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The Icon of the Twelve Apostles of the Pushkin Museum. Unknown Aspects of a Well-Known Work of Art

The well-known icon of the Synaxis of the Twelve Apostles (Ill. 76) from the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts¹ in Moscow has been the subject of numerous studies conducted by distinguished scholars, and its photograph has been published several times in various catalogues as well as in the context of special studies [1, pp. 121–124; 38, pp. 114–116, 270; 22, p. 127, pl. CLXXII; 16, p. 250; 29, p. 104, tav. XXXV; 5, pp. 142–143; 4, p. 22, pl. 254; 12, no. 933, pl. 48; 36, pp. 22, 122–123, pl. 42; 37, pp. 21, 33, 73; 18, pp. 165, 251, pl. 512, 513; 33, pp. 193–194, pl. 104]. D. V. Ajnalov related the icon to the Italian art of the 13th century and the painter Duccio [1, pp. 121–124, pl. XI]². V. N. Lazarev, on the other hand, noted similarities with the mosaic decoration of the Chora Monastery, suggesting a wide dating to the first half of the 14th century and considering it the work of a Constantinopolitan workshop [18, p. 165]. However, the most extensive study of the icon remains that by V. Putsko (1988), who disconnected it from the artistic workshops of the capital, traced its parallels in the illustrated manuscripts of the mid-14th century, and suggested its connection with Thessaloniki [25, pp. 251–262]. One of the recent references to the icon comes from the compositional study by Y. Piatnitski (2000), who associates it with the icon of Christ Pantokrator from the homonymous Athonite monastery, today in the Hermitage Museum, dated to ca 1363 [24, pp. 51–52]. As usual, all the scholars have examined the icon from a stylistic aspect and compared it with other related works, with the proposed dates covering a range of about seventy years³.

According to the testimonies of A. N. Muravyov, he purchased the icon from the sacristy of the Holy Monastery of Pantokratoros on Mount Athos in September 1849, and transported it to Russia. In his written notes, Muravyov considered it to be a work of the legendary painter Panselinos, dated it to the 11th century, and assumed that it was an imperial sponsorship⁴. The icon remained in his private collection until 1868, when he donated it to the Rumyantsev Museum, where it was exhibited until 1922. Afterwards, it was transferred to the State Historical Museum, where it remained for a decade. In 1932, it passed into the ownership of the State Museum of Fine Arts, where it is currently housed. It was displayed in two major exhibitions, namely in London and Edinburgh (1958) and in St. Petersburg and Moscow (1975–1977).

¹ Icon catalog number: Ж-2851.

² Dating to the end of the 13th century also proposed P. Muratov [21, pp. 186, 190].

³ *Iskusstvo Vizantii*: first third of 14th c. [12, p. 48]; Lazarev: first quarter of 14th c. [18, p.165]; Pucko: middle of the 14th c. [25, pp. 26–261]; Tyazhelov: beginning of the 14th c. [33, pp. 193–194].

⁴ See: [24, p. 51], with earlier bibliography and sources.

The icon is painted on a recessed cypress panel measuring 38×34×2,5 cm [24, p. 254]. It depicts the twelve apostles lined up in two registers. Behind them, a golden background and a green field emerge, where the apostles are treading. The golden background has been lost partially on the upper and lower parts of the frame and entirely on its right side.

The depiction is accompanied by an explanatory inscription (Ill. 77) inscribed above the apostles' halos in red and developed in three rows. It is written in Greek majuscule script and contains the title of the scene: Η ΣΥΝΑΞΙΣ ΤΩΝ ΔΩΔΕΚΑ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΩΝ as well as the names of the apostles depicted, except that of Paul: ΠΕΤΡΟΣ, ΑΝΔΡΕΑΣ, ΙΑΚΩΒ<ΟΣ>, ΙΩ(ΑΝΝΗΣ), ΦΙΛΙΠΠΟΣ, ΒΑΡΘΟΛΟΜΑΙΟΣ, ΘΩΜΑΣ, ΜΑΤΘΑΙΟΣ, ΙΑΚΩΒΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΑΛΦΑΙΟΥ, ΘΑΔΔΑΙΟΣ and ΣΙΜΩΝ. The inscription has not yet been thoroughly examined, at least not in all its dimensions⁵.

Despite being understudied, epigraphic material as an integral part of objects of art, of worship, and for everyday use, is an extremely rich, useful, and reliable source of information, not only about the objects themselves but also about the artists who created them. Apart from the meaning of the text and sometimes the historical information it offers, the morphology of letters contains unique information about the identity of each creator, too. Characteristic elements of each graphic idiom could be effectively identified through forensic analysis, just as in court cases.

Using the aforementioned approach, this essay discusses the identity of the painter of Moscow icon by comparing the morphological characteristics of the letters with those of monumental paintings with related stylistic features. The stylistic elements that, according to V. N. Lazarev, link the icon to the mosaic and painted decoration of the Chora monastery (Kahriye Camii)⁶ in Constantinople and, according to V. Putsko, link it to the decoration of the Church of the Twelve Apostles in Thessaloniki, serve as the point of departure for approaching the topic. Furthermore, it is widely recognised that the two monuments are connected⁷.

The extensive inscription⁸ gives a very satisfactory sample of the artist's handwriting (Ill. 78), which is sufficient for comparing with the writing samples from the above monuments. Twenty of the twenty-four letters of the alphabet are preserved, as well as ligatures of ΣΤ, ΤΡ, ΑΡ, ΑΚ, ΑΤ and ΟΥ. The letters that are not available include Γ, Ζ, Χ and Ψ. Particularly characteristic are the letters Α, Β, Δ, Κ, Λ, Μ, Ν, Ξ, Φ, Ω, as well as the ligatures ΣΤ and ΟΥ.

— The letter Α (alpha) is formed with a vertical stem and a triangular bowl, which covers almost all of the x-height of the letter. In some cases, the bowl line is placed too low, so that the character resembles an isosceles triangle. The right stem usually has serifs at the top and base.

⁵ About the division of paleography, which is also necessary to apply on epigraphy, into reading (la paléographie de lecture), analytical (la paléographie d'expertise ou analyse) and synthetic (l'histoire d'écriture) see M. Čunčić [9, pp. 1–12] —with earlier bibliography.

⁶ For wall decoration of Chora monastery see P. A. Underwood [34], C. Mango and A. Ertuğ [18].

⁷ On the stylistic characteristics of the decoration of the Monastery of Chora and the Church of the Twelve Apostles in Thessaloniki, as well as of the fresco decoration of St. Mary of Pammakaristos see: Xynopoulos [39, p. 266; 40, pp. 5–7], who first identified the stylistic similarities. The same workshop in both monuments is recognised by Stephan [28, p. 260], Gouma-Peterson [11, p. 61], Cormack [8, p. 66]. For the similarities of the graphic idioms see Troupkou [31, pp. 166–172].

⁸ I would like to thank Anna V. Zakharova for photographing the details of the icon, without which this study would not have been possible.

— The letter B (beta) is formed with a vertical stem and two semicircular bowls of equal size set apart from each other. To the same group also belongs the letter P (rho), whose semicircular bowl occupies less than half of the total space between the guidelines

— The D (delta), has a triangular arrangement. The crossbar is placed higher than the baseline, at about one-third the x-height of the letter. To the same group belongs the letter L (lambda). The characteristic feature of these letters is the slight curvature of the right stem, especially that of L.

— The curved letters form a separate group: E (epsilon), Th (theta), O (omicron) and S (sigma). The basic shape of all of them follows an ellipsoidal pattern. E (epsilon) and S (sigma) are formed by closed menisci, which in the first case adopts an additional horizontal arm, placed in the middle of the x-height, which reaches exactly to the notional boundary of the ellipsis. In particular the Θ and O are distinguished by their pointed terminations.

— K (kappa) is formed by one vertical stem and two diagonal strokes, which join in the middle of the way up the x-height. Thus, the upper stroke is slightly shorter and straighter, while the lower one is slightly curved and longer.

— The inner strokes of M (mi) take the form of a majuscule Y (upsilon) with a tall foot that occupies almost three-quarters of the x-height, while the diagonal arms are curved and extend up to the cap line.

— In the case of the N (ni), the vertical stems bear horizontal serifs on the upper and lower terminals of the letter, and the intermediate stroke extends diagonally from the top left corner to the bottom right corner.

— Very characteristic is the letter Ξ (xi), which has been executed in five movements that form two horizontal lines, that are joined together with two diagonal ones. The fifth movement forms the right-handed tail ending below the baseline.

— The vertical stem of the Φ (phi) intersects the ellipsoidal bowl in the middle. In some cases, the base of the bowl is almost straight, giving the two halves of the bowl the appearance of quarter-circles.

— The letter Ω (omega) is formed by two brushstrokes, that is, two opposite menisci joined by their lower terminals, while in the upper part the curves are almost non-existent and converge towards each other.

— The most characteristic ligature is the ST, characterized by its angular shape.

The comparative study of graphological characteristics started at the Church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki⁹. As it is known, the interior is decorated with both mosaics and frescoes where the inscriptional material, although quite damaged, is preserved to a sufficient degree to draw conclusions about the graphic idioms of the artists.

Due to the greater similarity in terms of execution technique, greater emphasis was given to the study of mural paintings, where the letters are executed directly with the brush, usually after the mortar has already dried, thus using the *secco* or *mezzo fresco* technique. On the other hand, during the construction of mosaics, the letters are first drawn and then constructed, but it is not necessary that both operations are always carried out by the same person. In the case where the tesserae of the letters are placed by other persons (assistants), some deviations from

⁹ For the mural paintings and mosaics of the church of Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki see Xyngopoulos [39, pp. 133–156], Makaronas [19, p. 612], Velmans [35, pp. 22, 63, 78, 83], Stephan [28], Ch. Bakirtzis; P. Mastora; St. Vassiliadou; N. Pitsalidis [3, pp. 57–63], Ch. Mauropoulou-Tsioumē [15, pp. 296–353], Tsigaridas [32, pp. 246–361].

the original form of the letters are possible, which weakens the accuracy of the conclusions. We note, however, that according to most researchers, the decoration of the church is the product of a single design [17, p. 384; 26, pp. 15–16; 10, p. 150; 11, pp. 125–126; 20, p. 251; 27 (with earlier bibliography); 32, p. 330].

Our further research distinguished three painters and four mosaic masters¹⁰. The A, B, and C mosaic artists are identified with the A, B, and C painters, while the D mosaic artist does not appear to be doing any painting. All the handwritings share common characteristics that allow us to place them in the same family and therefore assume relationships between teacher and student, but possibly also kinship between the members.

However, an obvious similarity with the handwriting of the Moscow icon is visible in the handwriting of the C painter of the frescoes of the Holy Apostles (Ill. 79), whose presence can be discerned with absolute certainty in the representation of St. Spyridon (Ill. 80) with an open scroll in the prothesis, on St. John the Forerunner in the nave, as well as in certain scrolls of the Root of Jesse in the southern part of the peristoon.

His handwriting bears many similarities with that of one of the two main painters — mosaic artists — whom we recognise in the representations of St. Demetrius and St. Nestor, on the dedicatory inscription, but also in all the scrolls of the hierarchs in the Apse (Ill. 81 and 82). Given the position of his works, which are in the immediate vicinity of those of painter A, and their quantity, which is clearly much smaller, it is concluded that the two painters obviously have a relationship of teacher and pupil, and it is not excluded that they could also be father and son at the same time.

Given the well-known stylistic and epigraphic connection between the wall decoration of the church of the Twelve Apostles and that of the catholicon of the Chora monastery¹¹, we searched for the graphic idiom among those distinguished in the foundation of Theodore Metochites.

Among seven different graphic idioms in the mosaics, and two in the frescoes of Chora¹², a significant number of examples with characteristics reminiscent of those of the graphic idiom of the icon under consideration were immediately distinguished. Despite the difficulties presented by this material, due to the small number of inscriptions and the lack of scrolls, it is clear that the material bears common characteristics, but no particular inscription can be identified with the idiom of the Moscow icon with absolute certainty. However, it should be noted that the involvement of the painter of the icon cannot be ruled out for this monument. The graphic idioms of the two main artists of the Holy Apostles are identified, and they are the same in both the mosaic and the painted decoration¹³. In both cases, in addition to these two artists, other individuals with small examples of handwriting are added. As far as the mural decoration is concerned, three painters can be distinguished, the two leaders and a new member.

Something similar seems to apply to the mosaic decoration of Panagia Pammakaristos¹⁴, where the number of inscriptions is even smaller and insufficient to draw complete conclusions about the synthesis of the workshop. On the mosaics of Pammakaristos, we can

¹⁰ N. Troupkou in her doctoral thesis [31], where she studies the Greek majuscule script in the wall mosaics of the Late Byzantine period, distinguished two graphic idioms in the frescoes [31, pp. 63–68] and two graphic idioms in the mosaics [31, pp. 70–73].

¹¹ See footnote No. 12.

¹² Troupkou [31, pp. 100–120].

¹³ Troupkou, on the contrary, distinguishes three artists [31, pp. 156–157].

¹⁴ For wall decoration of St. Mary Pammakaristos see: H. Belting, C. Mango and D. Mouriki [6].

discern the graphic idioms of the two main artists who also worked in the Holy Apostles and Chora¹⁵. On the contrary, the fresco decoration offers no evidence, as it is limited to only two representations, neither of which contains any epigraphic material.

In conclusion, we can argue that the painter of the icon of the Synaxis of The Twelve Apostles participated in the fresco decoration of the church in Thessaloniki alongside the two main artists, presenting a stronger graphological link with the painter A. Given the difficulty of either proving or disputing his presence in the mosaics of the catholicon of the Chora monastery (c. 1321) and of Pammakaristos (c. 1310), one could assume that he appears as an active member of the workshop in the environment of Thessaloniki. Despite the problematic dating of the fresco decoration of the church of the Holy Apostles, either between Pammakaristos and Chora in 1314 or after the completion of Chora in 1321, it is certain that the icon was made after the completion of the fresco decoration of the church of the Theotokos¹⁶, today dedicated to the Holy Apostles, perhaps for the needs of this monument, which would link it closely with the icons of Thessaloniki, as already suggested by V. Putsko.

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¹⁵ Troupkou traces the artists of the Holy Apostles also in St. Mary Pammakaristos [31, pp. 168–172].

¹⁶ The evidence for the existing dedication of the church to the Twelve Apostles dates back to the end of the 19th century [7, p. 91; 23, p. 39]. However, the opinion of O. Tafrali should also be mentioned, who in a patriarchal document (letter) of the year 1027, from Alexios Stouditēs to Theophanēs of Thessalonikē, identified the reference to a church of the Twelve Apostles, which he assumed to refer to this church of Thessaloniki [30, p. 180]. A. Xyngopoulos disagreed with him, based on iconographic analysis, claiming that the church was the same as the catholicon of the monastery of Panagia Gorgoepikoos [40, pp. 726–735]. For the same issue see also Janin [13, p. 353]. For an opposite opinion see Rautman [26, pp. 24–27], Stephan [28, pp. 23–24], Mauropoulou-Tsioumē [15, p. 302].

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Title. The Icon of the Twelve Apostles of the Pushkin Museum. Unknown Aspects of a Well-Known Work of Art

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Abstract. Despite being underutilized in science, epigraphic heritage, as an integral part of objects of art, worship, and everyday use, is in fact an extremely rich, useful and reliable source of information, not only about the objects themselves, but also about the artists who created them. As an integral part of any inscription, even those which are official or public in character, the graphic idiom contains unique information about the identity of each creator. These elements are effectively identified through forensic analysis, just as in court cases.

This essay, using the epigraphic evidence, discusses the identity of the painter of the icon of the Synaxis of the Twelve Apostles from the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. He is recognized as a member of the group of painters who decorated the Church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki, who in fact contributed to the fresco and mosaic decoration of the church. At the same time, the icon is disconnected from the painted decoration of the Monastery of Chora and Panagia Pammakaristos in Constantinople, with which it had been associated in the past. The new elements reinforce the view that the icon originated in Thessaloniki and its connection with this particular church, today dedicated to the Holy Apostles.

Keywords: Twelve Apostles, Thessaloniki, Palaeologan icon, epigraphy, paleographic analysis, forensic analysis

Название статьи. Икона Двенадцати апостолов из Пушкинского музея. Неизвестные аспекты известного произведения

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Аннотация. Несмотря на то, что надписи как часть произведений искусства, культура и повседневной жизни еще недостаточно исследованы, они представляют собой чрезвычайно богатый, полезный и надёжный источник информации не только о самих произведениях, но и о создавших их художниках. Почерк любой надписи, даже имеющей официальный или публичный характер, содержит уникальную информацию о

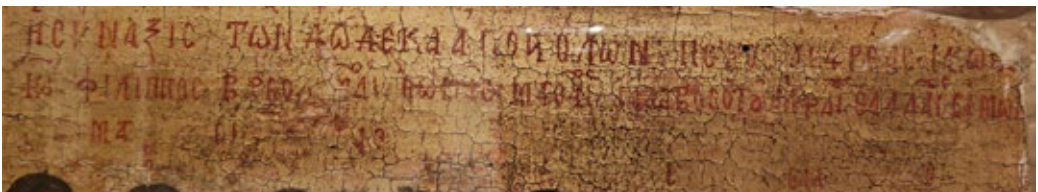
личности каждого пишущего. Эти элементы можно идентифицировать через почерковедческий анализ, как в судебной экспертизе.

На материале надписей в данной статье исследуется вопрос об авторе иконы «Собор Двенадцати апостолов» из Пушкинского музея в Москве. Он был идентифицирован с членом группы художников, работавших в церкви Свв. Апостолов в Салониках, участвовавшим в создании её фресок и мозаик. В то же время, было показано, что высказывавшиеся в прошлом предположения о непосредственной связи иконы с монументальной живописью в монастырях Хора и Богородицы Паммакарistos в Константинополе, не имеют достаточных оснований. Новые данные подтверждают мнение о том, что икона была создана в Салониках и связана с конкретным храмом, ныне посвященным Свв. Апостолам.

Ключевые слова: Двенадцать апостолов, Салоники, палеологовская икона, надписи, палеографический анализ, почерковедческий анализ



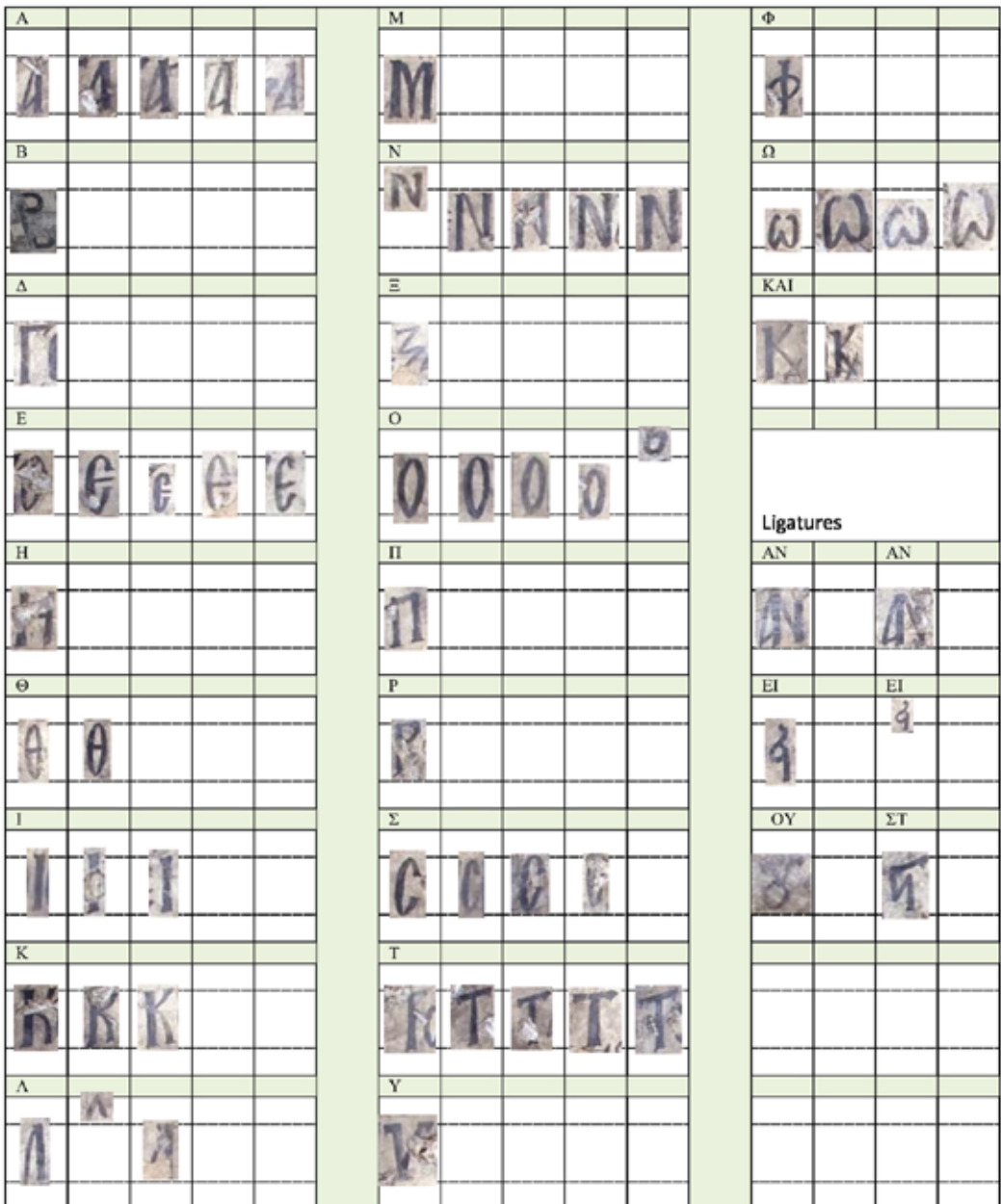
III. 76. Icon of the Synaxis of the Twelve Apostles. Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts.
Photo: A. V. Zakharova



III. 77. Icon of the Synaxis of the Twelve Apostles. Moscow, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. Detail.
Inscription. Photo: A. V. Zakharova

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III. 78. Graphic idiom of the icon painter of the Synaxis of the Twelve Apostles



III. 79. Graphic idiom of the painter "C" from the church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki



Ill. 80. Saint John the Forerunner and Saint Spyridon. Painter "C". Thessaloniki, Church of the Holy Apostles. Photo: E. Kostić



Ill. 81. Saint John Chrysostomos and Saint Basil. Painter "A". Thessaloniki, Church of the Holy Apostles. Photo: E. Kostić



Ill. 82. Characteristic letters and ligatures of graphic idioms of Moscow's icon painter and painters A, B and C from the church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki