
THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY IN THE ORTHODOX ESTHETIC AND ICONOGRAPHY ICONOGRAPHIC BENCHMARKS

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Abstract

There are still voices that remind one of the role that sacred art. Beauty's mystery and divinity bring into focus an element to be desired, felt, but never reached. And if by revelation a mystery partially reveals its presence, there is always something more to learn, and therefore, for the contemplating subject to know beauty is to go on a labyrinthine, endless journey in order to express it correctly and to strive to understand it. In the Orthodox iconography, everything is represented symbolically. Visual beauty begins with the seen and the unseen, and, based on the embodiment of the Savior Jesus Christ and the Theology of the Holy Person, 'sanctifies' the whole image and lifts man to the rank of collaborator to this 'sanctification' of the reality. The Holy Fathers reiterated the biblical concept of the greatness and beauty of God revealed in the beauty of the created world to which they added the belief that God, the source of this beauty, is Himself pure, perfect beauty, Beauty itself, where we can arrive through faith, contemplation and continuous spiritual exercise. Since God is equivalent with beauty, He contains in Himself the beauty of the world, of everything that exists, including man and His other creations. Therefore, the Holy Fathers name Him all-beautiful. All the beauty in the world has its origin in God the Beautiful, to which it aspires through spiritual exercise. God the Beautiful is the creator of all things beautiful in the world, whatever they may be.

Keywords: sacred art, harmony, Orthodox iconography, Christianity, divine beauty, revelation

1. A short introduction

All positive belief reminds one that the nostalgia of transcendence is part of every human being. When circadian reality stifles, minimizes or ignores it, this nostalgia retains the endurance of a projection onto sublime with the help of which the human being offers and receives the beneficial energy of the belief in an ideal reality. The constant referral to this reality is a univocal message whereby beauty reveals itself as perfection.

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It is difficult for art to find ways to manifest itself and develop harmoniously and without negative consequences, inhibitions and tensions, in the coercive systems where survival is the law that rules the existence both of a whole community and of an individual. A rigidly regulating supremacy that imposes pre-established rules, demands obedience without ... and opposes the freedom of belief does not usually accept the creative tendencies or actions seen as independent of the induced demands. Thus the emergence of the dichotomy 'engaged art' versus 'liberal art'. In which one is beauty more ... beautiful? More authentic? ... More beneficial! ...

Upon retrospective reflection, one realizes that the two meanings of the Greek word *Kalos* (*beautiful* – as adjective and *well* – as adverb) identifies beauty with wellness and generates the idea of *harmony*.

In fact, art should reflect *harmony*.

However, to accomplish such a prerogative does not imply diminished creativity or abandoning the search for new means of expression. They continue to protect themselves from the proliferation of many damaging influences in a short or long term environment already over-polluted by destabilizing and destructive messages.

There are still voices that remind one of the role that sacred art has played and of the fact that "art has forever been inseparable from religion, indispensably bound to it, and therefore has reached its height under the tutelage of religion". [1]

Before it becomes art, the positive human act of creation represents, in essence, people's belief in God, and beauty is but an expression of this belief.

2. Records

There have been references to beauty as a characteristic of human creation beginning with the Old Testament. In *Commentary on Numbers*, Origenes associates the meaning of beauty with human nature and its characteristics, showing that, on the one hand, beauty is the accomplishment of man's actions and works, and, on the other, beauty is the search for and careful analysis of Wisdom and Knowledge.

"How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, *and* thy tabernacles, O Israel! As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river's side, as the trees of lign aloes which the lord hath planted, *and* as cedar trees beside the waters." (Numbers 24.5 – 6)

In our opinion, the 'goodly tents' are not worldly homes (...). Should someone ask what the difference is between 'tent' and 'tabernacle', between 'Jacob' and 'Israel', here it is: a 'tent' or 'house' is an immovable thing circumscribed to certain fixed coordinates; 'tabernacles' are nomad homes, always on the road, never reaching the end of their journey. Therefore, Jacob represents man's accomplishments, whereas Israel is a symbol of his permanent search for Wisdom and Knowledge.

“(…) As for the one who has fulfilled his duty and has reached the limit of his accomplishments, he will be said to have found his ‘tent,’ his home. On the contrary, those who search for Wisdom and Knowledge will never find the end of their work – for where lies the limit of God’s wisdom? The closer one comes to it, the more profound he discovers it to be.” [2]

In Christianity, the term *philocalia* itself, i.e. love of beauty, contains the evidence of a religion of beauty. (*Philocalia* – gr. *Filo-kalos* ‘love of beauty’). 1. Title given by St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory Theologus to an anthology of Origenes’ writings on the topic of ‘love of the divine beauty.’ 2. Anthology of texts regarding the ascetic and contemplative life; it includes excerpts from the Four Holy Fathers of the Greek Orthodox Church (4th–14th century); it represents the main source of inspiration for the Orthodox tradition. [3]

Man’s yearning for beauty or this ‘constant desire for new beauty may represent, from a theological point of view, (…) his memory of the ineffable beauty he contemplated during his innocent state. Man remains the model of his Creator not just because he contains the indescribable thirst for ever more beauty (…) but especially because he proves to be a creator of beauty himself.’ [4]

3. The Divine Beauty

The instances of beauty in the Orthodox aesthetics include: *the divine beauty, world’s beauty, human beauty and artistic beauty* [5].

The divine beauty reveals God as the Archetype of Beauty, therefore the spiritual beauty of God’s son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, becomes part of the divine archetypes, in other words of God’s spiritual attributes (omniscience, wisdom, justice, mercy, holiness, patience, kindness, love).

“We communicate with the divine beauty only through prophets. We know that each attribute related to God’s infinity is, in turn, infinite. However, we are not able to seize the nature of this ‘infinity’, the ‘concrete essence of the infinity that characterizes each of these attributes.” [6] The very nature of infinity is mysterious according to pre-Socratic philosophers, to Plato, Aristotle, Plotin, later on to the Holy Fathers and other religious writers, and even according to Leibniz and several contemporary modern mathematicians. On the one hand, this mystery appears to be unknown, and on the other, unknowable.

An attribute identifies and singularises a reality based on specific characteristics. By identifying and singularising, the attribute comes to represent an ‘manifestation.’ It is also a means of rational cognition. The attributes guide our sensibility, subjectivity, and reasoning towards the essence of the Being without exhausting it. All theophany has an unfathomable side. Even in the less esoteric theophanies, God only reveals Himself partially. We can know God but because of our limited reason we cannot understand Him. Creation is not able to rationally contain the Increate.

Thus, God’s Being and His superessential characteristics reveal themselves only partially through their attributes, or rather ‘beneficent manifestations’ (St. Dionysus the Areopagite).

“An attribute, writes Father Daniloae, appears therefore as an expression of numerous works which confer upon us a holy gift they have in common to a certain degree and which becomes part of our lives. If in His attributes God’s Being seems to bring some of His aspects to our level of understanding, His works further specify these aspects or attributes. They often allow us to recognize God both in His general aspects brought to our understanding and in His countless specific characteristics permanently bestowed on us.” [6, p. 149] The Orthodox teachings on the different ways of knowing the divine Being and His attributes help us understand on the one hand that God is ‘characterized by beauty, ineffable beauty,’ and on the other that ‘He Himself is Beauty.’ [7] This understanding is not either complete or adequate.

The mystery of divine Beauty never reveals itself completely. It is perceived constantly, in different ways, shapes, forms, and circumstances, but never wholly. What we say about God is only what He allows us to say. The more we look for Him, the more He reveals Himself to us under His Grace. God helps and guides our efforts.

To us, knowing God is above all love. It is also the joy of receiving His goodness. As for the way in which the divine Revelation takes place, S. Bulgakov wrote that “it assumes the existence of the one who reveals Himself or of the Mystery Which reveals Itself. Mystery is not only that which is known or secret, utterable or not, knowable or not.

Even if It could be known, this knowledge would not be exhaustive or adequate. The Mystery remains somewhere *beyond* the human understanding which is unable to comprehend it. It is inaccessible for proper comprehension. It is characterised by arcane, superhuman, and otherworldly aspects.

But at the same time, It is characterized by the revelation without which it would no longer be a mystery. As to revelation, the essence of the Being is transcendental and it becomes manifest in the human existence although not completely. One of the characteristics of the divine Mystery is to be both above the Revelation and part of it ... The Mystery reveals itself remaining hidden at the same time; It is always *about* to reveal Itself “. [8]

It is the same with the Golden Ratio: we know it exists, it is manifest within us and the world, yet we do not know it fully. However, we find it in the Beauty of creation and in many of its structures. One of the consequences, mysterious as well, is the ancient statement that ‘God is Number.’

Therefore, one can talk about the divine Beauty if one takes into account the way in which It reveals Itself to the human conscience: directly or indirectly, through angels, miracles or the majesty and infinite power of seduction of His creation.

In the *Holy Scriptures* there are many texts where beauty is to be understood as God’s gift. Beauty is first mentioned as part of creation. ‘*And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.*’ (Genesis 1.31)

The book of *Genesis* is dominated by a eulogy to Divine Beauty. Because the “greatness of creation expressed in so few words in the Book of Genesis is the refrain of the divine Beauty.” [9]

Beauty's mystery and divinity bring into focus an element to be desired, felt, but never reached. And if by revelation a mystery partially reveals its presence, there is always something more to learn, and therefore, for the contemplating subject to know beauty is to go on a labyrinthine, endless journey in order to express it correctly and to strive to understand it. At the same time, faith also offers the possibility to detach oneself from the concrete labyrinth of existential tensions and even better, not to become lost among them. Religious faith allows a person to cross the labyrinth of life having the certainty of a protected existence, whatever vicissitudes he may encounter and however serious they may be because 'there are various aspects of one's life that one perceives and registers as ugly. Owing to these aspects, the beauty of the world is aggressed, diminished, negated.

Man is the one who allows the ugly into his world. He has this extraordinary power to animate the beauty of the world or to stifle it... Sin harms cosmic harmony. Introducing the ugly into the world through sin, man becomes estranged from God and the surrounding nature. On the contrary, when man is virtuous, his environment becomes more spiritual and changes because of an increase in the activity of the increate divine energies... The Orthodox world is beautiful because it has a spiritual significance. There is a cosmic presence of the Logos in it. It is precisely because it has a spiritual significance that the world receives a liturgical purpose.

Man only through faith perceives the beauty of the entire world as God's sublime creation. Contemplation generated by faith reveals the world as a coherent, harmonious whole, a reality which progresses becoming more and more perfect and spiritual aspiring at the Absolute Goodness and Absolute and Archetypal Beauty in the form of the Trinity. Rev. Prof. Dumitru Gh. Popescu states that: "Ever since the founding of Christianity, Orthodox theology has been the only one to consistently assert the presence of the Holy Spirit not only in Church beginning with the Pentecost, but as the spirit of God in the process of creation which took place in the genesis, because everything was created by the Father in the Son (Divine Logos) through the Spirit. The light that shone in the universe before the sun and all the stars, the perfect primeval matter containing all the potential of the created existence is the created energy flowing from the increate energy of the Holy Spirit floating across the waters in order to allow the apparition of life and its development." [5, p. 100]

We could imagine this beauty of the Genesis and try to represent it visually with the help of approximations and discoveries related to the past made by sciences. Out of this scene from the Old Testament, the Orthodox Christianity of the New Testament borrows the idea of the Increate Light; its golden background remains the constant tie between the Old Law and the New Law or the continuity of the extemporal divinity, as a state of affairs, situated above the labyrinth of constant search and transformation, of any nature and degree, within an existence.

4. The Visual Beauty in the Orthodoxy

In the Orthodox iconography, everything is represented symbolically. Visual beauty begins with the seen and the unseen, and, based on the embodiment of the Saviour Jesus Christ and the Theology of the Holy Person, ‘sanctifies’ the whole image and lifts man to the rank of collaborator to this ‘sanctification’ of the reality. Thus, the Increate Light becomes the first image to be represented by the Orthodox apprentice-painter in the Transfiguration, the icon of the revelation of the Divine and of the unification in faith of the two biblical periods [10].

Stating repeatedly and in various ways that beauty has a revealed character and that in genesis it is the ‘mirror of God’s beauty and greatness’, the Holy Scriptures establishes the teachings of beauty as attributes of the Divinity and the main ‘elements of patristic aesthetics’ [7, p. 277].

For St. Basil the existence of the world implies its obvious creator, the same way behind every ‘creative art’ (architecture, jewellery, tapestry) there is an artist admired for the quality of his work... Thus, the rational mind can easily understand the existence of the Creator of the world endowed with certain characteristics: kindness because the world is useful, wisdom because the world is beautiful or power because the world is immeasurable.

Hence, contemplating the world is a step towards contemplating the divine superessential beauty about which St. Basil says: “from the beauty of things that can be seen we should infer the presence of the One above all beauty; the greatness of the things that stir our senses and the limit of our bodies should make us think of the One without limits, the One who is above greatness, above all human power of understanding because of His infinite power. It is true that we do not know the nature of existence, but what our senses perceive is so wonderful that the sharpest of minds finds itself powerless when it comes to either describing the smallest being in the world or praising its Creator.” [11]

It has to be mentioned that in their doctrine on the Divine Beauty, the Holy Fathers and Writers use both information revealed in the bible and numerous concepts, ideas, proofs and conclusions belonging to the ancient Greek-Roman aesthetic and philosophy. Compared to the Old and New Testament commentators who wrote about the beauty of creation without identifying it with God for fear of idolatry, the Holy Fathers made a new and essential contribution to the aesthetic thought [5, p. 74].

The theological doctrine of the patristic period defines God as ‘beauty, pure beauty’. The writings of St. Dionysus the Areopagite, especially his influential work *On the Divine Names*, are significant because of the interpretation of aesthetic and theological questions from a spiritual-apophatic perspective. As a consequence, St. Dionysus the Areopagite has been called *the doctrinal spokesman for Orthodox aesthetics*. He insisted on the fact that Divine Beauty is eternal, immutable, omnipresent, and superessential, above reason, without end, all encompassing, and incognoscible. He said that Beauty is one of

the many names given the One 'above every name' (Philippians, 2.9) Names are considered *attributes of the Divinity*.

“This good is praised by sacred text writers with names like Beauty and the Beautiful, Love and the Beloved, says St. Dionysus the Areopagite, as well as other divine appellatives which indicate the ornate and graceful beauty (...). But the superessential Beauty is so called because of the beauty it imparts to all things according to their nature.” [12]

Before Dionysus the Areopagite, the idea that beauty is an attribute of Divinity is present in St. Clement the Roman's writings (1st-2nd century). He talks about the greatness and justice of God avowing at the same time the powerlessness of people to properly express His essence and attributes. “Who, exclaims the Saint in his *Epistle to the Corinthians*, can find enough words to describe His beauty?” (XLIX, 3) [13].

Clement the Alexandrine, who wrote in depth about the art of his period and the entire antiquity, the dignity of the human being and the greatness and harmony of the whole world, speaks about God's beauty in *The Tutor* (Book 3, 14, 12) [14].

The Holy Fathers reiterated the biblical concept of the greatness and beauty of God revealed in the beauty of the created world to which they added the belief that God, the source of this beauty, is Himself pure, perfect beauty, Beauty itself, where we can arrive through faith, contemplation and continuous spiritual exercise. Since God is equivalent with beauty, He contains in Himself the beauty of the world, of everything that exists, including man and His other creations. Therefore, the Holy Fathers name Him all-beautiful. All the beauty in the world has its origin in God the Beautiful, to which it aspires through spiritual exercise. God the Beautiful is the creator of all things beautiful in the world, whatever they may be.

Marcus Minucius Felix (2nd-3rd century), an important Christian Latin apologist, believes that everything beautiful that surrounds us attests to God's grace. The created world's beauty reveals the increate Beauty and Perfection as attributes of the Divinity. God the Beautiful has created a beautiful world because the beauty of the world is contained in its creator.

In his dialogue, *Octavius*, Marcus Minucius Felix demonstrates at the same time Christian doctrinal dignity and lyrical vibration: “Each of which things not only needed a Supreme Artist and a perfect intelligence, nor only to create, to construct, and to arrange; but, moreover, they cannot be felt, perceived and understood without the highest intelligence and reason. What! When the order of the seasons and of the harvests is distinguished by steadfast variety, does it not attest its Author and Parent? As well the spring with its flowers, and the summer with its harvests, and the grateful maturity of autumn, and the wintry olive-gathering are needful; and this order would easily be disturbed unless it were established by the highest intelligence. Now, how great is the providence needed, lest there should be nothing but winter to blast with its frost, or nothing but summer to scorch with its heat, to interpose the moderate temperature of autumn and spring, so that the unseen and harmless transitions of the year

returning on its footsteps may glide by! Look attentively at the sea; it is bound by the law of its shore. Wherever there are trees, look how they are animated from the bowels of the earth! Consider the ocean; it ebbs and flows with alternate tides. Look at the fountains, how they gush in perpetual streams! Gaze on the rivers; they always roll on in regular courses. Why should I speak of the aptly ordered peaks of the mountains, the slopes of the hills, the expanses of the plains? Wherefore should I speak of the multiform protection provided by animated creatures against one another? — some armed with horns, some hedged with teeth, and shod with claws, and barbed with stings, or with freedom obtained by swiftness of feet, or by the capacity of soaring furnished by wings? The very beauty of our own figure especially confesses God to be its artificer.” (XVII; 6-10) [15]

Here we are in front of the visual beauty, which has changed its image in nature, rhythmically, although the coordinates have remained the same for more than 1800 years except for some losses to which man has contributed. Therefore, it is an impeccable power that has generated the Creation and the forms it took.

Beyond what appears to our eyes as concrete, material beauty, there is the imagined, ineffable, imperceptible beauty, which plays a decisive role in the way we perceive beauty.

The idea that beauty reflects the infinite Beauty of its Creator is also present in the writings of St. Basil the Great. Divine Beauty is so intense, so overwhelming that it can never be expressed well. In *In-depth Rules*, the Saint states that we can aspire at the Divine Beauty only with our mind and soul if they are able to contemplate. He writes: “Unutterable and indescribable is the lightening of God’s beauty, the word cannot show it and the ear cannot capture it. The splendour of the morning star, the brightness of the moon, the light of the sun, they are all worthless compared to the Divine glory and the true light; they remain farther from it than a deep, dark, and sad night from the clearest afternoon. This beauty cannot be seen by human eyes, only by the eyes of the soul and the mind that can understand.” [7, p. 288] Accordingly, God’s beauty, model for the worldly beauty, can be perceived simultaneously at a sensible and rational level which emphasizes, almost two thousand years in advance, the concomitant way of thinking that characterizes man; the separation into feeling and intellect has proved to be either a unilateral concept or a conceptual error, because when man reasons, he also feels the same way he thinks while he senses.

Contemplation guides our mind and soul towards God the Beautiful, but the manner in which He is revealed during the act of contemplation cannot be expressed because Divine Beauty is above any measure of terrestrial harmony.

In the *Homily VI - The Creation of Luminous Bodies*, part of *Hexameron*, St. Basil the Great states: “If such are the good things of time, what will be those of eternity? If such is the beauty of visible things, what shall we think of invisible things? If the grandeur of heaven exceeds the measure of human intelligence, what mind shall be able to trace the nature of the everlasting? ...” [11, p. 132]

Similarly, Augustine believes that the beauty of the world is not by far comparable with the infinite, ineffable, endless beauty of its Creator. Unable to express the Divine Beauty, man who aspires to achieve It by contemplation can however praise It. In his memoirs, *Confessions*, the overwhelming Divine Beauty is celebrated lyrically: “Behold, the heaven and earth are; they proclaim that they were made, for they are changed and varied. (...). They also proclaim that they made not themselves; therefore we are, because we have been made; we were not therefore before we were, so that we could have made ourselves. (...) Thou, therefore, Lord, didst make these things; Thou who art beautiful, for they are beautiful; Thou who art good, for they are good; Thou who art, for they are. Nor even so are they beautiful, nor good, nor are they, as Thou their Creator art; compared with whom they are neither beautiful, nor good, nor are at all. These things we know, thanks be to Thee. And our knowledge, compared with Thy knowledge, is ignorance.” (Book XI, IV) [16]

It is Augustine who, in his *Commentary to Psalm 84*, emphasizes the idea that the man who contemplates the endless beauty of the world may catch a glimpse of the pre-existing Divine Beauty: “All these beautiful things that please and delight our eyes are created by God. If so great is the beauty of His work, imagine how much more He is!”

In his *City of God*, *Confessions* and other writings, Augustine approaches many aesthetic topics often reiterating Dionysius the Pseudo Areopagite’s opinions on God the Beautiful, the All-Beautiful and the Super-Beautiful, endless source of all harmony, communion and beauty. In this regard, Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu notes that in Augustine’s writings (*About Trinity*, XV, 8), “beauty, as well as the other Divine Attributes, is not only one of God’s qualities, but His very essence.” [7, p. 283] In *About the True Religion*, Augustine clearly states that God is *omnis pulchritudinis forma*. “In Him, from Him, and through Him everything is beautiful.” [5, p. 77]

Thus we can conclude that “God is the Archetype of Beauty. However, the concept of God the Beautiful imposes an evaluation of the archetypal character of the harmony and greatness present in the process of Creation. As one of God’s attributes and a transcendental mystery endless in revelation or in the infinite forms of nature, Beauty has an archetypal character.” [5, p. 79] This evidence helps us understand that the within the natural reality the identity beauty-harmony achieved by man becomes a positive benchmark for value judgments. On the other hand, disharmony, which induces tension, harm, ugliness, is a negative benchmark.

A negative archetype presupposes deformity, decomposition, and destruction of the initial harmony. To bring everything back to its original harmonious state is a difficult and long process, which requires one to abandon the cause of the ugliness, to re-evaluate one’s options within the frame of one’s existence. Preservation and restoration are necessary in order to maintain alive a culture. The present that does not fully value its past or protect its inheritance, runs the risk of becoming a future without fundamental values, therefore, vulnerable because of its limited options and choices [17].

5. Iconographic Benchmarks

We are constantly looking for something... Which way is better to go? ... As for the path that we see clearly, what does it hide in its past?! ... Are all of these accessible now? What has been preserved for us, and how much do we understand of everything we see? Do some benchmarks appear anachronistic because they are old? Or maybe, on the contrary, we should consider them modern as part of a chronological span that proves the contemporaneity of ancient ideas and images.

In 1955, in Rome, at a construction site on the intersection with Dino Compagni Street, the painted catacombs of 'Via Latina' were discovered underground. Father Antonio Ferrua (S. J.) led the research that established that the catacombs date back to around 315 A.D. and that most of the burials took place between 320 A.D. and 350 A.D.

There were about 400 people buried in 325 tombs part of a private cemetery belonging to a small number of families, some Christian but not all as the iconography of the place indicates. Different topics, both religious and laic, can be seen on the walls. Their aspect of 'a la prima' reveals spontaneous, confident, simplified brush strokes employed in painting the bodies, faces and clothes, but also the decorative motifs.

These unvisited catacombs seem an initiating trajectory of the road to faith, of the passage from one world into the other, from the lived reality to the transcendental one. It marks the beginning of Christianity when the iconographic themes representing the ideational substance were not yet crystallized. In these secret, poorly illuminated catacombs where the colours preserve their earthly hues predominantly ochre and brown, laic images alternate with religious ones. Thus, there are representations of birds, especially peacocks, does, plants, personalized suns, zodiacal signs and ornaments, rectangular or hexagonal insets, wavy rhythmic lines, next to populated biblical scenes. One finds remarkable the images revealing either a Good Shepherd in the midst of the vegetal, animal and human nature, or punitive scenes where the punished or the punisher threateningly exhibiting a sacrificial weapon is in the foreground. Noticeable is the oranta gesture made by three young men in flames and of course by The Virgin who appears individually.

In an association of symbols, next to a naked Adam facing the interior, there is a snake coiled on a tree trunk, persuasive and hypnotic in the power of attraction it directs at the surrounding world. Carrying a beneficial connotation, Jesus Christ the Saviour is seen blessing a standing apostle. He looks like a patrician holding a scroll in the right hand. His physiognomy reminds one of iconographic representations of St. Paul.

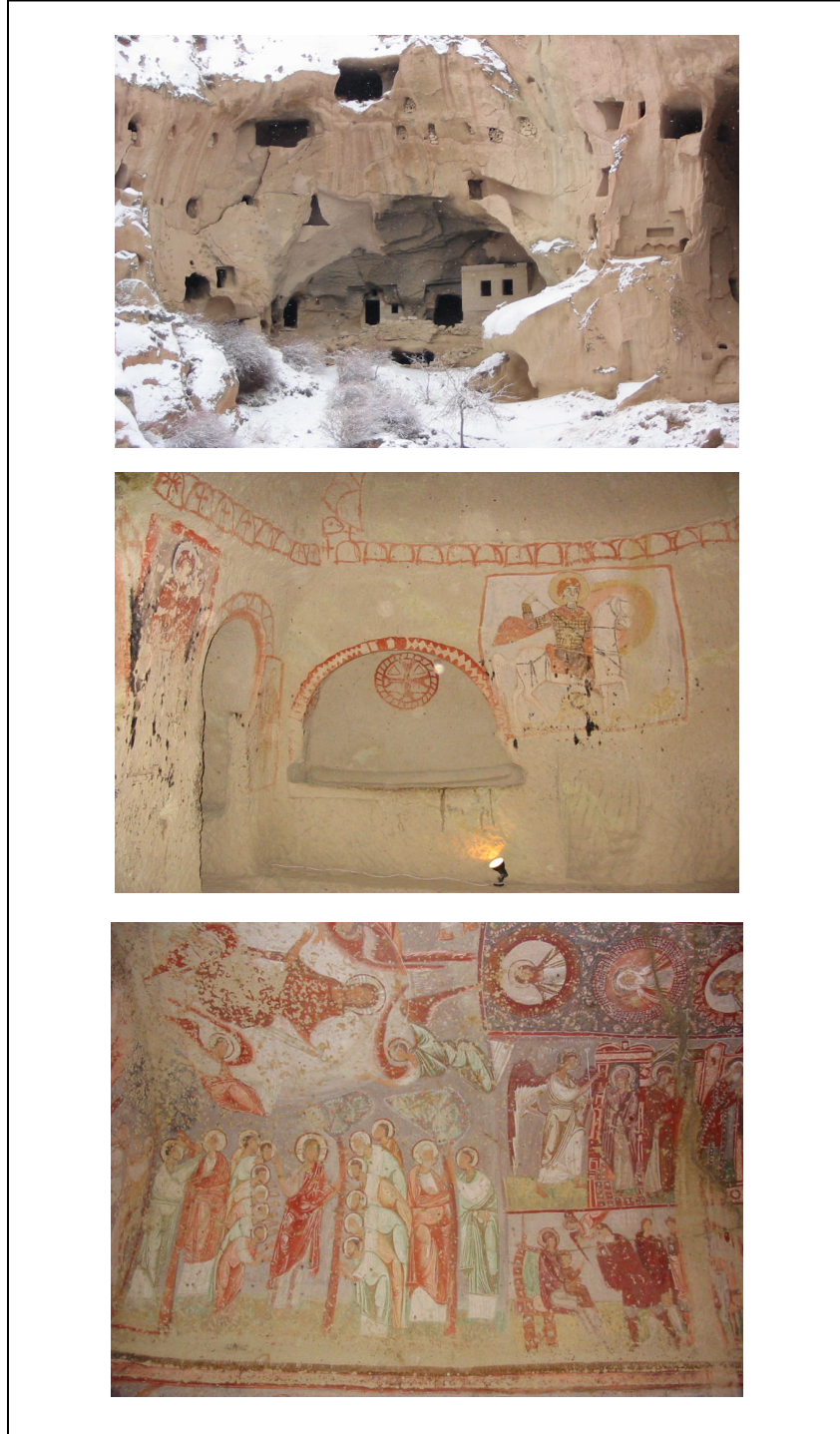


Figure 1. Images from The Hidden Church - Gureme (Cappadocia).

Travelling with the help of images from a period of beginning and resistance to one of Christian recognition we move from the Italic space to that of Asia Minor, the arid Cappadocia. Here, in Zelve and Gureme, one can visit settlements dating from the 6th century to the 11th A.D. where the Christian evolution can be traced from the stylised symbolism of the fish and the cross as ornaments to complex iconographic scenes illustrating themes from the New Testament (Figure 1).

In the volcanic tuff caves of Cappadocia there still are several Christian settlements whose first paintings represent side by side with crosses placed in circular groups, elements of flora and fauna like deer and grapes, allegorical allusions to power and resistance similar to a life-bearing vine that permanently regenerates itself.

In this parched, lunar-like area of Cappadocia, Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived peacefully together until 1923, at the end of the war between the Greeks and the Turks. Representing three civilizations, they defended their homes and houses of prayer by building small, inaccessible entrances often disguised behind huge pieces of rock.

There are many Christian sanctuaries both in Zelve and Gureme, some of them more decorated than others; however, very few of them have been restored. An in-depth chronological research could answer many questions and complete the iconographic history.

There is a beautifully executed icon of the Annunciation in an unrestored church and another one of the Entrance into the Temple where Zachariah can be seen as well. Even though deteriorated beyond repair by pagans' spears, the figure of the Virgin can be seen seated on the throne.

An icon of the Resurrection where angels and apostles can be seen marks the beginning of icon painting according to the Byzantine *erminia* (sacred painting handbooks that circulated in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine world till late-19th century).

As for the Crucifixion, there are several stages similar to sequences that include post-crucifixion instances as well.

In a church with cruciform motifs the image of the horned devil is framed between two riders signifying the Great Schism of the Christian Church into Orthodox and Catholic.

Other interesting images are represented by crosses, ornaments, ascetics, biblical scenes, etc. In the Tokali Church (also known as The Church of the Buckle) there are two layers of paintings, cruciform ornaments from the 9th century and figurative paintings from the 11th century. Here there is also an impressing icon of the Virgin holding the Jesus as a baby. His head seems to be dissolving into her face. The icon is remarkably well painted, lightly but confidently, with stylistic devices specific of the Byzantine art. Under this painting there can be seen an earlier layer of decorative motifs dating back to the 9th century.

In order to know the present, one has to keep revisiting the past in order to be able to return to the blinding light of the uncertainty that characterizes the present where on a façade assaulted by smog and noise there still is written 'Christo Salvatori'.

This is the very significance of the path that climbs towards the light of the love which Christ the Saviour has bestowed on the world for two thousand years leaving us enough time to find the path we have to follow.

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