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Lomonosov Moscow State University**

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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 St. Petersburg State University on October, 31 – November, 4, 2012. 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 21 st c., Russian art from the 18th to the 21st cc., theory of art.

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

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## Narrative Mode in Late Byzantine Painting: Questions it Raises about Sacred Images

Throughout its history, the interplay between the iconic-devotional image and the narrative-non-devotional image causes the chief creative tensions in Byzantine art [1]. Similar to language but using non-verbal means, the narrative image illustrates a text like a story and represents or implies actions and outcomes [2, 3]. As a result, its pictorial discourse is constructed differently from that of static, iconic representation. In the past and present scholarship, the study of icons dominates Byzantine studies while the narrative imagery has been neglected. The aim of this research is to draw attention on this neglect and enhance the study of narrative imagery in Byzantine art.

In this paper, I will focus on Late Byzantine painting (the period of the Palaeologan dynasty, from 1261 to 1453) (Fig. and discuss narrative mode characteristic of that time period. Indeed, between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, dense narrative ensembles — organized in long, often continuous and sequential cycles — cover entirely the interior space of churches [4, 5]. Within these cycles, individual scenes were crammed with secondary characters, architectural elements and various other features that enliven and enrich the story. Furthermore, this proliferation and multiplication of narrative elements grew into a wider artistic trend that also spread to neighbouring cultures like medieval Serbia or Bulgaria [6, 7].

To be sure, narrative representations that visualize different events of the sacred history (life of Christ, the Virgin, holy persons etc.) have a long history in Christian and Byzantine art [8]. But, traditionally, illustrated manuscripts were the main vehicle for the development of narrative picture cycles [9, 10]. Byzantine mural painting, at least until the end of the 11th century, remained more symbolic, spare and less narrative in its pictorial expression [1, 11]. However, narrative representations received a significant boost in popularity in the twelfth century and their use intensified and peaked in the Late Byzantine period. While this change is regularly mentioned in scholarly literature, its overall significance is not systematically discussed [12, 13, 14]. This paper, stemming from a larger research project, responds directly to this lacuna and initiates thorough discussions about the narrative mode in Late Byzantine painting. In the following pages, I will analyze selected examples of devices and features that illustrate this increased narrative expression and reveal that Palaeologan artists were concerned by the representation of time and space.

Despite the architectural particularities of the monuments, one observes that generally Palaeologan artists tried to organize narrative cycles into arranged and dense ensembles. In the church of Saint George at Staro Nagoricane (1315-1317), for example, the Passion cycle encompasses 22 scenes [15]. It starts on the south wall of the Bema, runs on the sidewalls of the naos and ends on the north wall of the Bema. The painters, well known artists Michael and Eutichios, used the architectural surfaces in such a way as to achieve the continuous depiction of scenes [16]. They were able to make a well defined cycle, with clear beginning (the last Supper) and end (the Entombment) while the Passion cycle is separated from other cycles just by red border lines [17, 18]. This mode of continuous narrative cycle, developing like a frieze, originated in the Greco-Hellenistic art, it was adopted by Christian artists and it was well known to Byzantine artists, namely through book illuminations [19].

This method was revived on the walls of the church at Staro Nagoricane where it produced a linear temporal succession of the episodes that followed one another in chronological sequence. In turn, this enabled the unfolding of the picture story from one end to another of the naos. The action develops from left to right, in a clockwise direction; the gaze of the beholder is induced to move from one scene to the next one, just as his eyes would read consecutive lines of writing in a book. Thus, the beholder «reads» a picture story, painted on the wall. He can follow events of Christ's Passion which, through a continuous temporal flow, allowing him to partake more intensely in the events represented. As a result, the beholder acquires rich visual experience of the Passion of Christ. If we add to that the fact that, from the dome to the *socle* zone, each horizontal zone of painting contains another cycle, following the same logic, than the overall impression created would be that of 'being inside of a book'.

Palaeologan artists explored other modes besides the linear and chronological narration. In the church of Christ Chora (1316-1321) (Fig. 86), for example, artists depicted the cycle of Christ's Ministry in the dominical vaults of the exterior narthex. In the second vault, Saint John the Baptist bearing Witness to Christ, at the bottom, and the Temptation of Christ, at the top, are represented in a rare, circular compositional scheme [20, 21]. Scenes are put together in a continuous but circular flow, where it is more difficult, at the first glance, to determine the beginning and the end of narration. Each circular frieze in the Chora church represents a pictorial, narrative and temporal unit in itself but they all communicate with similarly organized units in other dominical vaults. All in all, such mode of grouping episodes allows better articulation of specific theological ideas and stimulates a stronger interest in their message.

Palaeologan artists complemented frequently the central event with minor episodes that function as prologue and epilogue in narration. This method originated also in Greco-Roman art [19] but occasionally it was used in Byzantine art<sup>1</sup>. In the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (1295) (Fig. 87), the Dormition of the Virgin Mary exemplifies how this narrative device enriched and extended an established iconographic theme [15, 22]. Scenes of lesser importance precede and follow the central event<sup>2</sup> and create an effect comparable to that of a moving picture story, developing in several consequential sequences. The inclusion of secondary episodes and other particularities, such as the apostles riding on clouds or the heavenly gates, reflects a strong influence of Byzantine hymnology<sup>3</sup> and produces a composition encompassing numerous participants and elaborate architectural setting [15, 23]. In some Late Byzantine monuments, the Dormition of the Virgin is transformed into a small cycle *per se*, within the cycle of the Great Feasts [24]. The need to evoke a temporal progression in the scenes and to translate visually textual metaphors may be behind the efficient use of this narrative method.

Narrative expression can also expand within one single episode when it is divided into several phases. Thus, the beholder follows various changes and sequences of the action within one image. Originated in Greco-Roman art, this device entered Palaeologan mural painting coming from the manuscript illuminations [19]. The Nativity of Virgin, in the Church of the King (1314), at Studenica (Fig. 88), shows several sequences of the event within one scene, all combined in what appears to be, at first glance, an illustration of a single moment [15, 25, 26]. But, at closer look, the

<sup>1</sup> This method of narration appears already in the Middle Byzantine painting: for example, in the Christmas icon from the Monastery of St. Catherine, at Sinai (ca. 1100) [1, p. 261-262].

<sup>2</sup> The prologue scene (Virgin saying her goodbye to women) and the epilogue scene (the Apostles carry her coffin) extend the narration similarly to how it was developed in the literature.

<sup>3</sup> The sermons on the Dormition of the Virgin by John of Damascus stand out among various hymns and sermons that influenced this iconography, in particularly, during the Palaeologan period [23].

architectural setting creates a temporal layering: this achieved with thoughtfully placed low walls that situate the protagonists in the first or in the second picture plan. The number of moments depicted is maximized: while the mother of Virgin is resting after labor, servants bring her food; others prepare the new born for the bathing or bring her cradle.

Similar narrative device can be employed when the figure of the protagonist is repeated several times, in order to convey physical movement and time sequences. Such technique was not uncommon in Byzantine manuscripts [27] but it was often used in the Palaeologan paintings. In the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid, the Prayer in the Gethsemane exemplifies this method of narration [15, 22]. There a figure of Christ is depicted three times: in the first instance Christ is shown standing, turned to the left. In the second instance, he is kneeling and praying in the upper part of the scene. Finally, we see him standing behind the sleeping apostles. The repetition of the protagonist in a single picture field is a way to represent closely related time sequences of the event. As our gaze follows the figure of Christ in all three moments, the whole scene produces a sort of cinematic effect.

Despite the increasing number of cycles and scenes, painters don't recourse to brief and sketchy manner of painting. On the contrary, they don't disregard neither the representations of human figures (their gestures and relations) nor the elaborate landscape or architectural settings [12, 28]. In fact, artists often add a theatrical dimension by combining expressive gestures and lively movement to convey the protagonists' emotional state and describe their relations [29]. Gestures, head inclinations and looks work in tandem to produce living scenes and coherent narratives. The folds of the garments are overlapping; bodies are turned towards each other (profiles, bodies turned in 3/4), giving, taking, touching etc. With all these devices, the dramatic tension of compositions is intensified and the narrative ensembles become 'staged events' [12]. One has to add to that a rich interplay between figures and surrounding space. In numerous scenes, the figures don't appear against a simple background but within a spatial setting which expands significantly in Palaeologan period. The Nativity of Christ in the church of the Virgin in Pec (1335) (Fig. 89) [30] or in the church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Mistra (ca. 1360–1370) [31], takes place in the rocky landscape with numerous hills, fantastically jagged peaks and cave opening. Such representation of the landscape is intentional: the rock is used to structure the scene, to organize the secondary episodes around the central event but it also plays an active role in creating the dramatic tension in the scene: the particular configuration of the rock seems to echo and punctuate gestures and movements of protagonists.

Last but not least, despite their elaborated narrative expression, images within cycles often include long inscriptions. Such inscriptions are more than titles that identify scenes; they are quotations from the Gospels. The Nativity of Christ in the Church of the Christ Chora, for instance, includes the quotation from Luke, 2:10 ("Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people") and refers to the annunciation the angel delivers to the shepherds [20, 21]. Indeed, these lines are inscribed just above the scene where the angel addresses the shepherds, in a gesture of speaking. The same method is applied in numerous Palaeologan churches like in the Church of Saint Nicolas Orphanos in Thessalonica (early 14<sup>th</sup> c.) [32, 33].

Why was there a need to annotate the scenes with long inscriptions that are direct quotations from the Gospels? Many implications can be read out of such use of quotations in images that goes beyond mere scene identification. They emphasize the relation between the image and its textual source, as if to confirm the historicity of the represented event. One may also think

of a representational strategy that establishes a closer visual-verbal interaction, even a kind of equivalence between them. Both image and written words play their distinct role in the representation; they share the task of communicating the narrative. Furthermore, in paintings where we see long inscriptions next or within images, such relation recalls the proximity they would have in manuscripts.

Discussed methods and devices reveal that Late Byzantine painting took a significant narrative turn and this phenomenon needs to be better understood and contextualized. Thus, the next step in this research is to determine if the amplified narration mirrors particular cultural orientations of Late Byzantine society. The specificities of narrative mode in Late Byzantine painting may reflect the complexities of a millennia-long culture reaching its end, and represent the symptom of a *'fin d'époque'*. In painting, these specificities take the form of two separate but related phenomena: the increasing need both to accumulate existing knowledge and to rewrite sacred history by developing narrative techniques and devices, such as, lively, theatrical compositions and expressive human figures. These devices influenced the way in which the beholder approached and perceived the painting: they enliven the story and seem to draw the beholder into the action. Animated visual narratives would capture the beholders imagination and provoke an emphatic response, thereby stimulating a stronger interest in their message. With the use of such devices, the artist enabled the beholder to gain a fuller visual and spiritual experience of the Christological event that was represented. One needs to explore at greater length what were the cultural implications of these concerns with elaborated narrative images, inflected with dramatic and emotional qualities.

Further along these tracks, one should question more thoroughly how various elaborate narrative devices modified the viewer's perception of time, space and drama, and thus influenced the very process of looking at images and visualizing the sacred history they represent. Such approach is even more important because these new types of perception and reception of narrative imagery find parallels in western medieval in the Later Middle Ages and should be compared with similar processes in Late Byzantine Art [34, 35, 36].

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