

Daniel Bracho

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Color, gaudiness, and the meaning of Westernness:

A comparative study of Classical and Byzantine art

First walking into the ruins of the ancient world of Athens and even that of Thessaloniki, I found myself wondering how these wonders once looked. The lack of color in the ancient temples and buildings in Athens and the lack of recognition with the general society is something that always caught my eye when visiting every ancient site, souvenir store, and museum. Stepping in and roaming the ancient world that the epic Athenians built, the romanticization of Classical Antiquity and the idealized view of it was exemplary. The greatness of what was once there and the need to re-imagine the ideational concept of the past, which is just an abstract idea, became a thought that was continuously lingering in my mind. Revisiting these sites during this summer only further strengthened this need to reimagine, the desire to reenvision what was there, but then comparing it to how we see it today and how it is publicized, marketed, and revisualized today. The greatness, the majestic colors, the patterns, the hues and dyes, the vibrancy and mystery of the past was worthy of further examination, something which I believed was being overlooked and ignored to fit a 'Western' civilized discourse of whiteness and purity. For the previous semester, I established an academic focus on the reimagining of the past through an inaccurate lens which dismisses the artistic value of color, how that has created a mistaken aesthetic of ancient Greek society, and how that affects contemporary Greekness. Following my

new visit to Greece, this interest has transformed itself to a ‘civilized’ dilemma of Orthodox Byzantine Art and its comparison to Catholic Art. The focus of this paper, hence, will be to observe and think about the extravagance and complexity of Byzantine religious art, which may be equated to that of exoticism and lack of order through my perceptions, while comparing it to belief of harmonious and balanced Catholic Art.

The initial consideration of how the original painted ancient sculptures and other works of art looked in the Classical world compared to how they are portrayed today was my initial piece of investigation. As Euripides said in *Helen* that, “If only I could shed my beauty and assume an uglier aspect / The way you would wipe color off a statue”, polychromy and the colorful material culture that existed in Classical Antiquity was a commonly accepted in ancient discourse. However, for centuries, including the neo-Classical renaissance, archaeologists and curators have scrubbed away any traces of color or added artistry before these statues or relics were presented to the public (Talbot). The West has transformed its mentality into a form of collective blindness, where “vision is heavily subjective”. One only sees what one wants to see, only reimagines what one wants to reimagine, all for your comfortability and understandings. This trend has related whiteness with taste, purity, beauty, and vibrant color has become alien, garish, and hence not part of the West (Talbot). Accepting this view therefore made it significantly easier to exoticize other cultures, such as the Egyptian, and distinguishing the Greek from anything else in the region. Jan Stubbe Østergaard, a former curator of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, claims that, “Nobody has a problem hailing Nefertiti as a spectacular piece of world art, and nobody says that it’s unfortunate that it’s painted. Because it’s not Western, it’s perfectly O.K. for it to be polychrome. But let’s not have it in our part of the world, because we’re

different, aren't we?" (Talbot). This belief is further continued by the fact that even Johann Wolfgang von Goethe believed that, "savage nations, uneducated people, and children have a great predilection for vivid colors...people of refinement avoid vivid colors in their dress and the objects that are about them." (Talbot).

This research was followed with ethnographic accounts of tourist vendors and locals on the subject of color in Classical Antiquity, and all of them denied the existence of it, equating it to exoticism, not "simple and harmonic like the ancient Greeks", and to foreign occupants like the Persians. They perceive the ancient Greeks as virtuous, historically refined, and pristine, and the influences of other cultures in their art, which includes the colorful polychromatic layouts and lavish designs, is atrocious for modern society's understanding. The vivid Egyptian blues, the stimulating gold platings, the red hair, the green shoes, the detailed pants, and the bright colors that adored every sculpture and marble, is completely lost in today's understanding of ancient Greek art and the replicas (whether it be in neo-Classical buildings or art or even in souvenirs) that exist today. The imagined Greek abstract is tailored for the contemporary perspective and for the modern convenience of what is pure, civilized, and thus Western.

This 'Western' dilemma extends itself to later periods during the Byzantine Empire and beyond, and there is a need to analyze and understand the extravagance of Byzantine art in comparison to 'Western' Catholic art. The few small churches in Athens, the majestic and large churches in Thessaloniki, and specifically the katholikon of the Timiou Prodromou Monastery, were all perfect venues to observe the essence of Byzantine art and its part of quotidian life, all while comparing it to the Western tradition which I am more aware of. The dichotomy between what defines 'civilized' and 'harmonic' Western European art versus the extravagance of

Byzantine art is worthy of further analysis.

After Constantinople became the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire in 330 AD, it invoked a path for a flourishing center of Christian art. This evidently became a political unit that was used hand-in-hand with government planning and politics. The Hagia Sophia is just a mere example of the greatness of Emperor Constantine's sophistication when it came to showcasing power, artistry, and standards of the West but also emphasizes the greatness of the Eastern part of the empire as the Western side disintegrated into 'barbarian' localities. This greatness, however, was detained by the issue of the use of graven images, the interpretation of the Second Commandment, leading to the epoch of Iconoclasm which destroyed religious images throughout the Empire for over one-hundred years from 726 to 843 (Rice). Following the reintroduction of iconodulism, there was a strict standardization of what could be religiously portrayed—it became very conservative, as the form of images could only be copied but not improved upon. Religious sculpture and physical material religious art was banned, also. Neither of these attitudes were held in Western Europe, even though Byzantine art continued to have influence throughout the continent (Rice).

What I particularly wished to examine was this form of art that transformed itself to figures painted across the architecture and walls of the church, the architecture and structure itself becoming a medium, a canvas for artistic portrayal. The katholikon of the Timiou Prodromou Monastery, for example, was an organic structure, growing and extending itself as the years went by, with more art covering its newly built space, or being destroyed due to natural reasons or fires. With the popular imagination and understanding of Western religious temples, there is a vaster open space, including more illumination, emphasis on the outer structure and

beauty of the architectural marvels, rather harmonic and concrete structures that included majestic sculptures and figures. From the Gothic to Baroque periods, the architectural wonder, including its inner and outer artistry, also became a medium to host physical structures of art within, whether it be frescoes, sculptures, windows, or golden carved altars. This particular difference was something that struck me. The practice of religion differed greatly simply by the space in which it was practiced and how the structure and its art influenced and affected the religious duties that took place within it. This then was further expanded to the idea of what is exotic, gaudy, and uncivilized, with that which is Western, orderly, pure, and pristine. The dark space, the extravagance of the art, the immense detail and storytelling that takes place all over the walls, whether it be the fuller katholikon of the Timiou Prodromou Monastery or the fragmented art remains of the churches in Thessaloniki, although beautiful, could potentially become inordinate and labeled as disorderly, excessive, and not harmonic. The openness, precision, wealth, balance, and concord of the stable and unchanged structure existent in Western tradition is contrasted by the overwhelming sense that the Byzantine art could invoke to some.

This specific dilemma between the Byzantine tradition of art and that of the Western style is something that particularly caught my attention throughout the visits and while observing the art and space carefully, with humorous comparisons within the seminar of certain fashion houses to certain artistic religious styles. The need to understanding the history of the polar religious paths of art, not only the lack of sculpture and physical material artistry, but the usage of space as a religious venue, and whether or not that constitutes and falls into Western, proper, and orderly civilization, is all worthy of further examination in the longer term, especially as I continue to explore the newly opened realm of Art History as a major.

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