2017

Windows to the Divine: The Development of Byzantine Art

Sam Klein
kklein2@harding.edu

HARDING
UNIVERSITY

WINDOWS TO THE DIVINE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF BYZANTINE ART

By Sam Klein

Byzantine art, at times belittled and overlooked by critics, is now better understood within the mindset and motivations that produced it. Judged in terms of realism such as accurate bodily proportions, precise detail, or subtle and complex color, Byzantine style indeed lacks much. Its goals were elsewhere.[1] While the classical mind and its echo in the Italian Renaissance strove to depict the world as it was, if not more vibrant, the Byzantine eye looked beyond the world. Its scenes were not "representations but reenactments."[2] Its abstractions were not failures to capture reality, but conscious efforts to reflect a higher reality beyond mere sensation and emotion.[3] The nonrepresentational nature of Byzantine art, while not universally acknowledged, has been widely observed and is essential to framing its history.

Byzantine style first emerged as the Christening of Hellenic styles. Later challenged by iconoclasm, Byzantine style then progressed towards unity and formalized patterns. Finally, as other aspects of empire faded, Byzantine style found a second wind as it scattered through the Balkans and Eurasia. As such, the diversity of Byzantine art narrowed at its apex of formal style and then scattered and expanded in its twilight. And yet, though marked by distinct stages, a focus on unified expression allowed for remarkable consistency of theme even when style and subject matter changed.

Byzantine art was born out of efforts to recapture and christen the highpoints of Hellenic style, for unlike Western Europe, Byzantium enjoyed an unbroken link with its Greco-Roman past.[4] As part of this, respect for the classical tradition's mathematical approach to beauty was held in high esteem. From this focus on symmetry and balance Byzantine art acquired its characteristic rigidness and emotional coolness. In addition, the always present Platonism of Byzantine thought came out in the careful attention given to optic

---

[1] Antoine Bon, *Byzantium, trans.* James Hogarth (Geneva: Nagel Publishers, 1972), 189-190.

[2] Gervase Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1964), 1.

[3] Antoine Bon, *Byzantium, trans.* James Hogarth (Geneva: Nagel Publishers, 1972), 190.

[4] Gervase Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1964), 2.

stylings such as forced perspective and lighting.[5] But most importantly Byzantine art sought to link the visible beauty of the physical with the unseen beauty of the sublime.[6] It was in the striving for this connection that Byzantine art made its first break from the classical works that nurtured it.

Soon after Theodosius I made Christianity compulsory an explosion of Christian depictions emerged as vast amounts of pagan artistic energy then shifted to raising and decorating Christian churches. By the 5th century, clear stylistic shifts came to accompany this change in subject. Plant and scenic elements were simplified and abstracted. The human image became the center. Seen from afar as worshippers entered high vaulted churches, Christian figures stood in strong simple colors with dark outlines, directly facing the worshipper. Meticulously rendered with precious stones and gold, these figures represented both the culmination of venerable Greek styles and their transformation into a new form that would last until the empire's fall.[7]

The Baptistery of the orthodoxy in Ravenna offers a fine example of all these elements (see Figure 1). Christ and John the Baptist stand in the center the dome in a strict frontal perspective. Apostles radiate around him in a strict hierarchy.

Alongside church decoration, icon production also enjoyed its first flowering under Theodosius I. According to Byzantine Scholar Thomas F. Mathews, the icon itself is the purest example of Byzantine art and its sensibilities.[8] Like their mosaic counterpart, Byzantine icons represented an admiring but drastic transformation of classical styles. The development of the Christian icon traces back to about 200 A.D. when Hellenistic mystery cults began producing simple almost abstract paintings of spiritual figures for personal and commercial use. These pagan proto-icons were popular well up into the advent of Christianity in the East and strongly influenced developing Christian techniques. An example of this can be seen in the fact that both pagan and Christian icons shared the same strict frontal perspective. Additionally, the small almost portable format of these cult works strongly influenced the physical dimensions and intimate context of later Christian icons.[9]

---

[5] Mathew, 1.

[6] Ibid, 6.

[7] Roger Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 109-110.

[8] Thomas F. Mathews, *Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 46.

[9] Ibid, 43.

Around the 6th century, the abstract style of early Christian icons began to merge with a parallel tradition of secular Roman portraiture.[10] This synthesis was critical because it represented a shift in mindset as well as style. The Greek mystery icons never attempted to depict the gods as they actually were but instead rendered them as men, as substitutes for the gods' incorporeal forms. However, under the secondary influence of Roman portraiture, Byzantine icons worked to depict the reality of their divine subjects. In this way Christian icons sought to separate themselves from pagan tradition through the claim that the human forms of Christ and the saints could be physically depicted.[11] However the physical accuracy of such portrait attempts was debatable. As iconography progressed the specific gave way to the archetypical, and these archetypes often combined pagan and Christian imagery. The beard, long hair, and wide forehead of the quintessential Christ figure of Byzantine art were all in actuality pagan tropes from earlier depictions of Zeus.[12] Another challenge to the identity of Christian icons, came from the potential emotional trapping present in portraits, such as an illusory relationship between image and onlooker. While a spiritual connection was always the goal, icons often became the center of personal emotions of affection and longing that blurred the line between Christ the idea and the icon as Christ himself.[13] This would become the central problem of the icon controversies to come that would later be solved by an increased formalizing of the rules of depiction and a stark downplaying of emotional content.

After the highpoints of the 6th and 7th century, Byzantine art fell prey to intense civil turmoil that culminated in a backlash against icons that lasted from 716-843 A.D.[14] Beginning in earnest with Emperor Leo III, icons were banned and those who were sympathetic to them were brutally persecuted. This happened in part because early icons had very weak theological justifications. The best defenses mustered at first were usually along the lines that unschooled common people needed physical objects to understand the divine. Their opponents quickly countered that this concern was already better addressed by the Eucharist and the established liturgy of the Orthodox church.[15] It soon became clear that it would take an argument outside of this stalemate to provide

---

[10] Mathews, 48.

[11] Ibid,. 50.

[12] Ibid., 51.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Antoine Bon, *Byzantium, trans.* James Hogarth (Geneva: Nagel Publishers, 1972), 21.

[15] Mathews., 55.

an adequate justification. Such an argument was eventually found in Neo-Platonism, a staple of Byzantine thought. Removed from the turmoil by writing abroad in the 8th century, St. John of Damascus formulated one of the first and best Platonic arguments for icons.

His reasoning had two main points: all physical emblems of the liturgy were alike images,[16] and the incarnation allowed man to perfectly perceive the image of God.[17] The first point was mostly rhetorical and redefined "image" as any physical thing used to help one comprehend or worship of God. John cited the many artifacts of the Jews such as the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle as examples. He also claimed their legitimacy came from the fact that they were patterned after heavenly forms in this case the ones shown to Moses on Mt. Sinai.[18] John's second point was subtler and argued that the banning of icons on the basis that the physical could not depict the spiritual ended up denying the incarnation. If Christ truly came in the flesh, into the world of the five senses, then he could be legitimately portrayed through the five physical senses. He combined these points to show that icons were in the same category as the ark and the Eucharist for they were patterned after heavenly forms and had special power because they recalled the physical appearance and therefore the reality of God becoming a man.[19]

By the 9th century these Platonic justifications for icons began to affect the style of Byzantine art in every context. Works became less and less individually distinct as artists endeavored to submit to and match official forms.[20] Together, this host of unified images created a consistent and recognizable matrix that linked Orthodox worshippers from all corners of the empire to the same spiritual world. Likewise, these new images held no intention of stirring individual emotion.[21] Instead, universal images spoke to the universal soul, and every image served as iterations of a singular expressive whole.[22]

---

[16] St. John of Damascus, *On the Holy Images*, trans. Mary H. Allies (London: Thomas Bakers, 1898) Accessed October 6, 2016. Internet Medieval Sourcebook.

[17] St. John of Damascus, *The Fount of Wisdom,* trans. S.D.F. Salmon in *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (Grand Rapids Mi: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955) Accessed October 6, 2016, Internet Medieval Sourcebook.

[18] St. John of Damascus, *On the Holy Images*.

[19] St. John of Damascus, *The Fount of Wisdom*.

[20] Otto Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration*: *Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (Boston, MA: Boston Books and Art Shop. 1955), 3.

[21] Demus, 4-5.

[22] Ibid, 3-4.

In all this, the goal of the first stage, the union of the physical and divine, carried over. As Otto Demus points out, one of the central strengths of John's argument was that it answered the criticism that icons split Christ from his divinity. For if those who beheld Christ face to face experienced both God and man through physical senses, then a physical icon could capture both Christ's divinity and humanity. So it also followed that, just as Christ reflected the image of God, icons of Christ could reflect God himself.[23] However, to do so, icons had to follow rigid guidelines to, as believed, effectively mirror their source subjects.[24]

These guidelines often centered around line of sight. The icon had to be centered down a completely frontal perspective. The form had to be symmetrical and its details in accordance with the archetype portrayed. The eyes looked straight out to meet the onlooker, and, if placed correctly, brought the worshipper face to face with the divine.[25] These conventions brought great restrictions to pose and motion, and yet creative solutions were found. For instance, to show the interaction of two images, faces were carefully turned to maintain ¾ eye contact with the onlooker. So long as both eyes were visible communion was still possible. But if ½ or more of the face was obscured, as was the case with many evil figures, the spiritual connection was lost.[26] These new norms reset the standards for what it looked like for figures to face each other, allowing even slight changes in posture to stand out dramatically.[27] A prototype of this effect can be seen in the earlier mentioned baptistery dome where two apostles beneath Jesus and John turn ever so slightly to interact with one another. Another convention required that important figures be spatially isolated, but this also often obscured relational action between figures. To mitigate this problem, figures were often placed on curved surfaces and gestures were exaggerated.[28]

The final stage of Byzantine art came about during the gradual decline of the empire starting in the late 12th century to the eventual fall of Constantinople to Ottoman Turks in 1453. However, Byzantine tradition was unique in that its artistic production maintained its original quality even as other

---

[23] Demus, 6.
[24] Ibid., 7.
[25] Ibid..
[26] Ibid., 6.
[27] Ibid., 8.
[28] Ibid., 9.

elements of empire decayed.[29] This time of surprising cultural resilience is often called the Pelaeologue Renaissance.[30]

As political and military pressure grew along her eastern borders, pockets of Byzantine culture moved to more stable centers, usually monastic, on the Black Sea, in the Balkans[31] and in southeastern Greece.[32] At the same time, Byzantine influence even spread into Bulgaria and other Slavic regions.[33] Yet, despite this great geographic range, the ever important unity of theme within Byzantine style held out.[34] However, the economic pressures of the time did call for a change in medium. As the materials for mosaics became prohibitively expensive for most small monasteries, painting became the default form of expression.[35] Additionally, the cast of religious figures seemed to have expanded at this time even as the rules of depictions remained the same. Even the Macedonian school which seemed to have departed from the mold by depicting figures with slightly more movement and emotion did not ultimately depart from the formal Platonic goals shared by every region. As art historian Antoine Bon argued, the variances of the Macedonian school were neither political nor intentional, and similar trends could also be seen as far away as Crete.[36] If anything, artists in both places had finally perfected the formal compromises of motion and perspective without straying from their original Platonic aims.

With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Byzantine culture in the technical sense was extinguished. However, its influence long lingered in the regions touched by its influence. Because of this, it is somewhat difficult to pin point the exact end of Byzantine tradition. It lived on wherever a conscious choice was made to portray the archetypical as the actual in order to create a window to the Divine. It ended whenever and wherever these goals were abandoned or made impossible.

Throughout its course of influence, Byzantine style succeeded in bringing innovative and complex theological expression to visual art by transcending its pagan models. However, it would not have lasted if not for its finely tuned formalities. It survived civil turmoil precisely because it attained an

---

[29] Antoine Bon, *Byzantium, trans.* James Hogarth (Geneva: Nagel Publishers, 1972), 24.
[30] Ibid, 135.
[31] Ibid, 24.
[32] Ibid, 164.
[33] Ibid, 137.
[34] Ibid, 139.
[35] Ibid., 162.
[36] Ibid., 168.

ever more perfect uniformity of theme. Finally, never seeking liberation from convention, it instead embraced these restraints, and in doing so freed itself to expand into and influence a vast space. Only from this perspective do the unreal, rigid, and formal development of Byzantine art makes sense, for it was those very qualities that produced its paradoxical combination of stability and dynamism.