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Iconoclastic Echoes: Portraits and Presence

“When one has... glanced into the church itself... one is wholly awed as if one has entered into Heaven itself with no one barring the way from any side and been illuminated... by the beauty in many forms and partially visible everywhere.”¹

Although this description was written by the patriarch Photios in 864 to describe the newly completed church of the *Theotokos* of the *Pharos* in Constantinople, it could just as easily have applied to any of a myriad churches and chapels built throughout the long history of the Orthodox church. Indeed, the richness of this tradition of religious murals is among the most spectacular legacies of both Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. But the question springs unbidden to the lips of any human with the least inclination towards curiosity. What did these images mean? Why do they look as the do? And how did they come to be? Opinions regarding how Byzantines understood their imagery are almost as numerous as the images themselves, and Byzantine painting thereby offers a unique opportunity for the historian of art. Ravaged by the controversies of the “iconoclastic era,” Byzantium fostered one of the rare artistic traditions that is as preoccupied with the philosophical and intellectual implications of imagery as we are. Pervasive religious imagery is the predominate feature of Byzantine art, and it is all the more remarkable for having occurred in a

¹ Charles Barber. “From Transformation to Desire: Art and Worship after Byzantine Iconoclasm,” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (March 1993), 14. Translated from Photios’ tenth homily, written in 864 A.D.

society that embraced whole-heartedly—albeit with customization—the Judaic ban on idolatry.² This psychic tension—triggered by intensely debated factors—lead to a proliferation of writing dissecting the nature of the image: from the grandiose and polemic debates of Iconoclasm, to the hagiographic contemplations that prefigured them, rigorous scrutiny of the image seems to have been a regular feature of the Byzantine mind. Today, exactly how they understood the image remains a topic of fierce debate. Various and complicated psychological theories that have been forwarded, at various points in history, to explain the icon: they range from the academic’s psychological schemes, such as Charles Barber’s claim that the icon’s formal aspects (what he identifies as ‘abstraction’) are to be (and presumable were understood as) “absence,”³ to the official explanations presented during the iconoclastic controversies by church leaders and elites, who oftentimes emphasized that “painters do not contradict the Scriptures... what Scripture saith this they represent.”⁴ But these explanations fail to explain a key formal aspect of Byzantine art: the predominance of the portrait. Consider the decorations of the *parekklesion* of the Chora Monastery in Constantinople (image 1), which was completed in 1316, well into the final, autumnal glories of

² To use the words of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, “Anathema to those who do not salute holy and venerable images. Anathema to those who call holy and venerable images idols... Anathema to those who say that the Church ever allowed of idols.” I use here the almost gleefully hostile edition translated by John Mendham in the mid 19th century, written to explicate, to the delighted protestant reader, how “the evil [of idolatry] was found too deeply fixed to admit of removal” (iii). *The Seventh General Council, the Second of Nicea*, trans. John Mendham (London: William Edward Painter, 1850), 441.

³ Charles Barber. “From Transformation”

⁴ *Ibid*, 141.

the shrinking Byzantine state.⁵ The walls are alive with pigment: the vivid colors, teeming, rhythmic composition, and sheer pervasiveness are typical of the frescos (and the more precious mosaics) that decorated the sanctuaries and chapels of that time. However, let us examine the most prominent real estate in the church: the precious eye-level wall-space and the highest points of the barrel vaults. There, we do not find biblical scenes or dramatized allegories: we do not find images presenting frozen moments. What we see instead is, almost universally, a singular type of portrait. We see Christ, or the *Theotokos*, or saints and prophets: however, they are all painted standing alone, facing the viewer, isolated from narrative context. They are images that, when looked upon, *look back*, and this simple fact is the key to adjudicating between the countless theories that surround Byzantine art. By presenting us with portraits that take the depicted figure out of any narrative context and by then having them stare directly out from the plane of the picture, the Byzantine artist makes a statement: he implies that the depicted figure is *present* before the viewer, spatially and temporally. Any explanation of Byzantine art needs to explain why the Byzantine artist made this decision. It must be an explanation that emphasizes real and immediate *presence*.

Of course, that my beliefs, as a modern viewer, about the psychological implications of a Byzantine portrait are at all useful in understanding Byzantine thought is not immediately apparent. Indeed—fueled, perhaps, by a discomfort with a legacy of an Art History that dismissed Byzantine art, as Charles Barber remarks, “as drained of all human emotion”⁶—there exists a strong impulse to dismiss any visual analysis at all on our part as an anachronistic act of interpretational brutishness.

⁵ Annie Lablatt, "Frescoes and Wall Painting in Late Byzantine Art". *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/fwbz/hd_fwbz.htm (October 2004)

⁶ Charles Barber, “From Transformation to Desire,” 7.

What do our modern perceptions have to do with those of the people who created them? The problem with this aforementioned argument is that it fails to make a critical distinction in the ways that art can convey meaning. There are the parts of art that act as symbols, in the classic sense: objects, motifs, and characteristics that, by cultural convention, refer to something beyond what the picture depicts. Certainly, these meanings are inaccessible without textual or archaeological aid. Imagining, for example, what an “uninformed observer... [would] tell us about the image of a man nailed to a cross” is sufficient to illustrate the point.⁷ However, symbolic meaning is *not* the be-all-end-all of art. The word “dog” on a page reminds you of a dog, but a painting of a dog *presents* you with one. There are aspects of art that interact with the perceptive system independently of symbolism. It is what Bagley calls “visual power,”⁸ and it exists outside of cultural context. If eyes are looking at you, it is, at some level, understood that something is watching you.

This formal understanding of the Byzantine icon is helpful towards understanding the role of images in the Byzantine mind, and it is an essential tool in the interpretation of texts. Most notably, it allows us to reconcile two apparently divergent intellectual threads that exist in the Byzantine literature of image-justification: that presented in the writings of the church elite and the icon-related legends that were a fixture of hagiographic accounts.

Among the most notable reckonings of the image to survive to the present day comes in the form the records of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, an event celebrated as the Triumph of Orthodoxy, and held by the Empress Irene and the newly appointed Patriarch of Constantinople at

⁷ Robert Bagley, “Interpreting Prehistoric Designs,” *Iconography without Texts*, ed. Paul Taylor. (London: The Warburg Institute, 2008), 52.

⁸ Robert Bagley, “Meaning and Explanation,” *Archives of Asian Art*, Vol. 46 (1993): 25.

Nicaea in Bythinia, in the year 786 A.D.⁹ It represents the official end of the first iconoclastic controversy, anathematizing all those who embraced iconoclasm and officially placing images and iconography at the heart of the Orthodox church. In the writings of this council, icons are defended by a variety of means, but an oft-favored (and, indeed, logically effective) tack was that that equated the image to the written word. As neither side questioned the authority of the bible, an argument that rendered the image and bible as parallel, equivalent approaches seems to have been an obvious approach. “The divine Apostle,” the council noted, “teaches us, saying, ‘Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning.’ Now, holy and venerable images... were also written and are for our instruction, emulation, and pattern.”¹⁰ However, such an argument sits uneasily beside contemporaneous works: the dome mosaic in Thessaloniki’s Hagia Sophia features not a visual translation of biblical narrative, but instead characteristic, iconic portraits.¹¹ In the face of this disjunction, the writings of the council reek of *ex post facto* reasoning: their arguments seem more rhetorical than visual. The official and intellectual thought about the icon seems to be, for lack of a better word, wrong: or, if not wrong, then unrelated to the social and spiritual demands that shaped the *form* of the icon. For an explanation of the icon’s form, we have to search elsewhere.

It is in popular writings that we finally find a theory of the icon that corresponds to the appearance of Byzantine art. Kazhdan and Maguire provide one of the most comprehensive surveys of the genre, noting that the lives of the saints, although they “mention art only occasionally often

⁹ Mendham, iii.

¹⁰ Mendham, 141. The verse cited here is Rom. Xv. 4.

¹¹ Robin Cormack, “The Apse Mosaics of S. Sophia at Thessaloniki,” *Deltion*, Vol. 10 (1981), 113. The mosaics in the church are roughly datable through imperial monograms.

give us a more straightforward insight into art.”¹² Of critical importance, however, is in the social role of such works: “it is the genre,” they note, “which was closer than any other (with exception, probably, of popular chronicles) to the ordinary reader.”¹³ The icons of the hagiography are alive and powerful: they turn aside weapons with gestures of their hand,¹⁴ they bleed,¹⁵ and they perform acts of healing, emerging from their images to perform miracles and grant visions.¹⁶ Indeed, for the faithful, the saints and their icons were, visually, at least, one and the same. When they appeared in visions and performed miracles, saints appeared before the faithful “the same as the icon.”¹⁷

James Francis describes a remarkable passage, translated by E. Dawes and N. H. Baynes from the *Life of Daniel Stylites*. After the saint’s death, “the plank [upon which his body was fixed] was stood upright... and for many hours the people all looked at him... and besought him to be an advocate with God on behalf of them all.” In Francis’ words, in the face of this image, the people “do not pray God to allow the saint’s power to continue, but beseech the saint... to continue his work.”¹⁸ The icon is thus rendered equivalent to the body of the saint: it is merely a conduit through which a spirit acts. Miller makes note of a similar account, in which Simeon Stylites distributes a

¹² Alexander Kazhdan and Henry Maquire, “Byzantine Hagiographical Texts as Sources on Art,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 45 (1991), 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10. The fourth session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council also presents a vivid description of an icon bleeding when attacked.

¹⁶ “Here is the story from the seventh-century *Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon*. Returning to his monastery... Saint Theodore falls ill and lies weeping underneath an icon of the sainted healing twins. Eerily, Saints Cosmas and Damian emerge from the icon ‘looking just like they did’ in the painted image.” Miller, Patricia. “On the Edge of Self and Other: Holy Bodies in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2009), 189.

¹⁷ Kazhdan and Maguire, 7-8.

¹⁸ James Francis. “Living Icons: Tracing a Motif in Verbal and Visual Representation from the Second to Fourth Centuries C.E.” *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 124, No. 4 (2003), 591.

"*eulogia* made of [his] dust," declaring it *equivalent* to his physical presence: "The power of God is effective everywhere... when you look at the imprint of our image, it is us that you will see."¹⁹ With this understanding of the image in hand, descriptions where a Christ *Pantokrator* reacts to those who view it—that, for example, his eyes are "gentle and wholly mild... to those who have an irreproachable understanding... to those, however... condemned by their own judgment they are scornful and hostile and boding of ill"—can be rid of the psychoanalytic complications that modern literature has tended to attach to them because, in a way, it was understood by the common man that Christ *was* indeed present *through* the image.²⁰

This is, in the end, a cautionary tale, against privileging text against image, and about taking the words of the powerful as representative of the basic truths of their time. To declare, based purely on what can be gleaned from texts, that we "should understand" images in a particular way, without turning to the images in turn and asking if they answer to this claim, is to risk distorting our understanding of the past. This is not to say that these writings are irrelevant. Rather, it is not necessarily proper to use them to explain the visual nature of the icon, nor how it was understood. The icon visually implies *presence*, and any theory of the icon's development and psychological must incorporate this fact.

¹⁹ Miller, 191.

²⁰ Liz James and Ruth Webb. "To Understand Ultimate Things." *Art History*, 14 (1991), 12.

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Figure 1: Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Constantinople, interior of the *parekklesion*, with frescoes, 1316–21, (source: www.metmuseum.org)



Image 2: The dome mosaic at the church of Hagio Sophia in Thessaloniki, 8th century (source: Dr. Basic, at www.oh.edu).

