

Elizabeta DIMITROVA

## HOUSES OF THE HOLY

### Four Examples of Ultimate Byzantine Painterly Products (an essay on self-reflection of artistry)

**Key words:** *Saint Panteleimon – Nerezi, Saint Nicholas – Manastir, Dormition of the Virgin – Matejče, Saint Demetrius – Sušica, King Marko's monastery, Byzantine fresco painting*

**Abstract:** *The article intends to show how the basic idea in the process of creation of religious monuments transforms into a visual perspective of the depicted scenes. In that regard, each and every monument has a different ideological background dependent on the commissioners' preferences and privileges. They are reflected not only in the selected components of the decorative programme, but also in the manner of their execution. Hence, the fresco decoration can introduce a specific way of visualization of the religious ideas that is both canonical yet unconventional, or it can produce innovative spectrum of painterly elements to reflect the main religious notion in a diversified aesthetic compilation. Since the commissioners are always the most responsible individuals when it comes to detection of the painterly agenda, they manifest themselves not only as passive portraits within khetorial arrangements, but as active participants in what becomes their save heaven on earth. Contributing to the programme conception and engaging themselves in the articulation of visual decoration of their endowments, they became stake holders of the social charisma of religious enterprises embodied in the representative fresco ensembles.*

When we say art, we usually mean an object of creative endeavor which has a decorative function in the widest possible prospect of that term. In that regard, each and every art work has been produced with an aesthetic mission to a target audience in specific chronological and spatial horizons, as well as precisely defined social milieu. We may not accurately know how the gigantic painterly subjects in the cave of Altamira in Spain have been produced and can only guess what their function was in the given moment of their origination since they belong to the deep sphere of Paleolithic era. On the other hand, Leonardo's Mona Lisa is only 600 years old, yet still solidly mysterious and elusive to those who would

like to become intimate with the portrait in the aesthetic manner in which it has been produced. Picasso's immense portfolio is well known to all of us, but can anybody claim that there is nothing to be debated about the period 1900-1973? In that sense, every single piece of art can be seen as part of a given culture and thus analysed anthropologically as well as psychologically and aesthetically, technically being a container of huge amounts of information about both the person who commissioned it, the one who made it and the culture they are part of. This, of course, refers to Byzantine artistry as well, being created to cover twelve long centuries and a wide spatial diapason dependent on the historic circumstances, political events and diplomatic activities.

When we say Byzantine art, we mean complicated architectural structures, remarkable painterly panoramas and precious icon works that have survived until present day to testify to the opulent quantum of work done by the commissioners and their selected collaborators – architectural designers, building practitioners, leaders of artistic workshops, sculptors and painters. We admire their commitment, talent and perseverance embodied in some of the most representative monuments created by human hand, but do we understand the messages hidden beneath the canonic rules Byzantine artist were subjected to in the way they would have wanted us to acknowledge. Are we fully trained, thus prepared to penetrate the ideas transformed into frescoes under the strict rules of dogmatic nature, yet so fully potent and vibrant, energetic and animated, dynamic and enterprising. How can we, sitting in our comfortable offices equipped with high technology and all necessary commodities transport ourselves six or eight centuries in the past and feel the "spirit of the age" in the most appropriate way. Is it possible that surrounded by AI, chat GPTs, automatic translation tools and many different gadgets that are becoming our favorite

pets, we can find all the necessary data on a certain monument and still be left with no sustainable answer to the quintessence question – what is the fundamental idea that enabled the creation of a masterpiece, irreproducible art work which became a hallmark of an era of cultural diversity. Are we becoming subjective in our efforts to investigate and evaluate, research and estimate. Where do we put the borderline between objective angle and subjective opinion; moreover, are we so used to see through canonic rules that we miss the things that are meta-canonical? How deep can we dive into the abyss of structural methodology in order to explain, explicate and/or disclose the iconographic contour lines, stylistic modularities or programmatic schemes of a certain monument if we cannot go back in time with a shuttle made of our knowledge and experience, training and educational support. In that regard, we will try to travel back to the past centuries and make an effort to peek behind the heavy curtain of canonic regulations into the open horizon of absolute creation. To accomplish that task, we have selected four representative examples from the period 12<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> century seriously investigated by the scholars, all represented in monographs, as well as listed among the extraordinary accomplishments of Byzantine visual culture.

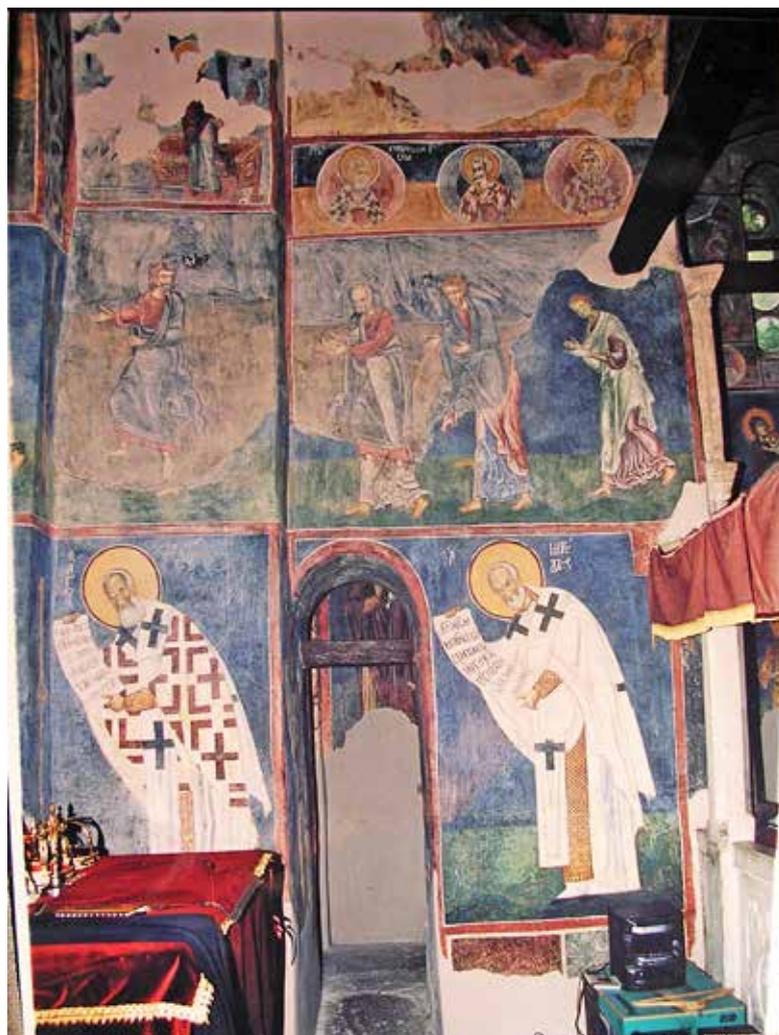
First example

***Magic Mirror*** – the church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi (ca. 1166)

Socio-historic status: positive (original khetorial inscription preserved, no commissioner's portrait)

The church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi<sup>1</sup>, with a bibliographic “support” of more than a century, is one of the epitomes of the Byzantine cultural attainments from the centuries long painterly tradition. Regard-

<sup>1</sup> I. Sinkević, *The Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi. Architecture, Programme, Patronage*, Wiesbaden 2000 (with bibliography); E. Dimitrova, G. Velkov, V. Iljovska, *Skopje. Seven Monuments of Art and Architecture*, Skopje 2014; pp. 8-23; E. Dimitrova, G. Velkov, *Seven Medieval Churches in the Republic of Macedonia*, Skopje 2014; pp. 28-45; E. Dimitrova, *The Church of Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi*, Skopje 2015; D. Mitrevski, V. Lilčić Adams, E. Maneva, E. Dimitrova, *Skopje. Eight Milenia of Life, Culture, Creativity*, Skopje 2020, pp. 482-505.



Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, Officiating Church Fathers

ed as a metropolitan monument created in one of the Byzantine provinces, moreover possibly a replica of some Constantinople's temple from the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>, Nerezi has been enumerated among the most remarkable art works done within the medieval artistic treasury. These compliments, however, mostly refer to its original fresco painting, while the architecture of the edifice which, according to the khetorial inscription has been finished in 1164, has not been praised that much; except for the five domed disposition of its vaulting structure, in the existing literature Nerezi has been seen as a building with few shortcomings – the lack of supporting pillars under the dome being the most evident and treated as a provincial feature of the architectural concept of the church. However, as we shall see further in this paper, this *deficiency* can be seen in a new light of consideration closely connected to the fresco programme of the church. What is also evident when one looks at the fresco decoration from the 12<sup>th</sup> century is the following: there are only

<sup>2</sup> I. Sinkević, *The Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi. Architecture, Programme, Patronage*, 11.



Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, Entry in Jerusalem

nine compositions encompassing biblical, as well as apocryphal motifs uniting three different cycles – the Festal, the Passion and the Marian; each composition is depicted on the entire width of the respective wall; the compositions of the Nativity and the Crucifixion were omitted from the decorative programme; the saintly figures are arranged according to the arithmetic calculation in groups of three or five and there are no signatures written next to their representations.

Unlike other medieval fresco ensembles in which the Gospel stories circle around the walls of the church in a clockwise direction, in Nerezi another orchestration of the visual components was chosen to fill the interior with fluent spirituality. Namely, the concept of mirroring in which every scene is a reflective counterpart of the one depicted on the opposite wall is a groundbreaking methodology of the Nerezi fresco decoration. That is why each scene needed its own wall as a whole and as a substantial element of the architectural concept of the church, as well, so it becomes obvious that the architecture and the painting are in close connection, or better to say the architecture serves as an appropriate background of the fresco decoration in any given spatial aspect of the programme. Theological ideas have been brought to dialogue across the interior of Nerezi in a very specific and challenging manner, while the fresco programme became a sophisticated puzzle recomposed on the walls of the temple. Elaborated thoroughly and arranged to detail, the scheme of disposition of the nine episodes of the Nerezi saga is a unique method

of configuring the religious context of the selected motifs in a unifying network of divine components. In that regard, the Nativity of the Virgin on the western wall of the temple mirrors the Communion of the apostles in the bema since the birth of Mary announces the incarnation of Jesus, while his incarnation becomes the prerequisite for the salvation of mankind the starting point of which is the last supper depicted as the Eucharist. The Annunciation represented with the Archangel and Virgin Mary on the eastern wall of the church mirrors the scenes of the Transfiguration (western wall of the south wing of the cruciform interior) and the Deposition (western wall of the north wing of the cruciform interior) through the idea of the embodiment of the Logos, i.e. the dual nature of Christ. While the Virgin as the human instrument of Christ's incarnation mirrors the divine metamorphosis of the rabbi witnessed by the three apostles, the archangel Gabriel mirrors the dramatic spectacle of the Deposition from the Cross as a consequence of Christ's human suffering. In that manner the diagonal lines of the mirroring vistas are spread across the spatial organization of the church with a powerful echo of emotional turbulence united by the idea of celestial glory versus real and passionate agony.

The mirroring of the scenes depicted on the southern and northern walls of the west wing of the cruciform interior can be seen in many details of their playful iconography. Yet, the main idea that connects their theological, as well as visual context is the causality of events – the Raising of dead Lazarus as the



Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, Disposition

epitome of Christ's supernatural power stands for his salvational mission for the humanity which will ultimately lead to his future suffering the beginning of which is marked by the Entry in Jerusalem. Similarly, on the widest walls of the church the painters have depicted Christ's presentation in the temple (south wall) as the crucial moment of prophecy for his future suffering, while on the north wall one can see the realization of that prediction – the Lamentation of the dead Christ. Both scenes are connected by the embrace of the Virgin; yet, the one on the north wall is to protect the baby Jesus from fear, while the one on the south wall is covering him as a funereal shroud. The sentiments are delicate but strong, the emotions criss-

cross the church transforming it in a live organism of divine substance and human pain. That is the main idea of the Nerezi fresco painting - to be spirited and vibrant, vigorous and sparkling with intensity overwhelming the entire spatial concept of the temple: walls are actually painted mirrors reflecting the sparkles of the religious ideas and fleshing them across the sanctity of the temple's interior. That is why there are no columns or pillars under the dome, so that the entire space of the church can be united through the mirroring system of the scenes. This implies that the architecture was basically a supportive element of the fresco decoration or at least the architecture and the painterly arrangement were thoroughly conceived,



Saint Panteleimon at Nerezi, Lamentation

i.e. mirrored in the process of creation of the monument. The fact that there are no signatures next to the saintly figures so meticulously arranged in the first register of the fresco programme, speaks in favour of the intellectual elite that had the privilege to visit the Nerezi church and attend the religious ceremonies. In that sense, Nerezi could be seen as *Capela Palatina* away from the palace for a Constantinopolitan prince who was away from home just the right amount of time to produce one aesthetically magic monument, divine and human at the same time, a religious mirror for sentiments and emotions, for passionate drama and overwhelming sensation.

#### Second example

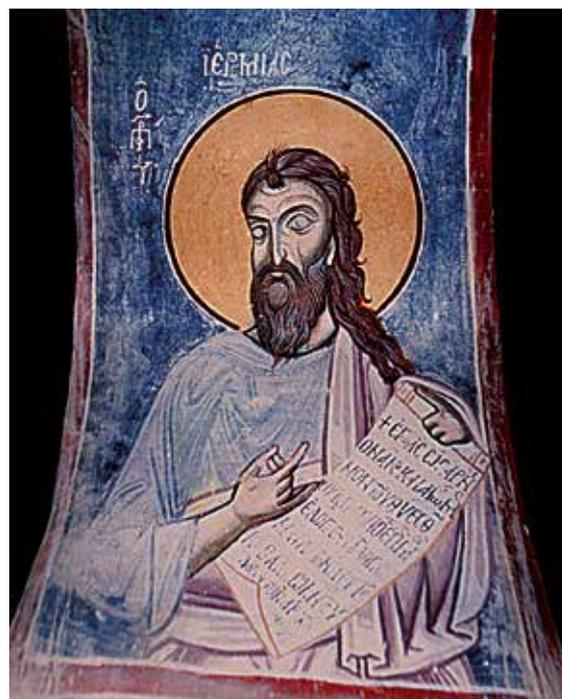
***Kaleidoscopic view*** – the church of Saint Nicholas at Manastir (1271)

Socio-historic status: optimal (original khetorial inscription preserved, original commissioner's portrait preserved, as well)

The church of Saint Nicholas at Manastir is the first monument which *appears* as a painterly ensemble after the restitution of the Byzantine power following the collapse of the Latin conquest of the Em-



Saint Nicholas at Manastir,  
Officiating Church Fathers



Saint Nicholas at Manastir, Prophet Jeremias

pire<sup>3</sup>. Precisely dated and *adorned* with an extensive khetorial inscription, the temple is not withholding anything which is relevant to its social or cultural context. Maybe the only peculiar feature is the ground plan of a basilica – outdated as an architectural matrix in the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but who can blame the commissioner depicted as modestly holding the replica of the church in the north aisle of the edifice. If we look at the broader picture, the entire concept of the church at Manastir looks modest: conservative building solution, old fashioned painterly repertoire, no groundbreaking visual novelties, no surprising historic portraits, etc. The classical typological frame of the khetorial composition only confirms the traditional method of approach to the production of a monument with no spectacular features and/or outstanding intentions. Yet, if one looks closer at the fresco decoration, one will notice that it is not as conventional as it seems at *prima vista*. It is true that the programme encompasses only a few components that were not seen prior to Manastir in terms of Macedonian territory; it is also evident that the iconographic solutions are far from innovative in regard to their visual aspects; it is more than obvious that the whole idea of the khetorial enterprise is to produce a temple in perspective adequate to the role and function of a monk who renounced himself of

<sup>3</sup> Д. Коцо, П. Миљковиќ-Пепек, *Манастир*, Скопје 1958; E. Dimitrova, Ph. Niewöhner, R. Paligora, G. Velkov, *Seven Churches in the Regions of Pelagonia, Mariovo and Prespa*, Скопје 2019, pp. 31-51; П. Костовска, *Свети Никола Манастир. Средновековно сликарство*, Скопје 2020 (with bibliography);



Saint Nicholas at Manastir, Deisis

all earthly pleasures and invested in a traditional and conservative religious endowment.

It is, also, no surprise that the church was decorated with frescoes by more than one painter. Its dimensions and the three-aisled configuration demanded more than one individual for the production of an ensemble consisted of several fresco cycles, saintly busts and a large gallery of saintly figures in the first register of the fresco arrangement. What is odd in that regard is not the number of the painters that participated in the depiction of the visual ensemble at Manastir, but the manner in which they created its decoration and all its constitutional components. Namely, it is no strange notion that the Byzantine churches, even the ones with small dimensions, were fresco painted by more than one painter; the larger ones were definitely adorned with frescoes by painterly workshops consisted of several members. In the majority of cases, if not in all instances, there was one leading master and his accompanying associates who tried to resemble his painterly handwriting or the painters had similar painterly handwritings to make the fresco panorama look united in its aesthetic capacity. In Manastir, on the other hand, that was not the case; contrary to the aforementioned traditional approach to the creation of ensembles produced by more than one painter, the church of Saint Nicholas is an example of an undeniable and clearly visible oppositional practice. If one looks at Manastir's fresco decoration, one can count six different painterly handwritings with no intermediary aesthetic links

whatsoever<sup>4</sup>. But what is even more strange than this painterly freedom of expression is that the diversity of artistic idiolects is mentioned in the very khetorial inscription, where one can read that the temple was decorated with *diverse painterly skills* and a handful of proficient artists<sup>5</sup>.

In that regard, the altar painting reveals a hand of a master that in one of our previous articles was labeled as an addictive to the Kurbinovo fresco ensemble<sup>6</sup>. Much less talented than the leader of the Kurbinovo

<sup>4</sup> E. Dimitrova, *Seven Streams. The Stylistic Tendencies of Macedonian Fresco Painting in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century*, Niš & Byzantium Symposium. Collection of scientific works VI, Niš 2008, pp. 194-203.

<sup>5</sup> Ф. Баришић, *Два грчка натписа из Манастира и Струге*, Зборник радова Византолошког института 8/2, Београд 1968, pp. 16-17; X. Меловски, *За натписот од црквата Св. Никола, с. Манастир, Мариово*, Годишен Зборник на Филозофскиот факултет 23 (49), Скопје 1996, pp. 211-212; Idem, *Натписот од црквата Св. Никола с. Манастир, Мариово*, Inscriptions and notes from Byzantine and Post-byzantine Times, Прилеп 2009, pp. 37-62; P. Kostovska – N. Popovska, *The Painted Inscription in Manastir and Struga Revised*, Proceedings of the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Sofia 2011, Vol. III. Abstracts of Free Communications, pp. 278-280; П.Костовска, *Свети Никола Манастир. Средновековно сликарство*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>6</sup> E. Dimitrova, *Seven Streams. The Stylistic Tendencies of Macedonian Fresco Painting in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century*, pp. 194-195



Saint Nicholas at Manastir, Saint Artemios

atelier, he tried to emulate the grand master with the ornamental modulations of the painterly masses and with the tonal display of the fresh colouristic resonances. Slightly less graphic is the author of the cycle dedicated to the patron saint, who in the south aisle of the church produced frescoes with toned down linear approach and very little amount of decorative ornamentation. The one who depicted the busts of the prophets in the arches between the central and the lateral aisles is the most conservative of all of his colleagues since he goes back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and tries to find his inspiration in the monumental shapes of the ascetic images from the Saint Sophia cathedral church in Ohrid<sup>7</sup>. In contrast to this *old timer*, the master who depicted the figure of Saint archangel Michael in the central aisle, full of plasticity and masculine strength, is the most progressive one, while the figures of the holy warriors bear the signature of deacon and referendarius John, the leader of the Manastir's artistic workshop and the one responsible for the unconventional freedom given to his associates and collaborative individuals. The frescoes depicted in the north aisle, although heavily damaged reveal yet another painterly *instrumentarium* particularly in the configuration of the Last Judgement<sup>8</sup>, which

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, pp. 200-201.

<sup>8</sup> P. Kostovska, *Reaching for Paradise, - the Program of*

has much more complex iconographic constellation than the rest of the painting in the temple. Does this *post-modern* (yet, in a good sense of the term) approach to the division of tasks in the Manastir's fresco decoration was simply due to the current artistic circumstances in the Ohrid Archbishopric? We do not think so since the leader of the workshop, deacon John, was a highly estimated church aristocrat, who, by all means, could have been aware of such a situation. Being open minded and unbiased, highly selective, yet prone to variety, he has created the most diversified fresco ensemble in the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Acting as a cultural visionary of his own epoch, he stands for the virtues of artistic privilege, painterly sovereignty and aesthetic vibrancy.

### Third example

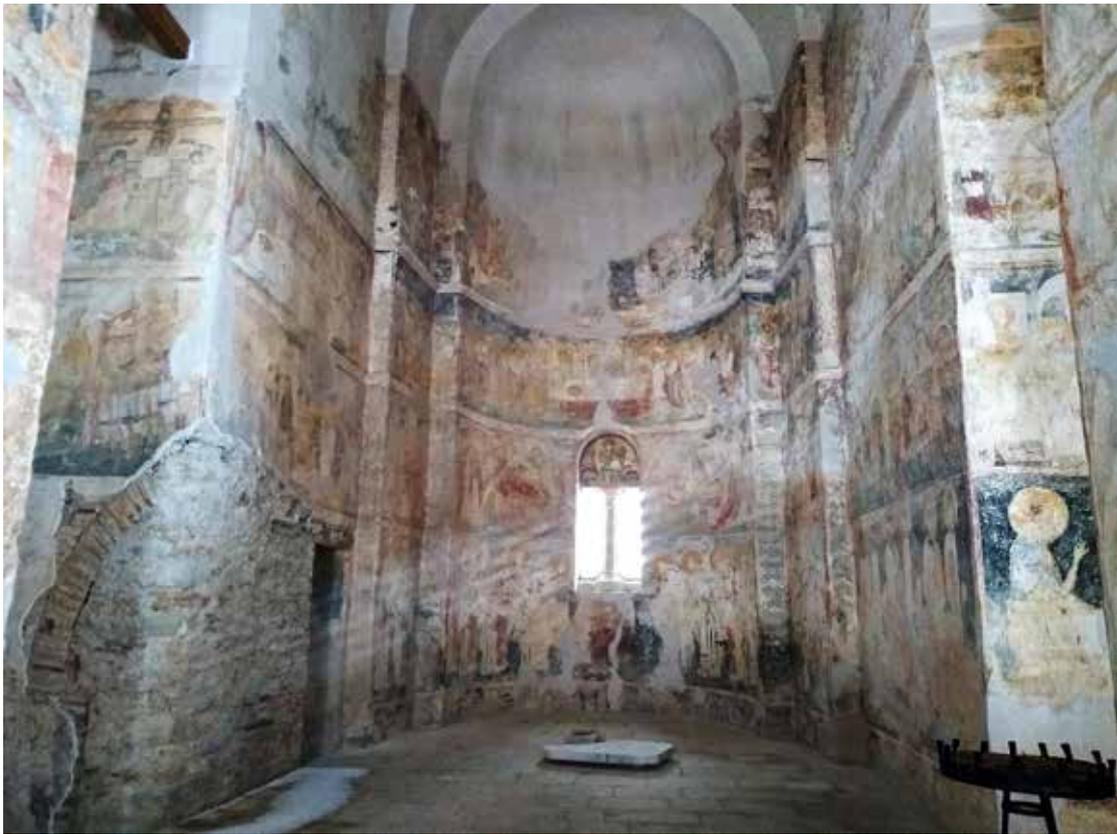
**House of Matriarch** – the church of Dormition of the Virgin at Matejče (1348-1352)

Socio-historic status: admissible (no khetorial inscription preserved, original commissioner's portrait preserved)

The fresco decoration of the church dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin at the village of Matejče is the largest painterly ensemble of 14<sup>th</sup> century Macedonia<sup>9</sup>. The colossal dimensions of the edifice make it look like a real stronghold of the imperial power. Erected and fresco decorated at the pick of the social, political and military capacity of the Serbian state, it is a true representative of the leading artistic potentials in time of peace, affluence and prosperity. Its cluster *oriented* architectural design, encyclopedic repertoire of the fresco themes, ideological context of the decorative programme and the iconographic novelties that permeate the visual panorama of the interior speak in favour of a delicate taste for production of an extraordinary monument and an unlimited and extensive budget, as well. Besides the grandeur of the building corpus of the temple, its complex spatial configuration and the vast perspective of nearly twenty cycles and numerous representations of saintly portraits, attention has been given to the aesthetic capacity of the depicted subjects, as well. Namely, the poetic refinement of the vistas, the consistency of the spatial organization of the compositional ele-

*the North Aisle of the Church of St. Nicholas in Manastir*, Културно Наследство 28-29 (2002-2003), Скопје 2004, pp. 67-89.

<sup>9</sup> Е. Димитрова, *Манастир Матејче*, Скопје 2022 (with bibliography); Eadem, *The Church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče*, Скопје 2016.



Dormition of the Virgin at Matejče, altar decoration

ments in the depicted prospects, the noble luminosity of the saintly portraits, the cultivate diapason of kinetic energy in the representation of the motion, as well as the crystal radiance of the coloristic gamut place this fresco ensemble in the treasury of the so called court style of the Byzantine painting from the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century; the name speaks for itself since the Matejče painterly arrangement is a product of the imperial court, i.e. the Serbian empress – the most powerful woman in the realm.

Although the architectural corpus of the church is quite masculine in its dimensions and manner of masonry work, the painted decoration of the church is actually quite feminine. Gentle vistas filled with noble characters, deep prospects framed by harmonic scenery, tender drawing for modeling of the painterly masses, inconspicuous kinetic energy filling the locomotion of the depicted figures and particularly the bright, pale, translucent chromatic repertoire of the coloristic palette are all on the side of graceful womanity. Although some debates have been going on in the existing literature on the identity of the painters<sup>10</sup>, how can anybody claim that the temple of the empress was decorated by the hands of the associates, when the great John Theorianos was already available for another engagement after finishing the



Dormition of the Virgin at Matejče, Akathistos, V kontakion

repertoire on the second floor of the narthex in the Saint Sophia cathedral church in Ohrid<sup>11</sup>. The aristocratic stylistic approach of master Theorianos was

<sup>10</sup> М. Радујко, *Драдњански манастирић св. Николе II живопис*, Зограф 24, Београд 1995, р. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Е. Димитрова, *Dimensio Sacra: за просторните вредности на композицијата во сликаните ансамбли на Теоријановото ателје*, На траговима Војислава Ј. Ђурића, Београд 2011, р. 186.



Dormition of the Virgin at Matejče, Akathistos, VI oikos

the most appropriate to delicately join the different iconographic segments of the painted programme into a visual entirety avoiding the pitfall of creating too much material with no intermediary connections. Although a sharp eye can recognize several different aesthetic handwritings, one has to admit that they all *fall into one basket*. Contrary to the manner of creation of the painted decoration in the Saint Nicholas church in Manastir, in Matejče all participants in the project of the fresco painting were under the strict control of the leading master. The programme in the bema, the cycle dedicated to the Martyrdom of the apostles, the Three of Jesse, the Ecumenical councils, the Legend of Abgar – they were all done by different hands but synchronized with the general principle of noble artistry, the one appropriate for the demanding commissioner, i.e. the Serbian empress.

It all becomes clear if we look at the khetorial composition<sup>12</sup>, or better to say, khetorial ensemble comprising ten substantial components depicted on the eastern and southern walls of the church. The Deisis skeleton, by all means, reflects the mausole-

<sup>12</sup> E. Димитрова, *Ктиторска композиција и ново датовање живописа у цркви Свете Богородице у Матеичу*, Зограф 29, Београд 2002-2003, pp. 181-188.

um idea of the temple, although no one can confirm its operability, i.e. practical realization. Pictured among St. Stephan – the patron saint of the Nemanjides, emperor Dušan and Serbian patriarch Ioanikios, empress Jelena is sharing her commissionership with her son, Uroš, the administrator of the territory where the church was erected. Situated between St. Stephan – the traditional protector of the Serbian state and its rulers and her husband – the most powerful ruler of the Balkans, she is celebrating not only the completion of her khetorial enterprise, but the achievement of the supreme harmony of the empire. Bringing together emperor Dušan, patriarch Ioanikios and king Uroš, Jelena is acting as a socio-imperial glue which keeps the ruling constellation together.

Always prepared to give her feminine support and wholehearted encouragement to her husband in the



Dormition of the Virgin at Matejče, Apostolic cycle, Peter and Paul in Rome

most appropriate way<sup>13</sup>, which is reflected in the visual configuration of their fresco portraits in the era of the Kingdom and later during the Empire, Jelena in Matejče is transferring her support to Uroš as a heir to the throne, thus vouching for the stability of the dynasty assets and the future of the Serbian empire. Managing to commission her own mausoleum

<sup>13</sup> E. Dimitrova, “Beauty and No Beast”. *Social and Cultural Perspective of Beauty in Byzantine Painting*, Patrimonium Mk 20, Skopje 2022, p. 244.



King Marko's monastery, Heavenly Court (detail)

church apart from that of her husband surely speaks highly of her social charisma, political sustainability and personal self-assurance. However, all that has been put in operation in favour of the country, its dominion and everything the dynasty stood for. Proudly presenting the replica of her endowment, Jelena actually presents her fifteen years old son as an inheritor of the ruling couple, skillfully pictured between herself and his father, as the khetorial ensemble intends to show. Manifesting her influential and highly significant status of an imperial matriarch, Jelena in the donors' composition in Matejče reflects the firm cohesion of political power and ecclesiastical rule within the Serbian empire; she is portrayed as the One who is the firm link of that indestructible coherence in the role of a loving mother, as well in the function as a loyal and faithful imperial consort.

#### Fourth example

***Oratorio de la grande tragédie*** – the church of Saint Demetrius at Sušica (1376/77) (1389-90)

Socio-historic status: optimal (original khetorial inscription preserved, original commissioner's portraits preserved, as well)

Nowhere else has history influenced artistic expression so much as in the creation of the church ded-

icated to Saint Demetrius at the village of Sušica<sup>14</sup>. Except for the confusing khetorial inscription, too long for its purpose, too puzzled for its function<sup>15</sup>, everything else in the temple is up to the highest level of artistic quality. The harmonized ground plan of the architectural planning, the merge of the naos with its western portion which served as a narthex, the cascade of building masses in the exterior and the elegant dome that gives the silhouette of the church graceful accent of vertical amplitude are only some of the visual qualities of the edifice commissioned by King Marko's family. Regal in its overall design, the temple in Sušica stands proud of its architectural achievements and can be enumerated among the most successful solutions of Byzantine artistry in the last quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Compiling elements from the century long Paleologan building practice,

<sup>14</sup> E. Касапова, *Архитектурата на црквата Св. Димитрија – Марков манастир*, Скопје 2012; М. Томић Ђурић, *Фреске Марковог манастира*, Београд 2019 (with bibliography); E. Dimitrova, *The Church of Saint Demetrius (King Marko's Monastery) at Sušica*, Скопје 2020; D. Mitrevski, V. Lilčić Adams, E. Maneva, E. Dimitrova, *Skopje. Eight Milenia of Life, Culture, Creativity*, pp. 526-553.

<sup>15</sup> E. Dimitrova, *Cultural CSI. Four Case of Socio-artistic Investigation: files, exhibits, evidence*, Patrimonium Mk 17, Скопје 2019, pp. 131-133.



King Marko's monastery, The Cry of Rachel

the church of Saint Demetrius can be easily labeled as the crown of architectural attainments in the closing decades of the medieval era. However, when we claim that King Marko's monastery is the product of the specific historic circumstances, we point to the outstanding and highly expressive amplitude of the fresco painting which, besides the program novelties and iconographic unconventionalities, brings new and compelling aesthetic charge to the visual articulation of depicted subjects.

The two khtetorial compositions, the one in the interior depicted as a constitutional element in the illumination of the Heavenly Court and the one in the exterior, above the royal entrance to the temple<sup>16</sup> are interesting enough in terms of the historic validity of the decoration. Namely, the commissioners' portraits included in the illustration of the Heavenly Jerusalem can vouch for the notion of a salvational prayer with accentuated soteriological constellation. Some twenty saintly figures accompany the khtetorial triade giving substantial support to their ruling house and lineage although in the time of their depiction as members of the celestial court, King Vukašin was already dead and his successor, young King Marko was not officially crowned as his inheritor. Was that the main reason which inspired the depiction of so many characters with no accompanying signatures to substantiate the unstable position of Marko in the tumultuous historic circumstances of Ottoman invasion. It seems that the two challenging situations, one caused by the foreign invaders and the other by the resentment of the feudal lords in the Serbian empire have given unifying background for the most elaborated depiction of the Heavenly Court in

<sup>16</sup> I. Sinkević, *Representing without icon: presence and image of king Marko in the church of St. Demetrios near Susica*, Proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Byzantine Studies III, Abstracts of Communications, London 2006, p. 318.

the Byzantine painting of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Since its configuration is based on the imperial type of Deisis accompanied by holy warriors as celestial courtiers, in King Marko's monastery they are placed in the first register of the decoration firmly connected with the commissioners' scene portrayed in the narthex. One can debate whether all of them are soldiers and martyrs or at least some of them can be put in other, historic categories or perspectives; yet, one thing is clear – they are here to testify to the legitimacy of the ruling family in times of need and despair, in situations of necessity and demand and in circumstances that require fundamental and utter support. Other elements in the painted decoration of the church refer to tragedy, such is the cycle dedicated to the Slaughter of the innocents at Bethlehem, the depiction of the Man of Sorrow, the image of the dead Christ in the prothesis, the symbolically designed Menologion, etc, but at the fundamentals, in the lowest register of the ensemble, there is still hope and expectation, power and



King Marko's monastery, The Man of Sorrows (detail)

support for King Marko in the painterly testament of King Marko's monastery.

Some fifteen years later, the exterior of the church of Saint Demetrius was adorned with yet another khtetorial scene depicted over the south entrance to the edifice<sup>17</sup>. Highly implicative and certainly very much explicative, it has two substantial elements – the figures of late king Vukašin and that of king Marko,

<sup>17</sup> E. Dimitrova, *The Portal to Heaven. Reaching the Gates of Immortality*, Niš & Byzantium Symposium. Collection of scientific works V, Niš 2007, p. 379.



King Marko's monastery, The Dead Christ

accompanied with bust of saintly individuals. Scholars have tried to decipher the meaning of the second khetorial scene either connecting it to some ritual practices<sup>18</sup> and dating it in concurrence with the fresco decoration in the interior, or alluding to the vassal task of king Marko<sup>19</sup>, or to his unfortunate relations with the Serbian nobility<sup>20</sup>. Regardless of the fact that the existence of two simultaneous khetorial compositions cannot be validated without a

substantial evidence, no one of the respected scholars has noticed that Marko holds the horn in a victorious manner, accompanied by the late father, i.e. the former Serbian king Vukašin. Represented as two



King Marko's monastery, King Vukašin and King Marko as commissioners

<sup>18</sup> Z. Gavrilović, *The Portrait of King Marko at Markov manastir (1376-1381)*, Byzantinische Forschungen XVI, Amsterdam 1990, pp. 415-428.

<sup>19</sup> В. Ј. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, Београд 1974, p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> И. М. Ђорђевић, *Представа краља Марка на јужној фасади цркве Светог Димитрија у Марковом манастиру*, Кралот Марко во историјата и во традицијата, Прилеп 1997, pp. 299-307.

pillars of the governmental power over the territory endangered by the Ottomans, the dual depiction of Vukašin and Marko alludes to the issue of legitimacy of the later linked to the privileges of the former. The historic momentum which inspired this second khetorial arrangement is, by all means, the battle at the Kosovo Polje and the death of Marko's political rivals, or better to say his bitter adversaries in terms of his pending rights to a royal crown and lawfulness. Furthermore, the iconographic constellation of the scene is designed in such a manner that Christ is simultaneously giving his blessing to the patron saint

in the lunette and favouring both rulers who flank the benefactor. Unlike the commissioners' composition in the interior, the external one does not need too many characters to vouch for the one who administers the law and order, since after becoming a vassal to the Ottomans he succeeded to maintain a relatively stable position in the governmental policy of the invaded territory. In that manner, the historical tragedy, the agonizing pictures of which have been depicted in the interior of the church, became bearable circumstances with striking iconographic application in the decorative exterior of King Marko's monastery.



King Marko's monastery, King Vukašin and King Marko as commissioners (detail)

Елизабета ДИМИТРОВА

### “ДОМОВИТЕ НА СВЕТИТЕ”

Четири примери за врвни византиски сликарски продукти  
(есеј за саморефлексивноста на уметничкото творештво)

#### *Резиме*

Четири примери на репрезентативни остварувања од трезорот на византиската ликовна култура секако не се доволни да се објасни методологијата на настанувањето на уметничките дела инспирирани од библиските стихови и средновековната лирика, конфигурирани според воспоставените канони и овозможени во визуелни панорами со специфични програмски, иконографски и стилски квалитети. Сепак, четирите селектирани примери можат да го отсликаат процесот на трансформацијата на првичната идеја во финален продукт на едно општо ниво – на хоризонтот на кој се согледува концептуалната рамка на творештвото, т.е. како фундаменталната идеја прераснува во визуелна структура или како идеолошката подлога се развива во ликовна визура со специфични пораки, подзнаци и постулати. Примерот со флуидната рефлексивност на нерешкото сликарство ги “оправдува” навидум забележливите недостатоци на архитектурата на црквата и ја манифестира неопходната кохабитативност на нејзините градителски и ликовни компоненти. Просторните трансферзали на нерешката сликана панорама ги почитуваат канонските цели на живописот, но ги ставаат во една нова и мошне впечатлива перспектива, дотогаш незабележана во развојот на византиската ликовна продукција. Кохабитативноста, пак, на сликарството во црквата Свети Никола во Манастир се однесува на паралелниот модус во разликите на стилската експресија на мајсторите, која создава каледиоскопска

визија на естетски поими со разновидна ликовна амплитуда. Сепак, иако различни во својата иницијална фреквенција, тие се конзистентно поврзани во стилско-ликовниот плурализам на творечката слобода и на концептуално и на контекстуално ниво. Во енциклопедискиот мултиверзум на фрескодекорацијата во Богородичината црква во Матејче доминира идејата за империјалната моќ на владетелското семејство и за кохабитацијата на државниот и на црковниот апарат во средновековна Србија. “Поделеното” ктиторство помеѓу царицата Елена и кралот Урош уште повеќе ја нагласува матријархалната улога на женскиот елемент во донаторскиот подвиг и ја акцентира функцијата на царицата во одржувањето на кохерентната структура на империјалниот фактор. Ктиторските композиции, пак, во црквата на Марковиот манастир имаат сосема поинаква улога од онаа во Матејче; тие треба да пренесат порака за феудалниот статус на самата заветница, декорирана во тешките времиња на отоманската инвазија. Оттука, ентериерниот донаторски ансамбл е “опкружен” со мноштво благородници кои ја илуминираат визуелната структура на Небесниот дворец во годините на неопходната поддршка од феудалниот апарат на Марковата држава. Екстериерната, пак, донаторска фреска го прикажува Марко како вешт администратор на територијата под негова управа, како единствен заштитник на православните традиции, како крал без официјална круна, но со доблести еднакви на крунисаните владетели.