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Годишњак Академије
Српске Православне Цркве
за уметности и консервацију

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САДРЖАЈ

THE AUTONOMY OF THE ICON:
Converging Aesthetics in Early Modernism[1]

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It is well to remember that a picture-before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote-is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.
Maurice Denis

Abstract: With the advent of Modernism, the magical 'accuracies' of post-Renaissance painting ceased to play a dominant role and monopolize aesthetic criteria, not only within the 'art world' and the visual culture we encounter on a daily basis, but even within the ecclesial sphere. It would not be an exaggeration to say that modern art has expanded our way of seeing and changed our expectations concerning images. What is now held as aesthetically acceptable and functionally viable has drastically changed. The reality is that the modernist avant-garde's anti-naturalism and appreciation for medieval, folk, and 'primitive' art partly contributed in preparing the ground for the twentieth century icon revival. For as the latter was unfolding, the former was already having its major impact in the reshaping of our aesthetic standards and expectations. This paper takes a look into the convergence of ideas that unfolded between the twentieth century icon revival and the Parisian avant-garde—in particular as represented by the parallels evident, yet often overlooked, between the aesthetic theories of the painter Maurice Denis (1870-1943), and the iconographers Leonid Ouspensky (1902-1987) and Photis Kontoglou (1895-1965). These parallels touch on their respective views on anti-naturalism and symbolism in painting. The larger context for this study is the question of abstraction and its association with spirituality, as it became formulated in the twentieth century. Exploring these convergences will help us gain a better understanding of the icon painting revival's 'dogmatization of style' and enable us to propose a strategy to overcome this tendency.

Key words: icon painting, abstraction, naturalism, modernism, mutability, immutability, hieraticism, autonomy, Maurice Denis, Leonid Ouspensky, Photis Kontoglou, symbolist painting, Ateliers d'Art Sacré, Neo-Byzantine, neo-traditionalism, dogmatization of style, enargeia, transfigured existence.

Autonomy unto Death

In our short and matter-of-fact epigraph, the first lines of Symbolist painter Maurice Denis's famous *Définition du Néo-traditionnisme* (1890),[1] we find in a kernel what would become one of the most crucial theoretical axioms in the development of modern art: the autonomy of the art object based on its inherent properties. For painting this means that, if it is to live up to its maximum of aesthetic and expressive potentials, it is essential that the integrity of its pictorial flatness is never overlooked. Painting, that is, should not be confused with mere naturalistic illusionism, a 'literary' or superficial illustration of the tangible world. Rather, painting is primarily a 'symbol' of inner states, a pictorial interpretive arrangement, functioning as an equivalent to the painter's subjective experience of nature.[2] This doctrine was to play an instrumental role in the shaping of formalist aesthetics, and the various forms of abstraction and non-objective painting in the twentieth century.[3]

The modernist focus on the inherent properties of painting partly arose from the disillusionment that the avant-garde painters

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[1] This paper is based on the article, 'On the Relative Autonomy of the Icon: Converging Aesthetics in Early Modernism', *Orthodox Arts Journal*, December 13, 2013. https://orthodoxartsjournal.org/on-the-relative-autonomy-of-the-icon-converging-aesthetics-in-early-modernism/ (accessed 20 October, 2020).

For the epigraph I have followed Herschel B. Chipp's translation, 'Definition of Neotraditionism', in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 94.

[2] On Symbolism see Herschel B. Chipp, 'Symbolism and Other Subjectivist Tendencies: Form and the Evocation of Feeling', in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 48-56.

[3] Roger Fry (1866-1934) and Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) rank among the most prominent formalist art critics whose work follow in the vein of Maurice Denis's dictum.

felt concerning what they perceived to be the formulaic dead end reached by academic painting at the end of the nineteenth century. Some blamed the crisis on the empiricism, scientism and banality of the academy's naturalistic approach towards the depiction of nature.[4] Moreover, with the invention of photography, concern with the accurate depiction of sense perception subsided. It seemed as if painting had been defeated by the unrivaled precision of the new medium. What else was there for painting to do? At a loss as to how to process the implications of this new technology, the academic painter Paul Delaroche exclaimed: 'From today, painting is dead.'[5]

From the midst of these developments various movements arose: Impressionism, Pointillism, Symbolism, Fauvism, Expressionism, and, of course, the major breakthrough, Cubism. With these, and others following their lead, the outward forms of nature gradually dissolved in a search for the essence of things. A new pictorial language was sought, capable of communicating more subtle perceptions. As there was a turn away from appearances, there also arose a renewed interest concerning the 'spiritual' in art. Consequently, abstraction was born. Painting, it was believed, had been liberated. It had become 'autonomous' from the demands of *mimesis*.

In the search for the 'essence of things' and 'subtle perceptions,' the pioneers of abstraction found clues in folk, 'primitive'[6] and medieval art. The icon was then 'discovered' as a prime example of non-naturalism, expressive form and color, pictorial 'flatness' and, therefore, a vindication of the drive towards 'autonomy'. For some modernist painters the icon pointed towards the

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[4] On scientific and 'documentary' naturalism and its connection to the republican values of the time see Richard Thomson, *Art of the Actual: Naturalism and Style in Early Third Republic France, 1880-1900* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 56-57.

[5] Stephen Bann, *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* (London, UK: Reaktion Books; Princeton University Press, 1997), 17.

[6] As a good example of how Neo-primitivism was being discussed in Russian in 1913 see Alexander Shevchenko (1888-1978), 'Neo-Primitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements', trans. & eds. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1992) 105-106; Also see Emile Nolde, 'On Primitive Art', Ibid. 101-102.

possibility of arriving at a pictorial language capable of conveying more subtle dimensions of reality and how they could perhaps develop an alternative symbolism for their 'new religion' centered on art. They sought, as Franz Marc (1880-1916) would say, to make of their paintings 'symbols that belong on the altars of a future spiritual religion.'[7]

A close friend of Franz Marc, and a notable representative of the 'discovery' of the icon in early Modernism, is the pioneer of abstraction Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), who also authored the little book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1911. In this text Kandinsky delineates his mystical views and foresees the arrival of a spiritual revolution with the visionary painter at the forefront, leading the way as a prophet. He also discusses his pictorial theories, based on the possibility of 'conscious construction'[8] and an expressionism based on 'inner need' and the 'inner sound' of nature rather than its outward form. The abstract purity of music would serve as a model for the painter. When asked in a 1937 interview how he had arrived at the idea of abstract painting, Kandinsky mentions as influence the completely painted interiors of farmhouses in Vologda, painted folk ornaments and furniture, Impressionism and also the icon: 'Since then I looked at Russian icon painting with new eyes, that is to say, I "acquired eyes" for the abstract element in this kind of painting.'[9]

In his *Reminiscences* (1913), Kandinsky once again recalls the brightly colored interiors and furbishing of Vologda. This time he also mentions *lubok* folk prints, which borrow elements from icon painting, and the devotional 'red corner' of the house, covered with painted and printed images of saints. Inside the brightly colored Vologda interiors he felt as if he had walked within a painting

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[7] Franz Marc, 'The Blaue Reiter Almanac', as quoted by Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art* (Boston, MA: Shambala, 1989), 64.

[8] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977), 57.

[9] Translated as 'Interview with Karl Nierendorf', in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, eds. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1994), 806.

which 'narrated' nothing[10], yet imparted a meaningful experience nonetheless. All of these components reminded him of the church interiors of Moscow and the strong impact they had on him.[11] But Kandinsky was not the only one within the Russian avant-garde to be inspired by icons and the 'red corner'. Some would even dare to take its domestic function ironically, turning it into a propagandist vehicle for their revolutionary ideology. Perhaps the closest we get to an 'altar' of the 'future religion', as envisioned by Marc, is Malevich's 'icon corner'.

In 1915 a group of Russian painters, organizing themselves under the banner of a new movement called Suprematism, held an exhibition in Petrograd titled, *The Last Futurist Exhibition, 0.10.* The highlight of the exhibition was the painting *Black Square*[12] by Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935), the leader of this movement of 'non-objective' painting, characterized by their compositions constructed out of purely geometric shapes. The painting was hung high up in the corner of the room, calling to mind the 'red corner' of the houses of pious Orthodox Christians. Thus, the *Black Square*, meant to signify the supremacy of feeling over meaningless nature, automatically became the center of attention, simultaneously fueling the public's outrage and revolutionary reverence. The gesture was calculated and the implication was obvious: Malevich was provocatively breaking with the past, along with its cultural and religious symbols. The old icon was removed and a new one, inaugurating a new stage—a Utopia—in art and civilization was erected in its place. This new symbol was 'autonomous', an 'icon without figures', as the art critic Donald Kuspit has called Malevich's 'non-objective' painting.[13]

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Wassily Kandinsky, 'Reminiscences/Three Pictures', Ibid. 368-69.

[12] Kevin Kinsella notes: 'It is not by chance that Malevich himself called his Black Quadrilateral (often referred to as "the Black Square") "the icon of my time."' Kevin Kinsella, 'Painted into a (Beautiful) Corner: Malevich at the Gagosian', in *Bomblog*, Apr 28, 2011. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/painted-into-a-beautiful-corner-malevich-at-the-gagosian/ (accessed 20 October, 2020).

[13] Kuspit made this comment in around 1993, during one of his classes attended by the author while studying at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City.

In the quest for the inherent properties of painting, abstraction would eventually lead to the non-objective reductivism of the monochrome, such as Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White (1918)*, and eventually, taken to its logical conclusion, to the conceptual zero point—a kind of aesthetic 'apophaticism'—resulting in the demise of painting itself. Thus in 1921 Alexander Rodchenko would paint his triptych, *Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color*, and famously proclaim: 'I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: it's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation.'[14] From here on he would focus, as a Constructivist, on formalist experiments in the fields of graphic design, film and photography. Now the aim was utilitarian, art as production—without any mystical connotation—in support of the Bolshevik Revolution. Painting as a bourgeoise 'commodity', with its religious residues, was now apparently overcome. The pursuit of Utopia morphed from a 'spiritual' to a materialist ideology. But neither the materialist Utopia nor the hoped-for future religion of the avant-garde mystics ever came. The altars were never built; only their 'symbols' remain as evidence of false hopes. Hence we are brought back full circle, to another proclamation of the death of painting.[15] It was thought photography had stricken it with a mortal wound. Abstraction came to its rescue, yet it ironically resulted in its second death. But, of course, painting never went away. It keeps on coming back—experiencing resurrections—no matter how many times its demise has been proclaimed.

The icon, *lubki*, folk art, and 'primitive' art were decontextualized and pillaged by the avant-garde in a Romantic search for aesthetic and ethnic authenticity, independent from the 'classical' Western standards of representation, yet rarely did their appropriation render successful results.[16] The icon was emptied of its content.

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[14] Rodchenko, as quoted in Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 238.

[15] *Cf.* Davor Džalto, 'Art: A Brief History of Absence (From the Conception and Birth, Life and Death, to the Living Deadness of Art)', in *Philosophy and Society XXVI (3)* (Belgrade, SRB: Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, 2015), 667.

[16] See C. A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology*

In a formalistic attempt to arrive at its elusive spirituality, closely identified with its abstraction, it could not be duplicated. Painting might have been successfully 'liberated' from the constraints of the tired, formulaic, vacuous and no longer viable, conventional approach of the academy. Nevertheless, it now found itself subjugated not only to subjectivism, but also the tyranny of programmatic conceptualism, which left the art object behind for its own theorizing and depleted it of its own aesthetic being, vitality and voice.

The modernists searched for 'the spiritual' in art and arrived at the zero degree of abstraction—non-objectivity. Some of us, however, have looked at the corner of abstraction and found the icon- the affirmation of the Incarnation. So, it would be disingenuous for us to solely relegate our discussions about modern art to utterances of disdain, since it was partly through Modernism that some of us have arrived at icon painting. Indeed, programmatic theorizing can plague not only modern art but also the icon revival. In the case of the later we find it in what has been called the 'dogmatization of style'.[17] But to better understand this symptom, and arrive at some possible ways of overcoming it, it is important to take a further look at the unexpected convergences which exist between the twentieth century icon revival and Modernism.

Convergences

As is well known, Paris initially served as the main center of dissemination for the avant-garde ideas which fueled the development of abstraction. It would be a bit naïve to think that the

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and the Aesthetics of the Christian Image (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 213), 90-91.

[17] The idea of the 'dogmatization of style' is indebted to the critical assessment contained in the writings of George Kordis. See in particular, George Kordis, 'The return to Byzantine painting tradition: Fotis Kontoglou and the aesthetical problem of twentieth-century orthodox iconography', in *Devotional Cultures of European Christianity, 1790-1960*, eds. Henning Laugerud & Salvador Ryan (Portland, OR: Four Court Press, 2012), 122-130; Also see Markos Kampanis, *Is there a 'sacred' style?*, paper delivered at The Sacred and Secular in Life and Art: A Workshop Dedicated to the Memory of Philip Sherrard, Oxford, July 14-17, 2016. https://www.academia.edu/39724501/MARKOS_KAMPANIS_Is_there_a_sacred_style (accessed 21 October, 2020).

pioneers of the icon revival, Leonid Ouspensky and Photis Kontoglou, would have been buffered somehow from these currents of thought, as they developed their painting theory during their formative years. The first, we should recall, lived in Paris from 1926 until his death in 1987, and studied under the symbolist painter N. D. Millioti (1874-1962),[18] while the second, after leaving the Athens School of Fine Arts in 1915, lived in Paris for a period of time before returning to Ayvalik in 1919.[19] We will focus on these two major representatives of the icon revival, since their convergence with Modernism pivots around their practice as both painters and theoreticians.[20] Most of the discussion, however, will deal with the views of Maurice Denis on Byzantine art and hieraticism, and the rarely explored link that exists between him and Ouspensky within the sacred art revival in France. We will then touch briefly on Kontoglou's modernist context.

In *The Progeny of the Icon*, Kari Kotkavaara's research helps us to situate the historical context of Ouspensky's *L' Icône, Vision*

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[18] Patrick Doolan, *Recovery of the Icon: The Life and Work of Leonid Ouspensky* (Ccrestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2008), 13; Of N.D. Millioti, who is also referred to as Nicolas Millioti or Nikolai Milioti we learn: 'The painting, Birth of Venus (1912) by Nikolai Milioti (1874-1962), marked the beginning of the development of abstract painting, along with numerous similarities to Wassily Kandinsky's work of the same time period.' Cathy Locke, 'Symbolist Painters- Exploring a world Beyond: The Russian Symbolist Painters', in *Musings on Art*, https://musings-on-art.org/russian-symbolist (accessed 20 October, 2020).

[19] See Nikos Zias, 'Chronological Table of Kontoglou's Life and Work', in the catalogue for the exhibition, *Photis Kontoglou: Reflections of Byzantium in the 20th Century* (New York, NY: Foundation for Hellenic Culture, 1997), 71.

[20] Pavel Florensky, another major contributor to the icon revival, although not residing in Paris, was nevertheless also influenced by avant-garde currents, in particular through his involvement with circles promoting the ideas of Russian Symbolism. After the Bolshevik Revolution Florensky taught at the VKhUTEMAS, along with Kandinsky and Rodchenko, where he delivered his famous lectures on reverse perspective. See Nicoletta Misler, 'Pavel Florensky: A Biographical Sketch', in Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler, (London, UK: Reaktion Books LTD, 2002), 62-93; Another member of the Russian émigré community in Paris that should also be mentioned is the iconographer sister Joanna Reitlinger, who studied with Maurice Denis, see below note 28.

du Monde Spirituel, a pivotal brochure in the development of the icon revival, which aims to theologically interpret the traditional icon and argue for its superiority over other forms of sacred art. Published in 1948, it would go on to be translated into Greek through the intervention of Photis Kontoglou and partly contribute in the shaping of his theoretical formulations.[21] The text, according to Kotkavaara, is best understood in light of the Roman Catholic sacred art revival unfolding at the time in France:

> His first French text, L' Icône, vision du monde spirituel, emerged more or less immediately after the Second World War in reply to two different revivalist ideologies which had matured in the inter-war years. The first of these had been advocated by émigrés who – as members of the Icon Association – were in pursuit of a revived Old Russian imagery; while the second had been put forward by French Catholic modernists who admired El Greco, Fra Angelico and – last but not least – the serene images of Byzantium.[22]

[21] Evan Freeman, 'Rethinking the Role of Style in Orthodox Iconography: The Invention of Tradition in the Writings of Florensky, Ouspensky and Kontoglou', in *Church Music and Icons: Windows to Heaven*, *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Orthodox Church Music*, Joensuu, Finland, 3-9 June, 2013 (Joensuu, FI: The International Society for Orthodox Church Music, 2015), 356.

[22] Kari Kotkavaara, *Progeny of the Icon: Émigré Russian Revivalism and the Vicissitudes of the Eastern Orthodox Sacred Image*, (Åbo, FI: Åbo Akademi University Press,1999) 245-46; The Icon Association is also referred to as the Icon Society, founded in 1927 by the Old Believer and patron of the arts Vladimir Pavlovich Ryabushinsky (1873-1955). Leonid Ouspensky, Gregory Kroug, Sister (in fact Mother) Joanna and Pimen Sofronov, are counted among its members. The Icon Society was established 'with the goal of disseminating information about icons, helping iconographers find orders for their work, and helping parishes finance the adornment and frescoing of their churches…The Icon Society engaged in a great deal of educational work. They published books, scheduled lectures, and arranged art exhibits where traditional icons were exhibited along with paintings of contemporary masters.' Irina Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant: The Underground Struggle to Save Russian Iconography* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 87-88.

These two groups would in fact cooperate during the 1930s and 1940s in the organization of various group exhibitions of revivalist sacred art. The French Catholic revivalists could be seen as the most recent permutation of a Neo-Byzantine and hieratic art revival which stretched back to the mid-nineteenth century. Part of the cultural background of this earlier stage of the Byzantine revival in France consisted of a polemical battle between the ultramontane and progressivist ideologies of the time. The former, on the one hand, saw in the qualities of the hieratic style, such as 'frontality, stasis, severity, and an emphatic reduction of pictorial illusionism,'[23] the kind of authority, solemnity, timelessness, otherworldliness and stability they identified with their traditional values.[24] The latter, on the other hand, took the matter of fact directness of naturalism, its look into the mundane and rougher side of contemporary life, as representative of scientific positivism and a way of voicing the plight of the common man as it unfolded in the transience of a rapidly developing modern world.[25] Thus, the dichotomy posed between these two stylistic modes can be seen as analogous to the philosophical problem regarding being and becoming—immutability and mutability.[26] By the 1860s and 1870s, however, a shift occurred. Naturalism was now embraced by many within mainstream Catholicism, in an attempt to conform to the scientific mentality of the time, while hieraticism and Neo-Byzantine forms became the preoccupation of the cultural vanguard, which rejected the excesses of scientism in exploration of mystical and subjectivist tendencies.[27]

Within the French avant-garde, one of the most important revivalists and admirers of Byzantine art was the devout Roman Catholic Maurice Denis.[28] In addition to his earlier involvement

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[23] Ibid., 5.

[24] Michael Paul Driskel, *Representing Belief: Religion, Art, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University State Press, 1992), 59-97.

[25] Ibid., 165-226.

[26] Ibid., 2-18.

[27] Ibid., 227-252.

[28] For a thorough overview of Denis' ideas on sacred art see 'From the Prophets to

with the Symbolist group Les Nabis (from the Hebrew *nebiim*, meaning prophet) in the 1890s, he would go on to play a major role in the articulation of the ideas surrounding the 'art sacré' revival in Paris. Although Denis's earlier work of the Nabis period at times verged on abstraction in its anti-naturalistic orientation, he never gave himself wholeheartedly towards that direction in his painting the subject matter was never abandoned. Nevertheless, as he theorized and directed his efforts towards the revitalization of the Christian 'sacred image', he implemented his symbolist aesthetic doctrine in the decorative murals of churches as best he could within this context. Symbolism would remain as his artistic doctrine throughout his life.

Symbolism, for Denis, 'is the art of translating and *inducing states of soul* by means of relations of color and forms. These relations, invented or borrowed from Nature, become signs or symbols of these states of soul: they have the power to suggest them.'[29] This process involves the interpretive alteration and stylization in the painting of what is perceived, as a means to express the painter's emotional response to nature. Thus, instead of copying the external appearances, the painter creates a pictorial equivalent—through the 'abstract' formal qualities of painting—of the state of his soul, which in turn induces a corresponding emotional response in the viewer. This broad definition allowed for the possibility of symbolist works in a variety of styles. It was Denis's conviction that 'all truly superior works of art, whether ancient or modern, are symbolist.'[30] Hence his designation of the term 'Neo-traditionalism' in 1890 to describe the radical changes in painting occurring in the late nineteenth-century. For Denis avant-garde symbolist painting was as traditional and 'iconic' as the Byzantine icon.[31]

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the Master', in Aidan Nichols, OP, *In Search of the Sacred Image* (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2020), 219-258.

[29] As quoted in Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York, NY: Charles Scibner's Sons, 1962), 203.

[30] See Peter Brooke, 'A Broad Definition of Symbolism', in his introduction to, *Maurice Denis: Writings on Sacred Art*, http://www.peterbrooke.org/art-and-religion/denis/intro/symbolism.html (accessed 30 September, 2020).

[31] For Denis, as Peter Brooke puts it: 'The transformation that occurred in the late

In 1919, he cofounded the *Ateliers d'Art Sacré* (Studios of Sacred Art), together with Georges Desvallières (1861-1950), from which he worked on commissions and prepared many artists for the decoration of places of worship.[32] One of the aims of the 'art sacré' movement was to renew French religious art by combating the conventional artifice of academic art and the proliferation of bad taste, or 'kitsch', coming out of the Paris quarter surrounding the Church of St. Sulpice. Hence the so called 'Saint-Sulpice style' of sentimental images, mass-produced devotional paraphernalia, and plaster statuettes of saints.[33] Denis describes his vision for the *Ateliers d'Art Sacré* as follows: 'I proscribe academicism because it sacrifices emotion to convention and artifice, because it is theatrical or bland…I ban realism because it's prose and I want "music above all else", and poetry. Finally, I will preach beauty. Beauty is an attribute of divinity.'[34]

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nineteenth century was not a discovery of something entirely new, something that had never before been experienced in the world, such as is implied in the absurd label 'modernist' or in the theories of the Italian or Russian 'Futurists'. Denis' most influential essay, written at the age of nineteen under the direct impact of his first encounter with the work of Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cézanne, was called A Definition of Neo-Traditionalism.' Ibid.

[32] An interesting detail in this history is provided by Irina Yazykova regarding Julia Nikolaevna Reitlinger, another member of the émigré Russian community and contributor to the icon revival. Julia, who later was tonsured taking the name, Mother Joanna, in fact studied at the Ateliers d'Art Sacré with Denis. She was looking for guidance in her search for a form of 'creative icon painting'. Yazykova says of Mother Joanna: 'She herself sought something of greater simplicity and depth and for several years she visited the atelier of the well-known French painter Maurice Denis, who tried to create a new form of religious art. Yet his painterly approach didn't satisfy her either.' Yazykova, Ibid. 73; Also see Peter Brooke, *Sister Joanna (Reitlinger) and Maurice Denis: An Orthodox-Catholic Encounter*, http://www.peterbrooke.org/art-and-religion/reitlinger/ (accessed 29 September, 2020).

[33] In this regard there is an interesting parallel between the "art sacré" movement and one of the current dilemmas the liturgical arts of the Orthodox Church confronts today: the ever-growing proliferation of mechanically reproduced icons.

[34] As quoted in Michael Rossi, 'Art and Catholic Faith in the 20th Century: The Ways of Creation', lecture delivered at the *Sacred Art in the 20th Century Conference*, Saint Paul de Wisques abbey, September 25, 2010. http://arras.catholique.fr/

For Denis, Byzantine art —at least for some time until 1913—became the prime example of an art in which he saw his symbolist ideas concerning Christian painting perfectly synthesized. In an 1896 article, *Notes on Religious Painting*, later published in 1912, Denis states, 'Byzantine painting is assuredly the most perfect type of Christian painting.'[35] Denis considers Byzantine art 'rational' and attributes to it the 'admirable formulas' of traditional iconography:

> That liturgical and rational Byzantine art to which we owe the marvelous mosaics found in Rome, Ravenna and Milan, is also the source, lest we forget, of those admirable formulas which Christian iconography has utilized ever since, for better or for worst, to set forth the mysteries and represent sacred history.[36]

He also goes on to display his enthusiasm for the 'supernatural compositions' of Byzantine works, which seem to gratify his longing for harmonious, classical order, and precise expressive form:

> It is impossible for us to conceive of a Christian subject without evoking various ones of their symmetrical, well-conceived and mysteriously simple, truly supernatural compositions. It is because of their "rightness" of expression that they have survived the long vicissitudes of the ages.[37]

Denis did not only speak of the 'admirable formulas' and '"rightness" of expression' that Byzantine art had produced, but also of its '"definitive interpretations" of the Gospels and the Doctrine, i.e. sacred pictorial formulas which lay at the root of all

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page-20317.html (accessed 29 September, 2020).

[35] Maurice Denis, 'Notes on Religious Painting', in *Maurice Denis: Writings on 'Sacred Art'*, trans. Peter Brooke, http://www.peterbrooke.org/art-and-religion/denis/notes/ideals.html (30 September, 2020).

[36] Our translation from the French as quoted by Kotkavaara, 249. The quotations that follow, as provided by Kotkavaara, have also been translated from the French by the author.

[37] Ibid., 250.

Christian art…'[38] In the same article, Denis summarizes his ideas about the Christian image as follows: 'To insuperable spiritual beauty corresponds perfect décor; astonishing correspondences point to truth from on high: proportions express concepts; harmony of form and logic of dogma coincide.'[39] This passage, as Kotkavaara notices, is paralleled by Ouspensky in a more laconic manner when he says: 'For the Orthodox Church the image is, as much as the word, a language expressing its dogmas and teachings.'[40] Ouspensky also seems to be speaking a similar language as Denis when he points out the 'astonishing correspondences' between prayer, the icon's simplicity and its harmonious, 'supernatural composition': 'The icon is the path and the means, prayer itself. From thence come the icon's majesty, simplicity, calm movement and the rhythm of its lines and colors, flowing from perfect interior harmony.'[41] What should be particularly noticed from these passages is the close link made by Denis, and paralleled by Ouspensky, between form and dogma.[42] Herein can be seen early signs of what would become the 'dogmatization of style' in icon painting, to which we will return later.

In Denis's *Définition du Néo-traditionnisme*, we find a passage-rarely discussed, as Michael Driskel points out-which exemplifies his concept of the 'iconic'. In this passage, aiming to clarify his symbolist ideas, Denis makes a contrast between naturalistic painting and a Byzantine icon of Christ: 'A Byzantine Christ is a symbol: the Jesus of modern painters, even if cloaked in the most accurate burnoose, is only literary. In one it is form that is expres-

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[38] Ibid., 250.

[39] Ibid., 250-51.

[40] Ibid., 250.

[41] Ibid.

[42] This link is also implied by Kontoglou when he says: 'Byzantine iconography is the only painting which is adaptable to Christian religion and achieved to express the spiritual essence of the Gospel.' As quoted by George Kordis, 'The Return to Byzantine Painting: Fotis Kontoglou and the aesthetical problem of twentieth-century Orthodox iconography', in *Devotional Cultures of European Christiniaty: 1790-1960*, eds. Henning Laugerud & Salvador Ryan (Dublin, IE: Four Court Press, 2012) 125.

sive, in the other it is an imitation of nature that wishes to be so.'[43] Thus, for Denis, painting is not to be confused with nature. Rather, if it is to attain to maximum expressivity, it should avoid the slavish imitation of nature and pedestrian representation, as practiced by the naturalist painters of his day, which he refers to as 'modern', that is to say, 'contemporary'. Herein we find a shift of focus from the 'what' of the representation to the 'how' of its execution.[44] Therefore, meaning resides not merely in the 'literary' or narrative content, but rather on the formal qualities of the painting itself. Instead of focusing solely on the documentary 'accuracy' of details, the avant-garde painter should rather follow the symbolist path-as exemplified by the Byzantine icon-and convey emotive content through the expressivity of form. According to Driskel:

> One can summarize Denis's polemic on behalf of Byzantium quite simply: he was demanding a renunciation of narrative modes of representation, ones requiring a discursive or "reading" stance from the beholder, and a revival of an iconic one, dictating an attitude of nondiscursive contemplation and direct emotional response to the forms constituting the image.[45]

But, in the context of religious painting, the emphasis Denis places on emotion should not be confused with 'sentimentalism'. In his *Notes on Religious Painting*, he clarifies the difference between two kinds of religious painting, one sentimental and the other having 'spiritual feeling'. He ascribes sentimental feeling to the 'literary' or anecdotal impulse of naturalism, which focuses on mundane everyday life. Byzantine art, however, which he identifies with hieraticism, transcends the vicissitudes of life in preference for its *mathematical* inner secrets. These secrets impart on hieratic art a 'spiritual feeling', intense yet sober, that taps into absolute 'supernatural Beauty'. Whereas the former is based on evoking mutable past experiences, the latter is concerned to move

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[43] As quoted by Driskel, 236. For an overview on the concept of the 'iconic' as discussed by the Nabis circle and other symbolist painters, see Driskel, 236- 242.

[44] *Cf.* D. Džalto, *Art: A Brief History of Absence*, 664-665.

[45] Ibid., 236.

the viewer through the stability of formal properties-the precise pictorial order-of the work itself. He writes of the two kinds of religious painting:

> The one is sentimental [*sentimentale*], if I dare to say so, restoring the beauty of attitudes of prayer, of heads inclined in ecstasy, of kneeling; purity, naïveté of veiled young girls...The other is less inspired by life and, in order to realize the absolute, turns to the intimate secret of nature - to number. From the mathematical relations of lines and colours there appears a supernatural Beauty…That is the prestige of the perfect chord, the splendor of immutability. Instead of evoking before the object that is being represented emotions we have experienced in the past, it is the work itself which wishes to move us. Think of the Egyptians, of the Byzantine mosaics in Italy, of Cimabue.[46]

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[46] Maurice Denis, 'Notes on Religious Painting', in *Maurice Denis: Writings on 'Sacred Art'*, trans. Peter Brooke, http://www.peterbrooke.org/art-and-religion/denis/notes/ideals.html (accessed 30 September, 2020).

Later in the text Denis connects mathematics to God's creative act by quoting Scripture: 'But You have ordered all things by measure, number and weight' (Wisdom 11:20). In what amounts to Denis' mathematical conception of 'spiritual beauty' we find the influence of the work of the Benedictine monk Desiderius Lenz (1832-1928), founder of the Beuron School of ecclesiastical art. Their philosophy of sacred art took as its basis a canon of mathematical proportion—considered as revealed—mainly as embodied in Egyptian art. They acknowledged the Byzantine tradition in so far as it retained aspects of the canon, otherwise they deemed it decadent. In this school we find yet another chapter of the late 19th and early 20th century revival of 'sacred art' aiming to overcome naturalism. Denis had made his acquaintance with Desiderius Lenz through his Nabis colleague, the painter Jan Verkade (1868-1946). Verkade eventually became a monk at the Archabbey of Beuron, taking the name Willibrord and dedicating his painting activity to ecclesial art. Their mutual friend Paul Sérusier (1864-1927) also became an enthusiast of the Beuron School and went on to translate Lenz's theoretical essay *The Aesthetic of Beuron*, publishing it in 1905. The Beuron influence on Sérusier can also be seen in his treatise, *ABC of Painting* (1921). It could be said that, in their emphasis on geometrization, the Beuron School played a role, often ignored, in the 20th century developments of abstraction. See Peter Brooke, 'Afterword: Peter Lenz and the Twentieth Century', in *Desiderius (Peter) Lenz,*

In Denis's contrast between the mutability of everyday life and the immutability of the supernatural, we have a clear parallel to the dichotomy we have already encountered in revivalist polemics: the mutability of progress and the stability of tradition, identified by naturalism and hieraticism respectively. In his emphasis on immutability Denis is in direct continuity with the ultramontane aesthetic. In a liberal Third Republic context—ideologically closely associated with naturalism—this stance would have made perfect sense for him as a Roman Catholic. Therefore, Denis's emphasis on hieraticism and a contemplative approach to the image, although seemingly 'revolutionary' in its opposition to the naturalist art establishment, can also be seen as a conservative political stance.

But in spite of all his appreciation and enthusiasm for Byzantine art and the icon, Denis's art did not succeed in capturing its hieratic sublimity and spiritual grandeur, very often remaining quite sentimental, lacking vigor in its decorativeness. He considered the Byzantine icon from outside, unable to grasp its spirit: the ecclesial reality, liturgical context, and tradition from which it arose. After a trip to Rome in 1898 he would go on to pursue the harmony, clarity and order, of a kind of 'neo-classicism'. In 1913 Byzantine art is scorned and replaced by an enthusiastic emphasis on the work of Fra Angelico and the Italian primitives—to whom, in fact, he always remained faithful during his exploration of hieraticism. Denis now praised them for their pure love of life, reflected in their naïve approach to the depiction of nature and its sensuous qualities, in contrast to the cold symmetries, formulas, and abstraction of hieratic art. In his view the latter focused more on ideas at the expense of the real world and feeling. Nevertheless, he still adhered to his theory of symbolism. In *Religious Sentiment in Religious Art* (1913) he writes:

Now then, what characterizes Medieval Art, is its development away from hieraticism through love of life… Could we say it is a symbolist art? But then, all art worthy of its name is symbolist, because all art has as its goal to signify something. Hieraticism and

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O.S.B.: The Aesthetic of Beuron and other Writings, (London, UK: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2002), 74-89.

allegory, each within its genre, are closed languages. But symbolism, by contrast, is the natural language of art. The one expresses ideas, the other, sentiments; one speaks to the mind, the other to the eyes; the one is founded upon conventional language, the other uses those proximate correspondences which we perceive between the states of our souls and our means of expression. It has been the moderns who have revealed the mysterious possibilities of that sort of symbolism. But our modern art is permeated by subjectivity.[47]

By the time he writes his *History of Religious Art* (1939), Denis laments the influence of Cubism on the younger generation of artists involved with the sacred art revival. He considers their overt geometrization a 'new hieraticism'. Recalling the ideas of his youth he says: '…they have retained…from our subjectivism of 1890 only liberty, or license in the representation of nature; a sort of Cubism that produces a new hieraticism. What interests them is the objectivity of the work of art, the decorative expression ... the descriptive element will be subordinated to the demands of the colour: the drawing will be only approximative—a pure geometrical line in two dimensions, without relief or perspective.'[48] We are here now very far from the emphasis on flatness of the *Définition du Néo-traditionnisme*. Thus, Denis appears to have partly recanted his subjectivist and anti-naturalist ideas of his early years—his emphasis on the 'abstract' in art—for what amounts to be its complete opposite, an affirmation of the imitation of nature and the lifelike in painting.[49] This stemmed from his conviction that Medieval art was a realist art in which can be discerned the love of life. Therefore, Denis in the end retained his symbolist theory but in an attenuated form, kept in check from license and its ugly extremes, through a reverence for the beauty of nature.

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[47] Maurice Denis, 'Religious Sentiment in Religious Art', in *Maurice Denis: Writings on Sacred Art*, trans. Peter Brooke, http://www.peterbrooke.org/art-and-religion/denis/sentiment/positivism.html (accessed 20 October, 2020).

[48] As quoted in Peter Brooke, 'Introduction', in *Maurice Denis: Writings on Sacred Art*, http://www.peterbrooke.org/art-and-religion/denis/intro/cubism.html (accessed 20 October, 2020).

[49] Idid.

Returning to the two revivalist camps, although there was much cooperation in the organization of exhibitions, mainly during the 30s and 40s, as the files of the Icon Association demonstrate, the Orthodox remained aloof towards their Catholic counterparts in the revivalist movement.[50] Yet, a public example, in the form of two articles, showing the level of rapprochement between the two camps, happens after World War II. Kotkavaara explains: 'It was not until after the Second World War-when a group of Dominicans rose against their colleagues (Maurice and his followers)-that V.P Rjabušínskij (having just resigned the presidency of the Icon Association) published two articles in Russian in which he revealed an appreciation of the older Catholic theorists (paying particular attention to their wish to reinstate the medieval, neo-Platonic aesthetics).'[51] Rjabušínskij, however, seems to be thinking of Denis's earlier views on 'mathematical' hieraticism, which as we have seen were cast aside. Denis even speaks explicitly against Platonist idealism, associating it with abstraction in his *Religious Sentiment in Medieval Art*, but instead praises what he considered to be the Aristotelianism of the Middle Ages, which valued 'the concrete and the individual'.[52]

The new Dominican revivalists Kotkavaara mentions consist of the circle around Frs. Marie-Alain Couturier (1897-1954) and Pie Raymond Régamey (1900-1996). They emphasized the importance of commissioning the best and most prominent contemporary artists, regardless of their personal believes, to work on the decoration of Catholic churches. They also deemed it essential that they be given the utmost freedom. Among the artists who collaborated with Couturier and Régamey are numbered Le Corbusier, Henri Matisse, Rouault and Fernand Léger. Their formalist aesthetic inclinations were far more radical than Denis's modernist views. This new trend caused an ideological crisis within the Catholic *art sacré* movement. Thus, Kotkavaara notes that the 'coming of age'

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[50] K. Kotkavaara, 248.

[51] Ibid., 248-49.

[52] Maurice Denis, *Religious Sentiment in Religious Art*, http://www.peterbrooke. org/art-and-religion/denis/sentiment/platonism.html (accessed 20 October, 2020).

of Ouspensky's 'programme in the late 1940's and the early 1950's coincided with a profound crisis which shook the ideas of the Catholic revivalists, and which may even have increased his determination to compete with all rival Catholic and Russian Orthodox trends.'[53] It could be said that the emphasis put by Ouspenky in *L'Icône* on the icon as reflecting and inextricably tied to personal faith is a direct reply to these new developments.[54]

Denis's pictorial theories rippled across the various movements of early modernism, which later tended to neglect and forget him as he turned, in their view, 'ultraconservative' and 'dogmatic', both in his political views and in his involvement in the *art sacré* revival.[55] Indeed, he exerted a lot of influence on many within the *art sacré* movement, some of which came in contact with sectors of the Russian émigré community who labored towards the revival of the Orthodox icon in its medieval style, amongst whom Ouspensky played a major role. It is hard to think of Ouspenky as unaware of his immediate artistic milieu and his writings as not being a reply to the broader discourse on 'sacred art' current at the time. Indeed, although having confessional differences, both Denis and Ouspensky-along with their respective communities—longed for a rejuvenation in liturgical art and agreed on one thing: a laying aside of sentimental naturalism, along with the artless 'Saint-Sulpice style' and a return to an authentic Christian image based on medieval models.

Now let us turn to Photis Kontoglou and briefly sketch his context. Although he is generally considered in light of his staunch opposition towards Modernism, this view overlooks and trivializes how the modernist milieu could have affected his pictorial ideas

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[53] K. Kotkavaara, 251.

[54] Ibid.

[55] This sentiment regarding Denis is expressed by Chipp: 'For a few years, until he turned ultraconservative like others of the Nabis and began to apply doctrinaire religious interpretations to the idealist principles of Symbolism, he wrote some of the most perceptive articles on the ideology, history, and formal characteristics of the subjectivist movement.' Herschel B. Chipp, 'Symbolism and Other Subjectivist Tendencies: Form and the Evocation of Feeling', in *Theories of Modern Art*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968) 53-54.

during his years in Paris. In the short essay *The Painter Photios Kontoglou: Reflections of Byzantium in the 20th Century*, Nikos Zias, speaking of the stylistic features in Kontoglou's work, says:

> As for style, the foremost features are lack of perspective (and consequently the lack of a third dimension) in works, the absence of a single light source, and the use not of tonal gradation, but of colour contrasts that often serve to complete one another. Some of these aesthetic principles-though springing from different premises-coincide with the principles of modern art…In a variety of ways therefore, while Kontoglou adopted these techniques and styles of the past (without, it should be noted, slavishly copying them), he was at the same time approaching the modern aesthetic ideas that were shaking conventional academic standards and realism, and in this respect, it is possible to see his sojourn in Paris as formative.[56]

But Paris did not stay behind upon Kontoglou's return home. The ideas of the Parisian avant-garde were already taking hold in Greece by the time Kontoglou settled in Athens in 1922. These ideas would go on to shape the developments of the so-called Generation of the Thirties, consisting of writers, poets, painters, critics, scholars and intellectuals, seeking an authentically modern Greek cultural voice.[57] Kontoglou was actually only one among many painters, some of which studied and apprenticed under him, who were exploring the Byzantine and folk traditions as part of a search for artistic national identity at the time. For the generation of the 30s the prime representative of indigenous folk sensibility was the painter Theophilos Hatzimihail (1870-1934), whose work was exhibited in Paris (1936), likened to the French naive painter Henri Rousseau, and appreciated by the likes of Le Curbusier and

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[56] Nikos Zias, Photis *Kontoglou: Reflections of Byzantium in the 20th Century*, New York, NY: Foundation for Hellenic Culture, 1997) 16-17.

[57] See Marina Lambraki-Plaka, "Art and Ideology in Modern Greece," in ed. Olga Mentzafou-Polyzou, *National Gallery, Alexandros Soutzos Museum, 100 Years: Four Centuries of Greek Painting* (National Gallery and Alexandros Museum, Athen 2013) 39.

the art critic Maurice Raynal.[58] A good example of Kontoglou's exploration of the folk and naïve sensibility is his portrait of his wife *Maria Kontoglou* (1928), which bears some similarities with Rousseau's portraiture. The portrait's frame is decorated with foliate and star motifs, details that, as professor Zias points out, 'link the work to the popular, folk tradition.'[59] The portrait is very hieratic. The face is starkly frontal, there is minimal and subtle rendering and all is predominantly flat, as if pressed against the pictorial plane. Moreover, the painting *Far from Civilization* (1957) is a clear example of Kontoglou's playful 'primitive' tendencies. Executed in a cartoon-like manner, it depicts an idyllic scene of African folk, some in a canoe at sea, while others climb a tree and one is sitting at shore weaving a basket. In this work Zias notes that the 'figures of the Africans are rendered in flat volumes, and are antirealistic.'[60]

A particularly important link between the symbolist ideas we have mentioned and the modernist milieu in Greece are the painters Nikolaos Gyzis (1842-1901) and Konstantinos Parthenis (1878-1967). According to Antonis Danos, 'Gyzi's late work emerges as the beginning of a process that continues with Parthenis and culminates with the artists of "The Thirties".'[61] In Parthenis's luminous and ethereal *Annunciation* (1910-1911), combining archaic and classical Greek vase painting with Byzantine elements, we find a clear example of his engagement with Symbolism. It calls to mind the cool pastel tones, blurred rendition of form, and solemn mood of *Le Mystére Catholique* (1889), by Denis.[62] Parthenis painted the

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[58] Ibid., 39-40; Also see Chris Michaelides, 'Theophilosand Tériade', in *British Library: European Studies Blog*, 6 July 2015, https://blogs.bl.uk/european/2015/07/theophilos-and-t%C3%A9riade.html (accessed 1 October, 2020).

[59] Zias, 30.

[60] Ibid., 62.

[61] Antonis Danos, 'Idealist "Grand Visions," From Nikolaos Gyzis to Konstantinos Parthenis: The Unacknowledged Symbolist Roots of Greek Modernism', in *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art*, eds. Michael Facos & Thor J. Mednick, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017) 11-22.

[62] See catalog entry in Bonhams, *The Greek Sale*, New Bond Street, London, 21 November, 2018, 26-31.

Annunciation during his stay in Paris (1909-11), where he came into contact with the symbolist works of Puvis de Chavaness (1824-1898), Odilon Redon (1840-1916) and Denis. Although often neglected by Greek art historians, 'Both Gyzis and Parthenis were deeply concerned with the representation of ideas within the framework of Symbolism, an enterprise for which they drew on idealist, allegorical, antirealist, and Modernist visual vocabulary.'[63] A direct connection between Kontoglou and Parthenis is to be found in the painter Yannis Tsarouchis (1910-1989), who studied with Parthenis at the Athens School of Fine Arts (1929-1935) and alongside Kontoglou for three years (1931-34).[64] In Nikos Engonopoulos (1907-1985), another of Kontoglou's students who also studied with Parthenis, we find an idiosyncratic combination of Byzantine influences with Surrealism. Spyros Papaloukas (1821-1957) and the younger Rallis Kopsidis (1929-2010), both part of Kontoglou's circle of friends and collaborators, in their own unique ways also dealt with the problem of the relationship between tradition and modernity, both within the secular and ecclesial artistic spheres. Therefore, as Markos Kampanis reminds us,

> It is well known that Photis Kontoglou is considered the major force behind the revival of the liturgical arts in twentieth-century Greece, and more generally the return to Byzantine ways of expression within iconography. It is important to stress the fact that although today many people and artists easily ground their artistic conservatism behind the teachings of Kontoglou, that was not his intent for most of his career. Kontoglou and the rest of the 30's generation where not turning to the past out of conservativism, but as a step to redefine the path of Greek art…It was much later in his career, I believe, that his teachings were over-systematized. This led many of his followers to a stagnant and uninspiring way of painting icons based on mere copying with lack of artistic personality.[65]

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[63] A. Danos, 12-13.

[64] Lambraki-Plaka, 23-45.

[65] Markos Kampanis, 'Modernity and Tradition in the Religious Art of Spyros

Kontoglou might have rejected the doctrines of the Parisian avant-garde when he turned exclusively to the icon, nevertheless, he was inevitably in the middle of Greek modernist discourse—there was no way of escaping it. His thought caused ripples, not only within the ecclesial artistic sphere, but also among those directly involved with secular painting. And the theories of Symbolism, partly through the pivotal role played by Kontantinos Parthenis, served to set the stage and shape the ideological development of Greek Modernism in the twentieth century.[66] Although we might not have hard evidence betraying ideological adherence to the avant-garde doctrines of Symbolism, nevertheless, in both Kontoglou and Ouspensky we find parallels with the theories of Maurice Denis. Let us now consider the similarities and differences.

Kinds of Symbolism

If for Denis symbolism meant a pictorial method that sought to make of a painting an equivalent of subjective emotion, for the pioneers it meant the expression of objective spiritual knowledge and experience. For Denis the starting point is the apprehension of nature as it is. For the pioneers, 'It is in a way painting from nature, but from *renewed nature*, using symbols.'[67] The first considers art to be 'the sanctification of nature,'[68] the second aims to reveal deified nature through pictorial form. The former remains in the human psychic level, while the later has to do with noetic illumination according to the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, Denis believed that symbolism had the potential to create in the viewer states analogous to a kind of mystical vision. However, in this regard he turns the affective states induced by art

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Papaloukas', in *Orthodox Arts Journal*, August 10, 2015. https://orthodoxarts-journal.org/modernity-and-tradition-in-the-religious-art-of-spyros-papaloukas/ (accessed 2 October, 2020).

[66] A. Danos, 18-19.

[67] Our emphasis. See Leonid Ouspensky, *The Icon Vision of the Spiritual World*, https://www.pagesorthodoxes.net/eikona/icones-sens.htm#vision (accessed 5 October, 2020).

[68] Denis, in Chipp, *Theories*, 100.

into ends in themselves, demanding an utter surrender, a 'perfect docility',[69] on the part of the viewer to the aesthetic feeling being expressed. Although he claims aesthetic experience makes God sensible to the heart, it remains in the end relegated to 'subconscious energies.'[70] For the pioneers, on the other hand, symbolism is seen as derived from revelation and becomes visual theology, serving a liturgical function that leads beyond the mere stirring of human emotion. It aims, rather, to actualize the transfiguration of the totality of the human person.[71]

It could be said that for Denis the art object predominates as locus of emotion, whereas for the pioneers it is left behind in accomplishing its anagogic function. Denis emphasizes the importance of the imagination and the creative act, while the pioneers condemn the first and tend to circumvent, if not completely downplay, the second. The two conceptions of symbolism, however, presuppose a non-naturalistic style. Concerning the development of naturalistic art after the Renaissance and its influence on ecclesial art, Ouspensky writes: Together with an infatuation with antiquity, the cult of the flesh replaced the transfiguration of the human body… "The image of this passing world" has replaced the image of revelation. The falsehood of any "imitation of nature" does not merely consist of the substitution of the traditional image by a fiction, but also in the preservation of religious subjects while blurring the limits that separate the visible from the invisible. The distinction between them disappears, and this led to a denial of the very existence of the spiritual world.[72]

In other words, for Ouspensky, naturalistic 'religious painting' obscures the icon's revealed dogmatic content-deification through the Incarnation-by solely focusing on one of the two ontological dimensions to be represented. Thus, in fixating on sensuous ap-

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[69] Denis is here quoting Bergson. See Maritain, 203.

[70] Denis, as quoted by Maritain, 204.

[71] *Cf.* Leonid Ouspensky, 'The Meaning and Language of Icons', in *The Meaning of Icons*, L. Ouspensky & V. Lossky, (SVS Press: Crestwood, NY, 1989) 39.

[72] Leonid Ouspensky, 'The Icon in the Modern World', in *Theology of the Icon, Vol. II* (SVS Press: Crestwood, NY, 1992), 488-489.

pearances, while disregarding spiritual realities, it embodies a 'carnal' mindset that denies the transfiguration of the deified body. The icon, to the contrary, should accurately and simultaneously convey *both* the historical reality and spiritual dimension of its subject, the perceptible physical likeness and its invisible sanctified state. This is to be accomplished, according to Ouspensky, through the 'abstract' stylization of the icon, which he calls 'symbolic realism'.[73] Speaking of the problem of depicting holiness, Ouspensky says:

> The second reality, the presence of the all-sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit, holiness, cannot be depicted by any human means, since it is invisible to external physical sight…Recognizing a man as a saint and glorifying him the Church indicates his holiness by visible means in icons, using a symbolical language it has established, such as haloes, and particular forms, colors and lines.[74]

Ouspensky here admits that holiness *as such* cannot be depicted. In this regard he is in full harmony with the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, who asserted the impossibility of depicting invisible realities, such as the soul or divinity. Yet he does augment the patristic teaching-the image as a mimetic representation of the subject's physical form-by positing the possibility of 'symbolic realism', capable of accurately 'indicating' or *suggesting* the spiritual vision of transfigured existence and therefore bearing theological significance. Sensing that his interpretation might be taken as novel fantasy, Ouspensky offers the basis for its veracity: 'Just as some great spirituals have left us verbal descriptions of the Kingdom of God, which was within them (Luke xvii, 21), so others have also left descriptions of it, but in visible images, in the language of artistic symbols; and their testimony is just as authentic.'[75] Clearly, he offers nothing other than his own personal conviction that it is so. For Ouspensky the icons themselves are the greatest evidence and boldly asserts, 'The holy image, just like the Holy Scriptures, transmits not human ideas and conceptions of truth, but

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[73] L. Ouspensky, *The Meaning and Language of Icons*, 36.

[74] Ibid., 38.

[75] Ibid., 41.

truth itself-the Divine revelation.'[76] With this assertion he closely links, if not completely equates, stylistic form with revelation.

In defense of the icon's apparent lack of conformity to classical standards of beauty, Ouspensky also derides those who consider them 'naïve' and 'primitive', calling attention to how this prejudice only betrays a lack of knowledge of the spiritual reality and dogma the non-naturalistic features symbolically represent:

> Transmitted in the icon, this transformed state of the human body is the visible expression of the dogma of transfiguration and has thus a great educational significance. An excessively thin nose, small mouth and large eyes—all these are a conventional method of transmitting the state of the saint whose senses have been "refined"… If this language of icons has become unfamiliar to us or seems "naïve" and "primitive", the reason is not that the icon has "outlived" or lost its vital power and significance, but that "even the knowledge that the human body is capable of spiritual comfort…is lost by men."[77]

For Ouspensky, as can be clearly seen in the few examples given here, stylistic form arises from dogma and revelation. Hence, 'symbolic realism', the medieval icon's peculiar non-naturalistic style, is not to be considered an arbitrary convention, replaceable with any other, equally efficient styles-even if these have had currency and been accepted within the liturgical life of the Church. For him style is inseparable from revelatory 'spiritual experience and vision.'[78] Therefore, tampering with 'symbolic realism' betrays a disconnection with Tradition and amounts to the distortion of dogma, which in the end leads to the betrayal of Orthodoxy:

> The dogmatic content of the icon vanishes from the consciousness of men and symbolic realism becomes an incomprehensible language for iconographers fallen under the influence of the West.

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[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid., 38-39.

[78] Ibid., 48.

Symbolical realism, based on spiritual experience and vision, disappears through the absence of the latter and through loosing its link with Tradition. This fact gives birth to an image which no longer testifies to the transfigured state of man—to spiritual reality—but expresses different ideas and opinions connected with this reality; thus what is realism in secular art becomes idealism when applied to Church art.[79]

In referring to 'idealism', Ouspensky most likely has in mind Baroque, Nazarene and Romantic painting, but also any sentimental image approximating the Saint-Sulpice style, which Denis also despised. Kontoglou, in derision of sentimentality, states: 'Works of Western religious art are sentimental or dramatic. The dramatic element is carnal, even though it is thought to be spiritual.'[80] Ouspensky, in opposition to the emotionalism of Western naturalism, also stresses: 'The icon never strives to stir the emotions of the faithful. Its task is not to provoke in them one or another emotion, but to guide every emotion as well as the reason and all other faculties of human nature on the way towards transfiguration.'[81] These attitudes against sentimentality and call for sobriety parallel Denis's conception of a religious painting based on hieraticism, and also call to mind the 'contemplative' approach of his anti-naturalism. In the same spirit, Kontoglou, taking the anti-naturalistic stance, argues for an 'abstract' style, meant to express symbolically mystical realities:

Iconography does not have as its aim to reproduce a saint or an incident from the Gospels or the lives of the saints, but to express them mystically, to impart to them a spiritual character…In Byzantine art…there exists no narrow and materialistic naturalness, but mystical forms and colors, expressing mystical meanings and symbols.

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[79] Ibid., 48.

[80] Photis Kontoglou, 'Iconography', in *Byzantine Sacred Art*, ed. Constantine Cavarnos (Belmont, MA: Institute of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1992), 91-92.

[81] L. Ouspensky, *The Meaning and Language of Icons*, 39.

> Most people who are accustomed to seeing naturalistic art, that is, who are attached to phenomena, seek to find naturalism in Byzantine painting, too. In reality, however, it expresses, with spiritualized forms abstracted from natural phenomena, a world which is beyond phenomena, a spiritual world.[82]

Hence, according to Kontoglou, 'Iconography represents persons who have been "regenerated into eternity".'[83] In harmony with Ouspensky, he also thinks of the stylistic specificity of Byzantine art as having dogmatic significance. He regards it, in its 'hieraticalness', as the only appropriate means-universally valid-by which to express the Gospels:

> Orthodox iconography paints every scene from the life of Christ not only in accordance with the description of the Gospels, but also with solemnity, simplicity, hieraticalness, and spiritual magnificence; that is, not as a spectacle, but as a mystery. This is why the only painting that is appropriate for Christian religion, the only painting that can express the spiritual essence of the Gospels, is Byzantine art, the liturgical art of the East.[84]

> Byzantine iconography has universal significance. This is why, instead of growing old with the passage of time and loosing its significance, on the contrary it becomes increasingly new. Byzantine iconography is eternal, like the Gospels, in which it has its source.[85]

Therefore, it appears that both Ouspensky and Kontoglou envision a non-naturalistic art that is immutable-as immutable as the spiritual realities it represents. Any change in it would amount to a change in Gospel doctrine itself. The link between form and dogma, sensible and spiritual, is so closely knit that the icon, in expressing the Eternal, shares in its eternity. Indeed, Ouspensky and Kontoglou do mention the fact that icon painting involves

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[82] Photis Kontoglou, *Iconography*, 89-90.

[83] Ibid., 96.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid., 99.

more than slavish copying, acknowledging its creative dimension.[86] They also point out the stylistic variety that has existed within the tradition throughout history.[87] Nevertheless, these points are overshadowed and muffled by their polemic in defense of 'symbolic realism' as ultimately arising from revelation, hence its dogmatic import and consequent immutability.

In emphasizing immutability, as we can recall, they closely approximate the theories surrounding hieratic art promulgated in the mid-nineteenth century by ultramontane Neo-Byzantine revivalists and later by Maurice Denis. It is quite ironic how the pioneers' anti-naturalism-although largely hurled against Roman Catholic influence within the Orthodox Church-in fact falls quite closely in line with an ultramontane aesthetic. Both the ultramontanes and the pioneers sought within their own cultural spheres a clear sense of religious identity, stability, and security in a rapidly changing and tumultuous modern world. They believed these virtues could be found within the harbor of their distinctive conceptions of tradition. Byzantine art best exemplified their ideological stance as an embodiment of immutability.

This brings us to the equation of abstraction with spirituality implied in the passages just revisited, a notion which informs many artists and historians in the twentieth century. This idea, as Evan Freeman suggests, finds its most influential source in the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965), in particular his 1908 book *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* ('Abstraction and Empathy').[88] According to Worringer, in non-naturalistic art we find the psychological impulse to 'wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life, i.e. of everything about it that was arbi-

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[86] See Photis Kontoglou, 'The Orthodox Tradition of Iconography', in *Fine Arts and Tradition: A Presentation of Kontoglou's Teaching*, ed. Constantine Cavarnos (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2004), 62-63; L. Ouspensky, *The Meaning and Language of Icons,* 43.

[87] L. Ouspensky, *The Meaning and Language of Icons,* 44; *Cf.* P. Kontoglou, *Byzantine Sacred Art*, 43-54.

[88] E. Freeman, *Rethinking the Role of Style in Orthodox Iconography*, 368-369.

trary, to render it necessary and irrefragable, to approximate it to its absolute value.'[89] An art of empathy, on the other hand, broadly associated with realism, represents an acceptance of nature, feeling at ease with and finding pleasure in the external world of everyday life. This idea clearly parallels the immutability vs. temporality-being and becoming-dichotomy we have already encountered imbedded within the hieratic art revival in France. Freeman finds in Worringer's theory of abstraction, and by extension Ouspensky and Kontoglou, a 'Platonist' aesthetic. Thus, he asserts that 'the very idea that a non-naturalistic style should be associated with themes of spirituality is not original to the Orthodox tradition, but has its roots in modern art historical scholarship.'[90]

It is difficult, however, to attribute the equation of abstraction with spirituality solely to Worringer, for Sarah Bassett also groups Franz Wickhoff (1853-1909) and Alois Riegel (1858-1905) as contributors to this modern conception. [91] Moreover, their ideas must be seen as emerging from and answering to the intellectual climate of their time, rather than the reverse. They were shaped by a larger milieu consisting of developments in theories of perception within the field of psychology, the influence of occult spirituality and the artistic ruptures with classical standards, taking place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. According to Basset, these intellectual trends all 'share common ground to the extent that all built on the premise that it was possible to see and understand some sort of higher truth-the truth of human emotion or spiritual essence-through the objects of the material world.'[92]Thus all of these currents came together in the formation of modernist esthetic thought and given expression in the field of art history by the aforementioned authors.

Although the anti-naturalist theories of both Ouspensky and Kontoglou have much in common with a modernist aesthetic, it

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[89] Ibid., 369.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Sarah Bassett, 'Late Antique Art and Modernist Vision', in Envisioning Worlds in Late Antique Art, ed. Cecilia Olovsdotter (Berlin, DE: De Gruyter, 2019), 5-22.
[92] Ibid.

seems to me problematic to claim that they advanced a 'Platonic' view, along the lines of Worringer's thought.[93] If there is a 'Platonic' dimension to the pioneers, it is there insofar as their thought can be seen as being in continuity with that thread in the Orthodox tradition which has relied on modes of expression derived from Platonism. However, it is difficult to claim with absolute certainty that they deliberately and fully subscribed to such a philosophical system. It is true that Kontoglou speaks of 'dematerialization' and Ouspenky of 'sensuous grossness'.[94] In this regard they overstated their case against what they considered to be the problematic use of an exaggerated and inappropriately sensuous naturalism within the liturgical context. But these rigorist rhetorical tropes must be understood within the entirety of their thought. Their theoretical writings ultimately grapple with the conviction that painting has the capacity to somehow convey the deified body-delivered from corruption. They did not claim, however, that the body was to be discarded as evil. Rather, they are to be best understood in light of the Pauline teaching on the eschatological 'spiritual body' (1 Cor. 15:44). So, their apparent anti-matter and body rhetoric stems from a 'logic of opposition' to what they perceived to be aberrant ways of depicting the body. Therefore, it is a question concerning the *kind* of body they upheld, rather than an outright opposition to the body as such. Indeed, the pioneers did bring new ideas to the theology of the icon. Nevertheless, in my view their understanding of the body operates in full conformity with the Orthodox patristic tradition. Ouspensky, for example, sensing he might be misunderstood, when speaking of conveying the transfigured body, states, 'This does not mean, of course, that the body ceases to be what it is; not only

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[93] However, Freeman's assessment of Pavel Florensky's Platonism is uncontestable. See Evan Freeman, 'Flesh and Spirit: Divergent Orthodox Readings of the Iconic Body in Byzantium and the Twentieth Century', in *Personhood in the Byzantine Christian Tradition*, eds. Alexis Torrance & Symeon Paschalidis (London, UK: Routledge, 2018), 142-151.

[94] Photis Kontoglou, 'What Orthodox Iconography Is', in *Orthodox Info Center*, http://orthodoxinfo.com/general/kontoglou_iconography.aspx (accessed 8 October, 2020); L. Ouspensky, *The Meaning and Language of Icons*, 45.

does it remain a body but, as we have said earlier, it preserves all the physical peculiarities of the given person.'[95]

Freeman has also traced the links between Symbolism and the icon revival, but he focuses primarily on drawing parallels between the French art critic and poet Gabriel-Albert Aurier (1865-1892) and Pavel Florensky (1882-1937). An important detail he touches on in particular is the role Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) played in the development of symbolist theoretical and critical discourse. Gauguin was pivotal not only in shaping Aurier's Platonic, so called 'ideistic', theory of art, as articulated in his *Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin* (1891), but also the ideas of Denis, as put forth a year earlier in his *Définition du Néo-traditionnisme*.[96] Denis, however, did not find what he considered to be the excessively metaphysical speculations of Aurier to his liking.[97] Freeman summarizes his insightful findings as follows:

> The surprising implication is that what is today commonly assumed by most Orthodox believers to be the Church's traditional theology of the icon dating back to Byzantine times…is essentially Western European modern art theory developed in response to post-Impressionist artists such as Gauguin…it is the particularly modern, rather than medieval, association of abstraction with spirituality that lies at the heart of these Symbolist readings of Gauguin and the Orthodox icon.[98]

Although Kontoglou and Ouspensky are now mostly considered as anti-modernist zealots, it seems to me unquestionable that in both of them we find a convergence with the aesthetic theories of modernist painting, although as Zias cautiously points out, 'springing from different premises.' That is, it goes without saying that they rejected the tenets of modernist subjectivism, utopianism, occultism, 'art for art's sake', etc. Nevertheless, their icon painting theory was partly shaped by the avant-garde reassessment of Byz-

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[95] L. Ouspensky, *The Meaning and Language of Icons*, 39.

[96] See Albert Aurier, 'Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin', in Chipp, 89-94.

[97] H. Chipp, 106.

[98] E. Freeman, *Flesh and Spirit*, 150.

antine, folk and so-called 'primitive' art, which was intertwined with an anti-naturalistic aesthetic within the development of abstraction. But to this must be added the crucial influence of Symbolism. In spite of the differences we have mentioned, between Denis and the pioneers, they both base their ideas on the conviction that an anti-naturalistic painting has the capacity to somehow convey more than what meets the eye. As we have seen, one aims to convey 'emotional or spiritual states' which remain in the psychic level, while the other, a divinely revealed spiritual vision, claims the immutable authority of dogma. In the end, however, it could be said that what we have in the symbolism of the pioneers—although transplanted into theological discourse and predicated on the doctrine of deification-is another version of Denis's 'Neo-traditionalism'. This observation, however, should not be taken as a condemnation. What is more pressing, and to which we will now turn, is how their thought has led to the problem of the 'dogmatization of style' within the icon revival.

Dogmatization of Style

Indeed, the traditional icon revival came at a cost: it has had its positive and negative sides. On the positive side, as George Kordis has observed, we have the continuation of the traditional pictorial system serving as the functional foundation of the icon and the possibility of its creative continuation and development.[99] On the negative side, however, in aligning too closely-if not completely equating-style with dogma, the pioneers of the revival have inadvertently contributed to the icon's ossification. The painter's creative engagement has been stultified and the static repetition of older models prevails, since it is thought that the alteration of any detail of the icon's stylistic features leads to the distortion of theological meaning, and by extension Orthodoxy.[100] Consequently, everything is reduced to a matter of duplicating *ad infinitum* a code of conventional signs and symbols to be read solely as a 'text'.[101] This excessively

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[99] G. Kordis, *The Return to Byzantine Painting,* 127.

[100] *Cf.* Freeman, *Rethinking the Role of Style*, 368.

[101] We have mainly dealt with 'Symbolism' as a term designating a modernist

semiotic approach to the icon turns it into 'a kind of hieroglyph or sacred rebus',[102] undermines it as locus of communion and leads to a complete disregard for the nuances of its aesthetic being-crucial components which contribute to the totality of its meaning.

Speaking of Kontoglou, George Kordis explains: 'The problem lies in the fact that…in his attempt to ascertain the legitimate character of Byzantine icons against western naturalism, [he] seems to have equated a specific historical style with an ahistorical and general theological meaning.'[103] The same could be said of Ouspensky. Henceforth, under their influence, the 'classical' periods of icon painting, whether these be considered to be the fourteenth, fifteenth or sixteenth century, became the standard sources for patterns to be simply traced and duplicated by iconographers. But in making a specific non-naturalistic style the locus of their theology, the pioneers completely undermined the fact that in the medieval period icons were always taken for granted as 'realis-

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painting movement. The limited scope of this paper, however, does not allow for an in-depth discussion of the complexity of symbolism as a much broader field of human engagement with reality. Symbolism can be analyzed from ontological, sacramental, semiotic, and cultural perspectives. It is important to clarify that what we are critiquing is an *excessively* 'semiotic' approach that becomes overly determinative for the icon, not symbolism as such. The Fathers took symbolism for granted as part of the integral fabric of the cosmos, understood as a theophany. They saw it as the means by which God reveals Himself, while remaining concealed in His uncreated ineffability. They did not consider their mystagogy as a 'reading into', but rather as a 'reading out' the inner meaning of Scripture and nature. What we are cautioning against, however, is the *misapplication* of symbolism. In our immediate context this error pertains, for example, to the imposing of theological and conceptual meanings that overlook the concrete aesthetic facts and differences between icons, and the notion that icon painting can be reduced to a 'sign system' to be mechanically duplicated, without any need of creative engagement within tradition. In current practice these tendencies have led some icon painters and schools to 'harden' symbolic interpretations by overlooking the multivalence of symbolism. Thus, symbolic readings or pious meditations on technique are arbitrarily elevated to the status of 'canonical' inalterability and presented as the 'true' traditional manner to abide by.

[102] Vladimir Lossky, 'Tradition and Traditions', in *The Meaning of Icons* (SVS Press: Crestwood, NY, 1989), 22.

[103] G. Kordis, *The Return to Byzantine Painting*, 127.

tic' representations. What the Byzantines valued in icons was not what we now perceive as their 'abstract' features, but rather their vividness—their life like or *living* quality.[104] What the pioneers now took as the only legitimate mode of conveying sanctity was actually used in the Byzantine tradition to depict both secular and ecclesial subjects, saints and sinners.[105] Moreover, they failed to account for the fact that the iconodule Fathers, neither prescribed any style, nor spoke of the stylistic mode of icons as bearing any theological significance.[106] Nevertheless, in spite of all of these and other hermeneutical problems we might find in the polemical arguments of the pioneers, we should not feel obliged to discard a non-naturalistic style. As we will see shortly, abstraction can still be revalorized.

As a way of overcoming the dogmatization of style, George Kordis has stressed the importance of the distinction made by the iconodule Fathers between the *substantial* element of the icon, by which he means the pre-existing 'bodily image' or external form of the person depicted, and the artistic mode, that is 'style', used in representing this form.[107] Hence Kordis often points out that icon painting consists of nothing other than the depiction of the subject's external form. He explains: 'While the Fathers thus made a subtle, but essential distinction between "external form" and "style", it was precisely this distinction that was lost in the twentieth-century effort to explain why Byzantine style should be reintroduced in contemporary icon painting. To do so, style was made identical with this preexistent form; it was canonized and became static.'[108] In making this distinction, as we have said, the Fathers did not proceed to give stylistic elements specific theological content, thereby securing the *substantial* element unchanged, while allowing for the possibility of the development of varieties of modes of stylistic expression within the tradition. Kordis concludes, 'Therefore,

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[104] E. Freeman, *Rethinking the Role of Style*, 365-367.

[105] M. Kampanis, *Is there a 'sacred' style?*, 26-32.

[106] G. Kordis, 128.

[107] G. Kordis, *The Return to Byzantine Painting,* 127-129.

[108] Ibid. 128.

it is not surprising that stylistic changes in painting were never discussed in Byzantine society. To Orthodox Byzantines, stylistic development was considered a natural phenomenon of this world, since style was simply a *modus* (τρόπος) of painting and not visualized theology.'[109]

Similarly, Kordis has also called attention to the difference between the *constant* Byzantine painting system—the pictorial grammar—and the *variable* styles that have developed within this system throughout history (Komnenian, Macedonian, Cappadocian, Palaiologan, Cretan, etc.).[110] But, although Kordis is always cautious about ascribing theological meaning to style, nevertheless he does not completely refrain from interpretation. He shifts the focus, however, from what could be called the *variable* 'surface styles'(of individuals) to the *constant and functional* 'inner style' (of the collective), that is, the Byzantine *pictorial system* as such, especially as applied to church murals.[111] Thus, for him Heaven and earth are brought into communion within the church environment through the Byzantine use of pictorial space, which lies in front of the surface and projects the figures out, making the saints present to the spectator, here and now, within the liturgical context. A crucial component of the painting system is the use of rhythm in the composition. Through its enlivening, harmonizing, and unifying effect, it also contributes to the actualizing of communion between the Church triumphant and the Church militant, as worship unfolds within the church environment. In this way Kordis avoids what he considers to be the pioneers' pitfall of claiming that the icon 'records' or 'depicts' supersensible realities and the transfigured

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[109] Ibid. 129.

[110] George Kordis, *Icon as Communion*, trans. Caroline Makroupoulos, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010) 1-3.

[111] Style can be subdivided into three categories, from narrow to broader, of distinctive manners of expression (*tropos*): individual (specific artists within a school); local (varieties of schools, i.e., Pskov, Novgorod, Moscow, Cretan, etc.); and religio-cultural (Byzantine, Renaissance, etc.). Hence our designation of the Byzantine system of painting as an 'inner style', which implies its distinctive 'infrastructural' function; *Cf.* Mayer Schapiro, 'Style', in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York, NY: George Braziller, 1994), 52.

state of holiness.[112] Rather, he sees the Byzantine system as an expression in iconography of ecclesiology, that is, the communion of love among the saints in the Body of Christ. Moreover, part of the painting system involves, according to Kordis, a 'functional abstraction' which interprets nature:

> So what did the Byzantines take from nature? Obviously the forms they used were minimalistic, this was because they did not care about details, they worked with a sort of functional abstraction, but they kept the gist of nature and created a new similar nature despite nature, but it was by nature because it shared a common ground… But how is this new nature created and how does it exist? Obviously there are principles and rules in painting, but this is not enough because in the end it is the human person who has to form the work that flows from him and thus it is characterized by the qualities of the person.[113]

Hence instead of shackling abstraction as a stylistic feature by ascribing to it dogmatic theological significance, Kordis liberates it by placing it in the domain of personal expression. So, although a 'functional' pictorial tool, abstraction-the 'drawing from' and abbreviation of nature-should not be seen as merely resulting from the dry application of pictorial rules and formulas of the Byzantine system. Rather, it is the means by which the painter creatively engages with the tradition. It reveals, through the expressive power of line, form, and color, the personality and interpretive approach of the iconographer within the parameters of the system.

We should also note that Kordis considers the abstract qualities of the Byzantine icon as an obvious fact. Hence although we should not forget that the Byzantines regarded their icons as 're-

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[112] See George Kordis, 'Holiness in the Painting Art of the Orthodox Church', in Θεολόγος.gr, January 19, 2017. http://theologosgr.blogspot.com/2017/01/blog-post_62.html?m=1(accessed 20 October, 2020).

[113] See George Kordis, 'Reflections on the Poetic in the Art of Painting: A Personal Testimony', in *Poetics of the Icon*, Vol. 1 (Autumn) 2017. https://poetics.holy-icon.org/reflections-on-the-poetic-in-the-art-of-painting-a-personal-testimony/ (accessed 20 October, 2020).

alistic', nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that they do look stylized and non-naturalistic to us today.[114] We cannot escape our 'period eye'.[115]

Indeed, icons were intended to be living representations of living beings. But these living representations incorporated, to various degrees, both what we perceive today to be 'abstract' *and* 'naturalistic' qualities. These two pictorial modes should not to be considered incompatible and in stark opposition to one another, as they have been treated by the pioneers. 'Far from being incompatible with naturalism', as Cornelia Tsakiridou reminds us, in the icon 'abstraction can bring landscape, animals and humans to a state of vibrant existence and unitive presence.'[116] So, we should be careful not to lump these two modes into their rigidly designated homogeneous mass of categorization, ideologically conceptualizing each one of them in a manner that lacks nuance. There are many different kinds of abstraction, as there are vast varieties of naturalism, each with their distinctive aesthetic flavor, expressive significance and implied meanings. Abstraction can contribute to the actualization of a living image as much as naturalism. Therefore, if we bear this in mind, our perception of Byzantine icons as abstract need not imply that we are undermining the Byzantine perception of them as lifelike. Rather, it actually calls us to carefully implement abstrac-

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[114] According to Grigg, 'Byzantines may, in some sense, have been mistaken in regarding their art as lifelike and natural, but the point at issue is their perception.' He cautions that what we have to bear in mind is their 'psychological receptiveness' to their images as 'exact likenesses', treated as sentient beings. Similarly, Maguire cautions that the Byzantine designation of their images as 'lifelike' should not be confused with the contemporary notion of 'photographic' verisimilitude. He argues that an image was considered so when it had 'accuracy of definition' or conformity to an established typology and set of attributes. See Robert Grigg, 'Relativism and Pictorial Realism', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 42. No. 4 (Summer, 1908): 397-408; Henri Maguire, *Icons of their Bodies: Saints and their Images in Byzantium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 15-16.

[115] See Michael Baxandal, 'The Period Eye', in *Painting and Experience in Fifth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), 29-108.

[116] C. A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 208.

tion as a means to vivify the image and bring it to a heightened level of expressivity. Tsakiridou, while drawing an analogy between the exemplary image and the human person, also speaks of the role of abstraction as a means of actualizing vivid form:

> Just as sin brings the human person to a state of resignation, to a state of ontic lethargy, so can painting denigrate its objects to the position of plastic artifact and itself to simulation. By contrast, in the exemplary image, physical (sensuous) elements that stand in the way of vivid form are removed. Their removal (abstraction) brings the aesthetic object to a state of hypostatic perfection by intensifying and augmenting its expressivity. Thus in the same manner that the austerities of asceticism perfect ones humanity, abstraction (under certain conditions) helps bring perfection to the aesthetic object.[117]

Indeed, painting can 'denigrate its objects' and become mere 'simulation'. Similarly, the dogmatization of style has caused the practice of icon painting to become lethargic, the production of simulacra and a simulacrum of itself, having no feeling for the depiction of its subjects in vivid form-as living beings. Neither is there awareness of how the icon as an aesthetic object can be brought to a state of heightened expressivity through the creative use of abstraction. In speaking of 'vivid form', Tsakiridou links the role of abstraction to the Byzantine understanding of the exemplary icon as a living image, imbued with *enargeia*. She tells us that 'in a fifteenth century *ekphrasis*, Ioannes Eugenikos used the term to describe the manner in which painted objects protrude from the picture plane, move forward, and engage the viewer. Where present, *enargeia* brings an image to an expressive and charismatic state of existence.'[118]

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[117] Ibid., 31-32.

[118] C. A. Tsakiridou, 'Aesthetic Nepsis and Energeia in the Icon', in *Seeing the Invisible: Proceedings of the Symposium on Aesthetics of the Christian Image*, Standford University, March 5, 2016, ed. Neda Cvijetić and Maxim Vasiljević (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2016), 40.

But although abstraction need not be seen as opposed to the icon as a 'realistic' image, Tsakiridou cautions that this is so 'under certain conditions.' Abstraction has its dangers, just as much as naturalism. The former has to do with excessive reductivism and the later with inappropriate sensuousness. The implementation of abstraction does not guarantee 'spirituality' in the icon. And conversely, neither does naturalism need to be equated with 'carnality' per se.[119] As can be seen in some strains of Modernism, the misuse of abstraction can indeed lead not only to the depletion of the art object, but also the denigration of the subjects depicted, dissolving them through reductivism into the void of hypostatic non-existence. Thereby abstraction becomes a denial of the incarnational basis of the icon.

Mark Cheetham has argued, as touched on earlier, that the development of abstraction in modern art has been fueled in part by a Platonic essentialist ideology: 'the search for immutable essence or truth and the concomitant ontological division between reality and mere appearance.'[120] A version of this metaphysical stance, in flight from the sensible world in pursuit of a 'pure' realm of Ideas,

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[119] Kordis notes that one of the problems with Renaissance naturalism, as was commonly practiced in that period, lies in the introduction of facial characteristics based on living models which run contrary to the traditional 'form-faces' of the saints. In contradistinction to this, Kordis importantly clarifies that, according to St. Photius, the use of art in the icon should serve to remove features distracting and detrimental to its theological purpose, and to purify the images of the saints in 'ways that do justice to their sanctity and holiness.' Renaissance naturalism failed in this regard. Otherwise many different styles can accomplish this artistic task. Therefore, changing the stylistic mode doesn't alter the authenticity of the icon, since this is ultimately predicated on adherence to the already existing and communally acknowledged 'form-image' of the saints. See Fr. Silouan Justiniano, 'The Art of Icon Painting in a Postmodern World: Interview with George Kordis', *Orthodox Arts Journal*, June 25, 2014. https://orthodoxartsjournal.org/the-art-of-icon-painting-in-a-postmodern-world-interview-with-george-kordis/ (accessed 17 October, 2020); G. Kordis, 'Creating a Christian Image in a Postmodern World', in *Seeing the Invisible: Proceedings of the Symposium on Aesthetics of the Christian Image*, 52-53.

[120] See Mark A. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994),

has resulted in the reductivism just mentioned.[121] The mutable vs. immutable dichotomy we have looked at, so crucial to the revival of Neo-Byzantine hieraticism, could be said to be indebted to this philosophical tradition. But Platonism does not have a monopoly on the question of being and becoming. St. Maximos the Confessor (580-662), for example, overcomes the rigid mutability vs. immutability dichotomy, through his paradoxical teaching on nature's eschatological attainment in God of 'ever-moving stasis' and 'stable movement'.[122] Moreover, there is no need to limit the discussion on abstraction by equating it to a dualism seeking liberation from the body and matter, for it can be interpreted according to an ontology grounded on the Incarnation-hence the importance of the Pauline teaching on the 'spiritual body'. To this we can add Fr. Stamatis Skliris's useful interpretation on the two 'forms' of Christ, in particular as it pertains to His post-Resurrection Body.[123] In short, Platonic essentialism does not have the final say on how we can interpret the function of abstraction in the icon.

In light of these considerations, we would like to offer an interpretation of abstraction, as it can function in the icon. Thereby we will be able to reframe it and revalorize it, away from a dualistic metaphysic and the dogmatization of style. This interpretation can in turn serve as a general principle for the practical pictorial considerations of the contemporary iconographer. Abstraction, then, as a pictorial approach, can be seen as the application of interpretive thought on our sense perception. It consists of the process of abbreviating and translating the sense experience of nature, through idea and feeling, into an aesthetic synthetic order-a compositional arrangement-in conformity to the demands of the flatness of the picture plane. The image, however, should not remain completely flat and inert as a result of excessive reductivism. Rather, it should project out parallel to the picture plane with its own vivid life and

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[121] Ibid., 102-138.

[122] See St. Maximos the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios*, trans. Maximos Constas (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press, 208), 538.

[123] Stamatis Skliris, *In the Mirror* (Alhambra, CA: Western American Diocese Press, 2007) 88-96.

rhythm. The synthetic order is to follow the logic of the Byzantine pictorial system, the restrictions of format in a given context and the iconological demands of the theme. It should at the same time heighten our awareness of the expressivity of the formal qualities, independent of their representational function. Thereby abstraction can enable the aesthetic object to assert its own presence and reality-its autonomy-charged with *enargeia*.[124]

The advantage of abstraction lies in its pictorial flexibility, which places it on the level of poetic expression. Arising from interpretive thought, it is not bound by the constraints imposed by a painting system based on slavish accuracy to retinal perception, scientific anatomy or linear perspective. Hence through abbreviated form and freedom from empiricist demands, abstraction enables the image to suggest a world distinct from our immediate temporal existence. Therefore, theologically speaking, abstraction can then be seen as a pictorial means capable of suggesting a world beyond the constraints of created being-corruptibility, temporal and natural necessity. It is not to be confused with a dualistic denial of matter and the body, or the undermining of the ontological integrity of the persons and beings depicted. Rather, it should be implemented as a way of affirming their plerotic participation in Christ. Hence in the icon the body can acquire subtlety, translucency and radiance, yet its concrete corporeality is not to be denied. The Lord's resurrected Body, therefore, is to serve as the ultimate model: both concretely corporeal-not a phantasm-yet able to go through closed doors into the inner chamber. Through the nuances of abstract stylization, therefore, instead of aiming at dissolving matter, the co-inherence of sensible and transcendent realities can be suggested. Furthermore, the stability and movement pictorially conveyed by hieraticism and rhythm, respectively, can be synthesized and implemented as a way of suggesting the 'ever-moving stasis' and 'stable movement' of eschatological existence.

A very important point to keep in mind is that the theological interpretation given here is not meant to be applied indiscriminately to every icon. Not all icons convey what we have just described,

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[124] *Cf.* C. A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 285.

although they might implement abstract stylization. The common tendency of arguments offered in defense of icons has been to disregard their aesthetic nuances and differences, thereby implying that they all successfully achieve the great feat of conveying pictorially a transfigured world.[125] Moreover, we cannot claim that only one style or limited historical periods, whether it be the fourteenth or fifteenth century, have accomplished this successfully and therefore must be duplicated *ad infinitum*. The interpretation of abstraction offered here presupposes multiplicity of styles as possible alternatives in the great aesthetic challenge of conveying transfigured existence. We are not claiming, however, the absolute certainty that the masters of the past had the interpretation just given in their minds as the theological framework for the stylistic development of their work. It is admittedly modern, but we believe one in consonance with an ecclesial conscience.

That the iconodule Fathers might not have attributed theological significance to style should not be seen as preventing us from doing so today. This approach is especially unavoidable at this juncture in history, after so many stylistic developments and major paradigm shifts in the field of visual art have taken place, all carrying their own implied meanings and distinctive emotional effects on the viewer. These circumstances call us to carefully discern which stylistic forms are deemed more in harmony with an ecclesial *phronema* and the liturgical function of the icon. We should be careful, however, not to attempt to 'canonize' or dogmatize, the various and justifiable, theological interpretations of the formal features found in the Byzantine style, as it has become customary since the icon revival. As Davor Džalto puts it: 'The appropriation of certain visual elements in Byzantine iconography is obviously not the *sine qua non* condition of icons and their theological meaning, though it certainly makes the message of the Church more articulate.'[126] The interpretation we have given of the value of abstract stylization takes for granted a painter

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[125] C. A. Tsakiridou, *Aesthetic Nepsis*, 29.

[126] Davor Džalto, *New Faces of Icons* (Belgrade, SRB; Chicago, IL: The Institute for the Study of Culture and Christianity & Holy Resurrection Cathedral, 2012), 31-32.

working within the Byzantine painting system. However, it has the advantage, we believe, of being open enough so that it need not be equated or limited to a preconceived and generic notion of the 'Byzantine style'.

Yet our theoretical considerations might cause some to pause and ponder a very important question: are we truly capable of conveying a deified and transfigured existence through pictorial form? Can the medium of painting claim such a capacity? The pioneers, as we have seen, have given us a problematic answer to the question. But in discarding their dogmatization of style, we need not completely deny the possibility of icon painting's capacity to somehow aesthetically—through the intervention of Grace—manifest the mystery of *theosis*. How this feat is to be accomplished is another matter. Tsakiridou gives us a clue:

> In *theosis*, the uncreated light is fully visible and sensible. A sweet, soft, joyful, and serene light appears in the person's face and body and in their surrounding space. Those who receive it are not simply illuminated; rather, they become bearers of light (*photophoroi*, as Symeon put it). This co-inherence of light and matter, the gathering in something concrete and particular of something discarnate and transcendent, has aesthetic implications. In the theophanic image, matter is luminous and light materializes. The two exist together in an unfolding reciprocity and difference. A figure that expresses this modality in painting stands between these two points, in an aesthetic and ontological ambiguity. It seems to rise out of its own being in fusion of light and pigment, as if it inheres in both at the same time.[127]

The 'aesthetic implications' of this passage are clear. It also parallels, in some respects, the description of transfigured existence we just offered. According to Tsakiridou, some of the paradoxical characteristics described here are evident in a mid-fourteenth century icon of the Apostle Thomas from Thessaloniki, which she considers as exemplary and *enargic*. Thus, *enargeia*

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[127] Ibid., 41-42.

does not only consist of actualizing a living image, as we have seen, but also enables the image to vividly convey holiness and divinity. 'It is *enargeia*.' Tsakiridou says, 'that brings the image to a state of ontological plenitude and presence, and enables it to convey holiness or in the case of Christ divinity.'[128] In positing the possibility of conveying holiness and divinity Tsakiridou directly opposes the depleting aesthetic of Platonic essentialism. She relies instead on the theology of St. Maximos the Confessor, along with St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) and St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), to develop her aesthetic thought. Thereby she grounds it on Orthodox ontology and the doctrine of *theosis*, which presupposes knowledge of God in this life and embraces the totality of the person, including both soul and body. For Tsakiridou, this restorative and plerotic vision, in which man and creation participate and are brought to perfection through synergic existence with God, also in principle embraces the aesthetic being of the art object and the iconographer's creative act.[129] Hence the exemplary image manifests and participates in divine life as much as the ascetic. 'The ascetic who converses with God,' she explains, 'inhabits God or participates in divine being. The exemplary image has a similar, intimate relationship to its object: it participates in its being and makes it present aesthetically.'[130] Hence insofar as the exemplary icon participates in its holy subjects and makes them present through Grace-filled *enargic* depiction, it has the capacity of aesthetically manifesting holiness, even divinity.

But in making this assertion, Tsakiridou is not claiming that we can 'describe' or 'depict' the soul or divinity as such, in contradiction to the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Neither are we dealing here with a denial of the icon as the likeness of something seen or the imitation (*mimesis*) of the prototype. Rather, we would suggest that by grounding painting on an ontological basis, she is emphasizing how the exemplary image results from a living encounter of communion between the painter and

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[128] C. A. Tsikaridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 20.

[129] Ibid., 21.

[130] Ibid., 19.

his holy subject. How does this unfold? Each hypostasis manifests its ontological uniqueness by moving outward from itself to commune with others. Along with its likeness something is given and revealed in 'dynamic (*energic*) expression', while an aspect of themselves still remains hidden and inaccessible (*ousia*).[131] Each reciprocal encounter of mutual self-giving is qualitatively different, with its own unique flavor of holiness and divinity. Being in the presence of a saint is not the same as being in the presence of Christ. The painter's challenge is to translate his living encounter with Christ and the saints into a living image. Hence the *energic* exemplary image mysteriously manifests plastically, through the nuances of its own aesthetic being, not the essence or soul of the hypostasis, but rather these unique qualitative differences of living communion. Thereby the icon becomes-through the synergy of human creativity and the intervention of Grace-a living manifestation of holiness and divinity.

Here we are far from a merely semiotic approach to the image, limiting it to the category of a sign to be deciphered. Indeed, we are intended to 'read' an iconological narrative, a typology, and set of attributes which help us to identify the saints and arrive at the doctrinal message of the icon. However, through the icon we are also meant to encounter living persons and engage in an act of communion transcending the conceptual level. In an *enargic* icon we encounter the subject as a living reality, in its 'hypostatic and dynamic…act of existence',[132] wherein the aesthetic object, rather than being depleted, is brought to a 'state of repletion'.[133] In this aesthetic repletion, qualitative nuances of form, imbued with feeling, contribute greatly to the totality of the icon's meaning.[134] Concept and feeling, living presence and plastic qualities - all come together expressively in the icon's ontological plenitude. In this way the icon 'ceases to be a mere likeness and becomes a living thing, a life-form in art. It is then exemplary.'[135]

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[131] C. A. Tsakiridou, *Aesthetic Nepsis*, 32.

[132] Ibid., 20.

[133] Ibid., 13.

[134] Ibid., 5.

[135] Ibid.

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Returning to Tsakiridou's description of *theosis*, it is clearly not just fanciful speculation, but rather based on the direct experience of the Holy Fathers (i.e. St. Gregory Palamas, St. Symeon the New Theologian). This experience embraces both noetic and sensible ontological levels-what the soul experiences is imparted to the body. The fact that they saw the Uncreated Light with their own eyes, with their senses transfigured, opens up the possibility, at least theoretically, of transcribing this experience into painting, based on their accounts. Ouspenky had these accounts in mind when conjuring the authority of the saints in arguing for the possibility of symbolically conveying the deified body. But by attributing to style the dogmatic authority of revelation, he inadvertently denied the role creativity has always played in the icon painting tradition and the possibility of multiple pictorial interpretations of this great mystery.

So, whether it be arriving at an exemplary image or the conveying of *theosis* in pictorial form, this task involves more than a merely illustrating, in a literal manner, the texts describing the experience of the saints. It requires a creative interpretive approach and the intervention of Grace. In the interpretive task of icon painting, however, no formulas can guarantee good results-dogmatic stipulations of style are of no avail. The Byzantine painting system gives the parameters to abide by, but it only serves as the infrastructure for the creative act. Personal creativity combined with prayer is indispensable if we are to succeed. We would require, as Kordis has put it, a poetic approach to the icon, rather than the sterilized copying of the experience of old masters as embodied in their works.[136] In short, the icon painter has to work from the inside out, from his own experience of encounter and communion with his subject. As St. Sophrony of Essex puts it: '…We must come to the state of painting icons with our personalities inside.'[137] The rest will be mysteriously provided by the activity of Grace. Only then will icon painting overcome the dogmatization of style.

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[136] G. Kordis, *Reflections on the Poetic in the Art of Painting*.

[137] As quoted in Sister Gabriela, *Being: The Art and life of Father Sophrony* (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 2019), 92.

Autonomy unto Life

In Modernism the pursuit of autonomy led to abstraction, then to non-objectivity and finally, under the tyranny of conceptualism, to the art object's demise. Similarly, the pioneers of the icon revival, in their polemic against Western naturalistic painting, battled for the icon's 'abstract' stylization, under the banner of theological concepts to its detriment. In speaking in defense of the icon they inadvertently muffled its own aesthetic voice. The pioneers sought to abandon 'academic' panting, yet the irony is that their ideas have resulted in another form of formulaic academicism, taken for granted by many as faithful 'canonical' adherence to tradition. In the end we are left with a mechanistic approach to painting that depletes the icon of the fecundity of its aesthetic life. In a way, with the icon revival 'the art of iconography "died", since no room was left either for inventiveness or creativity.'[138] Therefore, the icon needs autonomy unto life.

By asserting the icon's autonomy, we mean autonomy from the dogmatization of style.

In doing so we take for granted the fact that icon painting is an inextricable part of the liturgical context. We are not proposing the complete disregard, on the part of the iconographer, towards his communal responsibility within ecclesial life, as he pursues some kind of individualistic 'self-expression'. Rather, we are calling attention to the fact that the totality of the icon's meaning includes its aesthetic being. If the icon painter is to succeed in the task of conveying sanctified existence, it is crucial that he become aware of how the qualitative nuances of pictorial form either succeed or fail to actualize this great task.[139] This awareness presupposes that icon painting is ultimately an interpretive and personal creative act. For it to flourish, icon painting should not be stifled by prescriptive stylistic formulas. Moreover, in interpreting icons it does not suffice to bring to them theological and conceptual readings that

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[138] G. Kordis, *The Return to Byzantine Painting*, 129. Kordis here is referring to the influence of Kontoglou on the practice of icon painting in Greece, but the same idea applies to Ouspensky's influence on the icon revival.

[139] C. A. Tsakiridou, *Aesthetic Nepsis*, 29.

bypass the specificity of their form. They should be left to speak for themselves, each with its unique aesthetic voice. Interpretation should arise from the concrete aesthetic facts.

In this study, aiming towards disentanglement from the dogmatization of style, we have reassessed the icon revival's convergence with Modernism, as particularly related to the work of Ouspensky and Kontoglou. This reappraisal has enabled us to reframe the role of abstraction in icon painting, whereby we can revalorize it within our practice in conformity with an ecclesial conscience, away from the pitfalls of modernist essentialism and its depleting anti-incarnational metaphysics. We have thus seen how abstraction need not be starkly opposed to naturalism in the actualization of a living icon-full of *enargeia*-through which we encounter the subject in its vivid presence. We have also seen how casting aside the dogmatization of style does not mean abandoning the pursuit of conveying transfigured existence. Rather, it opens up the possibility of multiple stylistic approaches in interpreting this great mystery. These assessments enable us to arrive at a heightened awareness of the importance of form independent of its narrative content, and helps us to rediscover the icon as 'an aesthetic being that carries and delivers its meaning in its own act of existence…'[140] Thus, in the end, autonomy unto life is the assertion of the icon's aesthetic being as a painting-a work of art.

Therefore, ironically, Maurice Denis's famous assertion in his *Définition du Néo-traditionnisme* remains relevant: 'It is well to remember that a picture-before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote-is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.' To forget this truth is to deaden the icon. Yet to overemphasize it in disregard for the icon's liturgical function is also a danger. It can lead, as we saw in the beginning, to an autonomy unto death. Denis's axiom is an elixir.[141] It can serve as a medicine that revitalizes and heals, but it can also be a poison that numbs and kills. Indeed, discernment is required in administering the dosage, but let us not refrain out of fear and so

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[140] C. A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity*, 12-13.

[141] *Cf.* M. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity*, 25-39.

deprive ourselves of health. The key is to find the mean between extremes. Thus, as we can clearly see, finding ourselves talking about the dangerous truth of Denis's axiom reminds us that we cannot avoid the convergence that still unfolds today between the icon and Modernism. We cannot escape this fact. What we need to learn to discern is the beneficial side of the convergence-the pictorial clues that can be revalorized according to an ecclesial conscience-if we are to move beyond the problematic entanglements of the past.

Neither programmatic theories, the imposition of concepts which bypass pictorial facts, nor aesthetic formulas can guarantee good results. All must be discovered within the mystery of the act of painting itself and through the internalization of the pictorial grammar of the Byzantine painting system we have adopted. We will not do any justice to the themes depicted if we treat the icon as a form of artless academicism, a matter of the perpetual copying of old models, under the pretext of adherence to 'immutable' tradition, which in fact denies the crucial role of personal creativity within living Tradition. Without its autonomy the icon ceases to speak of authentic faith and life in Christ, and therefore fails to bear witness to the ever-renewing life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

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Резиме: Појавом модернизма, магија прецизног миметичког подражавања (природи) пост-ренесансног сликарства престала је да игра доминантну улогу и да држи монопол над естетским критеријумима у свету визуелних уметности. Експанзија новог уметничког покрета довела је до естетског заокрета, не само унутар „света уметности“ и визуелне културе са којом се свакодневно сусрећемо, већ чак и унутар цркве не културе. Не би било претерано рећи да је модерна уметност проширила наш начин гледања на слике и променила наша очекивања од њих. Оно што се данас сматра естетски прихватљивим и функционално одрживим вишеструко се изменило у односу на раније периоде. Не може се спорити да је модернистички, авангар-

дистички анти-натурализам, напоредо са порастом интересовања за средњовековну, народну и „примитивну“ уметност, делимично допринео отварању пута за оживљавање уметности иконе у двадесетом веку. Јер док се ово оживљавање одвијало, модернистички заокрет је већ остварио непорецив утицај на преобликовање наших естетских стандарда и очекивања. Овај рад разматра конвергенцију идеја које су утицале на оживљавања икона у двадесетом веку и идеја париске авангарде – нарочито кроз призму естетских теорија сликара Мориса Денија (*Maurice Denis*, 1870- 1943), и иконописаца Леонида Успенског (*Leonid Ouspensky,*1902-1987) и Фотиса Контоглоуа (*Photis Kontoglou* 1895-1965). Ове паралеле тичу се њихових погледа на анти-натурализам и симболизам у сликарству. У ширем контексту, ова студија истражује питање апстракције и њене повезаности са духовношћу, у смислу у коме је та веза формулисана током двадесетог века. У потрази за „суштином ствари“ пионири апстракције препознали су смернице у народној, „примитивној“ и средњовековној уметности. Икона је тада „откривена“ као врхунски пример не-натуралистичког сликарства, експресивног у форми и боји. Поред тога, за неке модернистичке сликаре икона је указивала на могућност да дођу до ликовног језика способног да пренесе суптилније аспекте стварности коју су желели да представе. Упознавање ове врсте конвергенција нам је, у наставку, могло помоћи да боље разумемо и феномен „догматизације стила“, који је пратио обнову језика иконе, те омогућило долажење до стратегије за превазилажење овога проблема. Јер, као што (свако) сликарство може да „занемари сопствени објект“ и постане пука „симулација“, тако је догматизација стила довела до тога да пракса иконописања постане летаргична, производећи сопствене симулације и симулакруме и губећи осећај за представљање сопствених субјеката (ликова) на жив начин – као живих бића. А нећемо уопште остварити поштен однос према темама које представљамо ако икону третирамо као врсту не-уметничког академизма, као ствар циркуларног копирања старих модела, под изговором везивања за „непроменљиве“ традиције, чиме се заправо негира пресудна улога личне креативности у живој традицији. Говорећи о аутономији иконе, стога, овде је подразумевана аутономија од „догматизације стила“. То, наравно, не подразумева иконописчеву незаинтересованост за сопствену одговорност у оквирима црквеног живота, нити некакву његову индивидуалну потрагу за „само-изражавањем“. Насупрот томе, ово истраживање покушава да скрене пажњу на чињеницу да целовитост значења иконе подразумева и њено естетско биће.

Кључне речи: иконопис, апстракција, натурализам, модернизам, променљивост, непроменљивост, хијератичност, аутономија, Морис Дени, Леонид Успенски, Фотис Контоглоу, симболистичко сликарство, Ateliers d'Art Sacré, неовизантијски (стил), нео-традиционализам, догматизација стила, преображено постојање.