



Aesthetics and Philosophy of the Arts

## **The Power of Symbolism in Byzantine Art**

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**ABSTRACT:** Our deeply visual culture today shows the fascination humanity has with the power of images. This paper intends to discuss the use and importance of images within the context of Byzantine art. The works produced in the service of the Eastern Orthodox Church still employed today, show a remarkable synthesis of doctrine, theology and aesthetics. The rigid program of Church decoration was meant as a didactic element to accompany the liturgy. The majesty of the images bespeaks of the Glory of God and the spiritual realities of the Christian faith. The images were intended to educate and provide contemplation of the invisible realm of the spirit. Byzantine aesthetics, therefore, is thoroughly in the service of theology.

In today's world artistic works provide an enigma to the viewer, for the emphasis on the total freedom of expression of the artist has led to a confusion as to the meaning and function of art. Many works of art today adhere to an almost 'anything goes' type of attitude to the extent of even dismissing the expression of ideas, thoughts or feelings from their repertoire. Yet a study of past artistic expressions reveals that freedom of creativity was not always stressed, especially during periods when art was in the service of religion. The need to penetrate deeper into the mystery of life and nature, to discover solutions to the practical as well as the spiritual problems that surround humans was sometimes developed with the aid of the power of images that provide a comforting world view. Byzantine art is one such example of art in the service of theology and the salvation of humankind which was perceived to be surrounded by sin and destruction. Although dominated by theology, Byzantine art is a complex phenomenon that incorporated along with the search for an absolute meaning and truth in life, a spiritual component and an educational, almost propagandistic aspect. The world of the Byzantines provides an interesting artistic phenomenon endowed with spiritual and symbolic revelations. The unifying element of this art form, which spanned from the 4th to the mid 15th centuries (the fall of Constantinople ended the Byzantine empire in 1453, Vikan, p. 81), remained in the service of theology as an educational component to the proliferation of the Orthodox Church. After the fall of Constantinople, the basic canons of Byzantine art have remained viable, even to the present day, in the Orthodox Church continuing the abstract and symbolic imagery meant to evoke spiritual elevation and divine contemplation in the viewer.

In Byzantine art one can discover the wealthiest and most complex fusion of functions, elements and reasons. The synthesis of theology, religion and aesthetics provides a window to a multifaceted world view that has endured remaining relevant for centuries, still being promoted today within the Orthodox Church. Borne of the Early Christian art of the 3rd and 4th centuries (Rodley, p.2) prior to its acceptance and promotion as the official state religion of the Roman empire, this art form originally drew on the visual imagery of the pagan past. Amidst the vastness of the Roman empire, multiform influences prevailed of which the most significant was Hellenistic (Stuart, p.54) The majesty and physical detachment one encounters in an icon contrast sharply with the delight in the beauty of the human form that Hellenism elaborated. The pagan deities were given visual form in images and idols that evoked their presence and assured their cooperation. Although it is difficult to reconstruct the emotive and psychological values that the idols and temples of antiquity elicited from the viewer, nevertheless, the power of those images to inform and instruct has been amply discussed from Plato onward. The Greek ideal of beauty in conjunction with truth and the good dominated ancient art and demanded thoughtfulness and contemplation from the viewer. Rome added the element of propaganda to the imperial images from the reign of Augustus on, along with the influence of the Greek aesthetic. It is important to remember that the Graeco-Roman religion was concrete, in the sense that the gods were portrayed with distinct characteristics and personalities. Their exploits were duly sung by the epic poets and dramatists who, in the process, humanized the idea of the remote and immortal deities. Thus people of the pagan past could clearly visualize their gods who appear almost human not only in their physique but also in their behavior.

By way of contrast, the Judeo-Christian religion was more esoteric and abstract, especially since Judaism forbade imagery of the Almighty. God could only be represented symbolically through the burning bush or such imagery. In Rome, however, many temples and statues of the various gods were on continuous display along with images of the deified emperor, especially Julius Caesar (Zanker, p.210). The power of those imperial portraits to evoke supplication and alliance to the emperor, as well as to educate the masses to the world view of the imperial ambition, is well known. Part of the reason for the cruel persecutions of the Christians was their refusal to light the incense and bow before the image of the ruler. This was seen as an act of defiance and rebelliousness, rather than the idolatrous admittance of the emperor as God. In a world heavily dependent on the visual image as a means of giving form to abstract ideas, the Christian religion could not compete without providing imagery for its more complex and difficult conception of God. The secrecy in which the early Christians were forced to worship, for fear of persecution, gave way to symbolism—images with double meanings intended to be appreciated only by the initiated. Antiquity already had developed a number of mystery religions that were shrouded in secrecy and only allowed the initiated to participate. The rise and proliferation of such mystery religions—Eleusinian, Dionysiac, Orphic—shows ancient man in search of meaning and hope and, especially, for a blissful afterlife. Though information about their rituals is scarce, due to the sworn secrecy of the participants, nonetheless, one can surmise from later Christian condemnations, like Tertullian, Clement and Origen, (Hinson, p. 137-129) that an epiphany was sought by the adherents. This experience provided participants with an ecstatic transformation through which they could identify with the deity. Some similarities are to be found with the Christians in their emulation of Christ, especially through the rituals of the sacred supper and baptism. Early Christian imagery grows out of the available visual vocabulary, and thus in the frescoes of the catacombs one finds a mixture of symbolism and some poses from Graeco-Roman art. For example, images like the Good Shepherd or the philosopher became transformed into symbols for Christ (Rodley, p.31). After Constantine's edict of toleration and even positive endorsement

of Christianity, one begins to find the gradual creation of a specific Christian and later Byzantine iconography. The ecumenical council of Nicaea in AD 325 (Rodley, p.10) which set the creed and successfully averted some heresies, in particular Arianism, also provided the central kernel that later blossomed into the canons of Byzantine art. The abstract concept of the Trinity and the Holy Spirit became symbolized through the Holy Dove, Christ and the hand of God, or three angels. In St. Apollinaris in Classe, Ravenna, the Trinity is shown only by the hand, dove and cross (Von Simson, p.41-42). In the Byzantine empire, the Church was closely associated with the emperor who also became the head of the Church, thus strengthening his position and empire. In contrast to the West, where the Pope became the sole spiritual leader, the Byzantine empire chose to weave the secular and spiritual world and infuse the ceremonials of the Church with the majesty and splendor of the court.

A multifaceted exploration of Byzantine art reveals the didactic element closely linked with the contemplative: The idea that the imagery viewed should elevate and reveal the truth. The dazzling display of gold and strong colors provide the viewer with an elevation of the spirit, the ecstatic experience of a spiritual and intuitive understanding of divinity. Though the images are material, made from mosaic or paint on panels, they bespeak of a transcendent world, the world of the spirit, to be understood through the workings of the spirit which is separate from the physical reality of life. The pious and calm images of saints, Mary or Christ descend their compassionate gaze onto the viewer with an air of reassurance of the mysterious knowledge they have of God. The glittering colors shimmering with the unreal gold of heaven envelop the viewer in such eternal churches as those in Ravenna, and silently provide witness to the strength of faith that created them centuries ago. The icons and mosaics point to the other world in almost surreal quietude. Strong delineation and outlines, rhythmical folds, abstractions and symbolism fuse to inform and educate the viewer to the everlasting truths of the Christian faith. The anonymity of the artists themselves bespeaks of the works as pious offerings to God. Since literacy was not widespread and access to books was quite rare, reserved for the wealthy prior to the advent of the Gutenberg press, the images were intended to educate people to the ideas and stories of the Gospels. The Fathers of the Greek Church wrote many sermons comparing the spoken word with the power of paintings to move the viewer (Maguire, p.9). John of Damascus explained in his commentary on eloquence: "the work of image and word are one...what more conspicuous proof that images are the books of the illiterate? (Maguire, p.10)" The viewer was also gently reminded, through the cycles of the Passion or Miracles, of the moral and behavioral demands of religion. The images were role models which the individual was encouraged to contemplate and to some extent even to emulate. Abstract concepts were rendered intelligible through symbolic gestures, narratives and colors. Placing these images on the walls of the church allowed the congregation to view them all at once with immediacy. As icons developed and were employed in processions, everyone had instant access to the vision of the spiritual world. Imagery created religious sentiment, encouraged piety and the ecstatic experience of the sacred. It was the divine essence that produced and informed the visual counterpart thus taking the viewer outside the realm of the intellect or the sensible, material world and allowing direct access to the transcendental. Divine truth and the Gospels were thus accessible to everyone.

The aesthetic that developed in Byzantine art cannot be separated from the religious, theological and didactic elements, for all these fused to create the almost rigid canons that informed this art form. the beauty one saw, especially the elongated forms, rigid countenance and abstract landscape provided a window to the transcendent, heavenly world one aspired to join. To combat heresy and idolatry the emphasis of the icon became the

anticipation of transcendence similar to the Transfiguration of Christ when He appeared in his glory to the frightened disciples. The stern yet compassionate images of Christ and the Apostles encouraged the viewer to penetrate deeper into the mystery of the spiritual world.

The propagandistic aspect of the image is perhaps best exemplified by the account of the conversion of Prince Vladimir of Kiev. According to the 'Russian Primary Chronicle,' probably compiled by the monks of the Crypt monastery in Kiev, late 11th century, Vladimir sent envoys to the Bulgars, the Germans and the Greeks to inquire as to their religious worship. It was the Greek that impressed them the most.

And then we went to Greece, and the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty. (Carroll, Embree, Mellon, Schrier, Taylor, pp.216-217)

Even from the above passage one can imagine the feeling and experience of beauty as a heavenly and divine presence. The ambivalence of experience which loosens the distinction between heaven and earth is a characteristic of the Byzantine aesthetic. Art was intended to bridge these distinct modalities of being and thus allow even ordinary humans a glimpse of the Glory of God. It was the splendor of Hagia Sophia, the largest and most lavish church dating from the time of emperor Justinian, that so strongly influenced them. Even descriptions from the chronicles, which describe the building of this church, marvel at its breathtaking beauty. In the words of Procopius the dome of this great church appeared "to be suspended from the heavens by a golden chain." (Diehl, p.102) Hagia Sophia was an imperial commission that also bespeaks of the power and glory of the empire. Along with the grand architecture and majesty of the Church itself, the Russian emissaries were also impressed with the whole ceremony of the liturgy. The procession of priests dressed in lavishly decorated attire, the incense, the hymns, the gestures, all choreographed to unveil an elaborate drama of the liturgy. The Eastern Orthodox worship adheres to such an elaborate program even today. It was the synthesis of all these elements that impressed the Russians and, needless to say, Vladimir became converted and baptized. Therefore, to this day Russia belongs to the Orthodox tradition. As a consequence of this conversion, one can still detect the Greek influence in the art and architecture of religious Russia. Perhaps even more importantly, the Cyrillic alphabet was developed by St. Cyril and St. Methodius, based on the Greek but adapted to the Slavic language.

Byzantine art is thoroughly in the service of theology. Through the abstractions and symbols of shapes and colors a sacred reality becomes visible. As Professor Mircea Eliade explains: "The great mystery consists in the very fact that the sacred is made manifest... for in making itself manifest the sacred limits and 'historicises' itself...the sacred accepted self-limitation." (Altizer, p.59) The importance here lies in the Incarnation of Christ in a particular place and at a specific historical time. As Thomas Altizer elaborates: "This revolutionary transformation of the archaic religion was grounded in a new theophany, a new manifestation of the sacred as a personal God who ceaselessly intervenes in history, who reveals his will through events." (Altizer, p.60) The God of Christianity is a personal God who can be directly accessible and His presence can be directly experienced in the Church. (Meyendorff, p. 13). Although one may know that God exists, not much about His nature can be known by human comprehension, rather one may contemplate theological truths such as the central concept, the Trinity. The Eucharistic liturgy provided the answer to the mystery of the Trinity, by a re-enactment of the sacred drama and communion with

God (Meyendorff, p.206). The centrality of the Eucharist was amplified by rich hymnody, elaborate ceremonials and extensive decoration which continuously emphasized the fact that God had revealed Himself to humanity in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The aesthetic program that developed in the Orthodox Church strictly adhered to the idea of rendering the invisible visible and thus provided the viewer with opportunities for the contemplation of divine presence within the edifice. The Church as the 'house of God' displayed a glorious vision of the heavens. It also reminded the worshipper of the power of God through images such as the Pantocrator, thus gently convincing the viewer to emulate the good deeds of the saints and Christ and thus be assured of entry to Heaven. The reminder of the future was the last image the viewer saw as he exited the Church, for the wall on the west usually contained a vision of the Last Judgment. The organization of the images within the Church also followed a strict program that was designed to accentuate the workings of the spirit. The complementary exhibited between work of art and sermons exemplifies the didactic and even propagandistic effect sanctioned by the church. The argument of the Incarnation through which God chose to become visible allowed the artists to represent images of Christ since He had assumed human form. His Deeds and His Passion were thus rendered in brilliant colors to accompany the liturgy. The strictness of the iconography ensured the proper interpretation of the Gospel and thus combated heresy. Yet the most important effect of Byzantine art is its stress on the spiritual realities that lie beyond the material dimension of life. The majestic bearing of the Saints, Mary or Christ remind of the transience of the physical and point to the transcendent and eternal spiritual world. The richness of decoration links Byzantine art to the power of the emperor who was considered 'God vicar on earth', showing the close relationship between the imperial house and its connection and even sanction from above. This fusion of worldly power with the spirit also incorporated much of the imperial ceremonial into the liturgy itself. This close relation is most eloquently depicted in Ravenna in St. Appolinaris Nuovo, where the timeless procession of Saints, richly clad and bejeweled, formally and eternally approaches Christ enthroned and the Virgin with the rhythm of a court ceremony.

By studying the spiritual intensity of Byzantine art, one may be able to regain once more the awe of mystery of life and nature that surrounds humanity even in an overwhelming technological and material world of today. The fundamental questions of truth and meaning remain in spite of the great scientific and technological strides of history. Byzantine art and theology still present today within the Eastern Orthodox Church provides a model of synthesis of spiritual and visual realities, thus adding to the repertoire of the power of images to inspire and educate.

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