

Introduction

The extant monuments in Byzantium and the Orthodox Slavic territories from the Palaeologan period show evidence of stylistic and iconographic changes in icon painting, murals and book illumination. There is, however, no scholarly consensus on the reasons for these transformations. What initiated the development of an innovative style of Christian art in Byzantine and Slavic lands in the 14th and 15th centuries? What caused the interruption of the 'pre-renaissance' in Byzantium, which was, admittedly, only incipient? Was the development of a new artistic style during this period the result of a revived interest in late-Byzantine society in classical antiquity?¹ Alternatively, were these changes in Byzantine and Slavic art caused by the 'triumph of monastic rigorism', which Palamites supported in the 14th and 15th centuries?

No written document offers evidence for the relationship between the appearance of new artistic trends in the 14th and 15th centuries and the spread of mystical trends during the Palaeologan era. Nevertheless, the two spiritual and theological movements of the 14th century, namely hesychasm and humanism, had some bearing on artistic development during the so-called Palaeologan renaissance.²

Urgency to reinforce religious identity by rediscovering the Byzantine roots in Hellenic culture, education and philosophy, underlined the humanist thinking of the Palaeologan era.³ The followers of this trend in Byzantium interpreted dogmatic truths with the aid of natural reason, adopting Aristotle and neoplatonic philosophy as an essential criterion of Christian thought. This resulted in an increase in literary editions and commentaries on classical texts, the development of secular-humanistic treatises and rhetoric, and the establishment of a new conception of art.⁴ This period nurtured a great flowering of arts and culture.

Parallel to humanism, an enigmatic movement known as hesychasm reappeared in Byzantine consciousness at the end of the 13th century. The central tenet of this mystical spirituality was the development of *hesychia*, a term denoting tranquility and stillness, and a psychosomatic technique (consisting of repetition

1 J. Meyendorff also posed these questions in his book *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia: A Study of Byzantino-Russian Relations in the Fourteenth Century* (Crestwood 1989) 95–128.

2 T. Velmans, 'Le Portrait dans l'Art Religieux à l'Époque des Paléologues et son Témoignage sur la Société Byzantine', *Art et Société à Byzance sous les Paléologues: Actes du Colloque Organisé par l'Association Internationale des Études Byzantines à Venise en Septembre 1968* (Venice 1971).

3 D.M. Nicol, 'The Byzantine Church and Hellenic Learning in the Fourteenth Century', *Studies in Church History*, vol. 5 (London 1972) 23–57.

4 C.N. Tsirpanlis, 'Byzantine Humanism and Hesychasm in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: Synthesis or Antithesis, Reformation or Revolution?', *The Patristic and Byzantine Review*, vol. 5, no. 12 (1993).

of the Jesus Prayer)⁵ to achieve knowledge and experience of the divine. The art of *hesychia* existed since the beginning of Orthodox monasticism in the 3rd century, and the monastic elders commonly transmitted this tradition to their spiritual children. In the 14th century, however, Gregory Palamas summarised hesychast teaching and came to its defence against attacks by Barlaam of Calabria, a leader of the humanist movement in Byzantium. The theological debate between Barlaam and Palamas escalated into the hesychast controversy.⁶ This dispute concluded with a reaffirmation of the theological doctrines of Palamas and a sanctioning of the dogma of the real distinction between the essence and the energies of God.⁷

The two different iconographic tendencies of the Palaeologan period, did not exclude the plethora of interwoven trends (hesychasm and humanism) as found in the monuments of north Russia (Novgorod, Pskov, Vladimir Suzdal and Moscow), as well as in Romania (Walachia and Moldavia), Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia.⁸

The Byzantine art of the 14th and 15th centuries, a period often wrongly referred to as Palaeologan or the Last Byzantine renaissance,⁹ was not uniform, therefore, and its evolution cannot be defined in clear stages. The ideas and tastes of each stage are variously reflected in the original symbolic iconography and the addition of new stories and songs. A multiplicity of interpretations and stylistic choices for a particular subject reveals a close relationship between art and theological dogma.

The first trend in the art of Palaeologan era began at the beginning of the 14th century. The religious art in Byzantium showed changes guided by a profusion of humanist ideas. There was a tendency towards adopting classical artistic traits, an increase of new symbolic images, appearance of a temporal element and tendency towards emotionalism. Scholars have studied this phase in detail.

A second spiritual trend appeared in Palaeologan art in the middle of the 14th century. No scholarship is solely devoted to this subject of the possible impact of Byzantine hesychasm on religious art in Byzantine and Slavic lands during the

5 I. Brianchaninov & K. Ware, *On the Prayer of Jesus* (Boston 2006); P.O. Sjögren, *The Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Have Mercy upon Me* (Minneapolis 1975).

6 Meyendorff, 'Introduction à l'Étude de Grégoire Palamas', *Patristica Sorbonensia*, vol. 3, no. 38 (Paris 1959) 178; Tsirpanlis, 'Byzantine Humanism and Hesychasm'; Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, G. Lawrence (trans) (London 1964) 27. M.B., 'Hesychasm: Its Development and Basic Characteristics', *Canadian Catholic Review* (June 1988) 228.

7 I. Ševčenko, 'The Decline of Byzantium Seen through the Eyes of its Intellectuals', *Society and Intellectual Life in Late Byzantium* (London 1981) 171–172.

8 G. Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics* (New York 1971).

9 M.M. Vasic, 'L'Hésychasme dans l'Eglise et l'Art des Serbes du Moyen Âge', *Recueil Th. Uspensky*, vol. 1 (Paris 1930) 110–123.

Palaeologan renaissance.¹⁰ Some researchers have claimed that hesychasm had a stifling effect on the arts, and it was detrimental to the development of new artistic trends.¹¹ Seemingly, the modest artistic growth of the preceding centuries had ceased and no new development occurred. Hesychasm was supposedly responsible for a decline in art production in Byzantium in the 14th century. Moreover the Palamite theology, presumably, reduced the Christian experience of direct contemplation of divine light and destroyed the main Christological basis of the iconography, thus introducing a 'de facto iconoclasm'.¹²

Would it be proper, then, to assert that hesychasm had a negative effect on art? What about the fact that this ascetic movement was influential in Byzantine society long before the triumph of Palamas? Moreover the chief promoters of hesychasm, such as Patriarch Arsenus and Athanasius, dominated the Byzantine church during the flourishing of the renaissance?¹³ Finally, how is it possible that the artistic trends to which the monastic millennium was supposedly hostile or indifferent flourished in the Slavic lands, where hesychast ideals and literature were widely accepted and propagated? A scholarly consensus on the reasons behind these transformations is yet to be reached.

The corpus of Byzantine art in the late-13th and the early 14th centuries was, above all, the product of a refined humanistic culture; e.g., a culture faithful to artistic traditions rooted in the past.¹⁴ Also, towards the end of the century, classical trends in painting began to wane, and the new idealistic tendencies became pronounced in art. Certainly, as art historians have identified, exactly in the middle of the 14th century variations in artistic patterns and style began to develop.¹⁵ The art of this period showed the world as wondrously animated by the divine essence 'alive to natural beauty, but consecrated to sacred aims'.¹⁶ Instead of the sensible realism, which characterised the art of the late-13th and early 14th centuries,¹⁷ new styles appeared and assumed spiritual rather than temporal qualities.¹⁸ The art of this period often featured a depiction of historical events, such as the victory of hesychasm, represented by the icon of the

10 G.A. Ostrogorsky, 'Афонские Исихасты и их Противники', *Записки Русского Научного Института в Белграде* (Belgrade 1931); Arhimandrite Syprian, *Антропология Св. Григория Паламы* (Moscow 1996); V. Lossky, *Мистическое Богословие* (Kiev 1991); Meyendorff, *О Византийском Исихазме и его Роли в Культурном Историческом Развитии Восточной Европы: История Церкви и Восточно-Христианская Мистика* (Moscow 2003).

11 V.N. Lazarev, *История Византийской Живописи*, 2 vols. (Moscow 1947–1948) 225–235.

12 H.G. Beck, 'Von der Fragwürdigkeit der Ikone', *Scripture Bulletin*, Philosophie & Historie, KL, vol. 7 (Munich 1975).

13 Meyendorff, *Byzantium and the Rise of Russia*.

14 M. Chatzidakis, *Hellenike Techne: Byzantina Psephidota* (Athens 1994).

15 A. Grabar, 'The Artistic Climate in Byzantium during the Palaeologan Period', in P.A. Underwood (ed.), *The Kariye Djami*, vol. 4 (Princeton 1975) 7–8.

16 K. Weitzmann, *The Icon: Holy Images—Sixth to Fourteenth Century* (New York 1978).

17 J.F. Hamburger, *St John the Divine: The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology* (Berkeley 2002).

18 Chatzidakis, *L'Icone Byzantine, Saggi e Memorie di Storia dell'Annie*, vol. 2 (Venice 1959) 11–40.

Sunday of Orthodoxy.¹⁹ Important hesychast protagonists such as Palamas and John Kantacuzenos were also portrayed.²⁰ Under the influence of this spiritual ascetical tradition, narrative scenes from the lives of hermits occupied the space previously assigned to the warrior saints.²¹ New compositions appeared in the 14th century, such as *Barlaam and Iosaphat*, the *Vision of Ezekiel* as well as various interpretations of the Akathist Hymn.²² The iconostasis (templon) was also fully developed during this time. These iconographic changes occurred due to the 14th-century formulation of the hesychast doctrine of uncreated light.²³

The geographical spread of the mystical spirituality of hesychasm outside Byzantium influenced the development of new artistic trends in the Slavic lands. Nevertheless, the definite installation of Christian art informed by hesychasm in the Slavic lands remained remarkable for its continued ability to apply the shared formulae of its past.²⁴ The art of Theophanes the Greek and Manuel Eugenikos, whose iconographic techniques are permeated with the hesychast thought, strongly reaffirms this view.²⁵ Hence, one may witness an appearance of fleshless, idealised figures animated by a religious lyricism and an exalted spirituality. Such iconographic and stylistic changes can also be traced in the churches of south of Macedonia, and the Aegean islands.²⁶ The monasteries of Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania also bear witness to this trend.²⁷ Moreover, the characteristics of Palaeologan art of the second half of the 14th century are the elegant and decorative effects, virtuosity of drawing, and rich and refined agreement of the colours. Such characteristics are present in the fresco cycles of the churches of Ivanovo, Mistra, Kastoria, Manasija, Kalenić, among others.²⁸ An increase in the number of churches dedicated to the Transfiguration of Christ in the 14th and 15th centuries reveals the hesychast influence on art

19 A. Cutler, 'Main Sources of Patronage in Byzantium', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, vol. 31 (Vienna 1981).

20 R. Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (Oxford 2000) 150–156.

21 S. Petkovic, 'The Lives of Hermits in the Wall Painting of the Katolikon of the Monastery at Josanica', in C. Moss & K. Kiefer (eds), *Byzantine East and Latin West, Art Historical Studies in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann* (Princeton 1995) 289–298.

22 S.E.J. Gerstel, 'Civic and Monastic Influences on Church Decoration in Late Byzantine Thessalonike: In Loving Memory of Thalia Gouma-Peterson', Symposium on Late Byzantine Thessalonike, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 57 (2003) 225–239; A. Karthsonis, *The Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton 1986).

23 M. Cheremeteff, 'The Uncreated Light: Hesychasm, Theophanes the Greek and Russian Iconostasis', *Записки Русской Академической Группы в США* (Moscow 1988) 125–162.

24 Grabar, *Byzantium: Byzantine Art in the Middle Ages* (London 1966) 188–200.

25 N.K. Goleizovskii, 'Заметки о Феофане Греке', *Византийский Временник*, vol. 24 (1964) 139–149.

26 S.E.J. Gerstel, 'Civic and Monastic Influences on Church Decoration in Late Byzantine Thessalonike: In Loving Memory of Thalia Gouma-Peterson', Symposium on Late Byzantine Thessalonike, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 57 (2003) 225–239.

27 D.J. Deletant, 'Some Aspects of the Byzantine Tradition in the Rumanian Principalities', *Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 59, no. 1 (January 1981).

28 Chatzidakis & Grabar, *Byzantine and Early Medieval Painting* (New York 1965) 22–29.

in the Slavic lands.²⁹ Noteworthy is the impact that the hesychast theology of uncreated light had on the development of iconography of Transfiguration, not just among Slavs, but also in Byzantium and the West.³⁰

Hence, this book aims to establish the possible relationship between the re-emergence of hesychasm in the 13th century and the development of new artistic trends in Byzantine and Slavic lands during the Palaeologan period (1261–1453). It investigates the background currents, circumstances and individuals impelling the outbreak of the hesychast controversy. It further examines the doctrinal views of both hesychasts and humanists and considers the iconographic and stylistic changes in the Christian art of the 14th and 15th centuries. The compositions of the Transfiguration, the Anastasis (the Resurrection of Christ) and the Trinity are selected to illustrate the iconographic changes during this period. Broad sociological and theological methods are used to analyse the three selected artifacts. There is an emphasis on several key issues: the cultural context, the thematic content, and the aesthetic status and role of images within the theological discourse. Nevertheless, formal and iconographic analysis are the principal means for the study of objects of art in their historical development and stylistic contexts.

Within a basic art historical framework, and drawing extensively on theology, this manuscript interprets the changes in Byzantine and Slavic art and iconography in the 14th and 15th centuries. The first chapter of the book explores the spiritual movement of hesychasm, starting from its conceptual beginnings in the 3rd century up until the 14th century. In addition, this section examines the historical and sociological background of the hesychast controversy. A subchapter is devoted to Gregory of Sinai, who established hesychasm in the Slavic lands, and also to Palamas, the main expounder of the hesychast theology in the 14th century. A separate section observes the doctrinal positions of both Palamas and Barlaam.

After a thorough analysis of the subject of hesychasm, the next two parts of the book examine the possible impact of Byzantine hesychasm on religious art in the 14th and 15th centuries. The first of these two sections, observes the general changes that occurred in religious art of Byzantine and Slavic lands. This section serves as an introduction to understanding the basic characteristics of Byzantine and Slavic art in the Palaeologan period, and their relation to social and spiritual trends, chiefly, hesychasm and humanism.³¹

29 D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500–1453* (Crestwood 1971) 460–461.

30 A. Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (Crestwood 2005) 215–217.

31 R. Nelson, *Later Byzantine Painting: Art, Agency, and Appreciation* (Ashgate 2007).

The possible affinity between hesychasm and art is explored in the second section through the study of three compositions: the *Anastasis*, the *Transfiguration* and the *Trinity*. These figurative scenes serve as examples of the impending changes in art and they reflect three media: a manuscript illumination (the *Transfiguration*), a fresco painting (the *Anastasis*) and an icon (the *Trinity*). In addition, the chosen works of art are from three different locations and periods (the *Transfiguration* image is from the second half of the 14th century, the *Anastasis* from the beginning of 14th century, and the icon of the *Trinity* comes from the 15th century). Finally, the *Transfiguration*, the *Anastasis* and the *Trinity* serve as paradigms of theological teaching about the three ways of union with or within God as described by the hesychasts. There is a hypostatic union of the divine and the human nature in Christ (*Transfiguration*). In addition, there is a union according to energies or grace between God and the saints (*Anastasis*); and, finally, there is the union between the three divine hypostases of the Triune God (*Trinity*).

A Byzantine manuscript illumination of the *Transfiguration* (*Parisinus Graecus* 1242),³² which provides the viewer with a dramatic visual narrative is the main subject of the first chapter in this cycle.³³ The *Parisinus Graecus* miniature is a composite and captivating image of the *Transfiguration*, eloquently illustrating the release of the uncreated light of God on Mount Tabor. It reflects changes in the iconography of the event, characterised by development of a new 'hesychast' mandorla, a tripartite representation of Mount Tabor, and variations in the overall reaction of the apostles to the Metamorphosis.

The second chapter is dedicated to one of the most accomplished images of the *Anastasis* in Byzantine art. It occupies the apse of the parekklesion (a side chapel, in this case a funerary chapel) of the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora (Kariye Djami), built and decorated under the patronage of Theodore Metochites, 'the real father of Hellenic paidaia' in Byzantium.³⁴ This figurative scene reflects the gradual shift from the humanistic³⁵ to the theocentric³⁶ spiritual trends in art of the 14th and 15th centuries.

The third chapter in this cycle reflects the impact of the hesychastic dispute on art production in the Slavic lands, where the iconography of the figurative scene

32 'Refutationes Duae Prochori Cydonii et Disputatio cum Paulo Patriarcha Latino Epistulis Septem Tradita Nunc Primum Editae Curantibus', *Iohannis Cantacuzeni Opera*, E. Voordeckers & F. Tinnefeld (eds), Corpus Christianorum. Ser. Graeca, vol. 16 (Belgium 1987) 3–105.

33 S. Ćurčić, 'Divine Light: Symbol and Matter in Byzantine Art', lecture, Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, Athens (Greece) 2 Jul. 2007; http://www.onassis.gr/enim_deltio/foreign/08/lecture_07.php (accessed 25/08/2010).

34 D.M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium 1261–1453* (Cambridge 1972) 166.

35 Meyendorff, 'Spiritual Trends in Byzantium in the Late Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries', *Art et Societe a Byzance sous les Paleologues* (Venice 1971) 56.

36 V. Lossky, *Theology of the Icon* (New York 1996) 243.

commonly known as the Hospitality of Abraham acquired a Trinitarian rather than Christological connotation. Andrei Rublev's icon of the Hospitality of Abraham (Old Testament Trinity) is the best example of this iconographic trend.

The closing chapter relates the findings of the assessment concerning the impact of Byzantine hesychasm on the development of new artistic trends in Byzantine and Slavic lands during the Palaeologan period.

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