarcely definable tones in depth, which were achieved by the layering of several paints, was the creation of "inner light."[58] Whether Rothko, who felt particularly close to Rembrandt, as well as to Turner, was also familiar with the concept of inner light in Byzantine or Russian-Byzantine painting, is a question of immense significance for the concerns of our topic in this chapter. Accordingly, later in this chapter we shall refer to the selected visual material and assess the similarities and analogies between the concept of inner light in Rothko's works of the classic period and its equivalent in Late Byzantine painting.

As has been observed, white was used abundantly even in the darker paintings of Rothko's final years.[59] In the early phase of his artistic development, watercolour was Rothko's preferred medium, and Gage observes that Rothko's method of creating inner light owes partly to his practice in watercolour.[60] As a basic point of comparison, a noteworthy characteristic of Byzantine fresco painting is that it is a watercolour-like technique, applied on fresh mortar, where the effect of the inner light is achieved through gradually adding white to the colour-mixture of each of the distinct (and slightly transparent) succeeding layers. Also, the surface of the fresh mortar absorbs the colours in such a manner that they become notably paler, which also contributes to the ethereal effect of the inner light, often observed in Byzantine frescoes. Rothko's grinding of his own pigments and the use of a variety of egg tempera are also aspects common to Byzantine painting – as well as the fact that he liked to prepare his canvases with rabbit-skin glue (as rabbit-skin glue is also used in Byzantine portable icons).[61]

Further, the following observation by Gage unassumingly indicates a possibility of a Byzantine influence in terms of Rothko's idiosyncratic usage of white: "Rothko's practice of mixing white into his hues is noticeable from the 1930s onward, quite apart from white paintings such as *No. 7 (No.11)* of 1949 (National Gallery of Art, Washington) and

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid, 249–250.

[58] Ibid, 249.

[59] See: John Gage, "Rothko: Color as Subject," in *Mark Rothko*, ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 250.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Rabbit-skin glue is a material which is used in preparation of Byzantine portable icons – but in other traditions also.

the recurrent use of important white elements in many paintings of the classic period, where it was used as a colour in its own right, clearly hovering in front of the ground."[62] The example of the latter can be seen in *image 12*.



**12.** Mark Rothko, *No. 18*, 1951, oil on canvas, 207 x 170.5 cm (81.½ x 67.1/8), Munson – Williams-Procor Institute Museum of Art, Utica, New York.

Speaking strictly in terms of the procedure of painting, the fact that in his classic period Rothko experimented with the effect caused by the varied percentage of white in his hues, is a phenomenon evidently analogous to fresco, as well as egg tempera technique of Byzantine painting, where in both cases volume is rendered through the gradual adding of white into each of the succeeding layers of the applied colour-mixture, and where

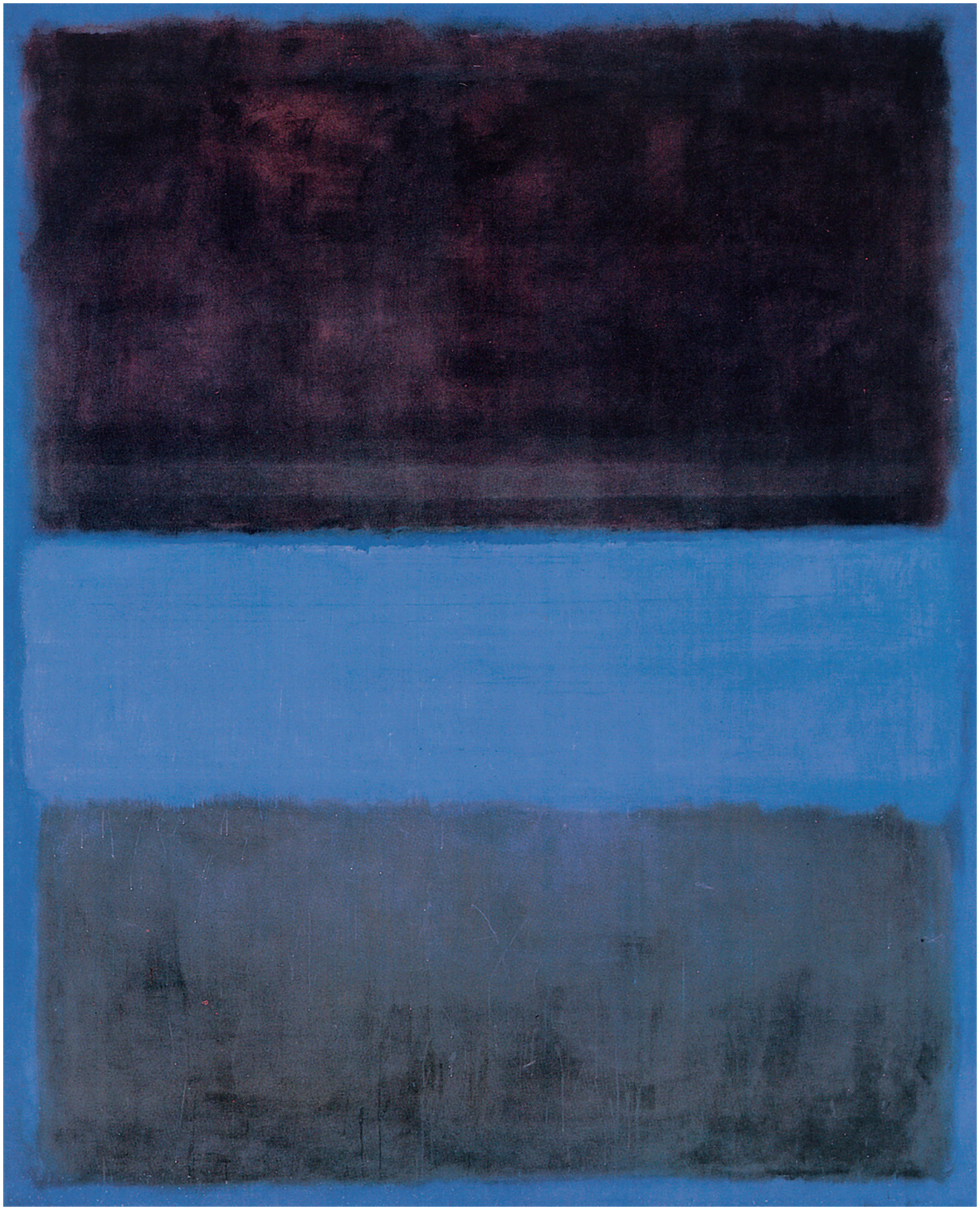
[62] John Gage, "Rothko: Color as Subject," in *Mark Rothko*, ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 250.

the last layer in rendering the features of saints, their robes, as well as architectural elements, is by rule the brightest. And also, the unnatural, inner light of the Byzantine figures, expresses the graceful presence of the *divine* which is believed to exist in every person: thus the technique serves a theological message. Therefore, we can understand through this comparison how Rothko's experimentation with white could be understood as a Byzantine inspiration. In other words, we can understand what Rothko meant by saying that he is "not a colourist" precisely through his usage of white, and through his frequent specifications as well as a continuous dissatisfaction regarding the lighting of the rooms in which his work was displayed. It could be observed that the decades-long experimentation with white was instigated and nurtured by Rothko's inner, psychological search for a light which was not accessible in nature manifest but *elsewhere*.

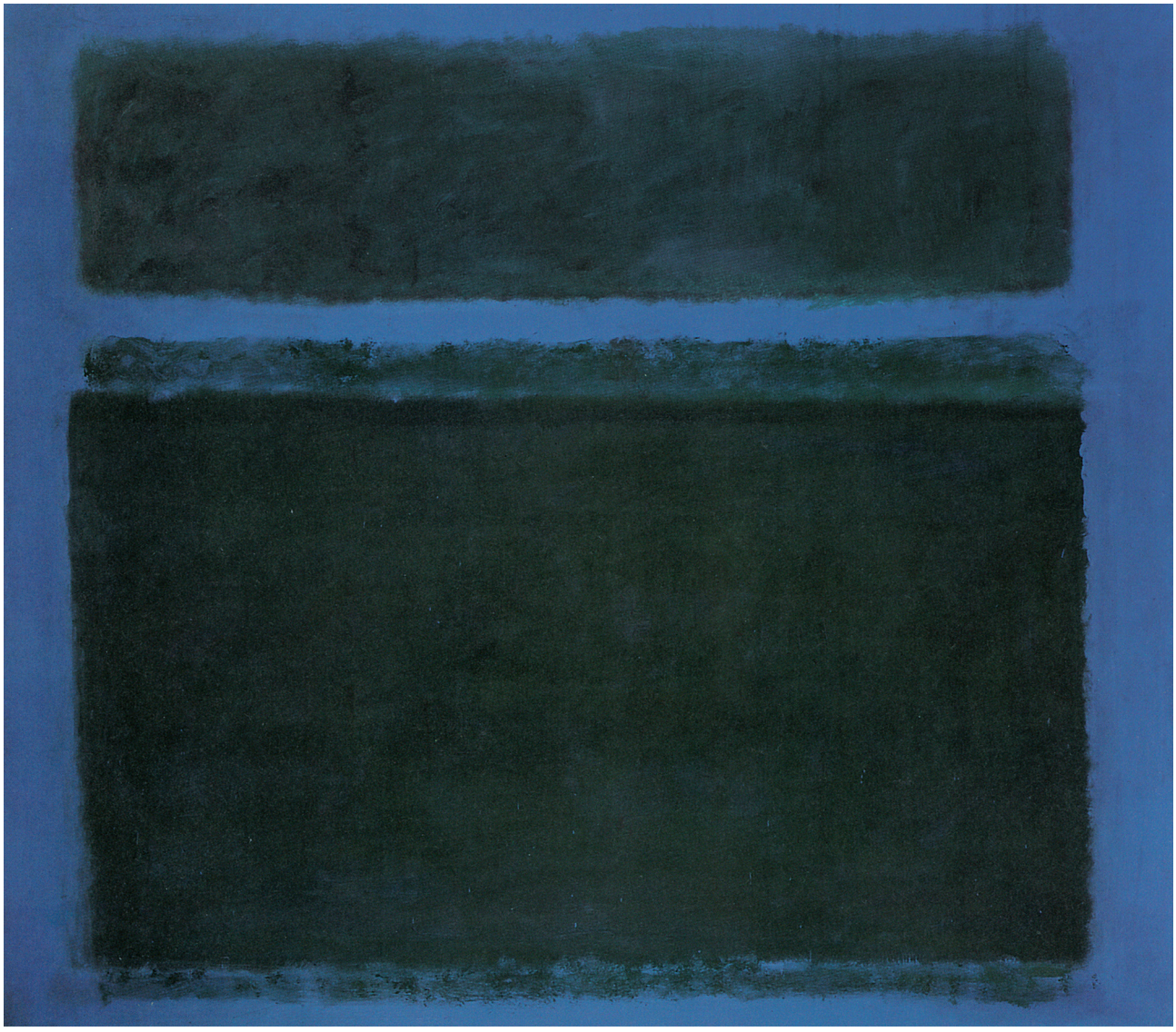
It is because of this that Rothko was so joyful when in 1964 he was commissioned by the de Menils to paint the pieces for The Rothko Chapel in Houston. He knew intuitively that this was to be his most comprehensive Nietzsche-like dialogue with the 'absent' *divine* – or his personal search for the Byzantine-like *uncreated light*. Consequently, as seen in *images 71* and *72*, the 14 large format paintings (3 triptychs and five individual pieces) in this chapel are not completely dark: the thinly applied dark blue layers of colour, which like in Byzantine painting, are applied gradually, not only permit the vision to enter but also entirely embrace the viewer by the spatial depth which they convey. Half of the paintings in The Rothko Chapel in Houston were finished as monochromes, while the other half were painted with borders as black rectangles. As it has been noted by Jacob Baal-Teshuva, both the entirely monochromatic treatment and the sharp borders of the black rectangles represented a novelty for Rothko.[63]

The initially intended architect of the then yet to be built chapel, Philip Johnson, was not responsive to Rothko's vision of the project, and consequently a new set of architects had to be employed, Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry, who acted according to Rothko's instructions.[64] Unfortunately, Rothko didn't live to see his work installed in the Chapel in Huston, though he was able to complete the large-size pieces and envisage their final effect within the space which was being created for them. Given that the paintings at The Rothko Chapel in Houston are the epitome of Rothko's artistic achievement, towards the end of the series of our following comparative analyses and visual demonstrations, we shall visually demonstrate the parallel between The Rothko Chapel and the painting of Late Byzantium.

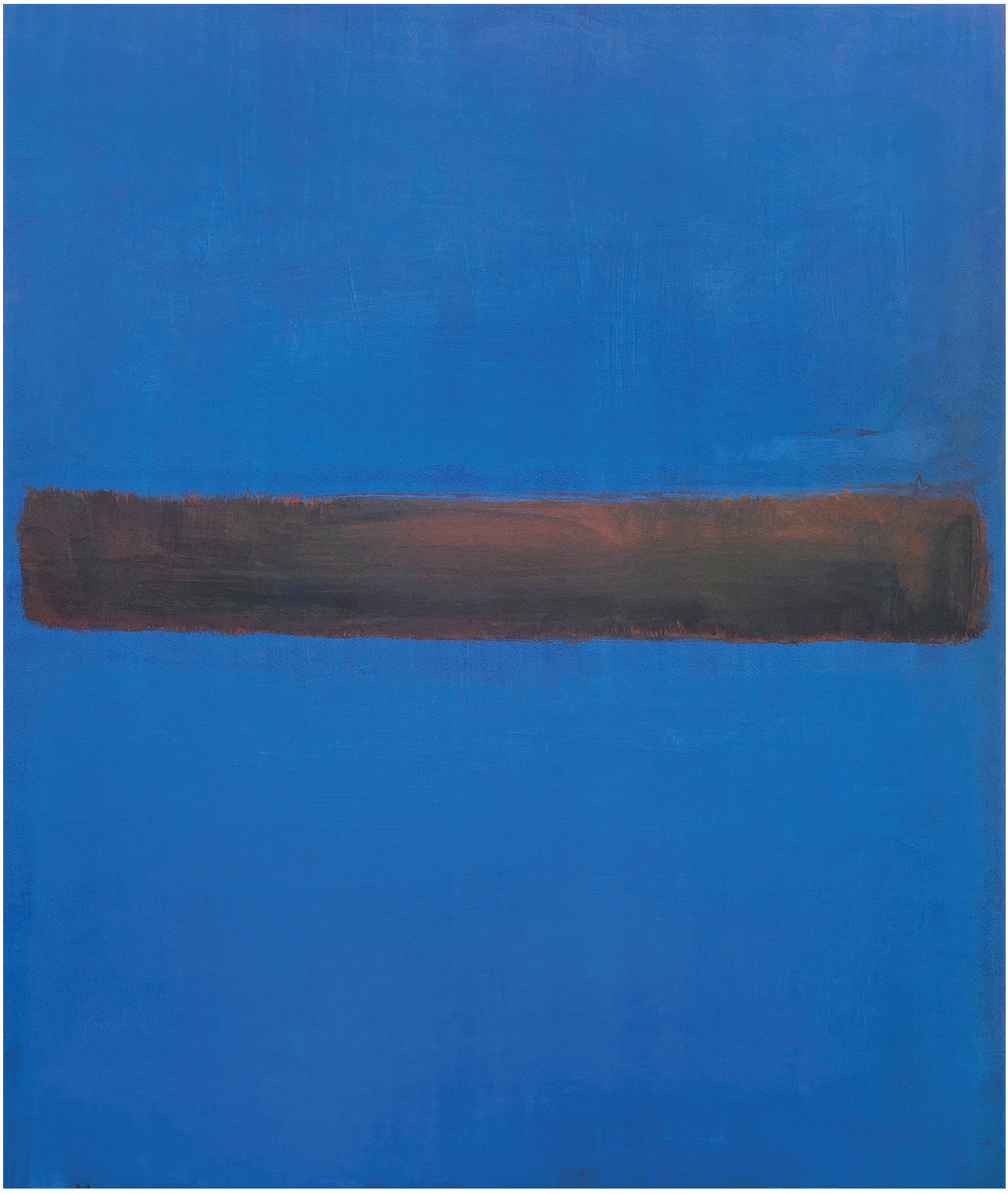
[63] Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Taschen, 2003), 74.
[64] Ibid, 73.



**13.** Mark Rothko, *No. 61 (Rust on Blue) (Brown, Blue, Brown on Blue)*, 1953, oil on canvas, 294 x 232.4 cm (115. ¾ x 91. ½), The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The Panza Collection.



**14.** Mark Rothko, *No. 15* (*Black Greens on Blue with Green Bar)*, 1957, oil on canvas, 261.6 x 295.9 cm (103 x 116.½), Collection of Christopher Rothko



**15.** Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, oil on paper on board, 123.2 x 102.9 cm (48.½ x 40.½), Courtesy Peter Blum, New York.

## Introduction to Visual Demonstrations

Besides the treatment of white and the concept of inner light, the stacked colour-bands of Rothko's classic compositions, as well as the soft brush-work characteristic of their edges, are also evocative of the kind of non-naturalistic space rendered in frescoes, icons and manuscripts of the Late Byzantine period. Further, we shall demonstrate that in Russian iconography of the same period, as well as in that of a later date, we find certain tones of colour which are strikingly similar to those characteristic of Rothko's classic paintings.

As the most appropriate introduction to the visual demonstrations that follow, we shall here include a citation of Rothko's own words. In a text included under a subtitle *Plasticity and Space* in his earlier mentioned book, Rothko discusses the "reality of *tactility*" and the "reality of *appearance*," and subsequently, perhaps quite unintentionally, provides us with the following insight into the significance of the Byzantine influences in his classic paintings:

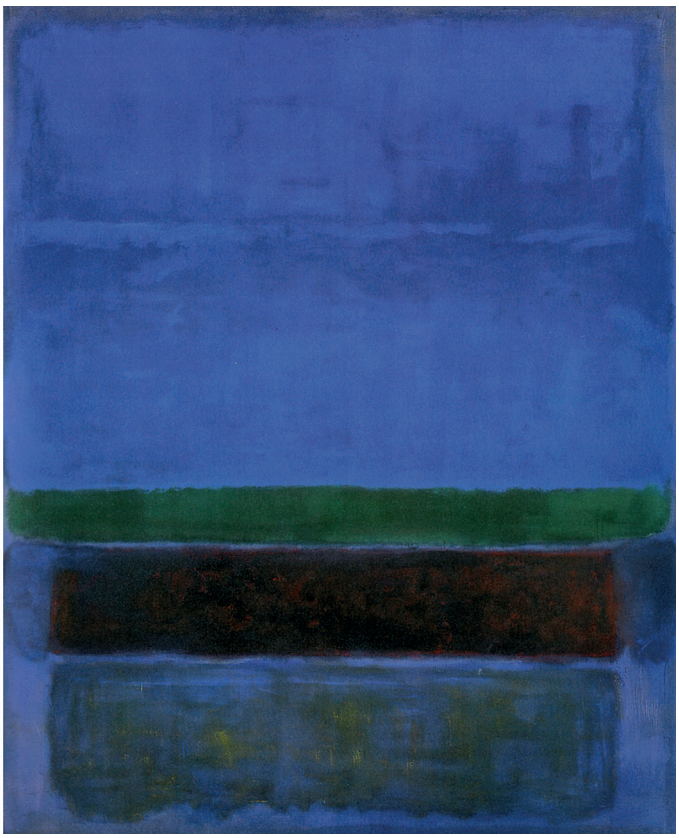
"Yet, should we go somewhat back in time and examine Giotto's forbears, the Byzantine painters, we shall find the notion of tactility carries further and can therefore illustrate our point. I doubt whether Berenson himself would have conceded the logical conclusions to follow. He wrote, however, before modern art had brought these painters back into repute.

These Byzantine painters were in the habit of embellishing their works with actual precious stones, and the halos which encircled the heads of their saints were of real gold. These stones, this gold, and the brilliant colors which were really an extension of the same idea and would have not been used if additional materials of great intrinsic and sensuous value were available, were not employed to convey a picture of the garments of the dignitaries pictured, but rather, in themselves, in their own costliness, to give a sense of the power and the sumptuousness of the church. Obviously this sensuousness could have been conveyed by illusory means, as witnessed in the representation of jewelry in either our portraiture or in the painting of the sumptuous costumes of the eighteenth century. To say that these Byzantine artists had not the skill would not be true, for they had the Coptic examples to learn from, where such skill is readily displayed. The only explanation was that they did not seek to create illusions but instead to directly convey their meanings."[65]

[65] This text is included in: Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, edited by Christopher Rothko (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 51.

# Visual Demonstrations





In this first diptych, we observe the similarity in the abundance of blue colour which is used in each case. In regards to other colours: the brown of the trees in the Byzantine fresco, shown on the left, is analogous to the band (stripe) of brown colour in Rothko's work on the right, and the same could be observed in relation to the green leafs in the Byzantine image and the band of green colour in Rothko's work. If the reader simultaneously covers the three figures in the Byzantine image and the upper area of blue colour

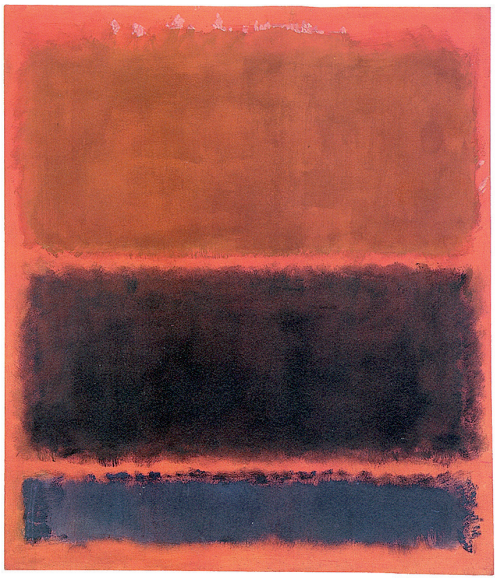
**Demonstration 1**

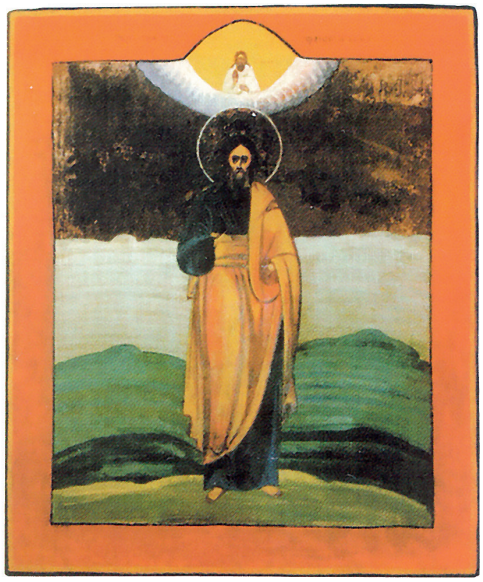
**16.** Left: Apostles, a detail of the scene of *The Ascension of Christ*, fresco, 1037–1056, St. Sophia, Achrida, FYROM.

**17.** Right: Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Blue, Green and Brown)*, 1952 (alternatively dated to 1951), oil on canvas, 261.6 x 211.5 cm (103 x 83.¼), Collection of Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia, United States.

in Rothko's work, they will observe just how much the tonal qualities as well as the specific colour-harmony in these two images correspond to one another. This, of course, is not the only example. Similar colour combinations could be observed in Rothko's classic paintings shown in *images 13, 14,* and *15*: all three of these works could be compared to the blue of the background in many Byzantine frescoes.







In this triptych, the warmth of colour of the three compositions – in spite of their obvious chromatic differences – speaks of a distant but nevertheless detectible relationship. Also, the almost entirely abstract bands of colour which represent the landscape in the icon on the right, are analogous to the horizontally arranged bands of colour in Rothko's work shown in the middle. The two Russian icons on the sides date to the 19th century, and, in the following analyses, we shall observe how, especially in terms of colour, Russian and Byzantine icons and manuscripts dating to the Late Byzantine period (13th -15th century), are much more comparable to Rothko's classic works.

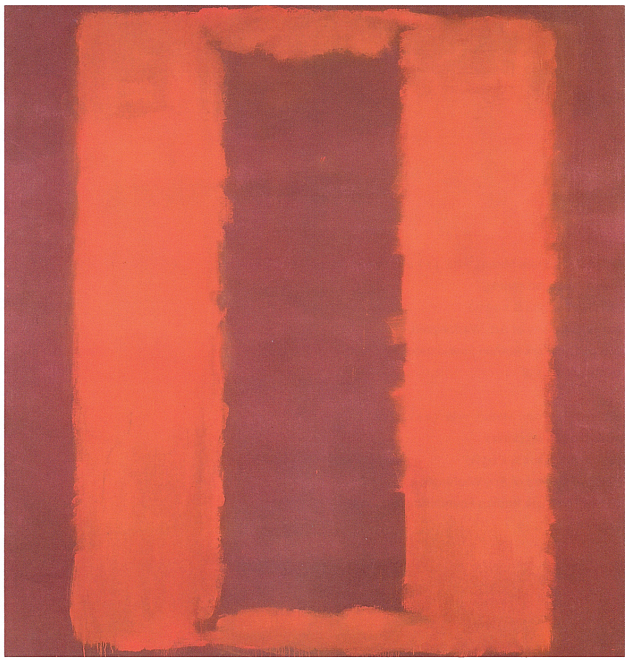
**Demonstration 2**

**18.** Left: *The Birth of Christ*, Russian icon, second half of the 19th century, 34.5 x 27 cm, Collection H. Villamo, Kauniainen, Finland.

**19.** Middle: Mark Rothko, *Brown, Black and Blue, No. 24*, 1958, oil on canvas, 176.5 x 152.4 cm (69.½ x 60), Private Collection.

**20.** Right: *Forefather Adam*, Russian icon, second half of the 19th century, 37 x 30.5 cm, Collection H. Villamo, Kauniainen, Finland.





When interviewed by John Fischer, Rothko said that Michelangelo's wall-paintings in the Laurentian Library (Florence) were a source of inspiration for his Seagram Murals.[66] The Seagram Murals, one of them shown on the right of the above diptych (*image 22*), were painted between 1958 and 1959 for the Four Seasons restaurant in then a newly finished Seagram Building on Park Avenue in New York. However, having felt that his work would not be appreciated by anyone who dined in such a pretentious place, Rothko returned the deposit of the commission and kept the work in hope of subsequently finding it a better home. The Seagram murals comprise the first related series of paintings and a first instance where Rothko created works for a specific interior space. We shall here consider to what extent the Seagram Murals could be related to traditional Russian iconography. At first consideration, in view of the above diptych, it could be argued that there are very few common aesthetic characteristics between a Russian icon and Rothko's Seagram Mural.

**Demonstration 3**

**21.** Left: *St John Climacus with Saints George and Blaise*, Russian icon, second half of the 13th century, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

**22.** Right: Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Seagram Mural)*, 1958, mixed media on canvas, 266.1 x 252.4 cm (104.¾ x 99.3/8), National Gallery of Art, Washington.

[66] Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Taschen, 2003), 62.



As demonstrated in the above diptych, when we extract the figure of St John Climacus from the 13th century Russian icon shown on the previous page and also exclude the other two saintly figures (St George and St Blaise), and place the figure of St John Climacus within the quadrilateral feature located in the centre of Rothko's abstract composition, on the one hand, the Russian icon turns into a Rothko-like composition (left), while on the other, Rothko's work becomes a Russian icon (the image on the right of the above diptych). Our view is that it is not a coincidence that the particular earthy palette used for the figure of St John Climacus is in absolute harmony with the palette used in Rothko's work. In view of this paradigm, one cannot help pondering whether there is a hidden extent of the influence that Russian iconography in particular had on Rothko's classic style.

**Demonstration 4**

**23.** Left: this image shows how a 13th century Russian icon of *St John Climacus* appears when all anthropomorphic representations are excluded and replaced with the colour of the background.

**24.** Right: this image shows the figure of St John Climacus (which was taken from its original Byzantine icon composition shown on the left of *demonstration number 3*) added to an abstract composition painted by Rothko.



**Demonstration 5**

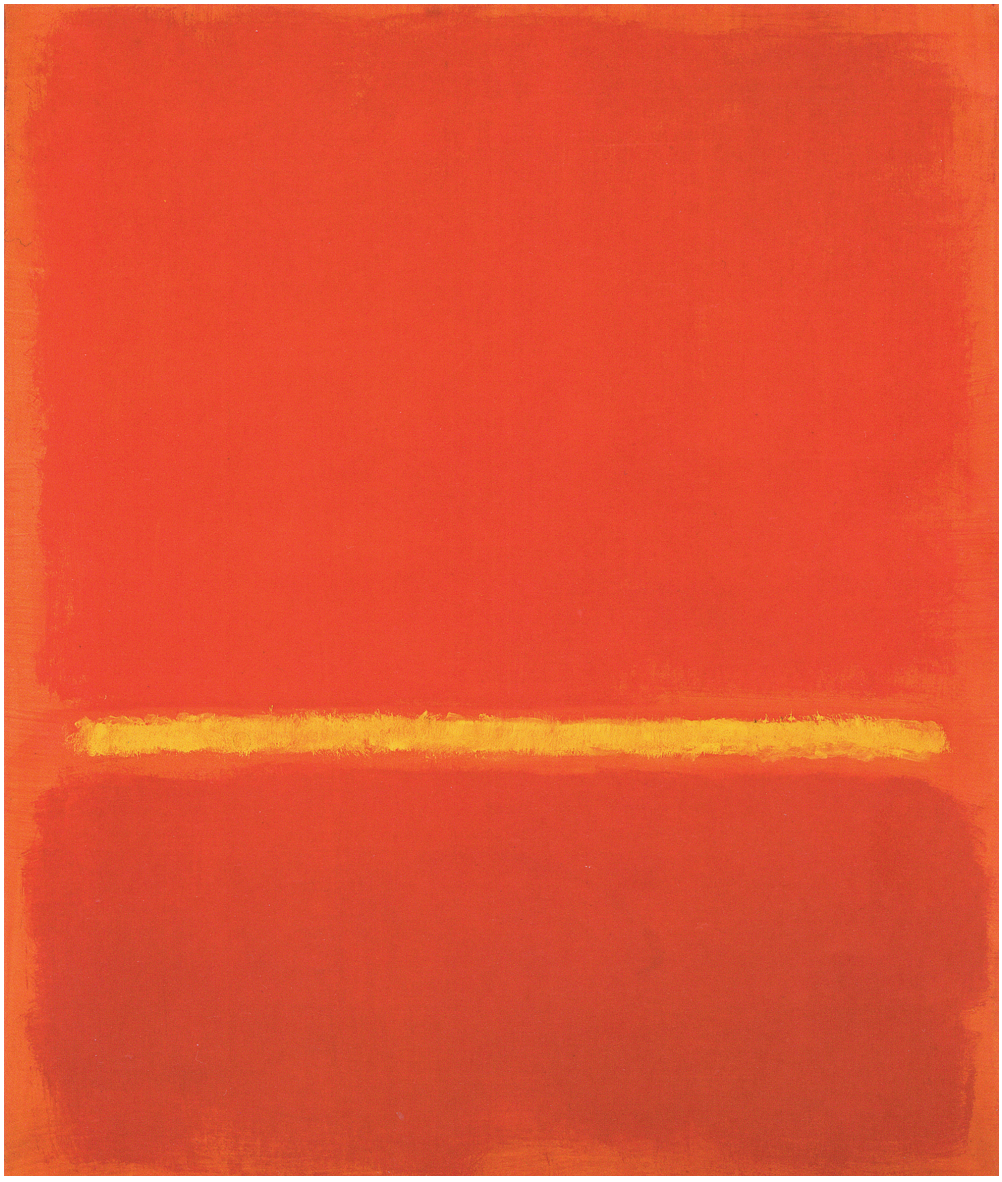
The three triptychs, top to bottom:

**25.** Our methodological intervention over a Russian icon of *St Nicholas* – late 13th and early 14th century, Novogorod, Hermitage, St Petersburg.

**26.** Our methodological intervention over a Russian icon of *St Elijah the Prophet* – 15th century, 75 x 57 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

**27.** Our methodological intervention over a Byzantine icon of *Christ the Savior (Golden Christ)* – first third of the 16th century, Byzantine (Greek) icon, from the church of Saint John in Achrida, FYROM.

The three triptychs presented on the previous page, convey just how close to Rothko's classic style we arrive, by simply excluding figures from Late Byzantine (and Russian) icons and replacing them with the colour of their backgrounds. For example, Rothko's work *Red, Yellow, Red* shown on this page in *image 28*, can particularly be interpreted as an abstract version of a traditional Russian icon, where the dominance of red over other colours is emphasised in order to create the mood of the Resurrection.



**28.** Mark Rothko, *Red, Yellow, Red*, 1969, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 123.2 x 102.9 cm, private collection.

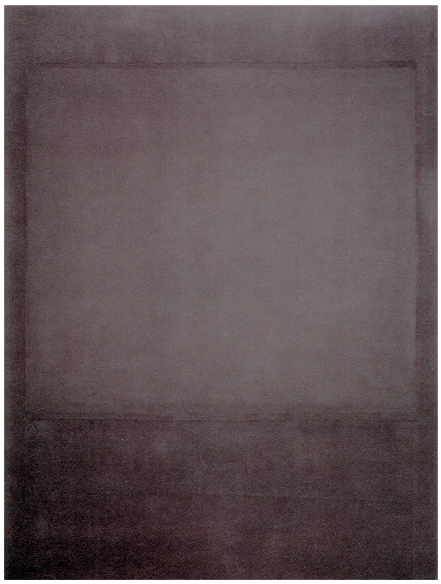


**29.** Mark Rothko, *Five Studies for the Harvard Murals*, c.1958–1960, tempera on coloured construction paper, various sizes, private collection.

Considerable insight into Rothko's inspiration by Russian and Byzantine iconography is also provided by his icon-like studies for Harvard Murals (c.1958–1960), shown in *image 29*. These studies were not painted with oil-colours, but like the Byzantine icons, they were most likely painted with egg tempera. Although it is uncertain whether these particular studies were actually painted with egg tempera or simply with tempera, it can be anticipated that, just like in his many other works, Rothko adhered to the former. And what is more interesting is that these are painted on already coloured, construction paper – which can easily be compared to the backgrounds of Late Byzantine compositions presented without figures in our visual demonstrations.

Of course, it is not only Rothko's bright-colour compositions that remind of Byzantine and Russian icons. On the next page, above left is another Russian icon from which we have eventually extracted the figural features (image below left), whereas above right is Rothko's work entitled *Black on Deep Purple*. In spite of the obvious chromatic difference and in spite of the fact that in this particular example of a Russian icon – unlike in some of the icons that we shall see later – there is no Rothko-like softness of the brushwork, the similarity of the overall mood created by the absolute treatment of colour is distinct. In the bottom right image of this page we have made an experiment by including the figural features of the late 16th century Russian icon within Rothko's classic composition: this image could be mistaken for a traditional icon in Russia of the 16th century.





**Demonstration 6** (above)

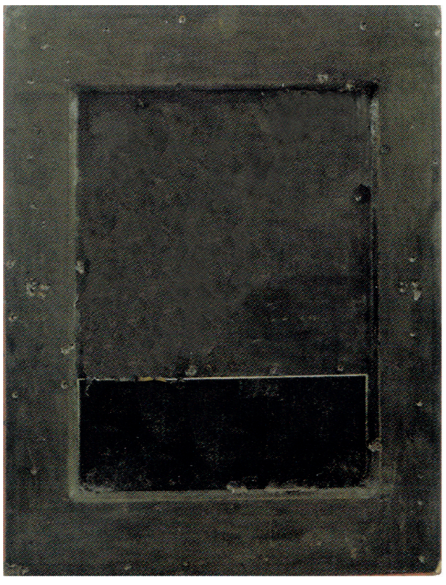
**30.** Above left: 16th century (1593) Russian icon of St Nicholas the Warrior, 29 x 22 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

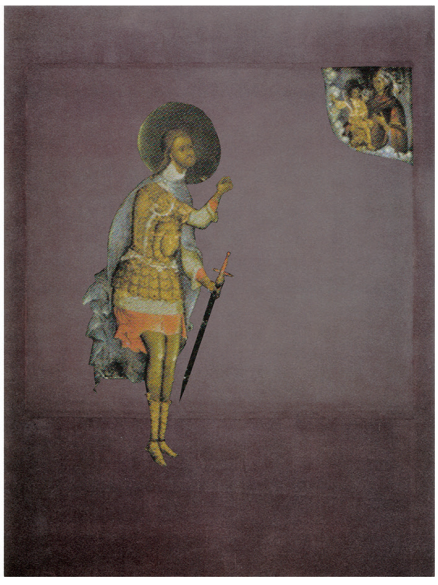
**31.** Above right: Mark Rothko *(Black on Deep Purple)*, 1964, mixed media on canvas, 266.7 x 203.2 cm (105 x 80), Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, Phoenix, Meryland.

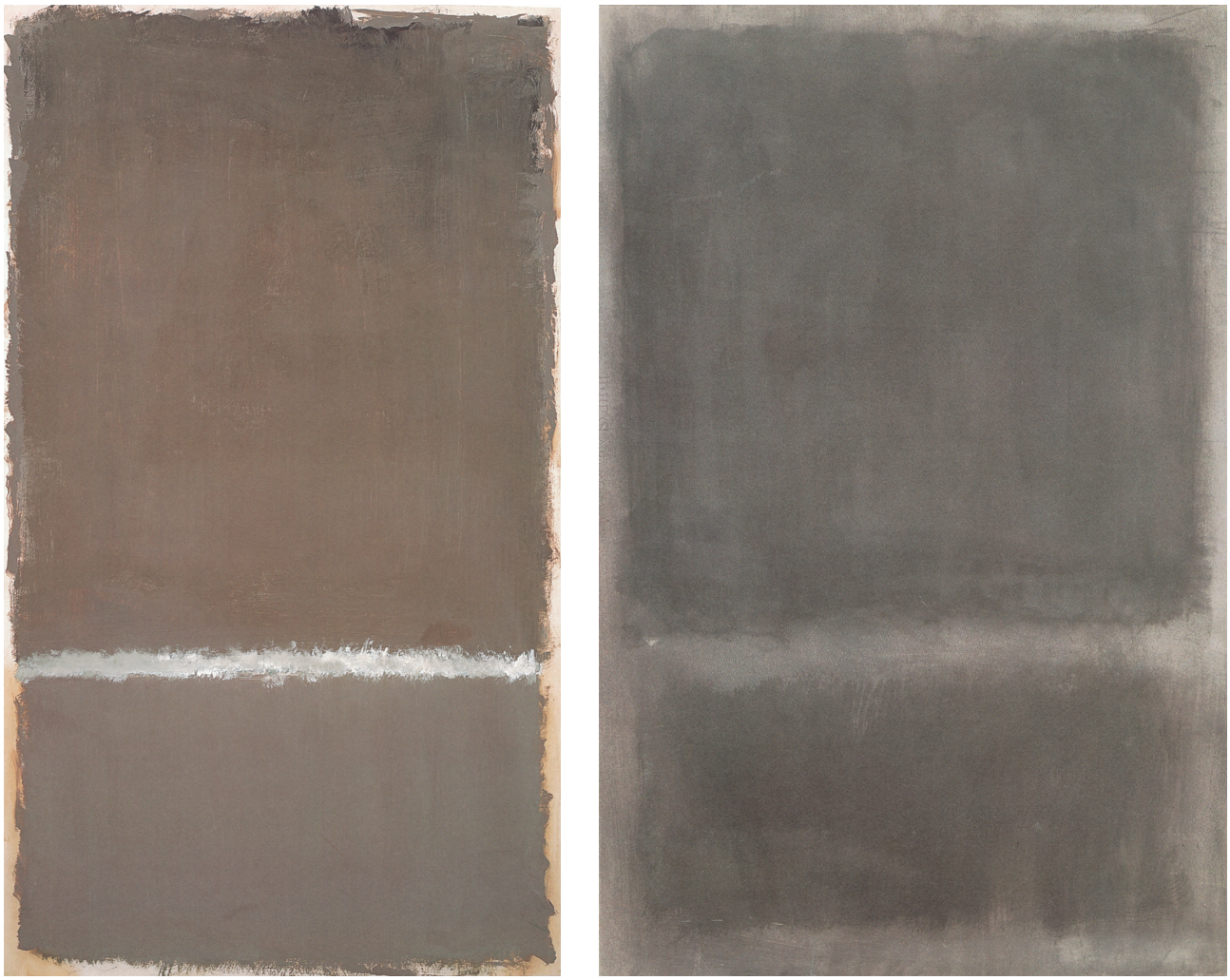
**Demonstration 7** (below)

**32.** Below left: 16th century Russian icon of St Nicholas the Warrior from which we have excluded the figure of St Nicholas and the corner-depiction of the Virgin with Child.

**33.** Below right: Mark Rothko's work *(Black on Deep Purple)*, 1964, where we have intervened by adding the figural forms from the adjacent Russian icon.



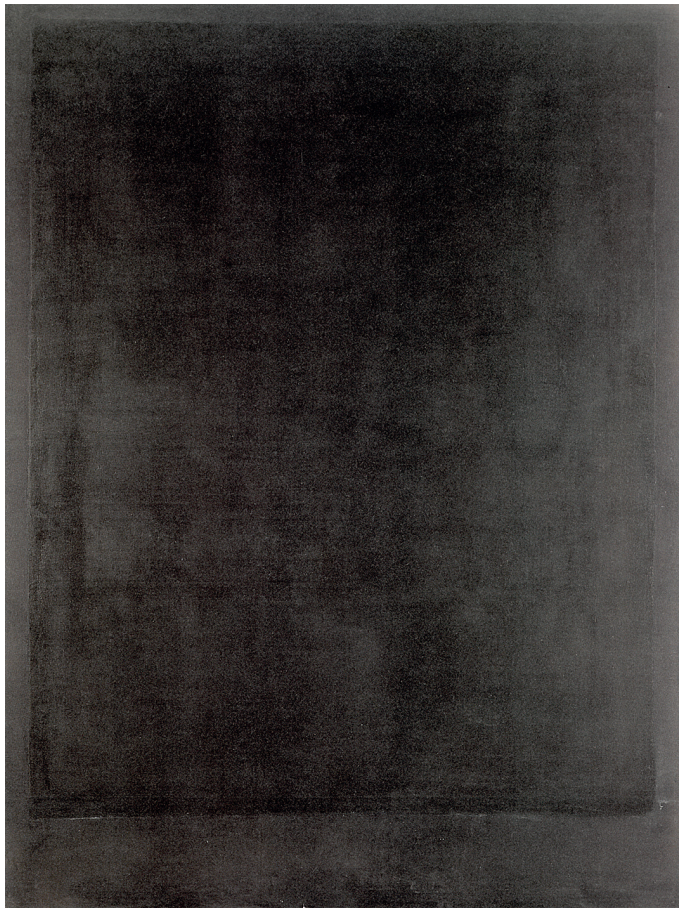


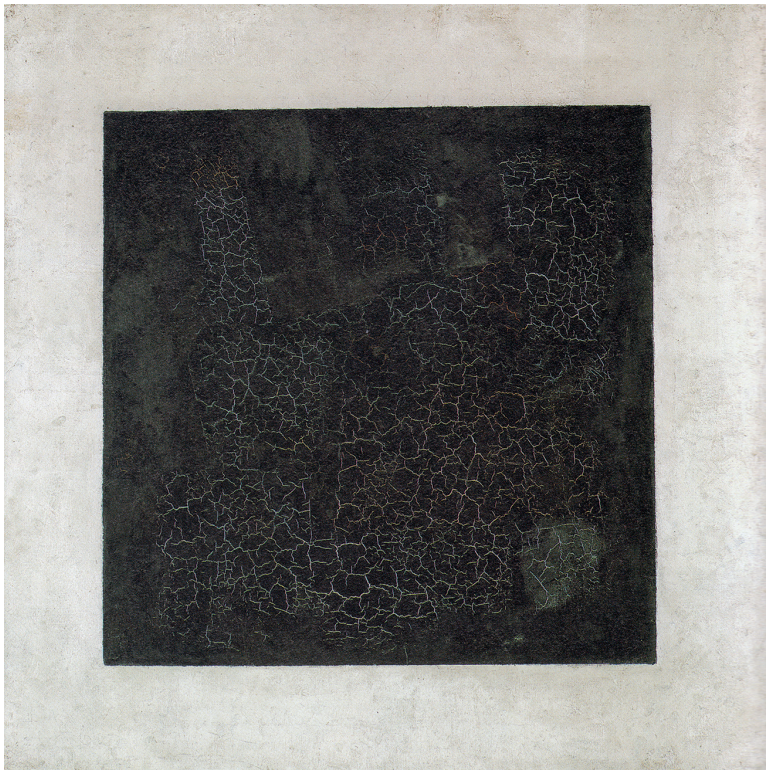


Mounting an already painted canvas-composition on wood was something that Rothko did quite often. At other times, just like in the work presented in *image 35*, he mounted his paper compositions on wooden boards or on wood fiberboard panels. These practices are comparable to the technique employed in Byzantine iconography, where the piece of canvas is glued on a wooden board and then prepared with a gesso (which includes the rabbit-skin glue).

**34.** Left: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 183 x 107 cm (72 x 42.1/8), Collection of Kate Rothko Prizel.

**35.** Right: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1968, acrylic on paper mounted on wood fiberboard panel, 103.2 x 67 cm (40.5/8 x 26.3/8), National Gallery of Art, Washington.





**36.** Left: Mark Rothko, *No. 8*, 1964, mixed media on canvas, 267.3 x 203.8 cm (105.¼ x 80.¼), National Gallery of Art, Washington.

**37.** Right: Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on canvas, 79.9 x 79.9 cm, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

In this diptych we observe a striking similarity of mood, a mood which in both compositions is produced through the optimised use of colour. To the left is a 12th century Byzantine icon of *St George*, with a yellow background, while to the right is Rothko's abstract composition painted in 1954.

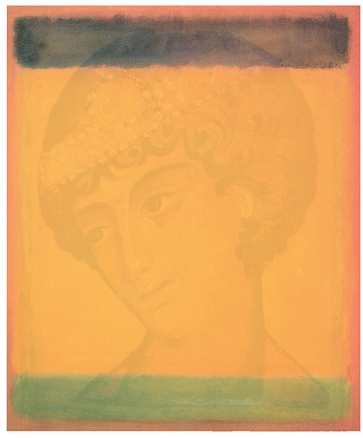


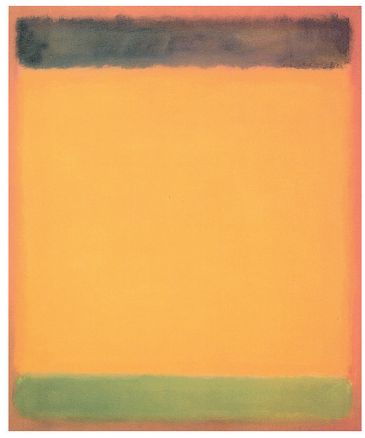


In this visual demonstration the head of *St George* is gradually dissolved into the absolute yellow of Rothko's work, and in the following diptych…









Above: **Demonstration 8**

**38.** Left: *St George*, Byzantine icon, end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century, 35,7 x 29 cm, St. Catherine Monastery on Sinai.

**39.** Right: Mark Rothko, Untitled (Blue, Yellow, Green on Red), 1954, oil on canvas, 197.5 x 166.4 cm (77.¾ x 65.½), Collection of Gisela and Dennis Alter.

Below: **Demonstration 9**

**40.** In this visual demonstration we are shown how the Byzantine icon of *St George* fades into Rothko's abstract composition shown on the far right.



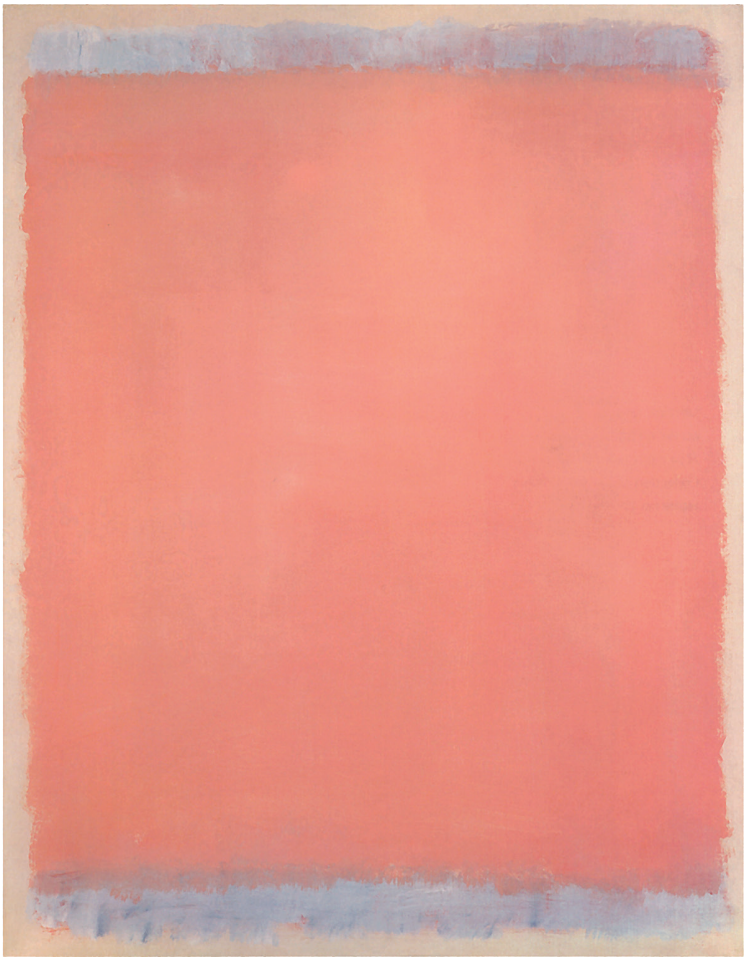
…we have taken the head of *St George* from its original composition and placed it over Rothko's abstract piece – where it sits comfortably in all respects. Most importantly, as can be observed in the image on the right, the colour tones of this Byzantine portrait entirely correspond to those used by Rothko. Thus, for example, we note that the band of green colour at the bottom of Rothko's abstract composition (image on the right) is equivalent to the particular green which frames the Byzantine icon (image on the left), while the band of dark blue colour at the top of Rothko's work is in harmony with the colour of the hair of *Saint George* (top of the image on the right). The Byzantine icon shown on the left of the above diptych – since we have excluded the portrait of *St George* from it – shares very common characteristics with some of Rothko's classic works: the dominating radiance and very specific bright tonal quality of colour, the narrow border of a different colour around the square monochromatic surface, and the approximate patchy rendering of edges. In spite of the exclusion of the portrait of *St George*, this Byzantine icon retains a sense of an enigmatic presence, and that, through the Rothko-like absolute treatment of colour – a colour which insinuates the inner light.

**Demonstration 10**

**41.** Left: The late 12th century Byzantine icon, with the portrait of *St George* excluded from it, and replaced with the background colour of its composition.

**42.** Right: Rothko's abstract composition *Untitled (Blue, Yellow, Green on Red)* with the late 12th century Byzantine portrait of St George attached over it.





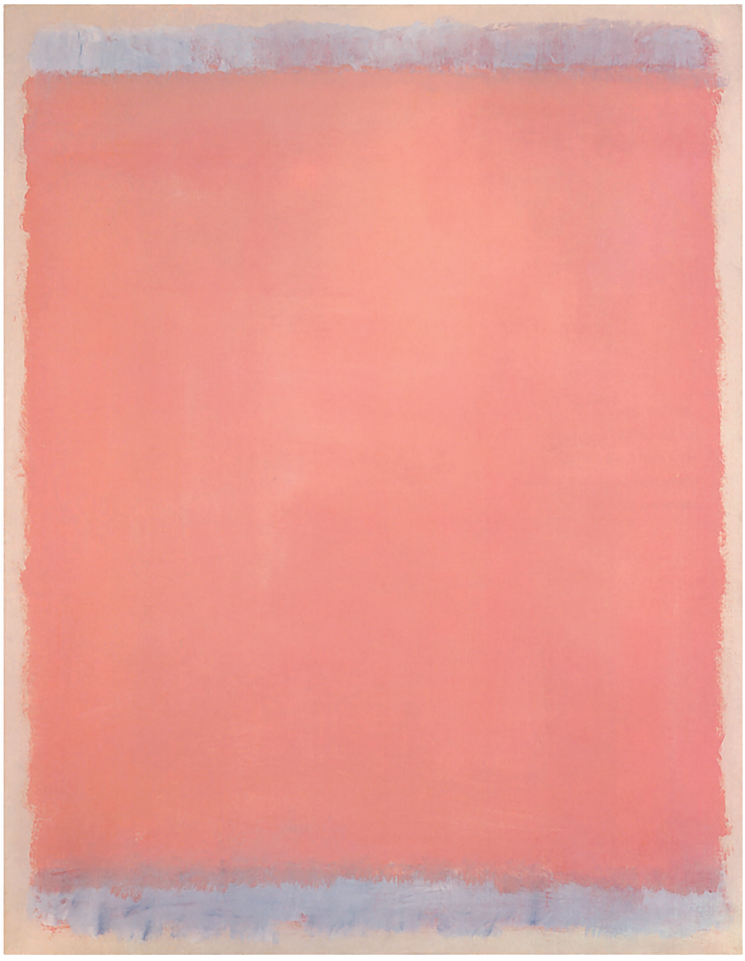
In the above diptych we compare the late 12th century Byzantine icon of *Annunciation* (on the left) with one of Rothko's classic works completed in 1969 (*Untitled*). This diptych serves as a necessary visual introduction to the following demonstration presented in the diptych of the next page.

**Demonstration 11**

**43.** Left: Byzantine icon of *Annunciation*, end of 12th century, 61 x 42.2 cm, St. Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai.

**44.** Right: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 137.2 x 107.3 cm (54 x 42.¼), Collection of Christopher Rothko.



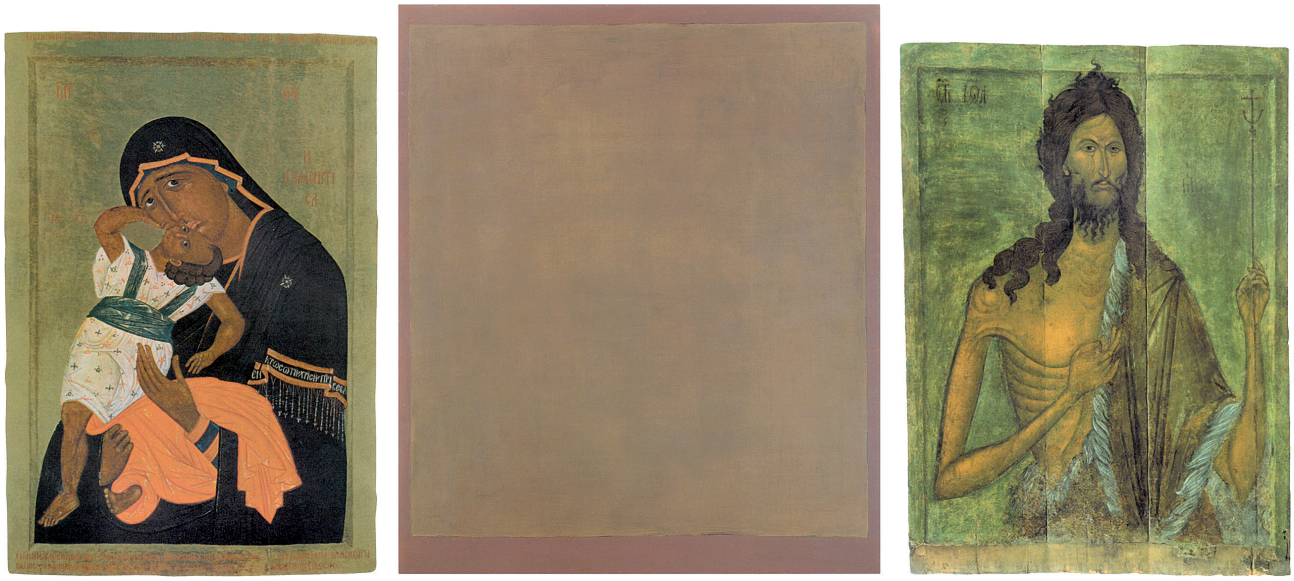


In the above diptych we again demonstrate how, when the figures are taken out from a Byzantine icon (image on the left), that which remains, the monochromatic surface distinctly framed by a complimentary colour, as well as (in this case) freely rendered colour bands at the top and bottom of the composition, could easily be mistaken for one of Rothko's classic works (such as the one on the right of this diptych).

**Demonstration 12**

**45.** Left: Byzantine icon of the *Annunciation* from which the figures and architectural features have been taken out and replaced with the golden colour of the background of the same composition.

**46.** Right: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 137.2 x 107.3 cm (54 x 42.¼), Collection of Christopher Rothko.



In the middle of this triptych is Rothko's untitled work of the classic period, where, when compared to the two Late Byzantine icons[67] on its sides, a peculiar *anti-absence* of the *divine* could be detected: this is an absence of figure (subject) compensated by the absolute presence of colour, one that echoes an otherworldly, numinous-kind of light. "Like a lamp in the fog" and "the mist of my dreams" are the words of a poem (which includes images of Heaven) written by Rothko; this poem is quoted by James Breslin in 1993,[68] and later, in 1998 by John Gage.[69] In Rothko's work included in this triptych, the square patch which is painted over a distinctly darker layer of previously applied colour, radiates the chromatic immediacy comparable to the background of the two Late Byzantine icons shown on the sides.

**Demonstration 13**

**47.** Left: *The Virgin Pelagonitisa*, Byzantine icon, 1421-1422, 135 x 95 cm, Art Gallery, Skopje, FYROM.

**48.** Middle: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1964 (alternatively dated to 1961), mixed media on canvas, 236.2 x 203.2 cm (93 x 80), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

**49.** Right: *St John the Forerunner*, Russian icon, 16th century, 124 x 87 cm, Ryazan State Regional Art Museum.

[67] The Russian icon of St John, shown on the right, dates to the early Post Byzantine period, but on the basis of its style it can certainly be regarded as Late Byzantine.

[68] See: James E.B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 43.

[69] John Gage has quoted the segments of this poem in his essay entitled *Rothko: Color as Subject*, which is included in: *Mark Rothko,* ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 254.









**Demonstration 14**

**50.** Top left: *Christ* (Euangelistario), Byzantine manuscript, c.1000, from the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai.

**51.** Top right: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1968, oil on paper, mounted on linen, 99.1 x 63.5 cm, private collection.

**52.** Bottom left: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1968, oil on paper, mounted on linen, 99 x 65.1 cm, Courtesy Waddington Galleries, London.

**53.** Bottom right: *The Transfiguration of Christ*, Byzantine manuscript, 1347–1355, National Library, Paris.

It is not a coincidence that the two of Rothko's works included in the above visual demonstration are oils on paper, mounted on linen. Rothko nurtured a liking of the qualities of texture, and of the refinement of the application of distinct colour layers, and this might well partly owe to his interest in Byzantine manuscripts and icons alike. In the two untitled works presented here (top right and bottom left), the bright yellow and the Byzantine-like blue stand as analogous to the gold and blue in two of the adjacent Byzantine manuscripts (top left and bottom right). In spite of its depiction of figures, the theme of the *Transfiguration* of the 14th century Byzantine manuscript shown on the bottom right, presents a particularly abstract vision of the uncreated light with which Christ shone at the point of his Transfiguration. In view of the above presented comparison, Rothko's subsequent turn to somber colours can be understood as a significant spiritual point of his personal transfiguration, one which is not to be identified with negativism but with theological profundity.

In the diptych presented on the next page, the colour as mood is in both examples a dominating aesthetic aspect, one which is charged with symbolism (*images 54* and *55*). In the 15th century Russian icon shown on the left, the crucified body of Christ is immersed in the darkness of his unjust condemnation and death – and this is symbolised by the absolute black colour of the sky area. In the same image, the almost orange and particularly warm red colour, which prevails on the robes of the surrounding figures below the crucified Christ,[70] delicately heralds his subsequent Resurrection. Accordingly, in Rothko's work on the right, the dark green in the upper part of the composition could be understood to reflect human mortality, or Rothko's inner experience of the tragedy of human existence, while the bottom part of warm orange colour could relate to the positive energy of life.

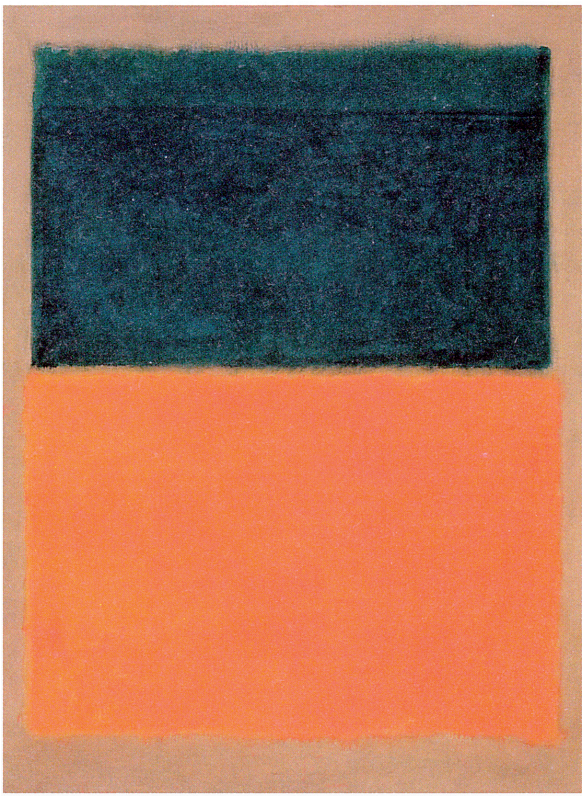
In view of this comparison, it should be emphasised that Rothko was no stranger to religious thematology, nor was he negative towards religious interpretations of his work. For example, Gage notes that Rothko "told the president of Harvard University [Nathan Pusey] in 1962 that his somber monumental triptych for the university was intended to convey Christ's suffering on Good Friday, whereas the brighter panels represented Easter and the Resurrection."[71] Jacob Baal – Teshuva notes that Rothko's religious interpretation of the triptych was aimed to counter Pusey's comment that the paintings were "very sorrowful," and that consequently, Pusey recommended that the board of trustees approve the paintings, which were hung in Rothko's presence in January of 1963.[72] Even if Rothko's religious interpretation of the Harvard triptych was entirely motivated, which in our view is doubtful, it still reflects Rothko's awareness of the fact that his work can be seen in such ways.

[70] As can be observed, only the robes of the lamenting Virgin are not of red colour, and are comparatively much darker. In this way, it is understood that among the depicted figures, the Virgin is the most affected by the tragic event.

[71] John Gage, "Rothko: Color as Subject," in *Mark Rothko,* ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 257.

[72] See: Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Taschen, 2003), 67–68.





**Demonstration 15**

**54.** Left: *Crucifixion*, Russian icon, 15th century, 88 x 60 cm, Sanok Historical Museum, Poland.

**55.** Right: Mark Rothko, *No. 16* (*Green and Red on Tangerine)*, 1956, oil on canvas, 237.4 x 175.5 cm (93.½ x 69.1/8), The Philips Collection, Washington, DC.



**56.** The Rothko Room, Phillips Collection, Washington, DC.





In the three examples presented in the above triptych we observe the same intensity of the expression of mood through colour and a relationship among the red nuances. In all three examples, the bright warm colour is positioned in the upper area and covers a larger amount of the composition, wherein the sense of Resurrection discreetly prevails over the sense of darkness. The darkness symbolised by the lower areas painted in dark colours, remains to exist as a tangible experience. Having previously discussed Nietzsche's influence in Rothko's painting, we can discern in Rothko's works above (left and right), how the Nietzsche-like notion of the dominance of darkness is combined with the Russian-Byzantine influence where the warm sense of Resurrection is dominant (and perhaps also combined with a liking of the Jewish, non-figurative artistic tradition). Also, we observe in the above presented Russian icon of the *Resurrection* (in the middle) how darkness (death and hell) is depicted under Christ's feet, whereas in the icon of the *Crucifixion* presented on the previous page, darkness is placed in the upper part of the composition, symbolising therein the dominance of tragedy – one that can aesthetically be related to Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy expressed in his book *The Birth of Tragedy*.

**Demonstration 16**

**57.** Left: Mark Rothko, *No. 14, Untitled*, 1960, oil on canvas, 289.6 x 266.7 cm (114 x 105), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

**58.** Middle: *Descent into Hell (Resurrection)*, Russian icon, second half of the 13th century, Palazzo Monmanari Gallery, Vicenza, Intesa Bank collection.

**59.** Right: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1953, tempera on paper mounted on board, 100.3 x 67.3 cm (39.½ x 26.½), private collection.

## The Late Byzantine Rothko

Based on the analyses in this chapter, we observe that in Rothko's works of the classic period, the particular aesthetic result of the unique combination of theological kind of influences does not simply amount to a notion of the tragic, nor to a notion of the mere absence of the *divine*, but rather, it amounts to the paradoxical *anti-absence* of the *divine* – one which is profoundly related to the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting. Thus, even when the *divine* seems absent, in Rothko's somber paintings, the intensity of that absence evokes a notion of a missing entity, which in itself confirms the existence of that same entity, and therefore also its invisible presence.

Ultimately, however tragic, Rothko's ascetic introspective contemplation of an enlightened existence which takes place *elsewhere*, a contemplation which is conveyed through his Byzantine-like inner light, can be identified with a yearning for the absolute *Other*, and thus, in our opinion, *divine otherness* is the key notion in view of Rothko's classic paintings. This particular understanding of the *divine* in Rothko's work could also be interpreted as a Byzantine – and particularly mystical – apologia to Nietzsche's atheism. Such an apologia could be summarised in the following way: God cannot be experienced as absence unless He truly exists.

One may even wonder whether Rothko was in fact familiar even with aspects of the tradition of mystical theology which throughout the centuries significantly influenced the mystagogical nature of Byzantine painting. We say this because certain core aspects of that theological discourse coincide with Rothko's mission to see the dim light within the dark void. For example, when in the 6th century Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite speaks of the divine *darkness,* he does not speak of ignorance, something that would place an emphasis on the necessity of intellectual kind of learning about God, but he understands this *darkness* as the Light which cannot be seen because it transcends human logic.[73] Therefore, the "*darkness* of God" implies that man's logic is limited, which is why the term *gnofos* (γνόφος), which Dionysius uses for *darkness* in this context and which was used before him in a like manner by Gregory of Nyssa, is an antithetic term that actually means *darkness of the light* (γνόφος τοῦ φωτός). More particularly, according to Dionysius, it is only by transcending the realm of logic that one can begin to ex-

[73] Διονυσίου Ἀρεοπαγίτου, *Ἐπιστολαί,* V, 162[1–3] (PG 3, 1073A): «Ὁ θεῖος γνόφος ἐστὶ τὸ 'ἀπρόσιτον φῶς', ἐν ᾧ κατοικεῖν ὁ θεὸς λέγεται, καὶ ἀοράτῳ γε ὄντι διὰ τὴν ὑπερέχουσαν φανότητα καὶ ἀπροσίτῳ τῷ αὐτῷ δι' ὑπερβολὴν ὑπερουσίου φωτοχυσίας.»

perience God as Light – otherwise He is experienced as *darkness*. Also, he teaches that this transcendental process of experiencing God as Light is itself endless. Such Byzantine theological ideas seem to correspond to Rothko's artistic achievement in a rather immediate way and it seems that the comparison is noteworthy even if – or precisely because – the correlation with Rothko's achievement is coincidental.

For our concluding visual demonstration in this chapter, consisting of 12 images, we have selected the Late Byzantine composition of *Resurrection* at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. This demonstration is designed as self-explanatory, but we shall here provide some basic explanations. As seen in the sequence of the following images, beginning from the original photograph of this fresco, shown in *image 60*, we have gradually excluded all figural features from it, starting with the figure of Christ (*image 61*), leaving finally only the dark blue colour of the sky (*image 68*). In continuation, as shown in *image 69*, we have divided the monochromatic surface into three parts – thereby making a triptych. We have then moved the middle section of that triptych slightly higher than the other two sections (*image 70*) and thereby arrived at a result strikingly reminiscent of Rothko's somber triptych in The Rothko Chapel shown in *image 71*.

The similarity of the colours is undoubted: a dark purplish-blue. And the parallel is clear: Rothko's reduction to a somber pallet is profoundly relatable to a deep blue Byzantine sky in the backgrounds of frescoes, especially when the latter is considered without the complimenting colours of the depictions of saintly figures and landscapes. Therefore, Rothko's somber paintings homed in The Rothko Chapel in Houston, could be interpreted as expressing a Late-Byzantine-like experience of the *divine*, an eschatological experience full of silence and exalted hope. The aesthetic result of our demonstration could also be compared to the overall atmosphere of The Mark Rothko Room in the Tate Gallery of London (*image 74*), as well as to Rothko's *Seagram Murals* displayed in the Rothko Room of the Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Chiba-Ken, Japan (*image 75*).

*Mystical Theology*, written in the early 6$^{th}$ century by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, which epitomises the mysticism of Eastern Orthodox theology, can be appropriately read during the observation of our last visual demonstration. Moreover, the final conclusion in both *Mystical Theology* and in our last visual demonstration (*image 70*), is very comparable to the aesthetic effect of somber paintings hung inside The Rothko Chapel in Houston (*image 71*). By surpassing all attributes that could be ascribed to the Cause of all things, the text *Mystical Theology* finally arrives at an enlightening truth, one which today consumes the viewer inside The Rothko Chapel, which is an enormous coincidence worth exploring.

However, at first glance it may seem that in the paintings of the Rothko Chapel in Huston, Rothko applied this apophatic method one-sidedly, solely as a method of negation or abstraction, much in the way *Mystical Theology* has historically been misconstrued in the West, whereas, as explained in our previous chapter, in the Orthodox Church the apophatic (negating) always simultaneously implies the cataphatic (affirming) methodology. For example, when in reference to the *divine* the term intangible (ἀνέγγικτο) is applied it means that the *divine* cannot be touched, which is the apophatic approach, but it also affirms that the divine is intangible and untouchable, which constitutes a cataphatic approach. The negation and affirmation are implied simultaneously by Dionysius, which is why when properly understood, his teaching does not lead to anti-iconic or iconoclast results. In his work at the Chapel in Huston, comparatively speaking, at first glance it could seem that Rothko adheres more to what constitutes the Western interpretation of the apophatic method, which entails solely a process of successive negation or abstraction. However, like his other classic works discussed earlier in this chapter, Rothko's paintings at the Chapel in Huston are far from iconoclast and are very much like abstract icons, precisely because a more careful consideration allows us to observe them as simultaneously apophatic (negating) and cataphatic (affirming). They also do indeed entail a dimmed embodied light. In this context, the reader is invited to read the fifth and last chapter of *Mystical Theology* in consecutive segments, as they are included beneath each of the successive images of our last visual demonstration (*images 60–70*):

"*That it that is the pre-eminent Cause of all things intelligibly perceived is not itself any of those things.*

Again, ascending yet higher, we maintain that it is neither soul nor intellect; nor has it imagination, opinion, reason or understanding; nor can it be expressed or conceived, since it is neither number nor order; nor greatness nor smallness; nor equality nor inequality; nor similarity nor dissimilarity; neither is it standing, nor moving, nor at rest; neither has it power nor is power, nor is light; neither does it live nor is it life; neither is it essence, nor eternity nor time; nor is it subject to intelligible contact; nor is it science nor truth, nor kingship nor wisdom; neither one nor oneness, nor godhead nor goodness; nor is it spirit according to our understanding, nor filiation, nor paternity; nor anything else known to us or to any other beings of the things that are or the things that are not; neither does anything that is know it as it is; nor does it know existing things according to existing knowledge; neither can the reason attain to it, nor name it, nor know it; neither is it darkness nor light, nor the false nor the true; nor can any affirmation or negation be applied to it, for although we may affirm or deny the things below it,

we can neither affirm nor deny it, inasmuch as the all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of Its absolute nature is outside of every negation – free from every limitation and beyond them all."[74]

In 1953 Rothko stated the following about his paintings: "Either their surfaces are expansive and push outward in all directions, or their surfaces contract and rush inward in all directions. Between these two poles you can find everything I want to say."[75] As a means to a visual epilogue of our final exploration, we have zoomed-in and photographed the portrait of Christ's figure in the composition of *Resurrection* at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople. This segment of the fresco is photographed as seen by the observer – within the given slightly dim afternoon light of the interior of the chapel (*image 76*). In view of this image, we are not certain whether Christ is emerging from or disappearing into the dimness of space: the viewer is separated from the painted surface by the indefinable volume of space – which becomes an integral part of the actual composition and evokes a puzzling kind of spatial interaction. The analogy to the peculiar atmosphere of this photograph is observed in Rothko's work shown in *image 77*, where we are not certain whether we are approached by or whether we sink into the strange *anti-absence* of the *absolute otherness*. In this sense, a number of Rothko's classic paintings can be understood as timeless pulsating portals which tend to absorb the viewer, reminding us therein of the Late Byzantine experience.

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[74] For the English translation of *Mystical Theology* see: http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/MysticalTheology.html For the original in Greek see:

*Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*: *Corpus Dionysiacum*, II. *De mystica thelogia*, hrsg. von G. Heil und A. M. Ritter, Patristische Texte und Studien 36, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1991, 139–150 (= PG 3, 997–1064).

[75] In his essay entitled "Rothko: Color as Subject," John Gage includes this citation. See: John Gage, "Rothko: Color as Subject," in *Mark Rothko*, ed. Jeffrey Weiss (Washington: National Gallery of Art, in association with New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 252.



**Demonstration 17**

**60.** Above: The beginning of our last visual demonstration: *Resurrection*, fresco in the conch of the apse of the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople, 14th century.

**61.** Below: The next phase of our last visual demonstration, showing the same fresco (*Resurrection*) without the figure of Christ: "*That it that is the pre-eminent Cause of all things intelligibly perceived is not itself any of those things.* Again, ascending yet higher, we maintain that it is neither soul nor intellect; nor has it imagination, opinion, reason or understanding; nor can it be expressed or conceived,..." (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)





**62.** The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "…since it is neither number nor order; nor greatness nor smallness; nor equality nor inequality; nor similarity nor dissimilarity;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)

**63.** The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "…neither is it standing, nor moving, nor at rest; neither has it power nor is power, nor is light; neither does it live nor is it life;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)





**64.** The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "…neither is it essence, nor eternity nor time;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)

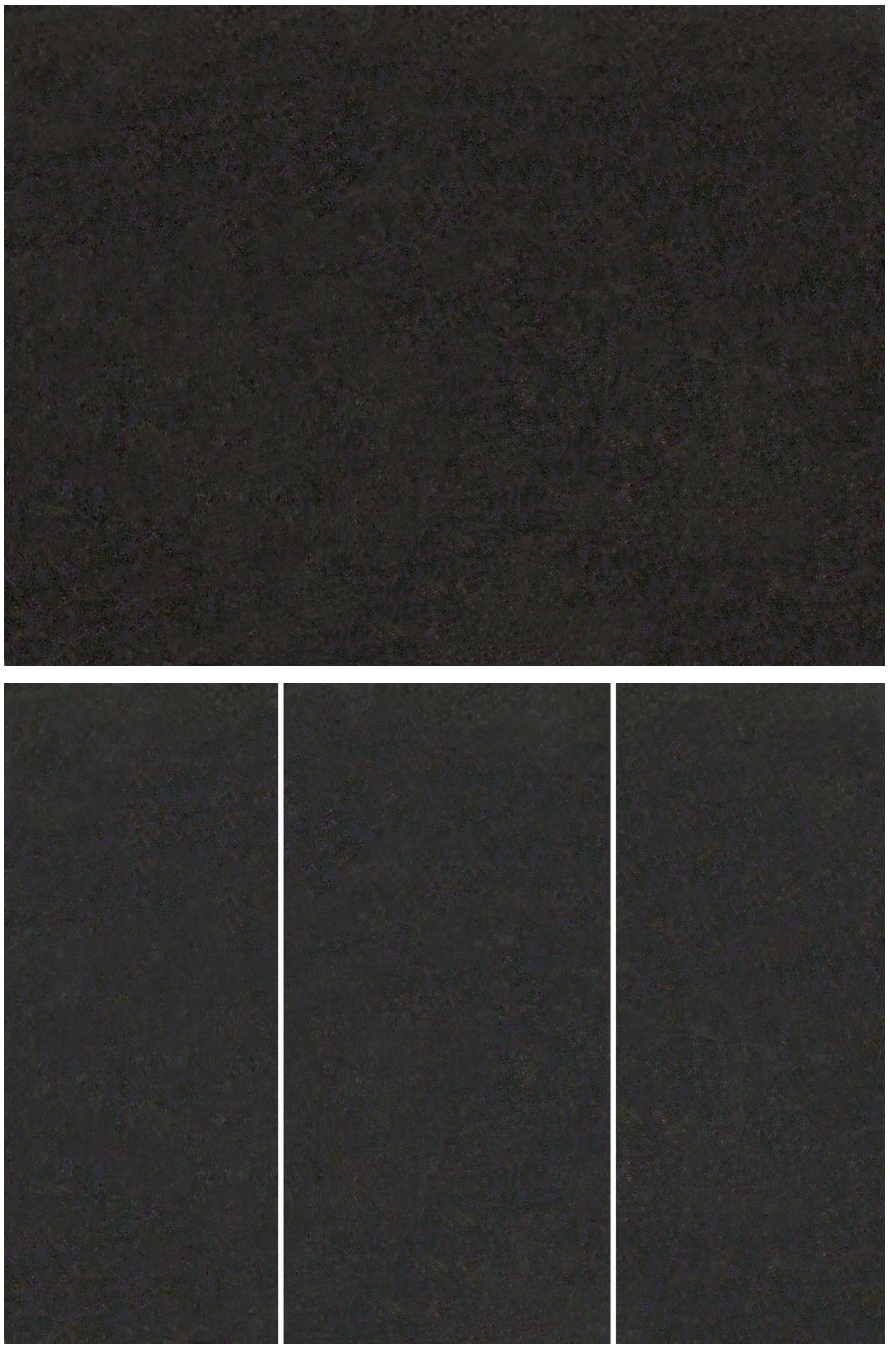
**65.** The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "…nor is it subject to intelligible contact;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)





**66.** The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "…nor is it science nor truth, nor kingship nor wisdom;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)

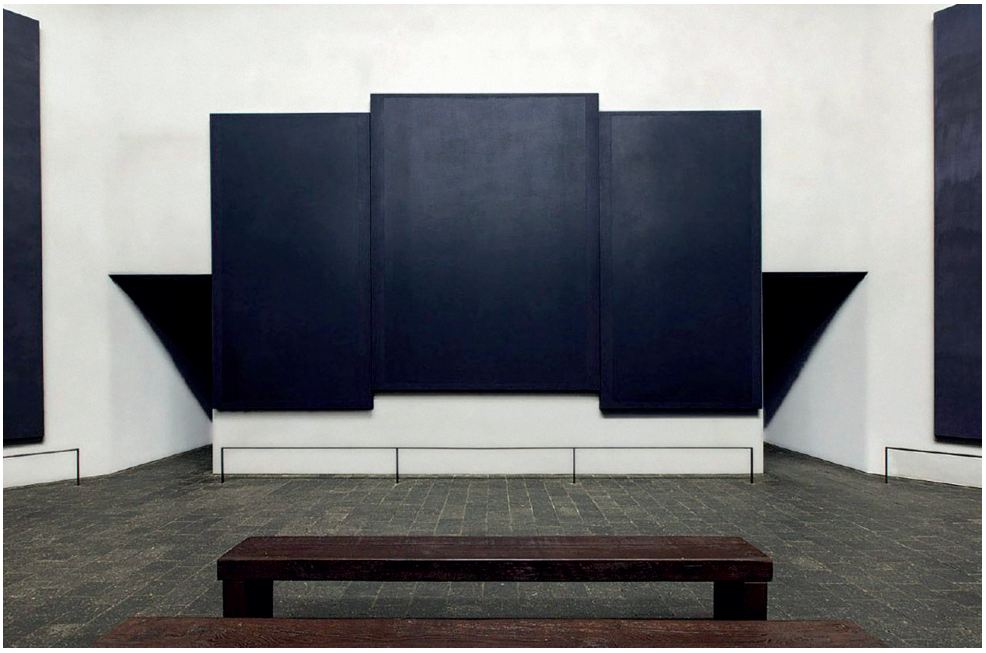
**67.** The next phase of our last visual demonstration: " …neither one nor oneness, nor godhead nor goodness; nor is it spirit according to our understanding, nor filiation, nor paternity; nor anything else known to us or to any other beings of the things that are or the things that are not;"
(Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)



**68.** The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "...neither does anything that is know it as it is; nor does it know existing things according to existing knowledge; neither can the reason attain to it, nor name it, nor know it; neither is it darkness nor light, nor the false nor the true;"
(Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)

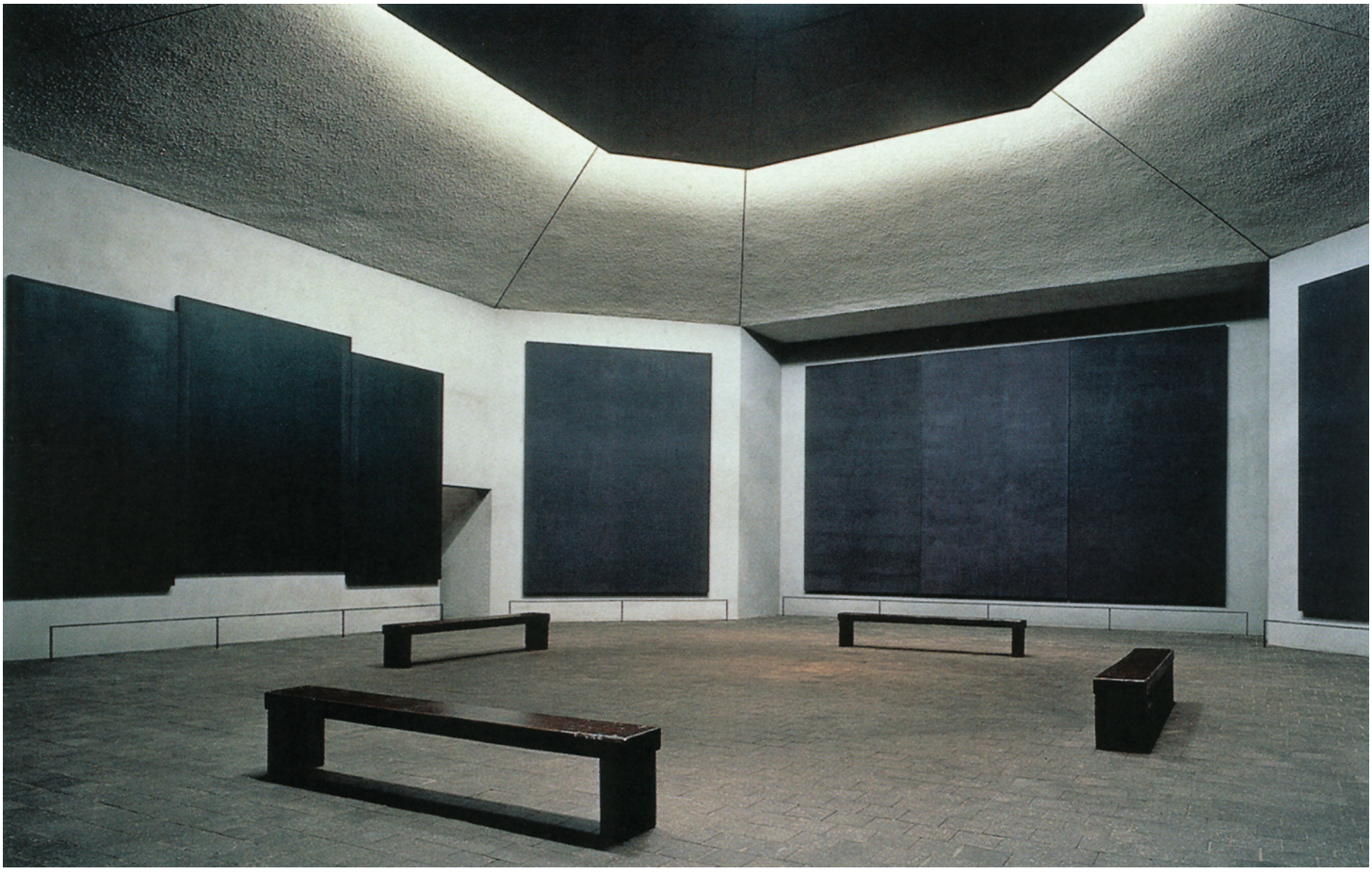
**69.** The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "...nor can any affirmation or negation be applied to it, for although we may affirm or deny the things below it, we can neither affirm nor deny it,"
Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)





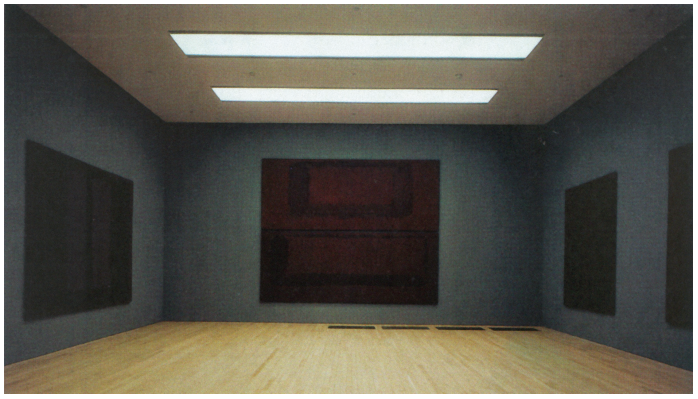
**70.** The final outcome of our last visual demonstration: "…inasmuch as the all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of Its absolute nature is outside of every negation – free from every limitation and beyond them all". (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)

**71.** Bottom: The Rothko Chapel (interior view), Houston.



**72.** The Rothko Chapel (interior view), Houston.



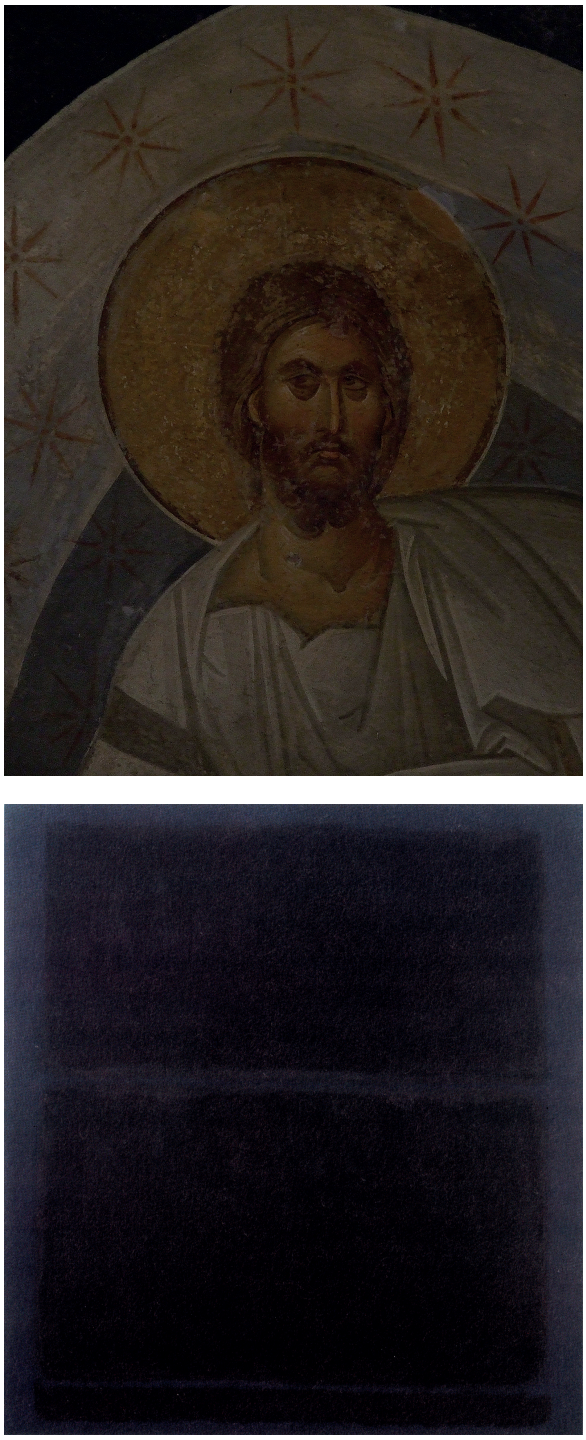




**73.** Top: The Rothko Chapel interior, Houston, photographed in 1971 with original skylight grid.

**74.** Middle: *The Mark Rothko Room*, London, Tate Gallery.

**75.** Bottom: *Seagram Murals – Seven Murals*, 1958, interior of the *Rothko Room*, Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Chiba-Ken, Japan.



**76.** Top: detail from the fresco of *The Resurrection* in the conch of the apse of the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople, 14th century; deliberately photographed without the artificial light.

**77.** Bottom: Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Three Blacks in Dark Blue)*, 1960, oil on canvas, 202 x 193 cm (79.½ x 76), Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westphalen, Düsseldorf.

# CONCLUSION

This work has considered the possible ways in which, after a period of negative attitudes towards Byzantine art in the West – occurring initially during the Renaissance and further enhanced during the 18th and 19th centuries – a subsequent revival of interest in Byzantine aesthetics greatly contributed to the rise of 20th century abstract painting. Through visual demonstrations and formal hermeneutics, we primarily aimed at shedding light on the significant but previously insufficiently examined parallels and analogies that exist between 20th century Modernist painting and Late Byzantine painting. More particularly, in the second half of this book we have argued that, being predominately a product of the contemplation of Eastern Orthodox experience, the 'irregular' aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting were *analogically* reinvented by three of the most renowned abstractionists of the 20th century: Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Mark Rothko.

Regardless of the variety of their influences, through their work, these three great Modernists have each in their own way pointed to the diachronic character of the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting. We have attempted to show that they have achieved this in a manner which is systematic and original, and one which often involved esoteric and transcendental contemplation while unassumingly pertaining to the methods and processes of science. Most importantly, this means that the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting played a significant and hitherto unjustly underappreciated role in the formation of 20th century Modernism. Once again, the heritage of Western civilisation reveals how much it owes to and depends on the Eastern experience. Seeing both Late Byzantine and 20th century Modern painting simultaneously through contemporary and Byzantine eyes, is one of the ways to appreciate how particular aspects of a creative experience may 'travel' across centuries between distinctly different civilisational experiences.

Concisely speaking, in the first half of this book we have attempted to interpret the aesthetics of Byzantine painting of the late period primarily in the light of its *mystagog-*

*ical* nature, whereas in the second half we have elaborated on the influence the aesthetics of Late Byzantine painting exercised on the work of the 20th century abstract painters mentioned above. Also, in the first half, certain emphasis has been placed on the period of Byzantine painting between the mid 14th and early 15th century (1350–c.1430). Accordingly, in the second chapter of the present work, which deals with the influence of Hesychasm in Late Byzantine painting, we have attempted to visually demonstrate how the transcendental experience of the *uncreated light* became tangibly expressed in some of the preserved frescoes which date to that period.

Moreover, the hermeneutics concerning the creative experience of both Late Byzantine artists and the 20th century artists mentioned above, has frequently led to an acknowledgement of what could be termed as *the spiritual artist*. We have observed that from the perspective of such an artist realism can only be a *Theological* Realism, one which in its visual expression has no limitations and therefore can even amount to absolute abstraction. To our understanding, Kazimir Malevich and Mark Rothko are prime examples of this phenomenon.

In view of such explorations, it is clear that due to its limitless capacity such a Theological Realism has the potential to delineate relationships among phenomena, meanings and facts, which among them commonly appear to be utterly antithetic or even irrelevant. Consistent with our analyses we have also attempted to convey that once detected in particular artworks, such relationships can open up an infinite range of possibilities for further developments in painting, as well as for further explorations regarding the significance of art in general.

For example, if one were to be asked about how we can practically benefit from the Byzantine experience of the 20th century painters mentioned above, one might answer in the following manner: We could show contemporary Orthodox iconographers, painters and interpreters of Byzantine art what they have yet to learn about the mystagogical and transcendental nature of Byzantine painting through the experience of the 20th century abstract painters. As can be more or less gathered from the last three chapters of this work, our view on this particular matter is that through their work and due to their Byzantine influences, Kandinsky, Malevich, and Rothko, in many respects *theologise* more than what innovative Neo-Byzantine iconographers of our time do. Accordingly, we suggest that the prospects of further revival of the Byzantine painting-experience, far from being exhausted, have so far only been touched upon. If embraced, these very encouraging prospects could lead to a historic rebirth of that which exists as a lastingly spiritual element within art and which found its depiction in the idea of the spiritual in art as propagated by Kandinsky, Malevich and Rothko and other artists of the 20th century.

The spiritual artist goes beyond the significance of forms or the colourful surface of their visual presence; the spiritual artist struggles to unveil the powerful invisible forces that make the essence of reality perceptible and ultimately known. The artists of the Late Byzantine period struggled hard to articulate such a vision within the context of a collapsing empire and a sense of lost unity; in their struggle to extract the permanent structures, the foundational schemata, that compile the morphological tissue of reality, they had to explore the geometry of force, and the morphic fields that give aesthetic expression its unity despite the fact that they dealt with its disparate embodiment and its fragmented manifestations.

A parallel situation emerged in the early 20th century with a detachment from all verisimilitude in artistic figuration and the suspension of all naturalistic illusionist techniques for rendering reality – and not only in painting. For different reasons, and while being subject to different conditions, artists suggested an analogous simulacrum, a parallel visual metaphor, with striking anti-realistic, *post-physical* references, in order to solve the eschatological, i.e., the ultimate question of the representability of the sensory world. In a sense, they returned to the ultimate dilemmas of the Late Byzantine period and re-envisaged the solutions that its artists gave to them, responding to the changing realities of the Orthodox world without stable points of reference except its faith in the transfiguring luminescence of the visible world. Under dissimilar circumstances, but with similar artistic needs, they both worked out a 'mystical' view of the real, articulating the 'theo-poetics' of artistic sensibility and thus redefining the role of imagination in the process of constructing bridges towards the darkness of the transcendent.

# APPENDIX

## Note on Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition*

The book by Andrew Spira, entitled *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition*, explores the complex and intricate role that icons have played in the development of avant-garde art in Russia. Generally speaking, Spira's book manages to provide a lucid understanding of a topic whose broadness, complexity as well as significance cannot be underestimated. The study could have easily been entitled "The Iconological Roots of Russian Avant-Garde Art." It begins with a historical approach, by providing a synoptic outline of the history and theology of icons from their source in Byzantium up until the end of the 18th century.

Spira also exploits this first chapter as an introduction to what will later be said in his work about the theological dimension of the influence of the icons in the Suprematist work of Kazimir Malevich. It is noteworthy that early in the first chapter, he cites Pavel Florensky, who said that an icon is in itself "proof of the existence of God"[1] – a citation that might be understood as a deliberate resonance of the title of one of Malevich's most important texts which Spira discusses and cites from in the fourth chapter, being the text entitled *God is Not Cast Down.*[2] In this manner Spira attempts to gradually lead the reader into deciphering the cryptic and, in our opinion, underdeveloped and thus difficult to classify theological-philosophical thought behind Malevich's writings and paintings.

[1] Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2008), 20.

[2] Ibid., 148.

In the first chapter of Spira's book, important facts such as that "unlike medieval culture in Europe, the equivalent in Russia was not displaced by a Renaissance," and that the Classical tradition did not become a natural part of the heritage of Russian clergy, as well as that the "classical values reworked during the Renaissance in Europe had no historical root in the collective memory of the Russian people,"[3] provide the appropriate perspective for the discussion in the succeeding chapters. While noting the "decline of icons" in Russia during the 18th and 19th century, Spira then discusses, in the second chapter, the role of Christian iconography in the development of Realist and Romantic art in Russia.[4]

Chapters three and four comprise not only a historical account but also formal analyses of the early 20th century works created by Russian avant-garde artists. Understandably, Spira does not fail to mention Henri Matisse's visit to Russia and his admiration of Russian icons.[5] A number of Russian artists, such as Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Liubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko, Vasily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall and others, are then discussed by Spira. In the fourth chapter Spira discusses mainly Chagall, Kandinsky, Goncharova and Malevich. He addresses the inspiration which Kandinsky found in the icons of St George and even comes to notice how at the point of entering his abstract phase, in one of his almost entirely abstract paintings entitled *St George*, Kandinsky keeps the component parts of the narrative of St George killing the dragon decipherable.[6]

However, a deeper significance of the particular inspiration from the icons of St George for the formation of Kandinsky's abstract style of painting is not something that Spira aims at exploring. Being focused on the influence of Late Byzantine painting on Kandinsky's work, our chapter on Kandinsky aspires also to contribute to an understanding of how the birth of Kandinsky's concept of the "musicalisation" of painting, which simultaneously constitutes the birth of his abstraction, was in part also inspired by and became combined with his iconological theme of *The Blue Rider* – which itself is inspired by the icons of St George.

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[3] Ibid., 21.

[4] Towards the end of the second chapter he says: "Besides reconciling aesthetic sensibility with manual skill and application, icons were believed to unite all levels of society and to express the soul of the nation and of the people." Ibid., 44.

[5] Ibid., 54.

[6] In particular, Spira stresses: "In one example (Plate 73), in which the image of the saint and the dragon fill the entire canvas, the component parts of the narrative are still decipherable (a blue horse, lozenge-shaped shield, tapering spear, bright red cloak, dragon's seratted wing and blood red wound), but it is the coherent interaction of dynamic thrusts, to which Kandinsky found this particular nexus of relationships so conducive, that creates the overall impact of the image." Ibid., 130.

In the fourth chapter, Spira commits most of his attention to Malevich's Suprematism and points out that Malevich's post-Suprematist works have none of the universal significance attributable to his Suprematist development.[7] While exploring the variety of influences in Malevich's Suprematist crosses (both those clearly rendered and those implied within the overall composition) but also in the *Black Square* and *Black Circle*, Spira points out the influences from Russian iconography most insightfully.

However, one earlier publication on the related topic has brought to light much of the Byzantine influences of Malevich's *Black Square*. In particular, the book entitled *The Byzantine Malevich*, written in Greek by a contemporary painter and art theorist Yannis Ziogas and published in 2000 examines the *Black Square* precisely in terms of Byzantine influences. The bibliography of Spira's book does not include Ziogas' *The Byzantine Malevich* – most likely because the latter is written and published in Greek and is yet to be translated into English. As it occurs, although Spira's book published in 2008 and Ziogas' book published in 2000 do not address precisely the same problems, at points they inevitably speak of the same phenomena. One such phenomenon is the peculiar position of the *Black Square* over the corner of the gallery. In this, the influence from icons is acknowledged by both authors, the difference being that Ziogas' book commits to comprehensively decode this influence by adhering not simply to visual comparisons but also to a visual explanation of the painting process – an explanation of how in Malevich's *Black Square* one can observe a reinvented Byzantine icon of the Virgin. To quote from the actual book, one of Ziogas' revealing observations is that: "In 1913–14, Malevich had started to construct the painting surface with overlapping layers, turning his painting into an icon whose layers have been re-assorted."[8]

Spira has detected a certain relationship between Orthodox theology (Gregory Palamas) and Malevich's writings.[9] This connection is indisputably present and important for understanding Malevich's work. But we should bear in mind that, unlike the Orthodox Fathers whose teachings most likely did inspire him, Malevich was no systematic theologian and his writings, when read theologically, are at points not just theologically inconsistent but also clearly agnostic. For example, in 1920 he wrote: "Therefore, all of the human references which lead to the meaning of God are characterised by a non-mean-

[7] Ibid., 163.

[8] Our translation of: «Το 1913–14 ο Μάλεβιτς έχει αρχίσει να κατασκευάζει τη ζωγραφική επιφάνεια με επικαλυπτόμενα επίπεδα, μετατρέποντας τον πίνακά του σε μια ανακατεμένη εικόνα.» Γιάννης Ζιώγας, *Ο Βυζαντινός Μάλεβιτς* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Στάχυ, 2000), 64.

[9] Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2008), 147–148.

ing."[10] In the cited sentence Malevich adheres to an exclusive kind of apophaticism, whereas Orthodox understanding of the apophatic method of theology always presupposes the simultaneous application of the cataphatic method. Orthodox theology always adheres to both simultaneously, while at points simply emphasising one over the other. We observe that, comparatively speaking, Malevich's earlier cited sentence is in fact much closer to the teachings of the historical opponent of the hesychast movement, Varlaam of Calabria, than what it is to the teachings of the hesychast Gregory Palamas: this can be evidenced in our second chapter entitled *The Relationship between Hesychasm and the Aesthetics of Late Byzantine Painting*. Spira does not make the necessary reference to the specificities of the Hesychast Debate and, as we have already indicated, even relates Malevich's thought precisely to certain aspects of the teachings of Gregory Palamas. However, when examined systematically in terms of their theology, Malevich's writings agree much more with the exclusive apophaticism combined with Aristotle's dialectical syllogism, which constitutes the basic approach of the opponent of Hesychasm, Varlaam of Calabria.[11]

Even still, in our view, this kind of selective and perhaps "creative" borrowing from the Byzantine theological tradition has significantly assisted Malevich in eventually finding means to re-invent modern art in respect to its formal characteristics. Thus, as can be understood from the given context, Spira rightly points out that after Malevich, on a global scale, art could not exist the way it had existed until then: "Malevich's realisation of the absolute work of art was not only consummate for Russia; it was also consummate for the European art tradition as a whole. In his hands, the language of art, through which the depths of consciousness had, for several centuries, been mediated into human experience, had become progressively refined to the point at which it was no longer necessary. It was now possible, thanks to Malevich's instrumentality, for the depth of consciousness to be realised in itself, unlimited to personal experience and unmediated by art."[12]

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[10] Our translation of: «Έτσι, όλα τα ανθρώπινα νοήματα που οδηγούν στην έννοια του Θεού χαρακτηρίζονται από το μη-νόημα.» This is a citation from Malevich's text entitled *God is not Cast Down*. See: Καζιμίρ Μάλεβιτς, *Γραπτά*, μετάφραση: Δημήτρης Χορόσκελης (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βάνιας, 1992), 192

[11] Regarding the Hesychast Debate and the teachings of Varlaam of Calabria see also: Δημήτριος Μόσχος, *Πλατωνισμός ἤ Χριστιανισμός; Οἱ φιλοσοφικές προϋποθέσεις τοῦ Ἀντιησυχασμοῦ τοῦ Νικηφόρου Γρηγορᾶ (1293–1361)* (Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Παρουσία, 1998).

[12] Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2008), 166.

Earlier in the same chapter Spira noted that Orthodox icons were originally not conceived as works of art or with a view to creating aesthetic impressions.[13] Thus, the least that one could conclude from both Spira's and Ziogas' views is that the "non-art" Byzantine experience is closely related to Malevich's "non-art" experience, and by extension, to global revolution in art which started taking place at the beginning of the 20th century in Russia.

The fifth chapter of Spira's book discusses the Soviet usurpation of icons while in the sixth chapter he recapitulates the fact that from approximately the middle of the 17th century, "just as Christ is believed, in the Orthodox Church, to have descended into hell after the Crucifixion and before Resurrection,"[14] the icons had undergone their own "descent into hell" and were then reinvented in the early 20th century.[15] Spira then adds: "It was as if the wisdom of icons had deliberately chosen to withdraw itself from the visible world, both in order to protect itself against the corruption of secularised humanity and to subject man – just when he was ready to experience it – to the ordeal of knowing for himself that life without the wisdom of the divine is a barren wilderness."[16]

In conclusion, the pivotal point of Spira's overall undoubtedly enlightening book is precisely the placement of Malevich's Suprematism in the context of the heritage of icons, which is realised in the fourth chapter entitled *Imagery, Iconography and Self-Transcendence*. Further, our view is that, while among the Russian avant-garde artists it rightly draws emphasis on Malevich's work, perhaps intentionally, Spira's book leaves much to be said on the topic of Byzantine influence in Rothko's work, who having a Russian-Jewish heritage, could in a certain sense be regarded as Malevich's artistic descendant in the West. This is one of the main reasons we have committed the last chapter of our book to the Byzantine influences in Rothko's work of the classic (abstract) phase. Thus, most importantly, Spira's book seems to open as many questions as it solves. Although Spira's overall view that there exists an immense significance of icons for the formation of Russian avant-garde art and by extension for the formation of 20th century Modernism as a whole, is shared in our work, our selected topics in each of the chapters as well as our particular arguments significantly depart from those in Spira's book—by extending its arguments and insights towards new directions.

[13] Ibid., 147.
[14] Ibid., 210.
[15] Ibid., 209.
[16] Ibid., 210.

While Spira does make the already mentioned references to the 14th century spiritual movement of Hesychasm and its advocator Gregory Palamas,[17] as well as to the possible influence of the hesychast argument in Larionov's Rayist works,[18] he does not explore the extent at which Hesychasm has influenced the final phase of Late Byzantine painting – an influence which is argued by scholars to exist also in the medieval painting of Russia.[19] Our second chapter explores extensively the profound influence that Hesychasm had on Late Byzantine painting (mainly in Greece and Serbia). Further still, in our work, the topic of the hesychast influence in Late Byzantine painting is conceived as in itself an introduction to subsequently decoding the influences of Late Byzantine painting in Kandinsky's, Malevich's and Rothko's work. This is conducted in separate chapters.

Given its topic, it is understandable that Spira's book does not examine the work of El Greco, which we have explored in our first chapter. More particularly, in light of the fact that El Greco was considered by the 20th century expressionist and abstract painters to be their forerunner, in the relevant chapter we examine to what extent El Greco's work, after he moved to Venice, owes its originality to his Byzantine artistic heritage. Thus, the topics of the chapters of our present work extend to new directions and differ from those in Spira's work, while our specific arguments coincide in their initial foundations – the main one being that through the Russian avant-garde experience the influence from icons contributed significantly to the formation of European Modernism.

When elaborating on the aesthetic connections between medieval Russian icons and the examples of Russian avant-garde art, Spira insists mainly on visual comparisons. Similar comparisons have been made by other scholars who conducted research on Malevich before Spira.[20] Our approach extends their conclusions in that, while also resorting to the method of comparison, we additionally take into account and examine the actual practical and artistic aspects of making of the examples of painting discussed. The

[17] Ibid., 18, 62.

[18] Ibid., 62.

[19] Some of the noteworthy publications which relate to the influence of hesychasm in Russian medieval painting are:

Mikhail Vladimirovich Alpatov, "Iskusstvo Feofana Greka i uchenie isikhastov," *Vizantiyskiy Vremennik* 33 (1972): 190–202. URL: http://www.vremennik.biz/opus/BB/33/52152

Nikita Kasyanovich Goleizovsky, "Isikhasm i russkaya zhivopis XIV–XV vv," *Vizantiyskiy Vremennik* 29, no. 54 (1968):196–210. URL: http://www.vremennik.biz/opus/BB/29/52007

Aleksandr Ilich Klibanov, "K kharakteristike mirovozzreniya Andreya Rubleva," in *Andrei Rublev i ego epokha*, ed. Mikhail Vladimirovich Alpatov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), 62–103.

[20] See for example: Birnholz, Alan C. "On the Meaning of Kazimir Malevich's 'White on White.'" *Art International* 21 (January, 1977): 9–16, 55. See also: Susan P. Compton, "Malevich's Suprematism: The Higher Intuition," *Burlington Magazine* CXVIII, 881 (August,1976): 577–585.

significance of this is in the fact that Byzantine icons, as well as frescoes, are always rendered in several separate and distinct layers and their making requires highly trained hands and a high level of discipline. Given that a Byzantine icon is quite deliberately rendered in separate and distinct layers, its aesthetic and theological depth is its partially visible first layer – a phenomenon eloquently acknowledged by Ziogas in his book entitled *The Byzantine Malevich*. From a studio-based perspective, a Byzantine iconographer gives prime importance to the first layer of the image (called "proplasmos"), which actually later becomes predominately covered, and therefore, the subsequent layers can be experienced as *discernible layers of meaning*, which are to be gradually revealed in the experience of a sufficiently prepared observer. Accordingly, throughout our visual comparisons and analyses, we elaborate on those relationships between Late Byzantine and Modern painting that can be detected not only on the surface but also in the practical experience of the relevant artists. This is perhaps most obvious in our last three chapters, related to Kandinsky, Malevich and Rothko respectively. In this regard, Spira's approach is rather different.

To clarify further, comparatively speaking, our approach is closer to the approach of Ziogas than what it is to the approach employed in Spira's book. For example, after arguing that Malevich's dissolution of the sense of a separate self into the sense of reality as a whole comes extremely close to the intuition of the Orthodox monastic practice (teachings of Gregory Palamas),[21] Spira insightfully discusses the analogous relevance of Florensky's identification of the icon screen (in his book *Iconostasis*) with "the membrane between the visible and the invisible worlds."[22] On the other hand, although without referring to Florensky, being himself a practicing artist, Ziogas progresses a step further by visually and practically demonstrating *how* that "membrane" applies to the Byzantine iconicity of Malevich's *Black Square*. In this sense, we observe that such a methodology exemplified in Ziogas' book takes into consideration the entire complexity of the artistic experience related to the Byzantine iconographic tradition, and as such is closer to unveiling that experience. Also, Ziogas' methodology demonstrates more practically the relationship of that artistic experience to Malevich's abstract painting. Overall, in regards to our present book, its separate topics in each of the chapters, as well as its specific methodology, which includes not only visual comparisons and visual analyses but also authentic visual demonstrations, expand significantly beyond the scope and the approach of both Spira's and Ziogas' publications.

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[21] Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2008), 147.

[22] Ibid.

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7. Kazimir Malevich, *Woman with Pails: Dynamic Arrangement*, 1912, oil on canvas, 80.3 x 80.3 cm, New York, Museum of Modern Art.
8. Kazimir Malevich, *Self Portrait*, c.1910, gouache on paper, 27 x 26.8 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
9. Detail of a late 13th century fresco (portrait of *St John the Theologian*) rendered by a painter known to us as 'Manuel Panselinos' at the church of Protaton, Mount Athos, Greece. (Photograph: Uroš Todorović.)
10. Kazimir Malevich, *Woman Worker*, 1933, oil on canvas, 71.2 x 59.8 cm, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.
11. *Virgin Hodigitria*, late16th century Belorussian icon, 120 x 85 cm, National Museum of the Republic of Belorussia.
12. Kazimir Malevich, *Self Portrait*, 1933, oil on canvas, 70 x 66 cm, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg.
13. *Spiral Diagram*, pencil on paper, 23 x 16 cm. Author: Uroš T. Todorović (2010). The diagram represents Malevich's Late Byzantine experience by interconnecting four particular points of art history: Malevich's *Self Portrait* (c.1910), *Christ the Pantokrator* at Daphni (c.1080), the traditional iconographical theme of the *Virgin Hodigitria* – common to the period of Late Byzantine art, and Malevich's *Black Square* (1915).
14. Detail from the 14th century fresco of the *Second Coming*, at the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople: The angel of the eschaton is depicted to be both unfolding and rolling up the scroll of time.
15. Kazimir Malevich, *Magnetic Construction*, 1916, oil on canvas, 49 x 44 cm, Wilhelm Hack Museum, Ludwigshafen.
16. Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1915, oil on canvas, 80 x 70.5 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

17. Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, 1915 (dated on reverse 1914), oil on canvas, 57.3 x 48.3 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
18. Kazimir Malevich, *Magnetic Composition, motif*: 1916–1917, version: 1929, oil on plywood, 71.1 x 44.8 cm, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.
19. Kazimir Malevich, *Composition of Combined Suprematist Elements Expressing the Sensation of Metallic Sounds – Dynamic (Pale, Metallic Colours)*, c.1920, pencil on paper, 20.9 x 16.4 cm, Offentliche Kunstmuseum, Basel.
20. Kazimir Malevich, *Dynamic Suprematism, Supremus No. 57*, 1916, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, Tate Gallery, London.
21. Kazimir Malevich, *Supremus No. 56*, 1916, oil on canvas, 80.5 x 71 cm, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.
22. Kazimir Malevich, *Women Bathers*, c.1930 (antedated to 1908), oil on canvas, 59 x 48 cm, The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.
23. Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 78.7 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
24. Kazimir Malevich, *Spheric Evolution of a Plane*, 1917–1918, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 74.5 cm, private collection.
25. Kazimir Malevich, *Dissolution of Construction*, 1918, oil on canvas, 97 x 70 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
26. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on canvas, 79.9 x 79.9 cm, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
27. Photograph of *0.10-The Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting*, at the Gallery Nadezdha Dobychina, Saint Petersburg (opening date: 30 December 1915).
28. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Circle*, 1915, oil on canvas, 79 x 79 cm, private collection.
29. Russian icon of *The Not-made-by-hands Savior,* late 14th century, 131.5 x 113 cm, Moscow.
30. Experiment: the face of Christ from the 14th century icon of *The Not-made-by-hands Savior* is placed over Malevich's work entitled *Black Circle* (1915).
31. Experiment: the segment (eyes) from the 14th century depiction of Christ's face (icon: *The Not-made-by-hands Savior*) is placed over Malevich's work entitled *Black Circle* (1915).
32. Experiment: the segment (mouth) from the 14th century depiction of Christ's face (icon: *The Not-made-by-hands Savior*) is placed over Malevich's work entitled *Black Circle* (1915).

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1. Mark Rothko, *Self-Portrait*, 1936, oil on canvas, 81.9 x 65.4 cm (32.¼ x 25.¾), Collection of Christopher Rothko.
2. Mark Rothko, *Bathers or Beach Scene (Untitled)*, 1933/34, watercolour on paper, 53.3 x 68.6 cm, Collection Christopher Rothko.
3. Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Subway)*, 1933/34, oil on canvas, 51.1 x 76.2 cm, Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art.
4. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1941–1942, oil and graphite on linen, 61 x 81 cm (23 x 31.7/8), National Gallery of Art, Washington.
5. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1941–1942, oil on canvas, 76 x 91.3 cm (29.7/8 x 36), National Gallery of Art, Washington.
6. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1948, oil on canvas, 127.6 x 109.9 cm, Collection Kate Rothko Prizel.
7. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1948, oil on canvas, 98.4 x 63.2 cm, Private collection.
8. Mark Rothko, *No. 18*, 1948, oil on canvas, 116.6 x 141 cm, Tel Aviv, Collection Joseph Hackney.
9. Henri Matisse, *The Red Studio*, 1911, oil on canvas, 181 x 219.1 cm (71.¼ X 86.¼), The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
10. Mark Rothko, *No. 15*, 1949, oil on canvas, 170 x 104.4 cm, Private collection.
11. Folio from the Beatus of Liebana Commentary on the Apocalypse, *The Great Whore of Babylon*, c.950, The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, m.644, fol.194v.
12. Mark Rothko, *No. 18*, 1951, oil on canvas, 207 x 170.5 cm (81.½ x 67.1/8), Munson – Williams-Procor Institute Museum of Art, Utica, New York.
13. Mark Rothko, *No. 61 (Rust on Blue) (Brown, Blue, Brown on Blue)*, 1953, oil on canvas, 294 x 232.4 cm (115. ¾ x 91. ½), The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The Panza Collection.
14. Mark Rothko, *No. 15* (*Black Greens on Blue with Green Bar)*, 1957, oil on canvas, 261.6 x 295.9 cm (103 x 116.½), Collection of Christopher Rothko.
15. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, oil on paper on board, 123.2 x 102.9 cm (48.½ x 40.½), Courtesy Peter Blum, New York.
16. Apostles, a detail of the scene of *The Ascension of Christ*, fresco, 1037–1056, St. Sophia, Achrida, FYROM.
17. Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Blue, Green and Brown)*, 1952 (alternatively dated to 1951), oil on canvas, 261.6 x 211.5 cm (103 x 83.¼), Collection of Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia, United States.
18. *The Birth of Christ*, Russian icon, second half of the 19th century, 34.5 x 27 cm, Collection H. Villamo, Kauniainen, Finland.

19. Mark Rothko, *Brown, Black and Blue, No. 24*, 1958, oil on canvas, 176.5 x 152.4 cm (69.½ x 60), Private Collection.
20. *Forefather Adam*, Russian icon, second half of the 19th century, 37 x 30.5 cm, Collection H. Villamo, Kauniainen, Finland.
21. *St John Climacus with Saints George and Blaise*, Russian icon, second half of the 13th century, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.
22. Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Seagram Mural)*, 1958, mixed media on canvas, 266.1 x 252.4 cm (104.¾ x 99.3/8), National Gallery of Art, Washington.
23. This image shows how a 13th century Russian icon of *St John Climacus* appears when all anthropomorphic representations are excluded and replaced with the colour of the background.
24. This image shows the figure of St John Climacus (which was taken from its original Byzantine icon composition shown on the left of *demonstration number_3*) added to an abstract composition painted by Rothko.
25. Our methodological intervention over a Russian icon of *St Nicholas* – late 13th and early 14th century, Novogorod, Hermitage, St Petersburg.
26. Our methodological intervention over a Russian icon of *St Elijah the Prophet* – 15th century, 75 x 57 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
27. Our methodological intervention over a Byzantine icon of *Christ the Savior (Golden Christ)* – first third of the 16th century, Byzantine (Greek) icon, from the church of Saint John in Achrida, FYROM.
28. Mark Rothko, *Red, Yellow, Red*, 1969, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 123.2 x 102.9 cm, private collection.
29. Mark Rothko, *Five Studies for the Harvard Murals*, c.1958–1960, tempera on coloured construction paper, various sizes, private collection.
30. 16th century (1593) Russian icon of St Nicholas the Warrior, 29 x 22 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
31. Mark Rothko *(Black on Deep Purple)*, 1964, mixed media on canvas, 266.7 x 203.2 cm (105 x 80), Robert and Jane Meyerhoff, Phoenix, Meryland.
32. 16th century Russian icon of St Nicholas the Warrior from which we have excluded the figure of St Nicholas and the corner-depiction of the Virgin with Child.
33. Mark Rothko's work *(Black on Deep Purple)*, 1964, where we have intervened by adding the figural forms from the adjacent Russian icon.
34. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 183 x 107 cm (72 x 42.1/8), Collection of Kate Rothko Prizel.
35. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1968, acrylic on paper mounted on wood fiberboard panel, 103.2 x 67 cm (40.5/8 x 26.3/8), National Gallery of Art, Washington.

36. Mark Rothko, *No. 8*, 1964, mixed media on canvas, 267.3 x 203.8 cm (105.¼ x 80.¼), National Gallery of Art, Washington.
37. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on canvas, 79.9 x 79.9 cm, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
38. *St George*, Byzantine icon, end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century, 35,7 x 29 cm, St. Catherine Monastery on Sinai.
39. Mark Rothko, Untitled (Blue, Yellow, Green on Red), 1954, oil on canvas, 197.5 x 166.4 cm (77.¾ x 65.½), Collection of Gisela and Dennis Alter.
40. In this visual demonstration we are shown how the Byzantine icon of *St George* fades into Rothko's abstract composition shown on the far right.
41. The late 12th century Byzantine icon, with the portrait of *St George* excluded from it, and replaced with the background colour of its composition.
42. Rothko's abstract composition *Untitled (Blue, Yellow, Green on Red)* with the late 12th century Byzantine portrait of St George attached over it.
43. Byzantine icon of *Annunciation*, end of 12th century, 61 x 42.2 cm, St. Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai.
44. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 137.2 x 107.3 cm (54 x 42.¼), Collection of Christopher Rothko.
45. Byzantine icon of the *Annunciation* from which the figures and architectural features have been taken out and replaced with the golden colour of the background of the same composition.
46. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 137.2 x 107.3 cm (54 x 42.¼), Collection of Christopher Rothko.
47. *The Virgin Pelagonitisa*, Byzantine icon, 1421–1422, 135 x 95 cm, Art Gallery, Skopje, FYROM.
48. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1964 (alternatively dated to 1961), mixed media on canvas, 236.2 x 203.2 cm (93 x 80), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
49. *St John the Forerunner*, Russian icon, 16th century, 124 x 87 cm, Ryazan State Regional Art Museum.
50. *Christ* (Euangelistario), Byzantine manuscript, c.1000, from the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai.
51. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1968, oil on paper, mounted on linen, 99.1 x 63.5 cm, private collection.
52. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1968, oil on paper, mounted on linen, 99 x 65.1 cm, Courtesy Waddington Galleries, London.
53. *The Transfiguration of Christ*, Byzantine manuscript, 1347–1355, National Library, Paris.
54. *Crucifixion*, Russian icon, 15th century, 88 x 60 cm, Sanok Historical Museum, Poland.
55. Mark Rothko, *No. 16* (*Green and Red on Tangerine)*, 1956, oil on canvas, 237.4 x 175.5 cm (93.½ x 69.1/8), The Philips Collection, Washington, DC.

56. The Rothko Room, Phillips Collection, Washington, DC.
57. Mark Rothko, *No. 14, Untitled*, 1960, oil on canvas, 289.6 x 266.7 cm (114 x 105), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
58. *Descent into Hell (Resurrection)*, Russian icon, second half of the 13th century, Palazzo Monmanari Gallery, Vicenza, Intesa Bank collection.
59. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1953, tempera on paper mounted on board, 100.3 x 67.3 cm (39.½ x 26.½), private collection.
60. The beginning of our last visual demonstration: *Resurrection*, fresco in the conch of the apse of the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople, 14th century.
61. The next phase of our last visual demonstration, showing the same fresco (*Resurrection*) without the figure of Christ: "*That it that is the pre-eminent Cause of all things intelligibly perceived is not itself any of those things.* Again, ascending yet higher, we maintain that it is neither soul nor intellect; nor has it imagination, opinion, reason or understanding; nor can it be expressed or conceived,..." (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)
62. The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "...since it is neither number nor order; nor greatness nor smallness; nor equality nor inequality; nor similarity nor dissimilarity;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)
63. The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "...neither is it standing, nor moving, nor at rest; neither has it power nor is power, nor is light; neither does it live nor is it life;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)
64. The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "...neither is it essence, nor eternity nor time;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)
65. The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "...nor is it subject to intelligible contact;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)
66. The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "...nor is it science nor truth, nor kingship nor wisdom;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)
67. The next phase of our last visual demonstration: " ...neither one nor oneness, nor godhead nor goodness; nor is it spirit according to our understanding, nor filiation, nor paternity; nor anything else known to us or to any other beings of the things that are or the things that are not;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)
68. The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "...neither does anything that is know it as it is; nor does it know existing things according to existing knowledge; neither can the reason attain to it, nor name it, nor know it; neither is it darkness nor light, nor the false nor the true;" (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)

69. The next phase of our last visual demonstration: "…nor can any affirmation or negation be applied to it, for although we may affirm or deny the things below it, we can neither affirm nor deny it," (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)
70. The final outcome of our last visual demonstration: "…inasmuch as the all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of Its absolute nature is outside of every negation – free from every limitation and beyond them all". (Excerpt from the 5th chapter of *Mystical Theology* written by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite)
71. The Rothko Chapel (interior view), Houston.
72. The Rothko Chapel (interior view), Houston.
73. The Rothko Chapel interior, Houston, photographed in 1971 with original skylight grid.
74. *The Mark Rothko Room*, London, Tate Gallery.
75. *Seagram Murals – Seven Murals*, 1958, interior of the *Rothko Room*, Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Chiba-Ken, Japan.
76. Detail from the fresco of *The Resurrection* in the conch of the apse of the chapel of the church of Chora in Constantinople, 14th century; deliberately photographed without the artificial light.
77. Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Three Blacks in Dark Blue)*, 1960, oil on canvas, 202 x 193 cm (79.½ x 76), Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westphalen, Düsseldorf.

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This exceptional and quite brilliant study takes a large theme—the affinity that has been perceived between the aspirations of modernist art and the canons of the Orthodox icon, recovered contemporaneously a century ago—and explores it by tracing Byzantine fresco and icon painting from the eleventh century to El Greco (controversially perceived as belonging to that tradition), on the way drawing in the fourteenth-century hesychast understanding of the prayer of the heart—as well as bringing the presuppositions of Byzantine iconography to bear on understanding the modernism of Kandinsky, Malevich and Rothko. Original in his insights and methodology, Todorović displays an intellectual rigour, not blunted by the range of his imagination, while his imaginative flights are supported, rather than reined in, by the integrity of his intellect.

Archpriest Andrew Louth, Professor Emeritus,
University of Durham UK

This study merits attention for the original insights it provides on the relationship between Byzantine and post-Byzantine iconography and Modernist abstraction. Key among them is the concept of theological realism and the ways in which the eschatological dynamism evident in late Byzantine and post-Byzantine panel and mural painting dialogues with Modernist masterworks. Iconographic clichés are challenged and the distance between sacred art and the secular art of the 20th century is re-evaluated from the dual perspective of an artist and theologian.

Cornelia Tsakiridou, Professor,
La Salle University USA

From Mistra to Suprematism and from Modernism to El Greco to Hesychasm, Dr Uros Todorovic demonstrates how he understands the experience of what he calls 'noetic vision.' For him, both as an artist and a theologian, this study constitutes a prime example of the spiritual *theoria* of the eschatological realisation of form, light and beauty. Not only conceptually, but also through quite tangible case studies, Todorovic engages in an understanding of the historical continuity and innovation in the world of the visual arts that is without exaggeration a tour de force – and he accomplishes this in ways that are astonishingly original, refreshing and insightful.

Dr Vassilis Adrahtas, Lecturer,
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