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Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art

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Сборник научных статей содержит материалы Международной конференции молодых специалистов, проходившей на историческом факультете МГУ имени М.В. Ломоносова 24–27 ноября 2011 г. и посвященной актуальным вопросам истории искусства и культуры от древности до современности. В статьях отечественных и иностранных авторов (на русском и английском языках) представлены результаты исследований в области изучения искусства Древнего мира, Византии, Древней Руси, Западной Европы от Средневековья до Нового и Новейшего времени, России XVIII–XX вв., а также теории искусства.

Издание предназначено в первую очередь для специалистов. Может быть использовано в учебной, научно-практической деятельности, а также интересно широкому кругу любителей искусства.

The collection of articles presents the materials of the International Conference of Young Specialists held at the Faculty of History of Lomonosov Moscow State University on November 24–27, 2011. It deals with the actual problems of art history and theory from Antiquity to the present day. The articles by Russian and foreign authors (in Russian and in English) present the results of research in the art of the Ancient World, Byzantium, Medieval Russia, Western Europe from the Middle Ages to the 20th c., Russian art from the 18th to the 20th c., theory of art.

The edition is addressed to art historians, historians, art students and art lovers.

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Visual effects and visual infection in Islamic and Byzantine champlevé sculpture

The stronger the infection the better is the art, as art
 Lev Tolstoj, What is Art?

In a brief but insightful paper, published on the *Revue archéologique* in 1846¹, the French archaeologist Adrien de Longpérier underlined the presence in French medieval art of some foreign ornamental features, rather pertaining to the oriental cultural and artistic tradition, that is to say the so-called pseudo-cuphic characters²: in the clear definition of Longpérier, “lettres arabes qui ne donnent aucun sens, mais qui se rapprochent beaucoup pour la forme”³.

These particular characters are in fact widespread throughout the Mediterranean area as an effect – and I would say, metaphorically, as an “infection” – of the pervasive influence of Islamic culture⁴. An enduring contagion that determined the continuous presence of such motives in artistic traditions far removed from Islamic conception of art, for example in fourteenth century French works or in Renaissance Italian painting and sculpture – in the decoration of draperies, borders or architectural elements – where these ornamental features seem to be immune to the rediscovery of ancient classic legacy and its deep impact on the evolution of style and taste⁵.

If we can understand the surprise of Longpérier to find Islamic ornamental patterns merging together with the mimetic principle governing the main Western pictorial tradition, all the more in nineteenth century, when the Islamic epigraphic documents were first scholarly studied and transcribed, the problem of artistic “contamination” between different pictorial systems is no less puzzling for us today. Indeed, in trying to explain the presence of the same features (or at least very similar ones) in artistic and cultural domains that had supposedly no historical contact, we have to face two different options: an “epidemiological” hypothesis, based on the idea of a transmission and migration of materials, “representations” or “forms”, from one group or culture to another⁶, even if in a hidden way, and a “structural” hypothesis, resting on the assumption that there may be some kind of spontaneous and independent convergence, according to some “formal”, cross-cultural universal laws⁷. But these are hardly totally exclusive approaches, and I rather think that they are complementary phenomena⁸.

In any way, that is what we can surely see in the case I want to deal with here: the spread of Islamic ornamental motives in the Byzantine artistic production, taking into account that the encounter between Byzantium and Islam was made of points of collision but also of collusion⁹.

More specifically, I will discuss some examples of the so-called champlevé sculptural technique¹⁰, in which the calligraphic visual effects of Arabic handwriting are given their utmost emphasis. The very flatness of the scheme and the sharp chromatic contrast between the dark ground and the brightness of the design make optically evident the decorative pattern¹¹. With their linear and frieze-like disposition the champlevé decorations are particularly apt to simulate the graphic, two-dimensional effects of handwriting, or pseudo-writing.

As observed by Owen Jones in *The Grammar of Ornament*, the regular repetition of a set of few elements on a sequential series allows the visual recognition of a basic scheme or unit, combinable and variable according to different series¹². Repetition is here the key factor to gain an

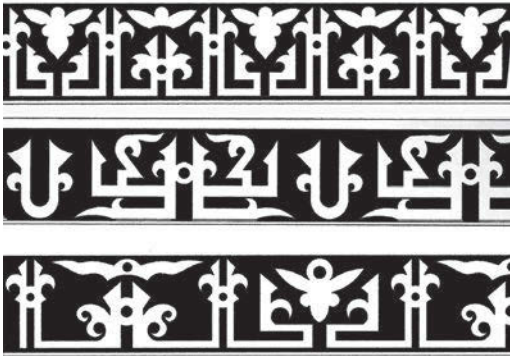


Fig. 1. Drawing of different kind of champlevé cornices, with pseudo-cuphic, in the Panagia church of Hosios Loukas.

ornamental effect. But unlike strictly geometrical decoration, the perception of homogeneity and regularity is more “subjective” and the rhythm of the signs is more lively and “organic”. Typically, the uniformity of horizontal lines gives the illusion – at a certain distance – of real writing, however the characters only “se rapprochent beaucoup pour la forme”, as Longpérier put it¹³. But, why not to use real writing? This is a difficult question, and probably several factors concur here, technical competence, economic/pragmatic choices, aesthetic preferences and much more. Perhaps we can speak of a combination of fascination and misreading, if not even of the desire

to appropriate the visual effect neutralizing the mental “infection”.

However that may be, we find Islamic cuphic characters in the architectural decoration of Christian Byzantine churches¹⁴. The earliest example, on a monumental scale, is that of the Panagia of Hosios Lukas¹⁵, where we can focus our attention both on the rich brickwork decoration of the walls and on some fragments of the long champlevé cornice on the external eastern wall¹⁶ (Fig.1). These fragments are decorated with three types of cuphic motives, presenting different degrees of similarity with their original models, from a maximum of resemblance to a free stylization playing with the vertical elements of the letters *lam* and *alef*¹⁷. The first part of the cornice shows a very close analogy with real cuphic inscriptions, as we can judge from the comparison with the casket of the Museum of Gerona cathedral¹⁸, dating to the 10th century, or with different silk fragments coming from Egypt and Palestine¹⁹. The same motif appears in one of the few artifacts surely made in Constantinople, for example the cup of the Treasury of San Marco²⁰. Another useful term of comparison is also offered by an Egyptian drawing, with a very similar inscription on dark ground, a possible medium of transmission of ornamental patterns²¹. In the second and third sections of the Panagia cornice there are only the Arabic letters *lam* and *alef*, joined in a glyph to form the name of Allah, and identifiable from the particular “curl” on the vertical arm of the letters. This ornamental design will be the most common solution in Byzantine domain, as shown by other pieces: an analogous cornice from the presbytery and apse of the church of Dafni²², or the borders of some slabs now in the Byzantine Museum of Athens²³, resembling the decorations of the helmet of Joshua in the famous fresco of the Hosios Loukas monastery²⁴. The success of this stylized pseudo-cuphic character is witnessed by its widespread use in Greece, as underlined also by Miles, Ettinghause and Grabar²⁵.

Though not confirmed by specific findings, it seems nevertheless plausible to suppose the existence in that period of books of models from which the sculptors could take the designs to be transferred on marble, as it's possible to infer, for example, comparing the slab from the Museum of Athens²⁶ (Pl. 14) with a drawing now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York²⁷ (Pl. 15). If in the drawing the relationship between the rampant lion and the text is justified by an illustrative function, in the Byzantine relief the letters are completely meaningless and merely ornamental. Nonetheless, we may note an analogous effect of the formal structure.

Thanks to the stability of the modular basic unit and its repeatability it's possible to find not only many other examples from the same geographic area²⁸, with more or less evident contami-

nations of classical motives, but also works of completely different provenance, like the Limoge cup from the Louvre (1200 ca.), striking for the close connection of its ornamental pattern with the examples we have already proposed²⁹.

From the 10th to the 12th century, the constant “contagion”, facilitated by the aristocratic collecting practices and the ensuing circulation of Islamic objects, as well as by the mimetic trends within Byzantine tradition, determinates new applications for pseudo-cuphic motives: we find them on capitals – like that ones from Makrinitza³⁰ (with black ground) and St. Vittore and Corona in Feltre³¹ (with red designs) – but also on sepulchral slabs³², depending on Islamic prototypes, where the cuphic characters are interwoven with vegetal motives in a thick arabesque. From this point of view, the sarcophagus of Anna Melissena³³ of 1276 is specially relevant: the letters spring and emerge from the raceme weave extending on the whole surface of the slab, with a final effect – now partly lost – very similar to Islamic niello-works³⁴.

A later evolution of the same ornamental scheme is detectable in examples like those from the Byzantine Museum of Athens³⁵ or from the Peribleptos church of Mistra³⁶. Here the fusion with vegetal motif is complete and generates a new original pattern.

We have seen here only few – but I hope meaningful – cases of a very complex process of exchange, assimilation, interference and transformation. A phenomenon that testify, on one hand, to the selective and deforming intersection of forms of visual taste with very different ideological foundations, but, on the other hand, it attests also to possible common roots of something like an “ornamental habit”, all the more important because we are dealing here not merely with aniconic and “abstract” visual materials, but also with a form (or, better, a trans-formation) of writing.

If Islamic artistic culture, with its rejection of the mimetic principle, has elevated calligraphy to a sovereign status, the very artistic reception and misconstruction of Islamic writing has contributed to unveil its pure, latent ornamental order. And, at heart, making sense of this order is the sense of art.

Endnotes

¹ A. de Longpérier, *De l'emploi des caractères arabes. L'ornementation chez peuples chrétiens de l'occident*, in *Revue Archéologique* II (1846), pp. 696-706.

² On this particular use of Arab letters in Christian context see the well-known essays by K. Erdmann, *Arabische Schriftzeichen als Ornamente in der abendländischen Kunst des Mittelalters*, in *Mainz, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur. Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse* 9 (1953), pp. 467-513; S.D.T. Spittle, *Cufic Lettering in Christian Art*, in *American Journal* 56 (1954), pp. 138-152; G.C. Miles, *Byzantium and the Arabs: Relations in Crete and the Aegean Area*, in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18 (1964), pp. 1-32; Id., *Classification of Islamic Elements in Byzantine Architectural Ornament in Greece*, in *Actes du XIII^e Congrès International d'études byzantines*, Belgrade 1964, III, pp. 281-287; R. Ettinghausen, *Kufesque in Byzantine Greece, the Latin West and the Muslim World*, in *A Colloquium in Memory of George Carpenter Miles (1904-1975)*, New York 1976, pp. 28-47. On the spreading of pseudo-cuphic characters in Italy, see: *Gli Arabi in Italia*, edited by F. Gabrieli, U. Scerrato, Milano 1979, passim; M.V. Fontana, *Un itinerario italiano sulle tracce dello pseudo-cufico*, in *Grafica* 10-11 (1990-1991), pp. 67-84; Ead., *Byzantine Mediation of Epigraphic Characters of Islamic Derivation in the Wall Paintings of Some Churches in Southern Italy*, in *Islām and the Italian Renaissance*, edited by C. Burnett, A. Contarini (The Warburg Institute, School of Advanced Study), London 1999, pp. 61-75.

³ De Longpérier, *De l'emploi* cit., p. 703.

⁴ On the ornament and the persistence of forms derived from an Islamic tradition, see A. Grabar, *Le succès des arts orientaux à la court byzantine sous les Macédoniens*, in *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* II, II (1951), pp. 32-60; K. Watson, *The Kufic Inscription in the Romanesque Cloister of Moissac in Quercy: Links with Le Puy, Toledo and the Catalan Woodenworkers*, in *Arte Medievale* ser. II, 1989/1, pp. 7-27, and, more generally, the important anthology of essays of O. Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, Princeton 1992.

⁵ See the ever valuable study of R.A. Jairazbhoy, *Oriental Influences in Western Art*, London 1965. For the lasting success of pseudo-cuphic motives in early modern art, particularly in Italian Renaissance, see M.V. Fontana, *L'influsso dell'arte islamica in Italia*, in *Eredità dell'Islam. Arte islamica in Italia*, Catalog of exhibition, edited by G. Curatola, Milano

1993, pp. 455-476; more recently, see the specific essay of R.E. Mack, M. Zakariya, *The Pseudo-Arabic on Andrea del Verrocchio's David*, in *Artibus et Historiae* 60 (30) (2009), pp. 157-172.

⁶ The main reference here is to the so-called "contagion model" as developed specially by the anthropologist Dan Sperber (*Explaining Culture. A Naturalistic Approach*, Oxford 1996) to explain the complexities of social and cognitive flows of cultural representations. From our point of view Sperber's naturalistic epidemiological account is preferable to apparently analogous theories, rigidly based on Darwinian mechanisms, such as the well-known "Memetics" put forward by Richard Dawkins (*The Selfish Gene*, Oxford 1976), for Sperber's model is transformational more than replicational. Other authors that used and popularized the viral and epidemic metaphors for cultural phenomena are Malcolm Gladwell (*The Tipping Point*, New York 2000) and Aaron Lynch (*Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society*, New York 1996). Ironically, but perhaps not so surprisingly, Gladwell's book never cites Dawkins and Sperber, and Lynch explicitly claims in his preface he "independently reinvented this theory of self-propagating ideas". One may think that, by and large, the "independent convergence model" is valued as personally preferable even by the "contagion theorists"!

⁷ Within Art History the "structural hypothesis" is typical of several formalistic theories, the otherwise great differences notwithstanding, and we can find similar positions in so different scholars as Jurgis Baltrušaitis (*Le Moyen Âge fantastique. Antiquités et exotismes dans l'art gothique*, Paris 1972, pp. 129-134) and Meyer Schapiro (*On some problems in the semiotics of visual arts: field and vehicle in image-signs*, in *Semiotica* 1 (1969), pp. 223-242). Also those approaches interested in psychology of perception draw heavily on the idea of structural visual laws organizing pictorial field and production. An eminent example is the work of R. Arnheim, *Art and Perception: a Psychology of the Creative Eye*, 1954. Needless to say, the perceptualist approach was no less heavily criticized by authors with historicist, semiotics or post-structural sympathies.

⁸ A balanced assessment of what we called "epidemiological" and "structural" options is to be found, for example, in E. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order. A Study in Psychology of Decorative Art*, London 1979, and in Grabar, *The Mediation* cit., passim. Both Gombrich and Grabar acknowledge a wide space for compromise solutions.

⁹ M. Canard, *Les relations politiques et sociales entre Byzance et les Arabes*, in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 18 (1964), pp. 35-55; see also: L.A. Hunt, *Byzantium, Eastern Christendom and Islam, Art at the Crossroads of the Medieval Mediterranean*, London 1998, vol. I-II. More recently, a conference held in Thessaloniki (*Byzantium and the Arab World*, december 2011) and two exhibitions (*Byzantium and the Arabs*, Thessaloniki, Museum of Byzantine Culture, October 2011-January 2012; *Byzantium and Islam. Age of Transition. 7th-9th Century*, New York, Metropolitan Museum, March-July, 2012) have been devoted to the relationships between Byzantium and Islam.

¹⁰ See: F. Coden, *Scultura ad incrostazione di mastiche: confronti fra la tecnica orientale e quella occidentale, in Medioevo mediterraneo: l'Occidente, Bisanzio e l'Islam*, Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Parma 21-25 settembre 2004, edited by A.C. Quintavalle, Parma 2005, pp. 304-311; S. Pedone, *Le cornici champlévé negli esempi medio-bizantini del Katholikon di Hosios Loukas e di Dafni, in Rolsa 5* (2006), pp. 17-49; F. Coden, *Corpus della scultura ad incrostazione di mastiche nella penisola italiana (XI-XIII secolo)*, Padova 2006; C. Barsanti, *La scultura mediobizantina fra tradizione e innovazione, in Bisanzio nell'età dei Macedoni: forme della produzione letteraria e artistica*, edited by F. Conca, G. Fiaccadori, Milano 2007, pp. 5-49; C. Barsanti, *Una nota sulla diffusione della scultura bizantina nelle regioni adriatiche italiane tra IX e XIII secolo, in La sculpture byzantine, VII^e-XIII^e siècle, Actes du Colloque International (Athènes 2000)*, Athènes 2008, pp. 515-557; C. Barsanti, S. Pedone, *Una nota sulla scultura ad incrostazione e il templon della Panaghia Episcopi di Santorini, in Mélanges Jean-Pierre Sordini (Travaux et Mémoires, 15)*, Paris 2005, pp. 405-425.

¹¹ On the use and effects of colors in this sculptural technique, see: S. Pedone, *Il Colore scolpito. Raffinatezze cromatiche nella scultura ad incrostazione del Medioevo Mediterraneo*, in *Sapienza Bizantina. Un secolo di ricerche sulla civiltà di Bisanzio all'Università di Roma*, Sapienza Università di Roma, 10 ottobre 2008, edited by A. Acconcia Longo, G. Cavallo, A. Guiglia, A. Iacobini, Roma 2012, pp. 179-199.

¹² O. Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, London 1856.

¹³ De Longpérier, *De l'emploi* cit., p. 703.

¹⁴ Miles, *Byzantium and the Arabs* cit.; Ettinghausen, *Kufesque in Byzantine Greece* cit. See also A. Grabar, *Sculptures Byzantines du Moyen Âge (XI-XIV^e siècle)*, II, Paris 1976, passim.

¹⁵ L. Bouras, *Ο γλυπτός διάκοσμος του Ναού της Παναγίας στό Μοναστήρι του Οσίου Λουκά*, Αθήνα 1980; Pedone, *Le cornici champlévé* cit., specially figs. 8-15.

¹⁶ A. Grabar, *La décoration architecturale de l'église de la Vierge à Saint-Luc en Phocide et les débuts des influences islamiques sur l'art byzantin de Grèce, in Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres. Comptes rendus des séances*, Paris 1971, pp. 15-37.

¹⁷ Arab letters alim and alef bound together are widely used in Byzantine art for decorative purposes. See the recent essay by Valentina Cantone on some manuscripts of Macedonian period: V. Cantone, *The Problem of the Eastern Influences on Byzantine Art During the Macedonian Renaissance: Some Illuminated Manuscripts from the National Library of Greece and the National Library of Venice*, in *Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art. Collection of articles*, edited by S. Maltseva, E. Stanyukovich-Denisova, I, St. Petersburg 2011, pp. 33-38. I'm at present working, together with Dr. Cantone, on a research project of systematic survey of ornamental motives in Byzantine sculpture and manuscript illumination, between the 9th and the 11th centuries. The project aims at defining a taxonomic catalogue of formal

schemes and units shared by different artistic techniques, and at reconstructing, if possible, the material “epidemic” ways through which such motives spread out.

¹⁸ *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A. D. 843-1261*, edited by H.C. Evans, W.D. Wixom, New York 1997, p. 410. See also the inscription on the box now in the Museo-Biblioteca de la Real Colegiata de San Isidoro, Léon: *ibid.*, p. 409.

¹⁹ See, for example, the pieces displayed on the exhibition *Trésor fatimides du Caire*, Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe 28 avril - 30 août 1998, Paris 1998, specially the pieces reproduced at p. 104, n. 24; p. 107, nn. 28-29; p. 110, n. 33 and p. 204, n. 188.

²⁰ K. Reynolds Brawn, cat. 21, *Vaso di vetro dorato*, in *Tesoro di San Marco*, Milano 1986, pp. 189-191; A. Cutler, *The Mythological Bowl in the Treasury of San Marco at Venice, in Imagery and Ideology in Byzantine Art*, London 1999, pp. 235-254. In the Treasury of San Marco see also the splendid rock crystal bowl with a cuphic inscription, *Tesoro di San Marco* cit., pp. 145-146, n. 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103, n. 22.

²² Pedone, *Le cornici champlevé* cit., pp. 27-32, figs. 27-31.

²³ M. Sklavou Mauroeidi, *Γλυπτά του Βυζαντινού Μουσείου Αθηνών*, Αθήνα 1999, pp. 108, n. 149; 110, n. 151; 127, n. 173.

²⁴ T. Chatzidakis-Bacharas, *Les peintures murales de Hosios Loukas. Les chapelles occidentales*, Athènes 1982, p. 174, fig. 107; N. Chatzidakis, *Hosios Loukas. Mosaics, Wall Paintings*, Athens 1997, fig. 5.

²⁵ See *infra*, note 2. For a more recent point of view, cf. *Effects of the Foreign Influence* in A.P. Kazhdan, A. Wharton Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1985, pp. 180-183.

²⁶ Sklavou Mauroeidi, *Γλυπτά* cit., p. 110, cat. n. 151.

²⁷ *Trésor fatimides du Caire* cit., cat. n. 15.

²⁸ For different examples, see: Grabar, *Sculptures Byzantines* cit., pls. XXII, XVIIa, XXIIa, XXIXa, XXXIc, XXXVc, LXXXIVa-c, CXXXIa.

²⁹ A silver-gilt cup with champlevé decoration by Maître Alpais (Limoges), now in the Musée du Louvre. See: D. Buckton, *Early Byzantine enamel in France*, in *Ritual and Art: Byzantine Essays for Christopher Walter*, edited by P. Armstrong, London 2006, pp. 94-105; S. La Niece, B. McLeod, S. Röhrs, *The Heritage of “Maître Alpais”, An International and Interdisciplinary Examination of Medieval Limoges Enamel and Associated Objects*, London 2010.

³⁰ Grabar, *Sculptures Byzantines* cit., pl. XXIIa; M. Šuput, *Les reliefs byzantins remplis de pâte colorée des XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, in *Zograf* 7 (1976), pp. 34-44; M. Dennert, *Mittelbyzantinische Kapitelle. Studien zu Typologie und Chronologie*, Bonn 1997, cat. n. 304, p. 141, tav. 54.

³¹ Coden, *Corpus della scultura* cit., pp. 293, 694, cat. III.41-5; p. 771, cat. III.41-6.

³² Bouras, *Ο γλυπτός διάκοσμος του Ναού της Παναγίας* cit., pp. 112-114, figs. 185-190.

³³ T. Pazaras, *Reliefs of a sculpture workshop operating in Thessaly and Macedonia at the end of the 13th and beginning of the 14th century*, in *L'art de Thessalonique et des pays balkaniques et les courants spirituels au XIV^e siècle*, Belgrade 1985, Belgrade 1987, pp. 159-182; *Id.*, *Relief Sarcophagi and Tombs Slabs of the Middle and Late Byzantine Period in Greece*, Athens 1988, pp. 32, 34-35; A. Avramea, D. Feissel, *Inventaires en vue d'un recueil des inscriptions historiques de Byzance, IV, Inscriptions du Thessalie (à exception des Météores)*, in *Travaux et Mémoires* 10 (1987), pp. 357-398, in particular, p. 377, tav. VII, fig. 1.

³⁴ Šuput, *Les reliefs byzantins remplis de pâte colorée* cit., p. 36.

³⁵ Sklavou Mauroeidi, *Γλυπτά* cit., pp. 205-206, cat. nn. 289-291.

³⁶ Grabar, *Sculptures Byzantines* cit., pp. 146-148; for color photo reproductions see: *The City of Mystras, Byzantine Hours: Work and Days in Byzantium, Catalogue of exhibition*, Mystras, August 2001 – January 2002, Athens 2001, p. 109, fig. 121.