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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE BYZANTINE PORTRAIT ART

Case studies

Keywords

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Abstract

Guided by the Christian faith, Byzantine art has attached special meaning to the representation of the human figure. Grounded on aesthetic principles, the artistic representation of the human face relinquished on the physical materiality of the represented model, searching for its essences and resemblances to the divine world.

Subject to specific representation rules, Byzantine portraiture bears a series of peculiar characteristics that mark it out among other images of this kind belonging to other spirituality areas, periods and artistic styles. Both in icons, where it highlights a series of particular significances describing the divine nature of saints, and in other fields of Byzantine arts – such as mural painting or mosaic – the portrait stands out due to its importance.

This paper intends to present a few of the defining characteristics of portraiture in Byzantine art, exemplifying the evolution of this artistic genre by analysing some of the most representative creations of this field.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we will refer, as we have already mentioned in the title, only to some aspects characteristic to the portrait in the art of the Byzantine Empire, the secular one, that represented the sovereigns and the paymasters of some works of art, respectively the religious one, found in icons or in church painting. In this respect, we are going to underline the specificity of portraits, from representation canons for representing the human figure to clothes, jewels and specific elements which complete these images.

Moreover, we mention that, by the notion of portrait, we refer to two different meanings, but still related in meaning, that is the notion of artistic genre also involving the idea of some specific compositional types (individual portrait or group portrait), respectively the notion of work of art which describes the physiognomic, psychologic or spiritual features of a person.

2. A few historical remarks about portrait in Byzantine art

In the large medieval artistic field, which contains the forms of stylistic evolution from Paleochristian art to the Byzantine, Roman and Gothic art, *portraiture* found numerous forms of representation, underlining different aspects in its various phases of evolution. Regarding the present paper, we will particularly focus our attention on the period between the 4th - the 15th century, from the appearance and setting of the first stable form of Byzantine art to the fatidic moment of the year 1453, which meant the siege of Constantinople by the Turkish people. This period is connected to the appearance of Christian Art, whose origin is connected to a hostile religious context, on the territory of the Roman Empire of the 1st -3rd centuries, during the reign of some emperors whose name is connected to bloody persecutions against the followers of this religion. In this context, when Christianity had to fight with the status of illicit religion, the first forms of Christian art, especially created in catacombs, depicted symbolic images beyond which one could deduce the Christian message. Beyond these representations, the forms of Christian art have developed also depicting the human figure in different scenes, the artists being more preoccupied to render the expression and the inner meaning of images, not leaving behind the concern for a specific anatomic proportion.

Christianity was that one that radically changed the evolution of portraiture. Though Christianity opposed idolatry, it continued to pay specific attention to portraits in the case of secular or sacred topics, in its artistic representations, having a pagan or a Christian origin and the human figure could not have been omitted (Francastel, 1973).

Starting from these aspects, we should mention the fact that, given the historic development of this art, we have in view a specific difference between portraiture with a religious character and those with a secular character, the first being influenced by a specific confessional criterium which would generate bigger differences between the East and the West. Given the context, the face of Christ, of the Virgin Mary or of the saints, in general, whose approach supposes some rigours from a theological and iconographic perspective, imposed by the Eastern Church and manifested in Byzantine and post Byzantine art, has a more and more humanized approach whose peak would be realism in Renaissance.

Regarding the beginning of Christian art itself, Michel Quenot mentions the importance of the year 330, which marked the inauguration of Constantinople as the new capital of the empire, and also the existence of a real cult of the emperor during that time, his face was shown on the streets of the city, the people solemnly went on their knees in front of it. It is still Quenot the one who shows that, in parallel with this fact, once the Christian religion became official, a new cult began, that is of the image of Christ, as an emperor, whose young face, without a beard, transmitted to the believers the idea of the power and gentleness of the master "of the Christian universe" (Quenot, 1993).

By extrapolating this analysis, one can also notice the fact that the purpose of such artistic representations was in most cases an ornamental one (Boespflug, 2008, p. 94), because none of the images of Christ, Virgin Mary or God the Father can be considered an image of worship, just like François Boespflug underlines, not before the beginning moment of worshipping the icon of Christ (the first half of the 5th century) (Quenot, 1993). This explains why the icon of Christ, for example, can't be understood as a historical portrait strictly speaking, but first of all as an effigy of God made man, who underlines the idea of divinity and victory over death, this idea would influence the representation manner of all fields of Christian art (Boespflug, 2008).

Representing a transfigured world, the one of divinity, a synthesis of the Greek, Roman and Christian cultures (Quenot, 1993, p.13) and presenting specific similarities with Egyptian funerary portraits (the region Fayum), the icon has known a special development particularly in the influence area of Byzantium, the interest for it determined another important moment of the existence of Byzantine art, marked by the period known as *iconoclasm*, historically placed between 726 -843.

Motivated by various causes, which are political, economic and theological, and by the existence of some *abuses* (Uspensky, 1994), which opposed the function and the main purpose of icons, diminishing their role and meaning, the iconoclastic controversy led to the destruction of a significant number of works of art which were the representations of saints, the iconoclasts connected them to the so-called *carved faces (idols)* (Exodus 20,4), which opposed the second divine commandment. Despite these controversies which appeared from various reasons, the icon also found solid supporters who brought various arguments with theological arguments which were hard to attack, among which those of divine origin, regarding the images *achiropita/acheropita* (not made by human hand) or the first image of the Virgin Mary painted by Saint Luca (Grabar, 1991). These examples of saint images had the role of rehabilitating the position of the icon among Christian believers, also serving the theological and political purposes of that time.

These controversies led to one of the most difficult phases in the history of figurative art and implicitly of portraiture, marking, on the one hand, the ceasing or the diminishing of productions of this type, and on the other hand, the regrettable massive destruction (Gombrich, 2007) of the existing works. But, once the 7th Ecumenical Council took place in Nicaea in 787, Christian art returned to the cult of icons, this thing was possible with some restrictions, which mainly regarded the representation canons of the saints. Despite the numerous destructions, the evolution of Byzantine art did not cease in the 9th century, the positive aspect of iconoclasm was the establishment of the status of an art with a deep religious character. The iconoclastic period thus contributed to the substantiation of the belief that the icon represents a face made not only after the rules and principles of art or culture, but also of the Church (Răducă, 1993).

Regarding the representation of the human figure, though iconoclasm temporarily stopped the evolution of portraiture, it did not manage to annihilate this artistic genre which adapted itself to the requirements of the time, creating a favourable climate for its later development. After the end of the iconoclasm, starting with the year 843, Byzantium faced a revival of iconography, together with a growing interest for art and theology, which would be stopped in 1204, when Constantinople was plundered by Western crusaders and in 1453, when the Turks sieged it. These events led to the diversification of traditions and regional artistic styles (Brown, M. P. (Ed.), 2009) which tried to express themselves in an original way, this fact was generated by the migration of more artists from Byzantium towards different areas from the East, Balkans and the West. This explains the major influence of Byzantine art over Russia, in the East, respectively of Italy, in the West, even around the 13th century.

Envisaging the continuation of the Byzantine artistic tradition, on the one hand, the schools of church painting from Greece (Salonic, Mystras) made themselves remarked and Mount Athos also, the ones from Bulgaria, Ukraine and Cyprus, from Macedonia and Serbia, places like Ohrid, Nerezi, Kastoria or Kurbinovo, respectively Dečani, Studenica and Sopoćani proved to have a high level of understanding of the mysteries of this art.

On the other hand, the influences came from the west gradually led to an estrangement from the original traditional Byzantine art, which meant that in the 13th – 14th centuries, there was an imminent decline and a loss of the symbolic language which had assured, for more than a millennium, the sacred character of the iconographic representations of Byzantium. In this context, the portrait type will acquire new aspects, being diversified in two big directions, a traditional one which kept the Byzantine inheritance and another one which slowly estranged from it, becoming desacralised, step by step.

3. Representation of secular portrait in Byzantine art. The imperial portrait

The cult of the emperor was transmitted to the subjects in a direct and also indirect way, by imposing high execution standards of the portraits of Byzantine sovereigns. Thus, the images of emperors replaced, in a symbolic way, in their absence, the real presence of the portrayed rulers (Negrău, 2011). In order to achieve these standards, Byzantine artists were inspired and took over different elements from the Roman pagan art, except for the tendency of suggesting the psychological resemblance of the model. This type of portraits, considered some sort of effigies, were often idealized on purpose, their rich ornaments participated at the suggestion of a specific

stereotype, lacking movement, which illustrated an ideal monarchic typology (Magdalino, 1993).

The sovereigns' Byzantine portraits also referred to a series of symbolic elements, such as the imperial signs represented by the ceremony costume usually formed of *chlamys* (the chlamys-costume) or *loros* (loros-costume), red shoes and different jewels, objects associated with power, such as the crown, the sceptre and *labarum*, *akakia* (the akakia) and *globus* (Parani, 2003). The presence of the aureole around imperial portraits – another visual attribute of this type of image – did not have the role of symbolizing the saint life of the emperors or empresses, nor their canonization during their life (Ciggaar, 1995), but it underlined *genius imperatoris* (Negrău, 2011), respectively the divine power invested in the sovereigns, also being a sign of the communion between the Church and the State (Debicki, Favre, Grünewald, Pimentel, 2000, p. 65). In order to clearly understand this idea, we remind the fact that, in the Byzantine Empire, the emperor was considered the living image of Christ and the ruler of the Church, the imperial power being perceived as a transfer of the authority of God on Earth (Craith, 2006).

Artistically expressing the idea referring to the portraiture representation of Byzantine emperors, at the Church *San Vitale* from Ravenna (548), there is a series of mosaic portraits which have been preserved, the execution is extremely accurate, having an obvious historic and artistic value. We are referring to the portraits of the Emperor Justinian and his Empress Theodora, surrounded by a great number of characters. The figure of the emperor can be easily distinguished by the central positioning among the other figures and also by the imperial clothes, and especially by the fact that his portrait is surrounded by an aureole.

Though they present clear physiognomic differences, the artistic realisation of these figures implies a specific type of stylization which, according to some opinions, "should not be interpreted as portraits [they show] the radical changes that interfered in figurative arts after the fall of the West Empire" (Hollingsworth, 2008, p. 102). The stylization way, specific to these figures, combines technical details specific to the art of mosaic with a series of elements which are specific to Byzantine art at its beginning. We remark the special attention paid to the eyes, supersized in the case of some characters, also suggesting their spiritual qualities.

The collective portrait also underlines the image of the Archbishop Maximian and of the banker Julian (Francastel, 1973), the one that paid for the execution of the mosaics, thus reminding of the importance of the Emperor from Constantinople. Of all the characters, the only true portrait is the one of Maximian, while the figure of the emperor is treated like an idealized effigy. The other

characters are differentiated formally, without touching psychological aspects.

If we analyze the context of these representations, François Boespflug remarks the fact that the first expressions of Christian art have underlined a clear break up from the worship statues representing pagan gods and also a firm distance from Hellenistic art (Boespflug, 2008). Regarding the rapport of these Christian representations compared to the Roman portraits which underlined in a realistic manner both physiognomic and character features, the first of these (Christian representations), as it is the case of the portraits from the Church *San Vitale* from Ravenna, were stylized, the figures of the characters seemed impassive (Debicki, Favre, Grünewald, Pimentel, 2000). In this respect, Michelle P. Brown remarked an interesting blending between the monumentality and the static character of the figures, the exotic aspect of Byzantine-type clothes and the iconography specific to Roman art that met in a unique mixture, typical to the cultural basis of Ravenna (Brown, M. P. (Ed.). 2009). Thus, it is clear the fact that, regarding the ways of representation of the portrait, in the case of the Church *San Vitale* from Ravenna, it constitutes the mark of a "spiritualized" synthesis, specific to this era, of the artistic influences of Rome and Byzantium, without any flashiness and finding almost a "natural" formula of joining the two forms of art.

4. Representations of religious portrait in Byzantine art

In Byzantine art, among numerous iconographic representations, portraiture had to play one of the most important roles in its evolution. Having a solid theoretical base, guided by the Christian faith, Byzantine art has placed special importance to the artistic representation of the human figure. Based on aesthetic canons, the form visually expressed through art did not have to refer strictly to the exterior or concrete materiality of the represented model. What was envisaged by this type of representation was, in fact, the divine nature and not the human one, from this point of view, Byzantine art being a purely spiritualized one, in service of the Christian religion, whose major challenge proposed the passing beyond the material plan of the image, towards the spiritual one that was desired.

Subjected to specific canons, Byzantine portraiture has a series of specific features, that make her recognizable among other representations of this type coming from other areas of spirituality, periods and artistic styles. Both in the icon, where it has a series of specific meanings, describing the divine nature of the saints, and also in other fields of Byzantine art, like wall painting or mosaic, the portrait is remarkable by its significance, the image

of the icon being "the centre of the body" (Quenot, 1993), the place of maximum visual and spiritual intensity.

In an icon, the importance of the portrait is that of "embodying a spiritual presence", the face is no longer a biological component, but the one which has the most important organs of sense which allow the perception of God's Grace. The eyes symbolize the sight of God, the large and domed forehead of the saints hides divine wisdom, the thinned and elongated nose underlines an attribute of noblemindedness, while the ears suggest the listening of God's word, while the mouth is a sign of spirituality (Quenot, 1993).

We exemplify these features by one of the most representative creations of Byzantine art, *the Icon of Christ Pantocrator* from the Monastery Saint Catherine from Sinai, Egypt. Dating back to the 6th century (approximately 525-530), it was created shortly after the Council from Chalcedon, showing Christ giving His blessing, as a Master of the Universe. The manner of realization of the portrait attracts the attention from the beginning given the accentuated asymmetry of the two halves of the face. This fact was interpreted as an expression of the two natures of Christ: human and divine. The blending of humanity and divinity represents one of the defining features of this creation, the attention of the viewer is focused on Christ's two eyes: the right one is the expression of His divine nature, full of understanding, beneficence and love, while the left eye is the symbol of His human nature, having a harsher expression meant to remind us the imminence of the Last Inquest (Piderit, Morey, 2012). By showing the elements mentioned above, Christ's right hand (the one that refers to divinity) gives His blessing, while the left hand (showing the human nature) holds a Gospel inlaid in gold, richly ornamented, with a cross of big dimensions, inlaid with numberless precious stones. The dualism of these aspects expressed with clarity in the expression of the eyes, in the gesture of blessing and in the representation of the Gospel, representing the word of God expresses the way that people should follow in order to reach the supreme goal of this life: "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be judged, but has crossed over from death to life." (John 5, 24).

In time, numerous speculations have been made regarding the resemblance of this work with the image imprinted on *the Shroud of Turin*, suggesting - given the beauty of the image -, that this icon could not have been made by a human hand, but by the angels (Zelensky, Gilbert, 2005). Another accepted hypothesis is that the painter who created this icon was, most probably, one of the most valuable imperial artists of Justinian from Constantinople (Dayvault, 2016). The image that he created managed to reach, beyond respecting the

typical canons of the Byzantine style, a high level of expressiveness and a rich spiritual charge, and last, but not least, a psychological peak.

Another masterpiece of Byzantine iconographic art which has become one of the most worshipped icons of the Orthodox space is the well-known *Virgin of Vladimir* or *Vladimirskaja* (11th-12th century), probably the work of a painter from Constantinople. Regarding the aspect of technical achievement, the work manages to impress us through the way of rendering details in the spirit of Byzantine art: the long and right nose, the small mouth, the three stars on the *maphorion* of the Virgin which symbolically suggest Her maidenhood - before, while and after giving birth to Christ, respectively the way of treating light, with gold on the vestment, all these elements are the proof of a work which belongs to a real Byzantine master.

Unlike other representations of the Virgin holding the infant Jesus, in this case, the portraits and the atmosphere are rendered with a sensitivity which is rather rarely met in Church Byzantine art. This type of representation is also known as *Eleusaor* "the Sweet Kissing", being an intimate portrait of the mother and of her infant, in which the face of the Virgin expresses human features, such as tenderness, compassion and maternal love. The composition is simple, but extremely powerful: The Virgin Mary is holding the Infant Jesus at Her chest, He gently caresses Her, the faces of the characters are turned one towards the other, like in a visual and affectionate dialogue, while their cheeks are touching each other. The Virgin, aware and aggrieved by the future sacrifice of Her Son (Kleiner, 2017), is looking at the viewer, the artists suggests, in a discreet way, that this sacrifice has been made for all of us. On the face of Jesus, we can't read the same sadness, but only maturity, understanding and kindness, He accepts His sacrifice and He soothes His Mother's suffering.

This Byzantine work has been the most worshipped and loved icon that makes miracles, from Russia (Haustein-Bartsch, 2009), being copied by the most well-known painters of icons from all times, Theophanes the Greek and Andrei Rublev.

Conclusions

In Byzantine art, the approach of portraiture has known substantial transformations, the portrait representations adapted themselves to social, political, cultural and religious conditions, and last, but not least, to artistic ones. In this study, we have tried to underline only a few of the features which characterize Byzantine art. From the analyzed information, what we truly believe is worth mentioning is the fact that, despite the canonic system which defines Byzantine iconography in general, in the representations of portraits, either secular or religious, there is often

an extraordinary interweaving between the rigours of the Byzantine technique and a series of spiritual feelings expressed in the most sensitive way possible. The examples presented in this paper come to support this idea, offering the measure of possibilities of subjective expression of the artists regarding the creation of some works of art which correspond both to the system of values, dogmas and canons of the Church and one's creative visions of the artists.

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