

Nazenin Elci

Mt. Menoikeion Seminar

June 12, 2019

Portrait Without the Spiritual Figure

Material objects that people own often appear in artwork, sometimes as depictions of everyday life, sometimes as symbols that carry greater meaning, and sometimes as portraits of people. I am interested in finding out which objects can be combined to represent a person or a space visually in an environment where material possession is minimized, such as a monastery. In art history, manifestation of spirituality has been associated with independence from visual references in the world, in other words, abstract art. How can spirituality be represented using visual references in the world? The apparent contradiction between material objects and spirituality is something I would like to explore and challenge through artmaking during my time in the monastery. Finding traces of complex relationships between the nuns and the objects surrounding them will require observing them and engaging in conversations in order to ask how they perceive the objects they own. In this essay, I will discuss material dispossession in the emergence of female monastic life, and the different ways of looking at spirituality in art.

In the 4th century AD, female monastic life emerged with its own unique organization—monasticism was no longer a male-only practice. Monastic life for women came with many restrictions: seclusion, celibacy, rejection of luxuries and many other constraints. The monastic evolution that was taking place in the Roman Empire - especially around the Mediterranean - is epitomized by Macrina the Younger's life. Macrina was born into a wealthy aristocratic family

in 328 AD in Cappadocia and became a Christian ascetic at an early age.¹ Her hagiography was written by her brother Gregory of Nyssa. Of other women who followed the same path, two of them were Paula the Elder (born 347 AD), another aristocrat-turned-desert mother, and Melania the Younger (born 383 AD), a wealthy woman who left her hometown and her own son and sailed for Egypt and Palestine where she spent her life as an ascetic.²

Ascetic women deprived themselves of all material wealth. Gregory of Nyssa describes the life of virgins living under Macrina's roof as "divorced from all earthly vanities and attuned to the imitation of the angelic life... Their wealth was in dispossession and in shaking off all material superfluity as so much dust from their bodies."³ Macrina discarded her property as soon as she accepted the ascetic life. Melania, too, was known for her "humility and poverty of her clothes".⁴ Leaving behind everything related to material luxury was believed to contribute to freeing one's soul from the body.

Along with dispossession of material wealth comes abandonment of former identities. Susanna Elm, in her book "Virgins of God," states that "By entering Macrina's community the women chose a new way of life; no longer widows, wives, and mothers, they were now virgins."⁵ Macrina and the others were no longer sole members of otherwise ordinary households. At the household under Paula's guidance, it was the same. "For any of them of noble birth, she was not allowed to have a companion from her own home... There was one form of dress for all: they used linen cloth only to wipe their hands."⁶In

¹ Silvas, Anna. *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008. Print., 12

² White, Carolinne, ed. *Lives of Roman Christian Women*. N.p.: Penguin, 2010. Print., 183

³ Silvas, Anna. *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008. Print., 56

⁴ White, Carolinne, ed. *Lives of Roman Christian Women*. N.p.: Penguin, 2010. Print., 18

⁵ Elm, Susanna. *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print

⁶ White, Carolinne, ed. *Lives of Roman Christian Women*. N.p.: Penguin, 2010. Print.79

this institution, virgins lived and worked together. Differences in social background was minimalized and women were treated as true equals.

Spirituality and rejection of material possession have historically been associated with abstract art. Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich developed the concept of “Suprematism” that aimed to create a form of expression that moved as far as possible from the world of natural forms and subject matter in order to access "the supremacy of pure feeling"⁷ and spirituality. Malevich placed one of his most famous paintings, *Black Square* (1915), in the upper corner of his studio, hinting at icons. Petrograd State Institute of Artistic Culture, where Malevich was the artistic director, was forced to close in 1926 after a Communist party newspaper called it "a government-supported monastery."⁸ The Soviet state was then heavily promoting Social Realism, which Malevich did not want to follow due to his interest in spirituality and “pure feeling.”⁹

Wassily Kandinsky, a pioneer of abstract art, in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* wrote, “The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience. It may take different forms, but it holds at bottom to the same inner thought and purpose.”¹⁰ Kandinsky also offered a visual metaphor for the spiritual experience: “The life of the spirit may be fairly represented in diagram as a large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost. The

⁷ Malevich, Casimir." The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed.. . *Encyclopedia.com*. 11 Jun. 2019 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

⁸ "Socialist Realism | art". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved 2018-10-15.

⁹ Malevich, Kazimir. *The Non-Objective World*, Chicago: Theobald, 1959.

¹⁰ Kandinsky, Wassily, and M. T. H. Sadler. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Dover Publications, 1977

lower the segment the greater it is in breadth, depth, and area.”¹¹ The idea of using geometric shapes as representation of spirituality can be also found in works of other artists such as Piet Mondrian and Hilma Af Klint.

American modernist painter Marsden Hartley was influenced by Wassily Kandinsky and in “The Portrait of a German Officer”, he created a new kind of abstraction. The painting brings together a cluster of real-world objects in a manner that mimics Cubism. Within his paintings, Hartley conveyed his emotions regarding his friend's traits through everyday items. Hartley’s painting is also more than a portrait of an individual: it portrays the rising German nationalism that he witnessed while he was in Berlin.¹²

How does one represent the complexity of spiritual life using only material objects in art form? What are the objects that tell us the story of life in the Hagios Ioannis Prodromos Monastery? Do monastics own objects that carry remnants of their former identities? Over the course of this seminar I will attempt to find answers to these questions.

¹¹ Kandinsky, Wassily, and M. T. H. Sadler. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Dover Publications, 1977

¹² Dr. Bryan Zygmunt, "Marsden Hartley, Portrait of a German Officer," in Smarthistory, February 2, 2017, accessed June 11, 2019, <https://smarthistory.org/hartley-officer/>.

Bibliography

Clark, T.J. (2001) *Farewell to an Idea; Episodes from History of Modernism*, [New Haven and London]: Yale University Press ISBN: 0-300-08910-4.

Dr. Bryan Zygmunt, "Marsden Hartley, Portrait of a German Officer," in Smarthistory, February 2, 2017, accessed June 11, 2019, <https://smarthistory.org/hartley-officer/>.

Elm, Susanna. *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print

Kandinsky, Wassily, and M. T. H. Sadler. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Dover Publications, 1977

Malevich, Casimir." The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed.. . *Encyclopedia.com*. 11 Jun. 2019 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

Malevich, Kazimir. *The Non-Objective World*, Chicago: Theobald, 1959.

Silvas, Anna. *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008. Print.

"*Socialist Realism | art*". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved 2018-10-15.

White, Carolinne, ed. *Lives of Roman Christian Women*. N.p.: Penguin, 2010. Print.,

This paper represents my own work in accordance with university regulations.