
MASTER MANUIL PANSELINOS AND THE MACEDONIAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING

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(Received 26 May 2010, revised 8 December 2010)

Abstract

Among the painting schools that might be included in what is known as *the Byzantine style*, the Macedonian School of painting is one of the oldest. It developed during the 13th and 14th centuries, in the ancient historical province of Macedonia, which corresponds today to the northern part of Greece, the south of the former Yugoslavia and the south-west of Bulgaria. The centre of this school's development was the city of Thessaloniki (the liturgical capital of the Byzantine Empire), and its most prominent exponent was the Greek painter Manuil Panselinos. There are several frescoes and icons painted by him, that have been preserved until today in the Holy Mount Athos and in Thessaloniki, his most important work being the mural painting of the church of the Protaton Monastery, on the Holy Mount. With Panselinos and his contemporaries, Mihailos and Eutihios Astrapas, the church painting in the entire Byzantine Empire, leaves the monumental style, whose main means of expression was the line, for a new volumetric, simply pictorial style. We can see in the Macedonian frescoes, at which evolution Panselinos had decisively contributed, the attempt of expressing the dramatism and the interior life of the saints. The scenes are more and more complex, with many figures moving in the smashing depth of the space, the movements are dynamic, the gestures are ample and expressive, and the colours are strong. The extraordinary Macedonian paintings have been a permanent point of reference for many generations of iconographers.

Keywords: Macedonian School, Panselinos, Mount Athos, Thessaloniki, dramatism

1. Introduction

Many schools of ecclesiastical painting can be numbered within the Byzantine Orthodox style, such as the Macedonian, the Cretan, the Russian Schools, each one representing a different visual formulation of the same truth of faith. The artistic landmarks set by Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, were differently assumed along time, by the various people from its sphere of influence, fact that gave birth to the specific characteristics of each

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school. One of the oldest known schools of the Byzantine painting is the Macedonian one.

The first Byzantine frescoes of a pan-orthodox value, if one may say so, are those belonging to this school. It is impossible to imagine the History of the Byzantine Art without this glorious chapter, since the Macedonian painting represented a permanent landmark, a reference and reporting point for the later artistic creations from the Orthodox Space. The echoes of the Macedonian School can be heard until today.

Among all these schools, the Macedonian one may be the most fascinating, marking the apogee of the Byzantine Art, and the eve that has given us some of the most remarkable (famous) masterpieces of the Church art ever done. There were many skilful artists who adorned the wonderful churches of that time, such as Giorgos Kaliergis, Mihail Astrapas or Eutichios; yet, the most prestigious exponent of this school was the master Manuil Panselinos [1].

The most important book for an iconographer, *The Painter's Manual* [2], is the one that not only reminds and presents some important artistic works from the past, belonging to this school, but also gives a direction for the ecclesiastical art pleading for the iconographers to follow the canons of this peerless school of painting. The author of this book written around 1730 is the Athonite monk Dyonisios of Fourná, who lived in a hermitage near Karyes, the capital of the Holy Mountain of Athos. He was not a very important artist, but the influence he had upon his contemporaries and followers, was considerable. Along with other painters, he tried to work in the spirit of the Macedonian school, imitating the art of the 13th and 14th centuries. In his manual, he presents himself as an enthusiastic disciple of Manuil Panselinos, the most prestigious exponent of this school, urging his apprentices at his turn to follow him artistically. Dyonisios taught himself the art of painting by following and allowing himself to be influenced by the frescoes from the church of the Protaton, from the Holy Mountain [2, p. 23].

As we shall see, the artistic personality of this great master had decisively influenced the course of the monumental and iconographical painting, taking the ecclesiastical art to a level unseen before.

2. Terminological clarifications

Before looking into the general characteristics of his work and of the Macedonian school, I would like to make some clarifications concerning the terminology. The collocation of *Macedonian School* was firstly introduced by Gabriel Millet, and it generally designates the ecclesiastical painting between the 13th and 14th centuries, which has certain characteristics compared to the paintings belonging to other schools, and which can be met especially on the territory of the former province of Macedonia (a present geographical approximation would include the North of Greece, Serbia and the South-West of Bulgaria) [3]. Considering the successive changes of the borders of this province, that one can find from its very beginnings until now, Macedonia must

be understood as a cultural, historical unity, and not as a geographical one, this being practically impossible. Millet does not have in mind the strict geographical delimitations, required by the repeated and somehow contextual modifications of the borders, independently from these fluctuations of the geographical expanse, on the Macedonian territory, which one can delimitate only with approximation, continuing to subsist along time a fund of common artistic and cultural elements. Other historians like Viktor Lazarev, prefer a more detailed delimitation of the paintings from Macedonia, distinguishing, depending on the local iconographical characteristics and influences specific for each area of the great province, *the Serbian school, the Thessaloniki School, the Athonite style*, considering that putting them together under the same name of *Macedonian school* is wrong and too uniform [3, p. 152]. Both points of view are entitled and correctly argued. However, even if the title of *Macedonian School* might not be the most suitable one (for example it was once proposed, on logical and very solid grounds, that the *Gothic style*, should be called the *Ogive style*, fact that was yet never put into practice), as long as all the works of the 13th and 14th centuries, from the province of Macedonia (whether it is the Greek Thessaloniki or the Ohrid of the former Yugoslavia) have the same stylistic characteristics, generally trying to render the dramatic nature and the inner life of the saints, inside a frame full of dynamism and movement, with the help of some vivid colours, in a picturesque manner [4, 5]. So, having all these in mind, I personally believe that the ‘label’ of *Macedonian school* is justified and belongs to the existing reality.

3. The Macedonian School

The art of the Byzantine monumental painting reached its peak at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th centuries, fact that coincided, not without reason, with the reign of Andronic II the Paleologue (1282–1328), this flourishing period of the Macedonian school being known as the *Paleologian Renaissance*. In this way, Viktor Lazarev noted: “The 13th century represents, undoubtedly, one of the most interesting and exciting periods in the history of the Byzantine painting. This was the century when the Paleologian style appeared and affirmed through its basic characteristics. Thus, the 13th century, and not the 14th, is the one that acquires a great importance in the developing of the Byzantine painting, having the greatest signification on the birth of the Paleologian style.” [3, p. 167]

Even though, the Macedonian School represents a special style among other painting schools, there too can be made certain distinctions and nuances among the paintings considered to be Macedonian, but coming from different decades or centuries, being also noticed, beyond every basic resemblances, certain differences. Thus, the frescoes and icons of the 13th century can be divided into two distinctive groups. The first one includes the creations with a conservative characteristic, that continued to feed on the traditions of the 12th century, and the second one includes the avangardist creations, that anticipated

the 14th century's style. So, the 14th century continues and fulfils the tendencies of the second half of the 13th century.

Just like the 13th century, the 14th century too (the period of the mature Paleologian Style), knows two periods in its evolution, to which correspond two artistic trends: the picturality and the graphics. Once with the victory of the Hesychast spiritual movement, promoted by the Saint Gregory Palamas, so after the second half of the 14th century, the development line of the free pictorial style from the first half of the century is broken; instead, will appear the germs and the first signs of a manner that will be defined by the Cretan School.

The artistic creations of the period between the second half of the 13th century and the first half of the 14th century, and which are the most representative and valuable of the Macedonian School, are grouped by certain art historians, in the so called *volumetric style* (a synonym for the Paleologian Renaissance), this syntagm referring to one of the most important visual characteristic of the frescoes from this period. In comparison with the flat paintings from the 11th and 12th century (the *monumental style*), the Paleologian representations are indeed, much more volumetric.

If for the monumental style, exposed to a strong oriental influence, are characteristic the abstract principles of the representation, and the separate parts of the work (the figures, the architecture, the rocks) are combined in an order of purely decorative independence, that ignores the laws of the empiric realities, as far as the volumetric style is concerned, the artists tend towards an optical unity of the image. They are trying to offer a unitary construction of the space, putting the figures and the architecture in an indissoluble connection. Typical for the first style is the insufficient depth of the composition; in the second one can notice the tendency towards the third dimension. In the monumental style, the landscape is extremely concentrated and sober: the rocks, extremely simplified, seem like flat backgrounds, and the simple buildings are reduced to some basic types. In the volumetric style, the landscape becomes more complex: new architectonic forms appear, that very often are due to the Hellenistic prototypes. The buildings become more volumetric and different, the curves and sinuous lines being more and more used; rocks lose their graphic aspect and turn into overlapped volumetric blocks. In the first style analysed here, the monumental and static figures prevail, usually frontally disposed, with clothes that fall harmoniously. In the second style, they become smaller and smaller, moving more freely, with their clothes blowing in the wind. The linear clothes, once completely flat, seem to gain some relief. Gradually, the manner of working changes, too: the strokes become stronger and wider, the chromatic scale is more complex and enriched with softer tones. So, we can notice, as a characteristic of this period, the development of the pure picturesque elements [3, p. 168].

The iconographic paintings of the 14th century will cover the entire walls of the church, from the floor to the ceiling, masking the structural function of certain forms. The frescoes are disposed in overlapped registers that form continuous paintings, or a series of different closed scenes, separated by a red frame. Diminution of the scenes surfaces, but also the small sizes of the

buildings, gives the interior of the church a special intimate character. The quantity of the themes that decorate the church, has considerably increased, comprising also cycles that illustrate the childhood of Christ and life of saints.

Often and often, dramatic episodes and details that give iconography an obvious vivacity are painted. Unlike the art of the previous period, the art of the 13th and 14th centuries expresses the dramatism. The mural paintings of a Paleologian church give the impression that it is formed out of a great number of independent icons. Thus, not without reason, in the Paleologian art, the iconographical painting has such a great importance.

The iconographical programme knows some innovations, as well, becoming much more complex. It is underlined especially the mystical, spiritual essence of the divine service, thus appearing a series of new composition of liturgical character. Symbolic and allegoric themes, hard to understand at first sight, appear. For instance, in the church of Mother of God from Ljevisa, Prizren, on the west wall of the narthex is illustrated the story of the human pride, under the form of a tree (a symbol and metaphor of the life), whose roots are eaten by mouses. The metaphor continues: while the man lays relaxed, eating honey, the hell opens its doors in front of him, waiting for his soul. In the same church, the believers could see on the narthex ceiling some feminine winged figures, taken from a series of classical personifications [6]. This indirect language used sometimes in the Macedonian frescoes was not always easy to follow, demanding a real theological and literary culture; for some people it was incomprehensible, but for those who understood its signification, it was very interesting and convincing

During the Macedonian school, the iconographical programme was elaborated in its final form, its changes from then until now being minor [2, p. 233].

4. Master Manuil Panselinos and his work

If Thessaloniki, the liturgical capital of the Byzantine Empire represented, through its flourishing, the training centre of the Macedonian School, and the city able to provide painters both for Athos and the Serbian Macedonia [7], Manuil Panselinos was the one responsible for the apogee of this school, his works practically changing the course of the ecclesiastical art.

Few things are known about *Manuil Panselinos*, the only concrete information being found in the Dyonisios' Painter's Manual. It seems that Panselinos was born in Thessaloniki [1, p. 169], where he painted, along with another painter, the chapel of Saint Euthymios. Other frescoes and icons belonging to him have been preserved on the Holy Mountain, dating around 1290-1310, which means that Panselinos spent a great part of his life on Athos, working during these twenty years as a painter, and probably becoming a monk.

The name of Manuil Panselinos from Thessaloniki gained a mythical status in the Athonite tradition. This fact is relevant since it represents a clue for the important role played by the painting of high quality made in the Orthodox

Byzantine world; a great artist or iconographer was regarded as a great hero, sometimes overcoming in fame even some great ascets. The correctness of the tradition and information concerning him are also validated by the nowadays researches [4]. Today, when the knowledge upon that period acquired a large scale and profoundness, one may watch Panselinos in the context of the artistic environment of his age. In this respect, of great help are some mural paintings dating from the same period and belonging also to the Macedonian school, paintings that may be found in some churches from Thessaloniki, Beria, Holy Mountain, Ohrid and Central Serbia, and which have Mihail Astrapas, Eutybios and others as their authors. Examined in this context, Panselinos appears as the most prominent exponent of the painting school that developed in Thessaloniki and the surroundings during the period of its maximum flourishing – the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th [4, p. 16]. There were many famous workshops of the Macedonian school; yet, above all was the workshop of Manuil Panselinos.

Recent researches allow us to complete today the picture concerning the artistic personality of Panselinos. The researchers ascribe to Panselinos and his workshop, seven iconographical ensembles and fragments: the face of Saint Nicholas from the *Great Lavra*, the frescoes of the *Monastery of the Protaton*, also from the Mount Athos, the iconostasis of *Hilandari*, the *Chapel of Saint Euthymios* from the Church of Saint Dimitrios from Thessaloniki, the iconostasis of *Vatopaidi*, the frescoes from the *exonarthex of the catholicon from the Monastery of Vatopaidi*, and five or six icons from the Monastery of Great Lavra and other Athonite monasteries [4, p. 17]. Along with the frescoes from the Protaton, Great Lavra and Vatopaidi, Dyonisios also assigned to Panselinos the catholicon of the Monastery of the Pantokrator, which is yet very unlikely to have belonged to him, considering the too expanded period of time that had passed since his first frescoes (1290 → 1370). Though this seems to have been the most probable order of the making of his works, an exact chronological reconstitution of the Panselinian opus cannot be given, since only in Vatopaidi can be found a precise date. Based on these works assigned to Panselinos, some of them uncertain, some certain, his style reveals to us as one of a slow evolution, with a permanent and firm understanding of the classic prototypes, even if they were contrary to the violent and frequent changes in the stylistic procedures of his contemporaries and somehow equals to him, Mihail and Eutybios [4, p. 19].

Thus, the oldest fresco preserved from Panselinos is the fragment from the Great Lavra, representing **Saint Nicholas** or **Saint Teoctist**. The rest of the composition is missing. This portrait is a work of a high artistic expression, being one of the most remarkable from the entire activity of Panselinos.

The frescoes of the **Monastery of the Protaton** are the most important works of the great master. [4, p. 12; 8; 9]. These frescoes, painted in the last years of the 13th century, are the only ones undoubtedly painted by Panselinos. The ascription of the other frescoes and icons, to Panselinos, was made due to the resemblance with the paintings from here [4, p. 20].

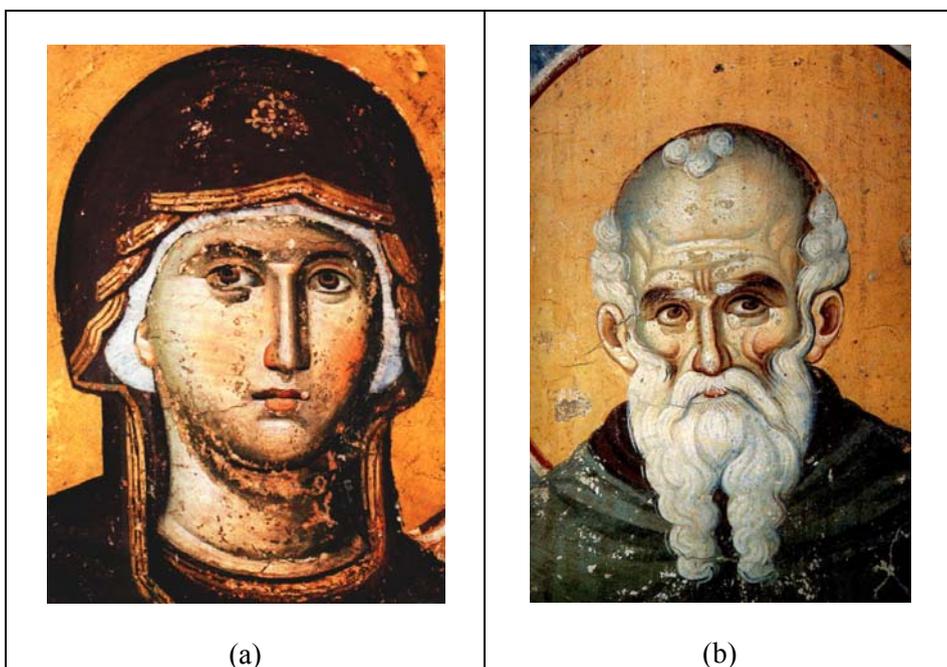


Figure 1. (a) Mother of God, detail, Monastery of Protaton; (b) Saint Athanasios the Athonite, Monastery of Protaton, Athos.

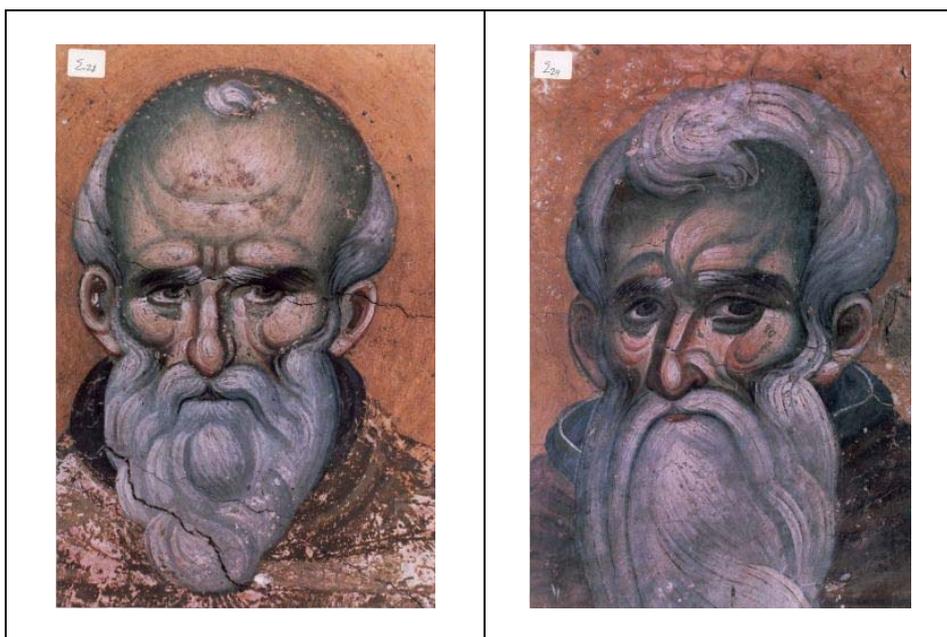


Figure 2. Portraits of saints, Monastery of Protaton, Athos.

The church of the Protaton Monastery, with its architectonic plan, outgrown for that time and rather unusual for the Holy Mountain, a basilica with a transept, offered the artist great surfaces that allowed him to easily extend his compositions. Panselinos used this advantage in the best way possible, managing not just to give unity and coherence to the entire decoration, but also to defeat the difficulty of adapting the iconographical programme that was thought for a domed church, to the surface of a basilica.

The iconographical programme was inevitably adapted and sometimes changed, as it was required by the shape of the walls. The greatest part of the church decoration has been preserved. However, the deterioration of the mural paintings in the upper section of the walls, in the corners and in other areas, doesn't allow us to create a complete image of the entire iconographical programme.

As Tsigaridas says, "the main characteristic of Panselinos' paintings, represents the memorialistic character of his compositions, which are symmetrical and equal, the narrative character of the rendering the scenes, the correlation of the positions and movements, the pictorial rendering of the bodies, which can be also noticed in the feminine shapes, the way of rendering some anatomical forms of the faces, the influence of the old Hellenistic art, the depth in the rendering of the architectural background, but also the dramatism and realism visible in this iconographical representation full of a profound spiritualism" (see Figures 1 and 2) [4, p. 51].

From the first years of the 14th century also dates the frescoes from the Chapel of Saint Euthymios, from the Church of Saint Dimitrios, frescoes of great value, painted by Panselinos and another unknown collaborator [10]. The small dimensions of the chapel couldn't offer the artists large surfaces on which they lay their compositions; however, these small dimensions didn't stop them from making the highest quality painting. Because of the bad state of conservation, the mural paintings from the chapel of Saint Euthymios are not well-known. Yet, their high artistic quality puts them among the exquisite creations of the Paleologians.

Based on the stylistic analysis, the Greek art historians [4, p. 23] believe that the frescoes from the exonarthex of the catholicon of the Vatopaidi Monastery also have Panselinos as their author. The frescoes from Vatopaidi present several resemblances with those from the Protaton, in what concerns the manner of the rendering the scenes and the iconographical connection between them. Also, the manner of rendering the clothes and the figures, presents numerous analogies with the painting from the Protaton. Considering these aspects, it is very likely that the painter from here would be Panselinos himself or one of his colleagues. In the second possibility, this other painter must have taken some elements from the style of the master of the Protaton, but with an excessive tendency, often too unnaturally, but yet very expressive. The obvious noblesse of the frescoes of the Protaton is easily lost especially in the group portraits [11]. The differences that can be noticed between the Protaton and the Vatopaidi might be due to the ten years distance that is supposed to have existed

between them, or to the different artistic execution of the artist and his workshop. Along with the frescoes from the Protaton the most prestigious Macedonian Athonite paintings remain those from Vatopaidi.

Inside the same monastery, a number of several icons belonging to Panselinos were preserved: the icons of Saint George, of Saint Demetrius and of Jesus Christ Pantokrator. Other three icons from the Monastery of Hilandary were also ascribed to him, but we cannot be certain about it.

“In parallel with the Italian art of the Trecento, and yet, independent of it, an exaggeration of the feelings may be noticed inside the iconographical renderings; through the deformation of the figures and the emphasis made upon the gestures and the expression, an increase of their effect is obtained. These trends, foreshadowed at the end of the 13th century, were accomplished by the coryphaeus of the Macedonian school. (...) Through his peerless talent, Panselinos gives a distinctive ethos to each of the hundreds of portraits. (...) The figures are volumetric, in their rendering and that of the other compositional elements, lively, bright colors being used; the gestures are impressive. The tireless military saints are dressed in their splendid armors. The old saints are looking sadly towards you from the land of perfection, seeming to reprove you for your sins. The scenes have backgrounds common for the Paleologian age, with elaborated architectures. The compositions are crowded, with the figures moving inside the vast space, interpreted in its striking depth. In the end, this whole ensemble of faces – so striking through their size, liveliness and abundance of shapes, through the shining, vivid and phantasmagoric chromatic – provides a feeling of grandeur, which, wherever is necessary, also shows a certain grace, trace of the Hellenistic art. The footprint of the art of Panselinos and of the Macedonian school generally consists in the realism of the painting of the figures, not only as the external features are concerned, but also in what regards the interpretation and understanding of their inner world”, says Kosta Balabanov [6]. Panselinos brings an essential change of the artistic means and style. Already at the beginning of the century, the accentuation of the lights was imposed as a label of a perfect technique, so that the convex parts would seem modeled, through the application of some fine lines of white. The creases of the clothes are treated carefully as well, gaining thus more plasticity; the dynamic of the gestures is transmitted to the rhythmic drapery.

5. Conclusions

According to the opinion of some art historians, the end of the Macedonian School does not represent the beginning of a new age in the ecclesiastical painting, but the shining, yet sad end of the true Byzantine painting. There are some frescoes on Mount Athos dating from the 14th century, painted after the fall of Constantinople and Thessaloniki. Even if the Byzantine tradition survived, sometimes with considerable strength, and the Macedonian School was continued at a technical level, the works lacked the inspiration. The characteristics of this school continued to be felt in all the frescoes and icons

from the Mount Athos, until the beginning of the 16th century, when the quality of the painting knew a rather strong decline. This situation will be saved by the coryphaeus of the Cretan school (the other great school of ecclesiastical painting from the territory of Greece), namely Theophanis the Cretan.

Knowing the great works of the monumental painting from the past appears as extremely important, especially because of the repeated artistic failures inside the contemporary ecclesiastical art. Unfortunately, the Byzantine tradition, so specific for the Orthodoxy, is too often deserted. The lack of artistic and theological knowledge, the nonchalance inobservance of canons from the Painter's Manual, the lack of some quality models and patterns and other factors, made the realisations of the Romanian monumental painting from the last decades be very far from the artistic masterpieces of the past centuries. The Macedonian School witnesses the level that the art of the Church can and should reach, and its better knowledge among the contemporary painters could only lead to more valuable creations. In one of his books, Sorin Dumitrescu said that the iconographer is asked to know art, theology and technique in order to be able to paint churches or icons [12]; the Macedonian frescoes show us how skilful masters their authors were. Those paintings which lasted for many centuries, reveal us technical perfection, a high artistic sense and some profound theological knowledge.

The Macedonian painting was a turning point in the history of Byzantine Art. That was the time when the iconographical programme of the churches was finalised remaining unchanged until today. That was the moment of a true Renaissance that led the ecclesiastical art to levels unseen before and rarely reached again.

Panselinos' contribution to all these was enormous. Even he comes to us as a figure half mythical, half historical, his work, as it has been preserved in the Monastery of Protaton, is representative for an entire epoch and for an entire school: the Macedonian one. Panselinos is the permanent Byzantine artistic source from which had fed both his collaborators and contemporaries and the generations that followed him. "The frescoes from the great church of the Protaton, turn Panselinos into the supreme exponent of the Macedonian School, and his work into something without equal." [4, p. 11]

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