

The Art of Theology in Colors in Macedonia from 11th to 14th Century

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1. Christian art and architecture on Macedonian soil

Opening the authentic Macedonian orthodox treasury, which is the core component of our historical, spiritual and cultural identity, we discover many and therefore diverse stylistic expressions in form of Christian art in numerous churches throughout the historical landscape of Macedonia nowadays. Many of the paintings witness the timelessness and the iconic beauty that stands behind the masterpieces of every authentic work done by the byzantine and local artists, known or unknown. Iconographic givens, thematic hermeticism and religious aesthetic definition are the basic principles of the complex entity called *the art of theology in colors* as the shortest definition of Byzantine art¹. Therefore, it cannot be unmentioned that with every painting from byzantine times comes along also the stylistic diversity, the exceptional richness of the artistic expression. The diversity of the artistry is even better seen in the systematical development of the theology in colors throughout the ages thanks to the skillfulness, the originality, and the boldness of some of the master artist who let themselves try and explore new ways and approaches of depicting the mystical and spiritual mood of the scenes born from the rich theological tradition. Therefore, there is a natural need of carefully choosing the tasks that are part of the medieval orthodox heritage presented on Macedonian soil, for the sole purpose of presenting the unrepeated beauty formed through time, with the main focus on the period between 11th and 14th century. Starting from 9th century, more specifically from the

¹ George Florovsky described the “observable occurrence of Russian icons as a theology in colours”, cf. G. V. Florovsky, *The Ways of Russian theology*, Cambridge 1978, 9–10.

period of rulership of the Macedonian dynasty (867–1056) the church architecture absorbs the vast specter of all the variations of crossed-dome plan widespread in all the Empire². From the times of the emperor Basil I, the Christian art went back before the Iconoclastic period, creating a unique renaissance form, that sometimes it's named 'the second golden age of byzantine art.'³ The cross in square type became the most preferred type up until 12th century, and later on, this type continues his journey, being developed in various forms⁴. Thankfully, there are many churches preserved on the soil of today's Macedonia from medieval times who are monumental in architectural terms and exceptional in craftsmanship. For the purpose of the paper, there are taken in consideration three churches that date from the period mentioned, and the first is the monumental and without question the most valuable of them all for the Macedonian people – the cathedral church of the Ohrid Archbishops St. Sophia in Ohrid. The unprecedented beauty of the fresco painting works present in the church of St. Panteleymon – Skopje makes this Komnenian pearl the second of the three, and as third, the paper will focus on the church dedicated to the Holy Mother of God Peribleptos, also known as St. Clement, in Ohrid.

2. 11th century Byzantium art in Macedonia's pearl – the city of Ohrid

The cathedral church of St. Sophia in Ohrid, or the church of the Ohrid Archbishops is without a doubt the most significant and the most monumental church in Macedonia. It is a domed basilica with outer narthex. It was first depicted between the period from 1040 to 1045, concluded from the stylistic features of the partially preserved paintings. To this period belong the frescoes painted in the area of the altar, the naos, and the narthex, which is the half of the total painted area. These frescoes without a doubt represent the best preserved theological program in one cathedral church so far discovered from the 11th century Byzantine Em-

² Cf. Е. Димитрова / С. Коруновски / С. Грандаковска, *Македонија. Милениумски културно-историски факти*, Скопје 2013, 24.

³ Прибислав Симић, *Црквена уметност, преглед развоја и градителства и живописа*, Београд 1994, 66.

⁴ Ibid., 67–70.

pire⁵. In addition, they are also the most magnificent surviving frescoes in European art of the 11th century from the time of the former chartophylax of the Constantinople Patriarchate, the head of the Ohrid Archbishopric, Archbishop Leo (1037–1056). The dark colorings, the shades of blue which predominate in the background, the dark and the ochre of the clergy and their attire, the black and gray of the drawing, do not speak of rich palette. Limited, the color serves the tonal painting, the plastic values of the volumes. It is subjected to the relationship between light and dark, designed with fascinating precision⁶.

The first zone of the church was painted with images of the most prominent superiors of the Christian churches. The depicted archpriests illustrated the idea of the hierarchy of the church capitals throughout the Christian world. Places of honor were awarded to the bishops of the Church of Constantinople, and the churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch, whereas the Church of Rome, included in the basic Christian institutional system, was represented in the diaconicon through the portraits of the six popes⁷. In this space of the altar, of particular significance to the Macedonian people are the depicted educators of the Slavs, the brothers Saint Cyril and St. Methodius of Thessalonica, and also their most noted disciple, the new apostle Paul for the Macedonians, St. Clement of Ohrid. The presence of educators portraits of the Slavs in the cathedral church of Saint Sophia is one of the strongest confirmations that their cult was widespread in Macedonia in that period⁸. Furthermore, the drama presented in the presented scene of the Ascension is directly absorbed by the spectator, because it seems like there isn't any geometric concept in the arrangement of the composition, but rather a type of illusion presented in the floating movement of the participants of the scene. It's worth mentioning the representation of the Mother of God with her son on the north column in the naos being remarkable in showing Christ's bare feet, which were to be observed in Western painting as late as the 13th century and whose depiction has been interpreted as the gem of the idea of humanizing Christ's divine

⁵ Cf. Коста Балаванов, *Македонски фрески, Macedonian frescoes*, Скопје 1995, 35.

⁶ Aneta Serafimova, "Beyond the stereotypes: on the stylistic diversity of the Byzantine art in Macedonia from 11th to 14th centuries", in: *Балканославика* 37–39 (2007–2010), 17–28.

⁷ Pasko Kuzman, *Macedonian cultural heritage. Ohrid world heritage site*, Skopje 2009, 73.

⁸ Cf. К. Балаванов, *Македонски фрески*, 36.

figure and image⁹. On the other hand, if we observe closely all the frescoes, we can see that the eyes of the saints are wide open, with a sharp gaze that catches everything that sees. Everywhere is present a very deep and mystical aura that triggers a touching tenderness. Here is significant to mention the deep veneration of the angels depicted approaching the Holy Mother of God in the conch, which is one of the best preserved frescoes. Below the Virgin with Christ child, a Communion of the Apostles is painted, which is one of the largest and most interesting eucharistic composition. In the depicted scene, the host is from leavened bread and Christ holds it in his left hand¹⁰. In the altar space are also presented themes from the Old Testament such as: Abraham's sacrifice, Abraham's meeting with the Archangels, the Three Jews in the Fiery Furnace and other. As for the narthex space, the iconography presented consist of only female saints, which is unique and distinguishes the chosen St. Sophia painting themes from that of other churches.

Throughout the church, everything seems sophisticated in perfect harmony, illustrating the faith of the Orthodox Church. Although there isn't any link to all that is earthly and material, but rather every painting is enclosed to the ascetic aesthetic. With certainty, the anonymous masters of St. Sophia in Ohrid were unquestionably very gifted and original in their works.

This surrealism is present also in the late frescos in the upper compartments of the narthex and porch built in 14th century, known as Gregory's gallery of St. Sophia, that are analyzed by the scholars as separate entities, because they date from 1345 for the narthex and 1355 for the porch, painted by the John Theorianos painting school with the help of local Ohrid artists¹¹. The painting program that Theorian disciples produced is a rare one. The program includes forty scenes of the cycle of Joseph from the Old Testament and the Act of the Separation of Soul and Body. The cycle of Joseph is illustrated so extensively only in one other place in the middle ages – St. Mark's Church in Venice¹². Joan Theorianos is widely known as highly regarded Ohrid painter from the second half of the 14th century¹³. His work is recognized by the specific use of

⁹ P. Kuzman, *Macedonian cultural heritage*, 75.

¹⁰ Cf. К. Балаванов, *Македонски фрески*, 36.

¹¹ Cf. В. Н. Лазарев, "Живопись XI–XII веков в Македонии", in: XII Congrès international del studes byzantines. Rapports, Beograd/Ochride 1961, 114–121.

¹² Ibid., 79.

¹³ Cf. Aneta Serafimova, "On the conceptual codes of entity: Paintings of the Upper Compartments of the narthex and porch of Saint Sophia in Ohrid", in: *Sergiy Radon-*

the mild reddish-ochre finishes and the graphic approach to rendering facial features. This means that his work is far more rich and vibrant than the previous frescoes from 11th century, and therefore introduces another approach when the holy soldiers are being depicted in the Ohrid region. More specifically, they are depicted without their weapons, but rather as martyrs with crosses in their right hand. Theorianos thematic conception of depicting the holy warriors as martyrs in noble stance and clothing faded not before the XV century, which means that his style influenced the local artists for around half a century¹⁴. It's important to bring up that his unique style is mainly influenced by the Peribleptos tradition, or, in other words, by the Paleologian renaissance¹⁵.

3. 12th century culmination of medieval art in the church of St. Panteleymon – Nerezi

The church of St. Panteleymon in the village of Nerezi in the region of the capital city Skopje is one of the most beautiful medieval monastery complex present on today's Macedonia. The church itself is a free cross shaped church of small dimensions, inscribed in a rectangular space type, built in 1164, thanks to its beneficiary the Byzantine prince Alexei Angel, son of Constantine and Theodora, the daughter of the Emperor Alexei I Komnen¹⁶. It's needless to say that the fresco paintings on the walls of this cultural monument are considered to be one of the greatest achievements of Byzantine art during the rule of the Komnenian dynasty¹⁷. The

ezhskiy and the Russian art of the 14th – first half of the 15th centuries in the context of Byzantine culture, International Symposium Moscow, November 11–13, 2014.

¹⁴ Cf. Цветан Грозданов, "Основни белези на охридското видно сликарство од XIV век", in: *Ликовната уметност на почвата на Македонија од IX до крајот на XIX век*, Книга 21, Скопје 2010, 643–662, 644.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ This is known from the inscription on the marble transom between the narthex and the naos that says: "This temple of the holy and glorious great martyr Panteleymon was beautified with the finds of lord Alexei Komnen, son of the noble-born lady Theodora, in the month of September of the 13th indict, in the year 6673 (= 1164), when monk Yoanikos was father superior." For more information, cf. Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric, *Monastery St. Panteleymon Gorno Nerezi – Skopje*, Skopje 2016, 7.

¹⁷ Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric, *Monastery St. Panteleymon Gorno Nerezi – Skopje*, Skopje 2016, 7.

frescoes themselves are painted by the hands of unknown masters in their field of work, in two diverse periods. The first period is right after the church was built, and the second period is after the reconstruction of the church itself, or more precisely after the occurred natural disaster caused by a large earthquake that damaged the first fresco compositions from 12th century, which needed restoration. The second frescoes therefore are after the earthquake from 1555, painted in the second half of 16th century. In the 19th century a new intervention on the frescos was made, a new one have been depicted over the old ones and these last ones are of poor quality. With the help of the art historian Nikola Okynyev, thankfully the large part of the old frescos were rediscovered and revealed ones again in 1926¹⁸. The preserved frescos that are still present inside the church are: The Christological cycle and the gallery of twenty six standing saints in the naos space such as martyrs, warriors, hymnographers, hermits, a part of the Eucharist scene the Communion of the Apostles in the altar, the fresco paintings in the four compartments and the fragmentary kept scenes of the patron saint cycle in the narthex. These old frescos are still visible today, which are the most exceptional form of Christian art from medieval byzantine times. The brilliant painting achievement inside the church gives away the artistic qualities of the unknown painters that enriched the church inside and out, putting it on the map of the general Byzantine and Christian legacy of the Orthodox Church.

Thus said, the development of the 12th century byzantine art achieved new stylistic expressions before not seen. Over passing the surrealism, everything is oriented towards the drama present in the compositions, which is visible especially on the facial expressions of the characters in the scenes depicted. The fine artistry of the unknown Nerezi masters reflects the peak of the Christian fresco art technique during the Komnen era of rulership. The bold moves made by the artists in using high tones enabled them to point out every facial detail of every figure present in the scenes depicted. There are various opinion of the number of painters that worked on the frescos in Nerezi. Some consider that several painters were at work. There was one main master painter, who was invited to come from Constantinople and his work is visible on the most important compositions such as: The Congregation of Archangels, The Transfiguration, The raising of Lazarus, The birth of the Virgin, the Presentation of the Virgin, the entry in Jerusalem, the Decent from the Cross and the

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

Lamentation of Christ. The second painter which was also the main assistant of the master painter worked on the Communion of the Apostles and on some of the depicted warrior saints. These two painters probably had two or three assistants who worked on the narthex space and they've probably been local painters¹⁹.

The fine work of the master painter and his main assistant is present through the boldness, the confident and crafty hands that are visible everywhere thanks to their precision in their painting, especially in the depicted scenes of the Descent of the Cross and that of the Lamentation of Christ, such as the sadness and the pain, the twitch, the poring tears on the face of the Mother of God who holds the body of her Son and our Savior, right after His descent from the Cross. The scene of the Lamentation is for sure their most celebrated work. We do not encounter the Virgin Mother of God as she is painted in earlier frescoes, where her pain is expressed with solemn gestures, a gently bowed head or a slightly raised hand. Here she is an ordinary mother embracing her dead son, weeping over him in pain. The emotive charge is intensified by the weeping angels hovering over the dead body of Christ. All the details support the judgment that the Nerezi Lamentation is an incomparable painting which is justifiably considered one of the most successful not only of the 12th century, but also of Byzantine painting in general²⁰. Comparing this composition with others, most notably with the famous Lamentation of the Italian artist Giotto, painted some 140 years later in the Arena Chapel in Padua, shows that the Nerezi fresco-painter paid more attention to showing the internal feelings of the figures and was much more successful in that sense than the famous Giotto, who paid more attention to the shapes of his figures. The Mother of God of Nerezi cries, her pain tears up hearts. Giotto's Mother of God is painted as a strong young woman with a slightly sad face²¹.

That said the Nerezi frescos take high place in the history of the Byzantine fresco painting. In difference of the 11th century painting which is characterized by the linearity and the stiffness of the depicted figures, in the 12th century something new is starting to emerge on the map. It's a completely another form of artistry which is more refreshing and humane. The depicted scenes are characterized by the impressionism and the graphicism of the painted surfaces. Bright and colorful tones, with clean

¹⁹ Cf. K. Балаванов, *Македонски фрески*, 45.

²⁰ Ibid., 46.

²¹ Cf. MOC – OA, *Monastery St. Panteleymon Gorno Nerezi – Skopje*, 14.

and clear precision in painting the facial expressions, the movements of the figures and their ecclesiastical garment, in a dignifying way reveal to us the inner sorrow and joy of the presented figures. This is in a way a kind of a Komnenian classicism. Seen in that way, the painted arrangement of Nerezi is a represent of the theological erudition and the sophisticated art taste of the highest noble circles from the Byzantine capital and of its founder. Cataloged among the most important works of art from the medieval era, the fresco arrangement of this church represents the most striking emblem of the theologically refined, sociologically idealized and aesthetically exalted Byzantine visual culture. The flourishing of academic erudition, the intensive development of literary genres, the emergence of new approaches and methods of studying the natural sciences, and the popularization of religious debate are the foundations of the impressive and monumental Komnenian culture, which culminates at the beginning of the second half of the 12th century. In that way emerges the new and fresh spiritual humanism which is seen as the most unique characteristic present in the 12th century Byzantine art²².

4. 13th century conserved Byzantine art in the church of the Holy Mother of God Peribleptos – Ohrid

13th century is not defined as the most serene period for the Empire. History notes turbulent events that left deep marks on the soil of Byzantium. Mainly it was troubled period for the Byzantines caused by the forth Crusade and the fall of Constantinople under Latin rulership from 1204 to 1261. Later on, the house of Paleologos rose to power and took the throne, ruling as last of the monarch families that governed with the Empire until its fall in the hands of the Ottomans in 1453. Their rulership suffered political and economical decline, due to the foreign enemies like the Ottomans, and because of the civil wars between members of the Paleologos family. Still, this period was fruitful when Christian art was in question. The Christian art continued its way of development in a traditional spirit, and many of the newly aroused churches gave their contribution by enriching the cultural and spiritual heritage with original

²² Cf. Е. Димитрова / С. Коруновски / С. Грандаковска, *Македонија. Милениумски културно-историски факти*, 67.

and vibrant frescos and icons. For the period of 57 years between the capture of Constantinople by the Latin's in 1204 and its recapture in 1261, the art historian Viktor Lazarev states that in this period many of the local schools revived. Macedonia played a crucial role by developing the Christian art by having their own schools, and in the 14th century, the schools grow as artistic centers, gravitating toward Thessaloniki²³.

Thus said, the 13th century was one of the richest and most fertile periods for painting in Macedonia, especially for fresco and icon painting in the archiepiscopal centre in Ohrid. One of the finest representatives of paleologian painting from this period is the Church of the Holy Mother of God – Peribleptos which was built in 1295 and is one of the oldest church in the city of Ohrid. This exceptional monument of Christian art and architecture was built by the Byzantine governor Progonos Sgueros, a son-in-law of emperor Andronikos II Paleologos, during the archbishopric of the archbishop Makarij. According to the reputation that was holding, its influence and wealth, the monastery church of Peribleptos was third in rank in the archbishop's city. In the second half of the 15th century, the cathedral church of St. Sophia was converted into a mosque, and during that time, the church of Peribleptos took the role and became cathedral church, becoming at the same time the seat of the Ohrid Archdiocese. From an architectural point of view, the church does not impress with its size. The chosen architectural type is that of an inscribed cross with a dome and a narthex, built by the traditions and the experience of the local architectural school. Along with the church of St. John Kaneo and the Holy Mother of God Zaumska built in the vicinity of the village of Trpejca and the monastery of St. Naum, which are both in form of an inscribed cross, the Peribleptos church is a prominent representative of the Macedonian school of architecture from the Paleolog period.

From the artistic point of view, the frescos are work of two very skillful master artists: Mihail (Michael) Astrapa and Evtihij (Eutychius), who worked alongside with their assistants and apprentices. Their frescos are colorful, serene, dramatic, and harmonic, with many new iconographic elements. Very characteristic are the depicted young saints who are presented in their full youth as energetic and powerful. Also, the old dwellers of the desert and the archbishops in the altar space are depicted as robust people, full of energy and liveliness. That said, on the frescos there isn't any sign of oldness. If the frescos are work of two young and prom-

²³ Cf. В. Н. Лазарев, *История византийской живописи*, Москва 1947, 158.

inent artists, which they are, it is probable that they had a goal to present their youthfulness through the figures present in every scene depicted by their hands²⁴. Surely, the artistic style of the two artists bears the mark of the Thessalonica school, although it cannot be neglected that they inserted in a very skillful and exceptional way many new, distinctive and unique touches that put the frescos in the church of Peribleptos on the map of the cultural and spiritual legacy of all the Orthodox Church as frescos with enormous value and significance. Mihail and Evtihij introduced realistic elements to the figures and on the compositions depicted, where we meet a very particular dynamism which is innovative and fresh. Using shades of red, green, white, blue and yellow ochre, allowed them to express the depth and give meaning of every composition. The preserved work from this master artist confirms the exceptional quality in choosing the right material and colors, as well as their sense for detail and innovation²⁵.

Regarding the preserved composition in the church of Peribleptos, the master artists comprehensively and systematically presented ten cycles of scenes that are present in the altar, the nave, and in the narthex of the church. At the central dome dominates Christ Pantokrator, surrounded by angels. Under this exceptional depiction of Our Savior there are the prophets, and on the pendentives are present figures of the four evangelists. The scenes that are part of the Great Feast, found on the upper walls of the church, and below them in the central nave space is depicted the cycle of Christ's sufferings, starting from the Last Supper to the Lamentation, and continuing with scenes with His appearances after His resurrection. Under them, on the southern part of the nave space are presented scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary. On the other hand, in the western part of the nave space are depicted scenes from Christ's miracles and healings. As for the scenes in the altar space, there we find three different zones, each one of them with different scenes depicted. In the first zone there are depicted figures of St. Nicolas, St. Gregory, St. Athanasius and St. Cyril. In the second zone there are figures of saints depicted to the belt, clothed in white felons and omofors. The third zone is reserved for three compositions: the Communion of the Apostles in the altar apse, the unbelief of Thomas on the north wall, and the Last supper on the southern wall. In the scene of the Last supper that took all of the space on the

²⁴ Cf. Коста Балабанов / Антоние Николовски / Димитар Корнаков, *Споменици на културата на Македонија*, Скопје 1980, 248.

²⁵ Cf. К. Балабанов, *Македонски фрески*, 53.

south wall, Judas is depicted in the moment of reaching for the bread with a transparent halo on his head, with which the artists announce his upcoming treachery. On the large spaces of the western wall, stands depicted the scene of the Assumption of the Virgin Mother. In this scene prevails the dramatic and tense atmosphere, which will become an example for further nurturing when this scene is depicted in our medieval Christian art later on.

The work of Mihail and Evtihij on the frescos in the Peribleptos church is made in their early and most fruitful period of their artistic life. Here there aren't present art forms close to the Constantinopolitan school and their unique way of painting, where predominates a different style characterized by the standardization of the classical forms, the measuredness in the movements of the figures, the ceremonialism in the scenes, the two-dimensional style of the artwork and the typification of characters. They explored the third dimension style which is especially present in their work on Peribleptos church, which opened a new path of development of the Christian art in general. In that way, their work became monumental and extraordinary, which arose them on the pedestal of most highly demanded artist on the Balkan Peninsula.

With this said, the Christian art and architecture on Macedonian soil represents a very innovative and fruitful period from Byzantine times, a time which is immeasurable in cultural and spiritual sense. The works from this period are of great importance not only for Macedonia, but for the history of the Romaic art in general²⁶.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*