

2016 Byzantine Studies Colloquium
Monumental Painting in Byzantium and Beyond: New Perspectives

ABSTRACTS

Byzantine Mural Painting in Context

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In this paper, I investigate the relationship of the painted program and its architectural setting, looking primarily at examples from Constantinople and Cappadocia. I suggest ways in which architectural forms might have impacted the decorative formats. Understanding how the decorative program relates to the architectural space also provides some insight into the working relationships that lay behind the creation of a Byzantine monument.

Within the churches of Constantinople, we may begin to understand the close working relationships between masons and painters in the construction and decoration of a church. In most periods, the capital was able to maintain active workshops, which, in spite of shifts in personnel, were able to find regular employment. With painters and masons readily available, the coordination of a project could easily be managed. It may be easily detected in surviving buildings—perhaps most impressively in the early-fourteenth-century Chora, where the entire project may have been supervised by a single individual.

In other, less cosmopolitan locations, however, it was difficult to maintain workshops, and patrons would have had to rely on itinerant artisans. At the court of Norman Sicily, for example, discrepancies are evident between the architectural form and the organization of the pictorial program. At the Cathedral of Monreale, decorated in the 1180s, a sense of unity was created at the expense of the original architectural framework, as the Constantinopolitan mosaicist grappled with unfamiliar architectural forms. Restorations revealed that during the initial mosaic decoration, windows were suppressed and decorative columns were removed to create uninterrupted mural surfaces. This discovery countered the view that one master was responsible for overseeing the construction of the church as well as its decoration. The impression of the harmonious interior was primarily the contribution of the mosaicist, who was willing to sacrifice features of the spatial articulation and to subordinate the architecture to the well-defined decorative program.

In provincial settings, the lack of coordination between architecture and painting may have been more common than coordination. Without active workshops on hand, patrons would have had to rely on itinerant workforces, with the painters arriving on the scene perhaps only long after the construction or rock carving was completed. This was likely the situation in Cappadocia, even at the best of times and at the highest levels of patronage. Thus we find decorative programs often painted over initial embellishment of a popular style, as well as painted programs awkwardly fitted into the architectural spaces provided, and of the evidence that the painters had modified the architectural setting.

Painting Chanted Prayers: Cognition and Monumental Decoration

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This paper focuses on monumental painting in late Byzantine monastic churches, where prayers and hymns were illustrated, primarily, in subsidiary spaces like narthexes and ambulatories. The poetic texts of prayers like the Akathistos Hymn, a Christmas *troparion* (Τί σοι προσενέγκωμεν, Χριστέ), the Oktoechos, etc., presented painters with a rich body of imagery that supplemented figures and scenes drawn primarily from biblical texts and liturgical practice. While many scholars have written about the illustration of specific hymns in monumental painting—seeing the late twelfth century as the pivotal moment for the introduction of new imagery—this paper draws on recent acoustical research on Late Byzantine churches in Thessaloniki and focuses on the settings of specific painted prayers. By examining several churches in depth, I would like to consider how paintings evoked sound, and how monumental imagery and chanted prayers worked together to create a space of transformation. How did the process of chant, while contemplating imagery, spiritually elevate members of the monastic community, effecting even a physical reaction through the combined processes of chanting and contemplation? This paper moves beyond a book chapter that I have recently published (“Monastic Soundspaces: The Art and Act of Chanting,” in *Resounding Images: Medieval Intersections of Art, Music, and Sound*, ed. S. Boynton and D. J. Reilly [Turnhout, 2015], 135–52) in incorporating data from scientific testing and considering research from the field of cognitive psychology.

Telling Stories with Pictures: Narrative and Narrativity in Middle and Late Byzantine Monumental Painting

Vicky A. Foskolou, University of Crete

In the Middle Ages, both in Byzantium and in the West, the “story” behind any visual narrative in monumental art was that of the divine dispensation for the salvation of mankind. Starting from the Creation, it focused on the eventful life of its hero, Jesus Christ, culminating in the drama of the Passion with an auspicious ending for the faithful in the Last Judgement. Thus the “story” also extended into the future, including medieval society’s own present moment, and addressed a public that was familiar with the basic points of its plot. It constituted both the framing device *and* the master narrative that contained and delineated all the individual narratives that have come down to us in images from monumental painting.

Despite the fact that the nucleus of this story remained the same throughout the Byzantine period, its narration in art varied not just from one period to the next but also between monuments of the same period. If, for example, the same viewer attempted to retell the story of the life of the Theotokos through the iconographic cycles of Dafni or the Chora Monastery in Constantinople, s/he would create a very different narration in each case. This discrepancy is not only due to the differences in date or style that separate these programs, but also to the “narrative strategies” adopted in each of them.

Starting from these premises, this paper examines the composition and the mechanisms of the visual narrative of particular iconographic cycles, such as the Passion or painted Lives, from

different periods, focusing on the middle and late Byzantine periods. Above all, this paper investigates the way in which images are connected with a story and its subtexts and examines the conventions used in each period to depict the events and to give a sense of time.

Directly interwoven with the narrative strategies of each period is the question of “narrativity,” that is, the “scope” of the visual narrative and the parameters that define it. The selection of scenes for a cycle, the relationship between them, their place in the overall space of the church, as well as the internal composition of individual scenes, are crucial factors that contributed to the development of the “story” and helped involve the viewer in deciphering it.

I will also examine whether the different methods of narration and the degree of narrativity can be used for more than typological classification, to analyze the work of art in social and historical terms. For example, can these criteria reveal anything about the function of the work, its creators, its audience, and its period?

We might approach this question by examining first of all whether similar narrative structures are found in other artistic media or whether they are found more generally in contemporary literature. Is the shift we find toward narrative genres in the literature of the Komnenian period, for example, also reflected in the paintings of this period? If so, in which ways? By contrast, could the narrativity of the scenes of the Palaiologan period be paralleled in contemporary literary texts?

Finally, this paper attempts to find information about how contemporary viewers “read” the “story” in monumental narrative paintings. Though unfortunately Byzantine literature has little in the way of these sorts of written testimonies, any evidence of the Byzantine viewer’s response to narrative works could make a decisive contribution to the decoding of visual narrative in Byzantium.

Non-Figural Imagery and the Inscribed Word

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This paper discusses the inner relation between non-figural imagery and inscriptions in painted church ensembles from early medieval Cappadocia. Non-figural imagery, consisting mainly of crosses and extensive geometrical patterns, has often been seen as a deviation from the “norm,” reflecting an iconoclastic background. Inscriptions could not naturally escape this preconception, and thus a close link between the choice of a particular text and the iconoclastic cause has been by all means legitimated. Nevertheless, the coexistence of non-figural imagery and inscriptions in medieval churches from Cappadocia appears to be a *choix voulu* in relation to their funerary function or to their particular dedication. Epitaphs painted on the walls of the church, in general next to crosses and tombs, serve as direct markers of someone’s death, ensuring perpetual protection and commemoration. In more elaborate, well-structured funerary painted contexts, crosses, interlaced ornament, and geometric patterns are in dialogue with long inscriptions deriving mostly from liturgical sources. Here, the synergy of non-figural imagery and the inscribed word results in the visualization of the process of salvation and eternal victory over death, which becomes even more explicit through the striking contrast between the

colorful and joyful decoration and the gloominess of the space. In non-funerary contexts, the parallel reading of non-figural imagery and inscriptions points to the deliberate choice of donors to dedicate a church to the cross, the most powerful weapon against all kinds of evil.

Painters in the Late Byzantine World

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Art history still lacks answers to many questions related to the life and work of fresco painters active in Byzantium and the Slavic countries of the so-called Byzantine Commonwealth from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. We know little about how the careers of these artists developed, where and for how long they learned their craft, at which point in their career they became independent masters, how they established their own workshops, for how long they practiced their craft, and what was their position in society. While the practice of painting is somewhat better understood, especially the technical procedures involved, further and more sustained inquiry is needed into the creation of iconographic programs and themes, that is, the role of literary sources and the iconographic tradition (prominent works of art from painters' immediate and wider environment, cartoons, and so on). As far as the formulation of iconographic programs is concerned, we still do not have a clear picture of the nature of the individual contribution of painters, patrons, and the latter's theological advisers, as well as the spheres of their mutual interaction and collaboration. Some characteristic examples however, demonstrate that it was precisely in this area that artists most clearly expressed their thoughts about the world around them. This paper attempts to shed new light, if only partially, on each of the above questions on the basis of specific examples offered by the pictorial or textual record at our disposal.

The Archaeology of Monumental Painting: Ways of Looking at the Painted Sources of Byzantine Society

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Since the study of monumental painting became an established subfield of Byzantine art, conventional art historical tools mainly dominated it. Although cross-disciplinary approaches have also been introduced into scholarship, particularly in the past few decades, much remains to be done to express various social and contextual accounts of Byzantine church decoration. It seems that, due to methodological complexities and difficulties, there has been little or no systemization of methodologies for extracting information from the wall paintings about the context in which they were created. This effort could be literally compared to an excavation in the painted sources of Byzantine society.

Art historians seldom use systematic archaeological methods to approach monumental imagery. This paper argues that monumental images can be studied as "artifacts" for understanding their environment. Using the term "archaeology" for the monumental art raises new questions about works of art and their users. I suggest that standard archaeological approaches to material culture may also be applied to Byzantine visual culture specifically when systematic investigation of monumental imagery is framed by theoretical insights from disciplines such as

art history, social history, anthropology, and, more generally, cultural studies.

Using examples drawn mainly from late Byzantine Cappadocia, but paralleled within the broader body of eastern Mediterranean art, this paper discusses how different layers of data contained within the monumental imagery should be approached and systemized in order to understand the historical, social and cultural processes behind the images and their audiences. I tentatively call this approach the “stratigraphy of monumental imagery.” I would like to consider how archaeological tools such as the three-dimensional gridding (horizontal and vertical grids) principle can be conceptually applied to a body of evidence and consequently how monumental imagery may be employed as an historical source, mirroring the context of its production.

Moving beyond a chapter of the book that I am currently preparing, this paper aims to conceptualize the processing of different strata of information derived from monumental imagery: inscriptions and other epigraphic evidence, the role of monumental imagery within cultural and anthropological landscapes, mechanisms and patterns of patronage, the practice of painting as an economic and social activity, the organization of artists’ workshops, and the place of the painted church within a larger social landscape.

The Aegean Painted Church within Its “Urban” and “Rural” Landscape

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After the reestablishment of imperial control in the Aegean in the late tenth century, the Byzantine central administration invested in the construction of monumental defense outposts, monasteries, and churches on several islands. This investment was framed by revived imperial propaganda for the resurgence of political, economic, ecclesiastical, and cultural links with the periphery.

A large number of churches, most of which preserve several layers of fresco decoration, were constructed between the late tenth and fourteenth century on the Aegean islands. Naxos, the largest of the Cycladic group of islands, preserves a remarkable number of Byzantine painted churches in its rural landscape. This unusually large concentration of religious monuments offers an opportunity for reading the sacred landscape of the island and its relation to sacred and community identities in the Aegean region.

Thus, the main aim of this paper is to explore the spatial dimension of churches in the middle and late Byzantine Aegean as landscape markers of settlement space under divine protection, spaces to bury the dead and promote memory, “liminal” zones that define agrarian community or monastic properties, and symbols of imperial affiliation and legacy. The methodology for better approaching the aforementioned issues of this preliminary study include the reading of architectural shape and visual imagery as a means for identifying the character of religious monuments (e.g., parish, funerary, monastic, “liminal”) through a classification of church plans and an evaluation of published surviving church frescoes; church traditions related to the cult of saints and their associated qualities; the evaluation of archaeological evidence for settlement and/or burial activity deriving from archaeological surface survey; and the application of

geographic information systems (GIS) techniques for a comparative analysis of settlement-sites and painted churches in order to test and visualize all aforementioned hypotheses.

Monumental Painting, Identity, and Cross-Cultural Interaction in the Eastern Mediterranean

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The successor to Rome, the Byzantine Empire was centered in Constantinople and at times wrapped around the Mediterranean Sea. A Byzantine legacy and the Orthodox faith remained in conquered areas following the crusades and the fall of Constantinople. Byzantine studies, however, favors a regional approach within traditional disciplinary boundaries and the political borders of modern nation states. These modern brackets generally did not affect segments of populations that imagined their histories and geographies in a more integrated manner.

This paper offers examples from the eastern Mediterranean outside political and chronological borders of Byzantium, suggesting that current art historical investigations can benefit from shifting scholarly attention from discrete Byzantine entities—such as Constantinople or Thessaloniki—to larger, regional connectivity and Mediterranean integration.

The hybrid or eclectic character of monumental painting produced in Venetian Crete, Frankish Cyprus, and other formerly Byzantine territories transferred to European rule at the advent of the crusades is well known and has been thoroughly studied. These studies focused on the foreign elite—distinct in each location—and the impact of the ruling class and its patronage upon the local artistic landscape. Careful stylistic analyses mapped the movement of objects and styles between Europe and the Levant on a similar trajectory of social mobility recorded in writing and analyzed by historians of the crusades. Instead, this paper investigates the kinds of information that can be gained from the evidence of monumental painting if we shift our methodological focus to Mediterranean connectivity, basing our inquiries on the common denominator of the Orthodox and Greek-speaking indigenous population.

This approach shifts scholarly attention from the elite and the urban to the lower classes and the rural environments they populated. Art, of course, was never exclusively a prerogative of the elite. Holistic studies, therefore, should strive to integrate all social strata and their roles as producers, distributors, and consumers of visual materials.

A series of case studies illustrates these issues and suggests alternative approaches that can serve to delineate and to expand the limits of our understanding of the Mediterranean from the perspective of Byzantine studies. Primarily, we can unravel the critical role played by art—and monumental painting in particular—in the intricate process of identity formation during the premodern period.