Aisthesis

Deifying Beauty. Toward the Definition of a Paradigm for Byzantine Aesthetics

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Abstract. Moving from the problem of defining how medieval speculation conceived the aesthetic dimension of art, this essay purposes an insight into the aspects that describe the peculiarity of the Byzantine conception of beauty and art. Surpassing the noetic perspective established by Platonic thought – shared also by Western medieval philosophy – according to which beauty is an intelligible model subsisting in itself as an autonomous entity, the Byzantine proper vision conceives beauty as a divine energy. The implications of this perspective lead us to investigate its connection with some of the most original achievements of Byzantine speculation, such as hypostatic ontology, theology of deification, *eikonic* thinking, and especially sophianic gnoseology, which permit us to overcome the dichotomy of the intelligible and the sensible domains of reality.

Keywords. Deification, eikonic thinking, pseudomorphism, sophiology, transfigured realism.

1. BEYOND THE PARADOX OF MEDIEVAL AESTHETICS

Any attempt at speaking of aesthetics with reference to medieval art cannot avoid dealing with the question of the possibility of reconstructing a genuine aesthetic thought which would supposedly have been developed by medieval thinkers. The problem does not concern the legitimacy of applying an aesthetic interpretation to medieval art, but the drawing of the parameters of an aesthetic thought of sorts, which would have been philosophically elaborated by medieval authors aware of shaping a theory of the arts that was not based merely on intellectual, symbolic or religious issues. In fact, these aspects, well evident and recognizable, constitute the essential rationale through which medieval men have looked at, interpreted and produced works of art. What does not, however, derive from medieval reflection on art and its principles – if not in an unsystematic and occasional way – is the combination of motives that are unavoidable in the process of art production and fruition, involving

the relationship between the artist or the behold-er and the phenomenal aspect (formal-material-temporal) of the artwork, in which its histori-cal accomplishment emerges – and this cannot be reduced to its intellectual justification alone. Certainly, the main sense that a medieval artist wanted to impress upon his work, and which its beholder looked at, does not fit solely within its phenomenal surrounding, but refers to a dimen-sion that is in discontinuity with the phenomenal aspect of the artwork, that is, a dimension which concerns its supposed transcendent rationale.

This problem must not, however, be confused with the theme of art as a vehicle of meanings that are not immediately apparent on the basis of the work itself, nor does it concern the subjectiv-ism that characterizes the relationship between the artist and his/her work in contemporary art: for instance, it is evident that without knowing of the bombing of Guernica in 1937, Picasso's famous painting could not be comprehended in the full depth of its significance. The reference to tran-scendence, however, leaves behind the historical-factual plane that may have inspired the work and is concealed behind it, implying the transcendence both of its historical and its aesthetic dimension. The medieval orientation towards sensible real-ity addresses thinking about art so as to conceive the meaning of art itself in a dimension that com-pletely escapes the senses and distances itself from any kind of thought that rigorously aims at pre-senting itself as "aesthetic"[1].

The paradox of medieval aesthetics therefore lies in the fact that every theory of beauty, form and art finds its completion within the context of a non-aesthetic dimension. Umberto Eco defined medieval attitudes regarding art as a «metaphysi-cal pansemiosis», which leads to «an idea of the symbol as a manifestation or expression that refers us to an obscure reality, inexpressible in

words» (Eco [1987]: 75)[2]. Medieval thought con-ceives of beauty not as something defined by its phenomenal appearance, but as a manifesta-tion of something hidden, so that sensible beauty results in nothing other than a reflection of intel-ligible beauty. Any medieval art object, and gener-ally any output of the traditional arts, never fails to question its beholder about its role as a vehicle of transcendent significance. This is suggested by the preponderance of religious themes that are generally conveyed by medieval artworks or that are implicit in their original context of fruition, as well as the propensity to fantastic representa-tions, which demand interpretation on a different plane from that of the aesthetic. But also natu-ralistic representation, according to the medieval mindset, almost never ends in itself. Or, at least, this question cannot be avoided by the post-medi-eval exegete: in the case of a cat's head painted on a bowl, one may assume that this representation would not have failed to recall to the medieval observer's mind – according to knowledge widely disseminated through bestiaries or magico-natural conceptions – the symbolic meaning or the intrin-sic virtue of the animal in question. The difference from the modern conception depends largely on the weight accorded by medieval thought to the evocative power of representation.

Treatises devoted to medieval aesthetics must consequently take into account a broad set of non-aesthetic meanings, which cannot be underesti-mated if one desires to understand how medieval men looked at their art and why they produced it: they will therefore not miss – to mention only the most relevant themes – references to the idea of transcendent beauty, to sensible beauty as a manifestation of transcendent beauty, to the meta-physics of order and the aesthetics of light, which is conceived as a manifestation of transcendent light, and so on. Medieval culture has devoted systematic reflections to these theoretical aspects, which historiographical reconstructions dedicated to medieval aesthetics cannot avoid taking into

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[1] See Zografidis (2011): 33: «More than a theory of beauty Byzantine aesthetics must be considered as a theory of art, that is, about the status of the work of art, its func-tions, its reception, its beholder, etc.».

[2] «Un'idea di simbolo come apparizione o espressione che ci rinvia a una realtà oscura, inesprimibile a parole».

account, considering also their theoretical and historical development[3]. However, alongside the treatises on intelligible beauty and the canons of art, at the basis of the concrete realization of a work of art there must necessarily have been an aesthetic intuition that guided its production: given that Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals share a common symbolic language, their difference in proportions, brightness, sculptural ornamentation is the outcome of the particular aesthetic sensibility of their respective ages, and this sensibility is aesthetico-mimetic and not merely symbolico-rational. The aesthetic sensibility shapes the form of concrete art realizations, beyond the ideal project that they imply. Nevertheless, medieval thinkers say nothing or very little about aesthetics. A reconstruction of medieval aesthetic thought that would take into account the aesthetic sensibility that has led to the creation of artworks through the centuries is therefore made difficult by the lack of a unitary aesthetic discipline, contemporary with the sources, that would assemble the evidence and its interpretation in a comparative and systematic manner[4].

The need to highlight the aesthetic aspect of the artwork as its indispensable ontological component, by which it is linked to the phenomenal texture of the surroundings of its era, can be further clarified through reference to non-religious art: in the case of a medieval castle, besides reasons of functionality and giving due weight to the symbolic aspect beyond its plan, it is the aesthetic impact of the form that transmits to us the sense of the historical, regional or particular differences that characterize every single building. The aesthetic level of the fruition of art involves the relationship between the artwork and its historicity,

although this relationship does not exhaust its creative motives. By recognizing medieval art's debt to a transcendentalist or allegorizing mentality that is focused on explaining the usefulness of art for the purpose of inner and spiritual edification, we can trace the coexistence of these motives with a genuine aesthetic creative rationale: this means that the creative process in medieval art is based, rather than on a symbolic or allegoric plan, on a sensibility toward form and matter, which reflects the medieval artist's relationship with his age and his culture. Within the frame of this relationship, a contiguity emerges between the intellectual reasons that gave rise to a medieval philosophy of art and a medieval aesthetic sensibility, which appears generally in aspects such as the propensity to order and symmetry, the preference for geometric regularity of the forms, the taste for an equilibrium between the material aspect of the artifact and the nature surrounding it, or the sense of ornamentation that underlies an aesthetic expectation for the harmony between the cosmic and the human order, and so on.

The reading of a medieval artwork cannot ignore taking into account a plurality of hermeneutic levels, from the metaphysico-symbolic one, which is an inescapable characteristic of medieval reflection about art, to the aesthetic one, which medieval thinkers did not attempt to enclose within a systematic theorization, but which cannot be underestimated as part of the process of the concrete shaping of the artwork, and which is not lacking from the literary description of the artworks and the effects they convey to beholders. Behind this approach we must observe the persistence of a paradigm, which derives from antiquity, in particular from Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy[5]. According to this paradigm, the truth of what appears is what does not appear at all, and what is sensible must be understood according to an intelligible prototype.

The survival of this model is far from being entirely anodyne and devoid of crucial impact on the history of art: this is what we will try to show

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[3] See the plan of the arguments in Eco (1987); for a concise review on the state of the art see Mariev (2013).

[4] The same problem is to be found regarding the quest of an aesthetic thought among the Fathers; see Zografidis (2013): 113: «Patristic aesthetics, unsystematic and functionalist as it is, cannot be an autonomous field, because for the Fathers aesthetics can only be considered contextualized in a wider theological, philosophical and artistic frame».

[5] For a recent contribution on this topic see Iozzia (2015).

through the following observations, which will be devoted to Byzantine art in an effort to sketch certain aspects, beyond what has already been said about its theological background, which can help in outlining a Byzantine "aesthetic" paradigm in the full richness of its implications. Byzantine art appears to be a particularly fruitful ground for the verification of such a paradigm, since fine arts had a huge cultural significance in the history of Byzantium, as is highlighted by the long-running dispute concerning the legitimacy of sacred images that involved the whole of Byzantine society between the eighth and ninth century, and was destined to be solved by the Seventh Ecumenical Council, held in Nicaea in 787, which had a decisive impact on the shaping of future Byzantine identity. Such persistence of a question that we would understand as superstructural would not be surprising if the timeless masterpieces of Byzantine art – from the basilica of Hagia Sophia, to the art of mosaic and icons – did not testify to its high aesthetic value, which is no less evident than its theoretical background.

2. COMMON AND PROPER OF THE BYZANTINE VISION OF ART

The theoretical framework of Byzantine aesthetics does not differ from that of Western medieval art. However, in addition to the lack of systematic philosophical reflection on the sensible aspects of the artworks, its full comprehension is further undermined by the poor knowledge of the sources that can contribute to reconstructing the profile of aesthetic thought in the Greek Middle Ages. The huge significance of the debate on sacred images in Byzantine history has attracted the attention of scholars widely to the understanding of the theology of the icons as it has been defined by the authors and the canonical texts that have established and sanctioned the religious legitimacy of the cult of images. Yet even with respect to a field that has generated countless pages of bibliography, the origins of Byzantine visual thought and the question, which has

not yet been completely resolved, of the triggering causes of iconoclasm still arouse questions that should be placed at the centre of current and future investigations[6]. Despite the reasons that lie behind historical facts and determined the contrasts between different factions – on whose original and true motives the sources and the witnesses are often vague and unclear – philosophical discussions of Beauty and theological reflections on icons in Byzantine sources still hide deep and unexplored motives, especially with regard to the general Byzantine approach to fine art, which – to a much greater degree than in Western medieval art – imply a comprehension and a mode of fruition that needs to be understood beyond the dichotomy between the noetic and aesthetic points of view. The linearity of the motifs that outline the theological aspects of Byzantine art does not reveal the whole structure of thought that lies behind it with all its related implications.

A fertile basis on which to undertake an investigation of Byzantine aesthetic sensitivity is found in the *ekphraseis*, that is, the literary genre devoted to the description of monuments, buildings or artifacts, which was inherited from antiquity and widespread within New Rome[7]. Although these compositions recall more or less insistently the anagogical-spiritual sense that lies behind the artwork, they do not neglect the aesthetic impressions aroused by the observation of the artwork itself. The Byzantine *ekphrasis par excellence* was that dedicated by Paul the Silentiary to Hagia Sophia, read in 562 at the inauguration of the reconstructed central dome of the Great Church: in this *ekphrasis*, alongside the

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[6] Noteworthy advancements in Byzantine aesthetics scholarship can be indicated in some recent studies devoted to this subject: Mariev (2013), Pentcheva (2014), and Schibille (2014); the current vitality of interest in this subject is also shown by the forthcoming volume: *Texts on Byzantine Art and Aesthetics*, 3: *Visual and Textual Culture in Later Byzantium (1081-ca.1330)*, ed. by F. Spingou and Ch. Barber.

[7] See Webb (1999): 59-74. For recent issues concerning iconoclasm and its theoretical background see Lingua (2006) and Brubacker (2012).

inevitable reference to anagogic elevation that is conveyed to the visitor by the forms, the lights and the colours of Justinian's basilica, naturalistic metaphors are employed with a purely aesthetic significance:

And not from discs alone does the light shine at night, but in the circles close by a disc you would see the symbol of the mighty cross, pierced with many holes, and in its pierced back shine a vessel of light. Thus hangs the circling chorus of bright lights. Verily you might say that you gazed on the bright constellation of the Heavenly Crown by the great Bear, and the neighboring Dragon[8]. *(Paulus Silentiarius [1977]: vv. 827-833; Lethaby, Swainson [1894]: 50)*

Instead of a root, bowls of silver are placed beneath the trees, with their flaming flowers. And in the centre of this beauteous wood, the form of the divine cross, pierced with the prints of the nails, shines with light for mortal eyes[9]. *(Paulus Silentiarius [1977]: vv. 879-884; Lethaby, Swainson [1894]: 51)*

The Silentiary does not give any place to the metaphysics of geometry, which appears instead to have inspired the Great Church's architects, Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus, former disciples of the Neoplatonic school[10].

Furthermore, we can observe exquisite aesthetic annotations in the chapter dedicated to Hagia Sophia by Procopius of Caesarea in his *De aedificiis*, which surely surpasses in terms of intensity and extension all of the notes he devoted to

the anagogical value of the building, and indeed has the effect of reinforcing them:

For it proudly reveals its mass and the harmony of its proportions, having neither excess nor deficiency, since it is both more pretentious than the buildings to which we are accustomed, and considerably more noble than those which are merely huge, and it abounds exceedingly in sunlight and in the reflection of the sun's rays from the marble. Indeed one might say that its interior is not illuminated from without by the sun, but that the radiance comes into being within it, such an abundance of light bathes this shrine. (Procopius [1940]: 17; Procopius [1964]: I, 1, 29-30)

The whole ceiling is overlaid with pure gold, which adds glory to the beauty (τῷ κάλλει), yet the light reflected (αὐγή) from the stones prevails, shining out in rivalry with the gold. (Procopius [1940]: 25; Procopius [1964]: I, 1, 54)

Or who could recount the beauty (εὐπρέπεια) of the columns and the stones with which the church is adorned? One might imagine that he had come upon a meadow with its flowers in full bloom. For he would surely marvel at the purple of some, the green tint of others, and at those on which the crimson glows and those from which the white flashes, and again at those which Nature, like some painter, varies with the most contrasting colours. (Procopius [1940]: 27; Procopius [1964]: I, 1, 59-60)

And whenever anyone enters this church to pray, he understands at once that it is not by any human power or skill, but by the influence of God, that this work has been so finely turned. And so his mind (νοῦς) is lifted up toward God and exalted (ἀεροβατεῖ), feeling that He cannot be far away, but must especially love to dwell in this place which He has chosen. (Procopius [1940]: 27; Procopius [1964]: I, 1, 61)

Likewise, in the homily pronounced by patriarch Photius on March 29, 867 for the inauguration of the image of the Theotokos depicted in the apse of Hagia Sophia (a work that marks the restoration of the cult of images in the Great Church after the defeat of iconoclasm), we find the theo-

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[8] «ἀλλ' ἐνὶ κύκλωι / καὶ μεγάλου σταυροῖο τύπον πολύωπα νοήσεις, / γείτονα μὲν δίσκοιο, πολυτρήτοισι δὲ νώτοις / ἄγγος ἐλαφρίζοντα σελασφόρον. εὐσελάων δὲ / κύκλιος ἐκ φαέων χορὸς ἵσταται. ἢ τάχα φαίης / ἐγγύθεν ἀρκτούροιο δρακοντείων τε γενείων / οὐρανίου στεφάνοιο λελαμπότα τείρεα λεύσσειν».

[9] «ἀντὶ δὲ ρίζης / ἀργυρέους κρητῆρας ἴδοις ὑπένερθε παγέντας / δένδρεσι πυρσοκόμοισι. Μέσον γε μὲν ἄλσεος ἀβροῦ / ἀμβροσίου σταυροῖο τύπος φαεσίμβροτον αἴθει / φέγγος, ἐϋγλήνοισι πεπαρμένον ἄμμασιν ἥλων».

[10] For a reconstruction of the geometrico-symbolical plan of Hagia Sophia and the relationships between its architects and the Neoplatonic school see O'Meara (2005): 144.

logical subject alongside the aesthetic impressions aroused by the artwork, which contribute to make its beholding a living experience:

> With such a welcome does the representation of the Virgin's form cheer us, inviting us to draw not from a bowl of wine, but from a fair spectacle, by which the rational part of our soul, being watered through our bodily eyes, and given eyesight in its growth towards the divine love of Orthodoxy, puts forth in the way of fruit the most exact vision of truth. Thus, even in her images does the Virgin's grace delight, comfort and strengthen us! A virgin mother carrying in her pure arms, for the common salvation of our kind, the common Creator reclining as an infant – that great and ineffable mystery of the Dispensation! A virgin mother, with a virgin's and a mother's gaze, dividing in indivisible form her temperament between both capacities, yet belittling in indivisible form her temperament between both capacities, yet belittling neither by its incompleteness. With such exactitude has the art of painting, which is a reflection of inspiration from above, setup a lifelike imitation. For, as it were, she fondly turns her eyes on her begotten Child in the affection of her heart, yet assumes the expression of a detached and imperturbable mood at the passionless and wondrous nature of her offspring, and composes her gaze accordingly. (Photius [1958]: 290)

> For, having mingled the bloom of colors with religious truth, and by means of both having in holy manner fashioned unto herself a holy beauty, and bearing, so to speak, a complete and perfect image of piety, she is seen not only to be fair in beauty surpassing the sons of men, but elevated to an inexpressible fairness of dignity beyond any comparison beside. (Photius [1958]: 292)

Such examples could be multiplied[11]: the general impression that we can draw from them is the emphasizing of the spiritual significance of the sacred artwork through its aesthetic appearance, which is most evident in the case of hagiographic portraits, wherein the facial expression and the gaze of the person portrayed is related to his/her inner spiritual condition.

The theoretical principles underlying Byzantine art generally do not diverge from those governing Western medieval and ancient art, since they all conceive of artistic expression as a manifestation of transcendent beauty and evaluate it in close association with the theme of *ethos*. The general concerns of the Byzantines and Western medieval theoreticians in attempting to fix the canons of the art are closely related to the function they attributed to the artwork, which is not only to express noetic beauty, but also to reproduce its goodness: these concerns recall those expressed by the authors of the tradition of Greek musicographers, from the Pythagoreans to the Neoplatonists, passing through Plato, for whom the choice of composing and playing music must take into account the musical modes capable of shaping the soul of the listeners in order to preserve the moral purity of the *polis* (Moutsopoulos [2004]: 24-25).

3. THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE BYZANTINE PARADIGM

A theory of art that reserves a place for the epiphanic and ethical role of the art – whose conception of the relationship between noetic and the sensible reality is generally linked by scholars (with regard to the period and the cultural area that are of interest here) to the influence of the Neoplatonic philosophy – can be applied in principle to Byzantine art. This model responds to a central problem of Hellenic philosophy, dealing with the question on how it would possible to understand the relationship between the intelligible and the sensible domains of reality. Given this general framework, which is useful for locating the Byzantine philosophy of art within the general history of aesthetic thought, some important distinctions have to be made: the cosmo-centred paradigm that oriented Hellenic philosophy has given life to a dualistic vision in which the separation between the intelligible and the sensible is radicalized, recognizing with regard to the first, reality in its highest degree, and, with regard to the second, a faded shadow of

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[11] See Schibille (2014): 201.

it. The Hellenic model identifies the true rationale of art in its intelligible prototype, which belongs to the domain of immutability and perfection, and this relegates the "aesthetic" dimension to be a degraded residue of the supposed ideal reality. The irreconcilable dichotomy between the noetic and the aesthetic domains nourishes the basic dualism of the cosmo-centred vision.

The medieval Western conception of art inherited this perspective from antiquity, conceiving the transition from the noetic to the aesthetic domain as a series of downward steps through different ontological levels. As in the case of the ancients, whose most general vision of the world revolved around the primacy of the cosmos – conceived as eternal –, and whose ontology was developed with regard to the question about the state of things in their cosmic existence, for medieval Christians the cosmic order was ensured by Providence and the *omnipotentia dei*. Western art emancipated from the noetic-centred system focusing its interest on the concrete form of the things: the growing attention paid to nature during the twelfth century and the diffusion of Aristotelian epistemology produced a transformation that avoided the duplication of plans by which reality was previously observed through the filter of extreme allegorism, which was a consequence of the hegemony of Neoplatonism in the early Middle Ages (Eco [1987]: 99). The price for this emancipation was, however, the loss of the seeds of symbolic realism that the early Middle Ages had learned through the teaching of Pseudo-Dionysius. Consequently, the epiphanic-symbolic value of art, which appreciates the reference of sensible appearance to its transcendent cause, was put in brackets from the beginning of thirteenth century and with the advent of Scholasticism.

The epiphanic-symbolic conception is equally recognizable at the basis of Byzantine thought of art but is far from exploiting all of his facets. In fact, Byzantine sacred art and its theoretical understanding, starting from this general point of view, developed a slightly different model of the relationship between the noetic and the aesthetic domains. This model finds its premises in the the-ology of the Incarnation, in which the Word of God has assumed human nature and become man within History: the conceptual side of this central dogma of the Christian faith had a revolutionary impact on ontology, breaking the tenet of ancient philosophy that postulated the radical separation between intelligible and sensible reality, proceeding from the original distinction between the intelligible form and primordial matter. Patristic exegesis saw the purpose of the Incarnation not only in the salvation of mankind which had fallen into sin, but as a predetermined divine project that envisaged establishing – independently from the lapsus of the first parents – the communion between uncreated nature and the created nature, that is, between the divine prototype and his image (εἰκών), i.e. man. This issue had major consequences in ontology: the Christological dogma of Chalcedon maintained in fact the principle of incommunicability between uncreated and created nature and established at the same time that divine nature has united with human nature in the person of Christ perfectly and without any sort of ontological mixture:

> [O]ne and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division, or separation (the difference of the natures being in no way destroyed by the union, but rather the distinctive character of each nature being preserved and coming together into one person and one hypostasis). (Price, Gaddis [2005]: 59)[12]

The concept of "hypostasis" became the central subject of a new ontology, which was elaborated by the Greek Fathers and successively assumed by Byzantine thought as one of its main tenets: hypostasis-based ontology succeed in harmonizing the absolute transcendence of the divine essence

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[12] See Mühlenberg (2006): 137: «ἕνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν Χριστὸν υἱὸν κύριον μονογενῆ, ἐν δύο φύσεσιν *ἀσυγχύτως ἀτρέπτως ἀδιαιρέτως ἀχωρίστως* γνωριζόμενον, οὐδαμοῦ τῆς τῶν φύσεων διαφορᾶς ἀνηρημένης διὰ τὴν ἕνωσιν, σῳζομένης δὲ μᾶλλον τῆς ἰδιότητος ἑκατέρας φύσεως καὶ εἰς ἓν *πρόσωπον* καὶ *μίαν ὑπόστασιν* συντρεχούσης».

and the deifying communion between God and man as the goal of the whole divine economy. The difficulty due to the conception of a radical separation between transcendency and immanency was surpassed through the theory of divine energies, which were conceived as the acts by which the common essence of the three Trinitarian hypostases reveals itself (Hussey [1974]: 28-30).

This conceptual development, which introduced a radical theoretical novelty with respect to the philosophical legacy of antiquity, led aesthetic thought to a new paradigm, modelled on the theoretical principles of Cappadocian and Dionysian teachings. This paradigm was destined to exercise a deep influence on Byzantine thought and its *Fortleben*[13]. In no other civilization did discussion about the legitimacy of sacred images have the religious, political, social and cultural relevance that the iconoclastic controversy had for nearly two centuries (680-850). However, the debate found its solution again within the Chalcedonian doctrine, that is, within the frame set by the ontological model built on the theology of the Incarnation. The canons of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) and the items of the *Synodikon* of Orthodoxy (843), which represents the two main moments of the defeat of iconoclasm, expressly affirm the legitimacy of the cult of sacred images, since they testify to the Incarnation[14]. The outcome of the Incarnation was not a new nature, but – as the Chalcedonian formula affirms – the divine-human hypostasis-person of the Word, who became flesh, visible, tangible and representable.

Moving from this historico-doctrinal framework we must step beyond the theoretical level in order to answer the challenge posed by Byzantine art to aesthetic reflection. Byzantine art has actually known different styles and developments, especially if one considers its different areas of reception, but it has maintained itself faithful throughout the centuries to its essence and vocation, whose deeper meaning is not just about

some conceptual tenets, such as those of intelligible beauty or the epiphany of light, or even the dogmatic justification of the icons as a testimony to the Incarnation. The Latin West also received these motifs but its tradition did not know anything comparable to Byzantine sacred art and its context of ritual, theological and aesthetic appreciation, which was capable of establishing an enduring identity regardless of the historical evolution of its styles. The sole theoretical justification of sacred art would not have been sufficient to keep alive the conception of art, the symbolic canons, and the aesthetic sensitivity, without a deeper rationale. The innermost underpinnings of the Byzantine sense of art must then be sought beyond its dogmatic justification, taking into account all of the speculative aspects, but at the same time the deepest sensitivity which acted behind it, emerging from a crossover synthesis of religious beliefs and philosophical convictions.

That sensitivity is to be found, first of all, in the comprehension that the Byzantine theoretical approach to fine arts cannot be circumscribed within an intellectual and contemplative act, but should be understood in connection with the idea of participation that is rooted in the theology of the divine energies. This theory can lead us, in fact, to a deeper understanding of Byzantine art (in particular, of Byzantine sacred art). Participation through the energies is far from being merely connected with the noetic domain, since it involves man as a *prosopon-hypostasis* in all of its dimensions, without excluding the faculty of sensation. As a vehicle of divine energies, sacred artwork meets the objective of what Byzantine religious thought has seen as the ultimate purpose of man's creation, i.e. his deification, which can be defined as man's personal participation in God's hypostatic life. Deification (*théosis*) is one of the cornerstones of the Byzantine theological construction, its response to the antinomic depiction of man's partaking in divine life and gifts despite the absolute unparticipability of the divine nature (Russell [2004]: 296-311). Moreover, the gnoseological framework resulting from this *theologoumenon* is able to overcome the irreducibility of

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[13] See Bradshaw (2013); Louth (2008); Karahan (2012); Karahan (2013).

[14] See Lamberz, Uphus (2006): 313; Gouillard (1967): 55.

intelligible and sensible knowledge through the concept of *sophia*, which – as we will see below – embraces and transcends both the noetic and the sensible dimensions.

The overcoming of an intellectualistic gnoseology made possible by the theology of deification should be related to the surpassing of one of Christian Platonism's main assumptions, which had been developed within the context of the Alexandrian tradition of the third century, that is, the tenet that the apex of deification coincides with noetic enlightenment (Russell [2004]: 131, 143). The noetic paradigm, issuing from religious and philosophical syncretism, was widespread throughout Late Antique culture, both in the East and in the West, finding in Origen one of its main exponents: the rejection of Alexandrian-Origenian intellectualism, which had been pursued through a long-standing criticism carried out by Byzantine theologians and had culminated in the condemnation of Origenism by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553), constituted one of the most important chapters of the Byzantine paradigmatic breakout from the ancient philosophical tradition, and represented a decisive step toward the affirmation of Byzantium's own speculative identity and originality.

As a consequence of overcoming Platonic intellectualism, Byzantine thought was able to develop a conception of art as living participation, where the artwork becomes a means of hypostatic communion, regardless of the gnoseological component. The spiritual and deifying aspect that is implied in this conception of art can not be associated exclusively with one of these levels of fruition – that is, the rational, symbolic, and aesthetic levels – but involves them all as energetic partaking whose dynamism involves the human beings in their spiritual interiority, as well as in their psychological-affectivity, and in their bodily-sensitive functions. One of the allegation against Origenism was in fact the negation of the participation of the body in the economy of salvation and deification.

In the light of hypostatic ontology, the artwork – conceived as *symbolon* – embodies the ontological place of inter-hypostatic communion, in which art evidences its role as a means of communion between hypostases: in the case of sacred art, the agent is the transcendent divine trihypostatic unity and the communication of his energies provides the beneficiary hypostasis the condition of the anagogical movement in deification; in the case of secular art, whereby communication takes place horizontally on a non-transcendent plane, the artwork is shaped by its relationality towards otherness, through which hypostatic identity is generated and regenerated.

The paradigm of thought underlying the Byzantine vision of art can be accordingly summarized as follows: it instantiates a balanced synthesis between theological-philosophical speculation, symbolic reading, and aesthetic fruition. Its goal is not merely connected with contemplation, or related to intellectual knowledge, but assumes a central place in inter-hypostatic communion as conveyer of their energies. Hence, we can move on to review the essential themes that contribute to its definition.

4. BEAUTY AS ENERGY

One of the major consequences of the application of the theory of energies to the problem of art is the transformation of the ontological model of participation upon which the function and fruition of the artwork is comprehended. The Byzantine tradition of though that maintained itself within the path established by the Cappadocians Fathers and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite has seen beauty not as a divine attribute – according to this theological tradition, in fact, God has no attributes in himself – but as the divine name that indicates the energy through which God allows creatures to know him as Beauty-in-itself (*autókalon*), and by which he sets the imprint of beauty on creation. As divine energy, beauty does not coincide with divine essence, but realizes its activity *ad extram*. It does not match an ontological conception based on exemplaristic self-sufficiency: consequently, the beauty of beings is not derived from their participation in Beauty-in-itself, but is an effect of the energy that manifests God in his

distinction as Beauty[15]. Since the name of Beauty is distinct from that of Being, the recipient of beauty is not the nature of created beings but their singular hypostasis.

The peculiarities of the Byzantine tradition and the special place accorded to art as a tool of deification can be attributed to the fact that God is worshiped mainly in his names of Good (*agathón*) and Beauty (*kalón*), and the problem of his knowledge – very different from Latin concerns over the agreement between *fides et ratio*, as well as from Origenistic intellectualism or Scholastic ontotheology – results in a hypostatic participation in divine luminous glory and theophanic beauty, that is, in the energies that, in the form of *kalophania*, effect personal deification.

Scholarship on the medieval theories of beauty agrees almost unanimously in emphasizing the importance that Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite had in the development of the theory of beauty within different linguistic and geographic areas during the Middle Ages (Mariev [2013]: 8-9; Schibille [2014]: 199). Usually, Pseudo-Dionysius is identified as the principal figure responsible for the transmission to the Middle Ages of the Neoplatonic conception of beauty as a transcendent model. Nevertheless, this is a post-Neoplatonic reading of Pseudo-Dionysius based on formal and lexical points of contact between his works and Late Neoplatonic scholars, but it misunderstands Pseudo-Dionysius' deepest intent, which had a ground-breaking paradigmatic impact, and can be depicted as an effort to de-platonise philosophy in order to elaborate a new speculative model in support of Christian monotheism (Mainoldi [2017]: 202). Pseudo-Dionysius contributed to an outstanding development of the Cappadocians Fathers' theory that conceives divine names as energies, calling them also processions (*próodoi*), by which the divine gifts are made participable without questioning the unparticipability of the superessential divine nature. Though we do not find a specific art theory in Pseudo-Dionysius, we can infer its essential lines from the treatise *On*

Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, wherein artistic creation concurring in the celebration of liturgical rites assumes a symbolic value as a sensible means by which deifying energies are communicated to the members of the hierarchy.

5. EIKONIC THINKING

The paradigm of energy-hypostatic participation establishes an *eikonic* relationship between participating and participated reality, which is established by the energy of the latter as a vertical medium that realizes a synergy along with the participant. Byzantine thought devoted a central place to the concept of the image: it became the principle by which every thing assumes an affirmative identity outside of God's Wisdom, which is provided by its own existence and life, through the relationship – instantiated by energies – between hypostases, among which one becomes the image of the other. Incidentally, it should be underlined again that the image was not conceived as participation in a universal form, metaphysically separated from immanence, in the manner of exemplarism.

The premise of this conception is once again found in the Cappadocians[16], but it is above all John of Damascus who developed it in a decisive way, pushed by the iconoclast controversy. In the third of his *Apologetic Discourses against those who Slander Sacred Images*, we find a theory of *eikonic* thinking, structured in a logocentric sense, for which the Word of God is the origin of forms and the generator of ontological identity, which is primarily hypostatic. The first and principal sense of the image is in fact the Word as Icon of the Father; the second sense sees the image as a predisposition in the Verb-Wisdom of the meontological power of every reality before its ontological generation; the third type of image is derived from biblical anthropogenesis, whereby man is created «in the image» (κατ' εἰκόνα) of God (*Gen* 1, 26); the fourth type consists of scriptural images; the

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[15] For an historiographical sketch see Mariev (2013): 8-9.

[16] See Vasiliu (2010); Bradshaw (2013): 20.

fifth is the typologico-symbolic one; the sixth is the mnemonic one, and includes verbal and visible images[17].

The *eikonic* principle conveys the relation of analogy subsisting between entities tied by causal links. It does not concern the relationship of their respective natures (as apophatic theology always emphasizes), but just those of respective hypostases, whose relationship can be also seen as a downward hierarchical transmission of the energies. It is only in the hypostasis that the *eikonic* relationship between two realities belonging to irreducible domains (such as those of divine superessential essence and created human essence, or the materiality of the artefact and the rational nature that observes it) is realized concretely as communion of energies. This kind of relationship excludes both an ontological degradation between the model and its copy and a confusion of them, and also enables the dichotomy between the sensible and intelligible domain to be overcome through the understanding of their relationship on the basis of the concepts of energy and hypostasis[18]. The Second Council of Nicaea explicitly states the significance of sacred images in the terms of hypostatic ontology: «The honour given to the image is transferred to the prototype, and he who venerates the image venerates the hypostasis of the one depicted» (Lamberz, Uphus [2006]: 315).

The *eikonic* principle expresses the antinomic condition underlying the Christian conception of reality, according to which the axiom of metaphysical separation is overcome after the Incarnation – which has been accomplished in history – and hypostatic deification – which begins in history and will see its fulfilment at the end of time. The icon, as a testimony of the Incarnation, is also a testimony of the antinomic polarities between created and uncreated, temporal and eternal, human and divine, and picks up the implications of the Chalcedonian formula. A noteworthy example of Byzantine art's capacity to return this combination of meanings through the aesthetics of the gaze, comes from one of the oldest icons of the Pantocrator, depicted in encaustic during Justinian's age and preserved since that time at the monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai (fig.1). The Pantocrator's asymmetrical traits are meant to express the two salvific energies that are associated respectively with the First and the Second comings of Christ – according to the remarkable analysis offered by Maximos Constas, who corrected the past hypotheses that interpreted this asymmetry as symbolic of the two natures of the Incarnate Word. The icons depict in fact hypostases and not natures:

> *The temporal or historical approach to divine polarity figures prominently within Christianity, where it gives shape to Christ's two comings: the first in humility, and the second in terrible glory, when he will "come again to judge the living and the dead". But Christianity also knows of polarities within God that are much deeper than this, and which present themselves as more abiding features of the divine portrait. Thus God is one and many, same and different, simple and complex, unified and differentiated. God is at once transcendent and immanent, hidden and revealed, known and unknown; he is great and small, giver and gift, origin and destination. (Constas [2014]: 69)*

The doctrinal background which the painter of this icon aimed at contrasting should be identified very likely as sixth-century Origenism, whose eschatological tenet of the *apokatastasis* excluded the final division between the righteous and the wicked announced in the Scriptures. Consequently, after this example, we can see how icons succeed in transposing into aesthetic experience a synthesis of meanings which concepts cannot circumscribe with the same immediacy of sense that is conveyed by the gaze and by facial expressions: «The subtle yet insistent asymmetries of time and eternity provide the framework for the Sinai Christ's unconfused union of mercy and judgment, and give the icon much of its animation

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[17] See John of Damascus (2003): 96-100 (*Treatise* III, §§ 18-23).

[18] See Pentcheva (2014): 1: «*Eikon* designated matter imbued with divine *pneuma*, releasing *charis*, or grace. As matter, this object was meant to be physically experienced. Touch, smell, taste, and sound were part of "seeing" an *eikon*».

and vitality» (Constas [2014]: 84). This icon is not a transposition of concepts (the two natures, the Incarnation, etc.), but a testimony of glances: the merciful gaze of the Christ in the first coming (fig. 2), and the severe gaze of Christ's second coming as universal judge (fig. 3). It is a reading that can not be understood outside the experience of gazes that the observer keeps within himself, and it is a meaningful example of the *eikonic* thinking that Byzantine art requires from its beholder. *Eikonic* thinking is what best describes the theoretical background of this living experience of artworks, which is the ultimate underpinning of Byzantine aesthetics[19].

6. HIERARCHY, AS AN ICON OF BEAUTY

Eikonic thinking finds a cosmological transposition in the notion of hierarchy. This concept was added to the Byzantine theological and ecclesiological lexicon by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite on the basis of the patristic angelology and ecclesiology of the fourth-fifth century. Hierarchy implies a vision of the cosmos as an order based on the hypostatic relationships that involve the path of deification. The particular rank of each of the members of the hierarchical universe (angels and men) is not in fact determined by their ontological specificity, but depends on the degree attained by each of them in deification. As a consequence of the indispensable role of energies as means of the hypostatic participation of intelligent and rational creatures in deification, the concept of hierarchy assumes, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, an *eikonic* connotation. Actually, hierarchy is the modality by which the divine energies are transmitted, establishing an energetic *koinonia* between God, angels and men, otherwise definable as anagogic synergy. Hierarchy, being a relational structure established by the downward transmission of the divine energies, is a central element of *eikonic* thinking since it is the order (*diakósmesis*) in which the unnoticeable transmission of divine energies manifests itself as visual arrangement, what makes of the hierarchy an image of the divine beauty:

If one talks then of hierarchy, what is meant is a certain perfect arrangement, an image of the beauty of God (οὐκοῦν ἱεραρχίαν ὁ λέγων ἱεράν τινα καθόλου δηλοῖ διακόσμησιν, εἰκόνα τῆς θεαρχικῆς ὡραιότητος) which sacredly works out the mysteries of its own enlightenment in the orders and levels of understanding of the hierarchy, and which is likened toward its own source as much as is permitted. Indeed for every member of the hierarchy, perfection consists in this, that it is uplifted to imitate God as far as possible and, more wonderful still, that it becomes what scripture calls a "fellow worker with God"[20] (Θεοῦ συνεργόν), and a reflection of the workings of God (τὴν θείαν ἐνέργειαν ἐν ἑαυτῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν ἀναφαινομένην). (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, De coelesti hierarchia, III, 2, 165B, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita [1991]: 17-18; Pseudo-Dionysius [1987]: 154)

7. THE SOPHIANIC BEAUTY

So far as we have seen beauty is participation in the energy by which God manifests himself as «Beauty-in-itself». The Byzantine conception of beauty as anagogic energy escapes from the gnoseological framing that generally establishes the backbone of scholarly expositions on medieval aesthetics. The experience of beauty – being a deifying anagogy – cannot in fact be reduced solely to theological reflection, or to psychological affectivity, or to the mere aesthetic perception, since it includes and transcends all of these aspects at once. The theory of divine names introduces the

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[19] See Lidov (2016): 20: «The Byzantine mosaic craftsmen do not simply show a flat figure of the Virgin Orans against the background of this space, but create an image of the Mother of God appearing outside of this space – she enters, as it were, the space of the church. The image is produced not within the pictural plane, but within the space between the viewer and the representation. Such is the fundamental principle of the Byzantine iconic image, which, because it conflicts with the notorious "paradigmatic flat picture" that continues to dominate our thinking, is not yet fully comprehended».

[20] See 1 Cor 3, 9; 3 Io 8.

name of *sophia* as the divine energy that allows the creatures to whom it is given to access a form of knowledge that involves intellect, reason and perception together, and at the same time exceeds their possibilities: «The name "Wisdom" reaches out to everything which has to do with understanding, reason, and sense perception, and surpasses them all» (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus* V, 1, 816b, in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita [1990]: 181; Pseudo-Dionysius [1987]: 97)[21].

Before the sophianic gaze, the artwork reveals itself as a synthesis of energy, form and matter. This synthesis constitutes a *symbolon*, that is, an ontological subsistence in which essences and energies come to unity in a material form, and as such it discloses itself sophianically to intellection and rational understanding, as well as to emotion and sense perception. The symbol is energy that reveals itself as form and matter, on the basis of analogy. Consequently, sacred art, which originates in the imitation of the scriptural symbols or the prototypes (word, images, or melodies) that, according to the hagiographical traditions, originated in particular angelic revelations, embodies the possibility of participating in the intangible and informal energies that are manifested within symbols substantiated by form and matter.

The Byzantine tradition follows the Dionysian approach in conceiving of beauty as a sophianic experience which is not confined within the boundaries of mere sensible perception, nor is exclusively associated with the contemplation of intelligible prototypes, since the unity between these domains – which would remain otherwise ontologically incompatible – is realized in the sophianicity of beauty. Being beauty conceived as participation in a particular energy and not as intellectual contemplation of a metaphysical prototype, it does not fit in with the terms of the reproducibility of a transcendental model in an immanent copy, but should be understood as a manifestation of a hypostatic unrepeatable unic-

ity. As a consequence of the Byzantine surpassing of noetism, we can discern a comprehension of beauty as energy informing creation, which led to the acceptance of natural forms without having to justify their significance through alienating allegories. The purpose of icons, conceived as symbols-vehicles of divine energies, is then to represent the divine and the deified hypostases in the features of a transfigured realism, a peculiarity wherein we can recognize the vertex of Byzantine art and its conception.

8. PSEUDOMORPHISM

Painted images are often related in Byzantine sources to verbal images, with particular regard to scriptural symbols[22]. Assuming this patristic parallelism as a paradigm, we wish to conclude this approach by attempting to delineate a four-senses theory of the image – in accordance with what we have observed on the Byzantine conception of art –, on analogy with the theory of the four senses of Scripture. In each image a quadruple function can be envisioned: it finds its deepest rationale in manifesting the energy of hypostatic relationships (at a primary level, that between the artist and the beholder of his work); it encloses an allegorical narrative fashioned according to conventional parameters of communication; it is shaped by the mimetic output of the imponderable psychological motions that guide the artist from within; finally, it is concretized by a technical-stylistic process. In the four senses of the image (energetic-anagogic, allegorical-narrative, psychological-mimetic, technical-stylistic) we can envisage the profile of an interpretative paradigm for Byzantine art, which ensures we take into account its deepest inspiration, as well as its aesthetics.

The main historical-philosophical extent of Byzantine conception of art can be seen above all in the overcoming of intellectualism (or noetism) upon which the Platonic-idealistic theory was

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[21] «Ἡ δὲ τῆς σοφίας εἰς πάντα τὰ νοερὰ καὶ λογικὰ καὶ αἰσθητικὰ ἐκτείνεται καὶ ὑπὲρ πάντα ταῦτα ἔστιν».

[22] See for instance Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, IV, and John of Damascus (2003): 100 (*Treatise* III, § 23).

based, and which supported also the exemplarist theory of intelligible beauty in the Western Middle Ages. The transcending of noetism was made possible by the elaboration of the theory of the energies, by which the antinomy between unparticipable *ousia* and participable names-energies found a solution that recognizes deification as union of hypostases by means of the energies, avoiding in this way the breakdown of an ontological confusion between natures.

To ignore the first of the aforesaid four senses, that which embodies anagogic energy, leads to a relapse into noetism and reopens the conceptual fracture between the intelligibility of the model and its sensible existence. This fracture can be defined as pseudomorphism, since it conceives of sensible form as a falsification of its unapparent reason. The Platonic conception of art is pseudomorphic by definition, since it conceives of sensible appearance as concealing the truth of the intelligible (Schibille [2014]: 203). The sophianic conception, on the other hand, seizes on the unity of the sensible and intelligible processions of energies by which the Divinity is revealed and communicated.

Iconoclasm is, in turn, pseudomorphic, since it disregards the sophianic aspect of art and the action of energies behind the mimetic form; moreover it failed to recognize the role of hypostasis, falling back into an assessment based on ousiocentric ontology. In its theoretical censorship of sacred images, iconoclasm set forth the issue of ontological incompatibility between the terms of the polarities – uncreated and created, divine and human, eternal and temporal – which the Incarnation brought into unity. The iconoclasts reasonably denied the possibility of representing the divine nature according to its essence, respecting the principle of apophatic theology and the biblical prohibition of making images of God (before the Incarnation), but they failed to recognize that hypostases are representable, and that God is representable since he had himself incarnated in the hypostasis of the *Logos*.

The Latin West, remaining attached to the exemplaristic paradigm, which is focused on the relationship between universal genres and indi-
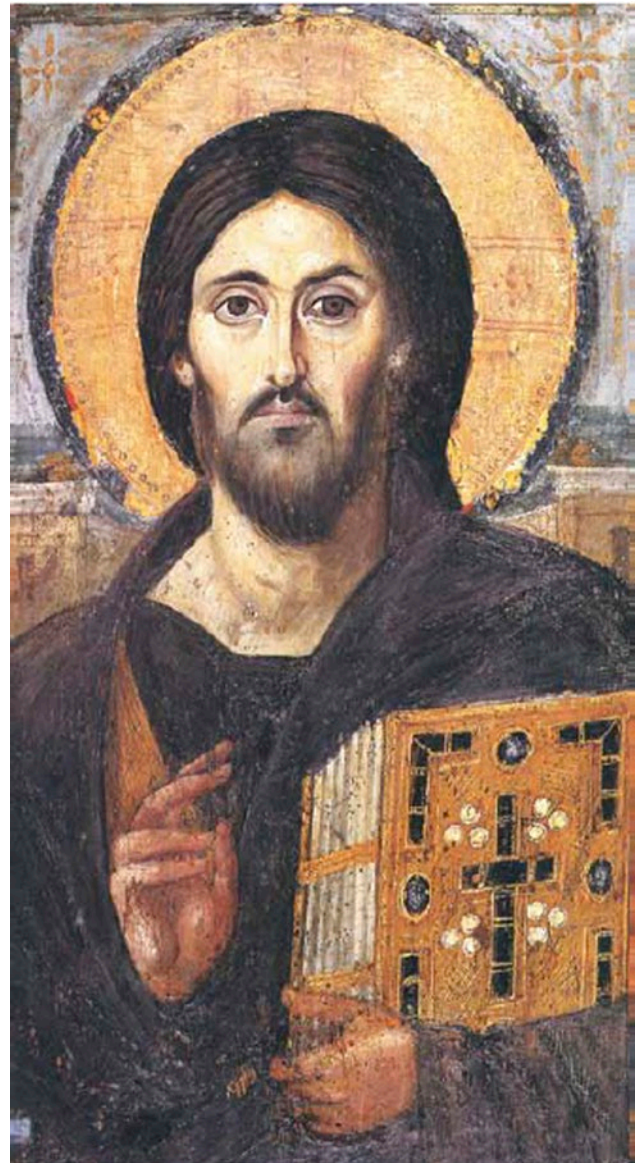

Fig. 1. Christ Pantokrator. Mid sixth century. Encaustic on board, 84.5 x 44.3 cm. Monastery of St. Catherine, Mt. Sinai. (Source: Constas [2014]).

viduals, did not share the hypostatical and energetic understanding of the ontological primary identity as it was elaborated by Greek-speaking Christian authors. It is not by mere chance that the Medieval West developed a conception of art that radically diverged from the Byzantine sophianic vision. This latter seizes the vicarious presence of the hypostasis acting through its energies within the mimetic-artistic work, while the
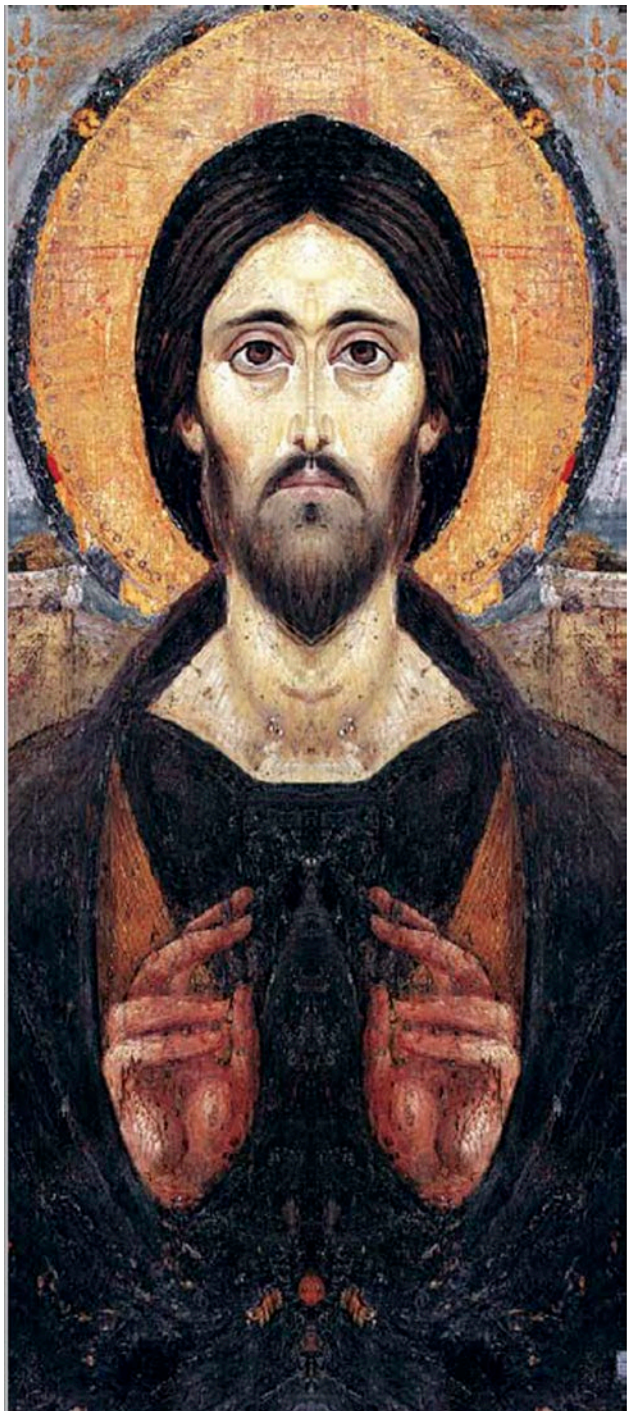
Fig. 2. Christ Pantokrator (Right Half Doubled). (Source: Constas [2014]).
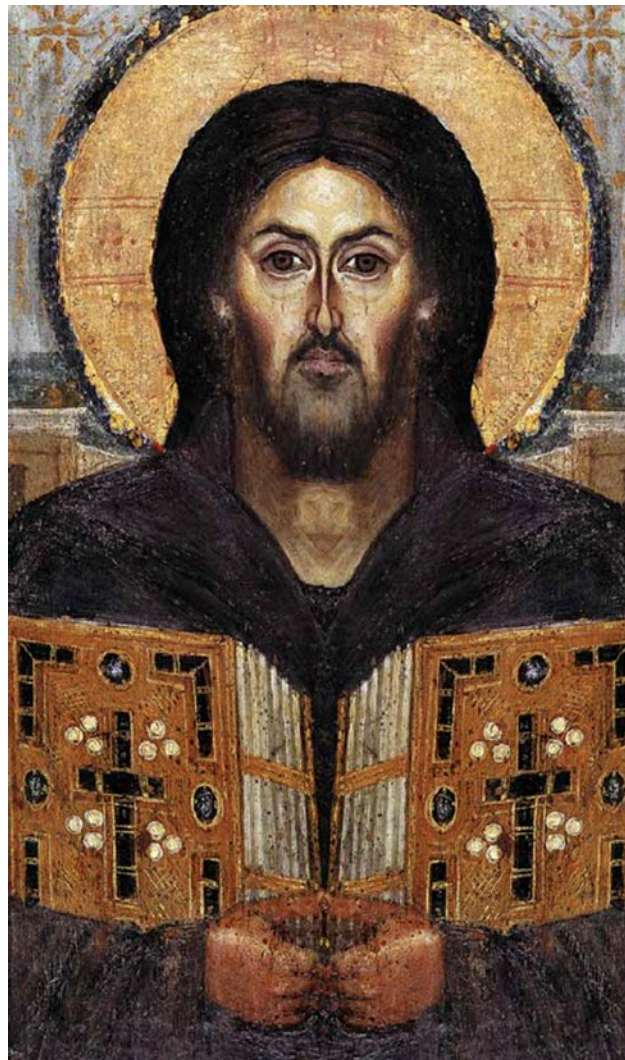

Fig. 3. Christ Pantokrator (Left Half Doubled). (Source: Constas [2014]).

all attempts of renewing themselves through symbolic, allegorical or numerological superstructures, Medieval art arrived at its historical end. On the opposite side, the sophianic vision allowed Byzantine art to survive until today in the unexhausted vitality of its symbolism, aesthetics and technique.

Western Medieval conception of art has remained anchored in Platonizing models, which did not escape pseudomorphism, and once they exhausted

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