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“BEAUTY AND NO BEAST” *Social and Cultural Perspectives of Beauty in Byzantine Painting*

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Abstract: *The paper investigates the visual constitution of physical appearance of the female representations in Byzantine mural painting of the Balkans’ in regard to the notion of beauty as a manifestation of one’s spiritual character and social function. It actually examines the manners of creation of painterly portraits of female medieval celebrities (empresses, queens, aristocratic ladies) whose role in the society was highly dependent on their feudal rank and noble status. In that regard, the iconography of their visual constellation reveals more than the customary pose and outfit of highly significant women as consorts of their dominant spouses. On the contrary, each of the selected portraits radiates with features of delicate femininity which goes beyond the canonic principles of spiritual exposure of modest beauty appropriate to Byzantine notion of female subordination. Hence, according to their social position and acquired popularity, they have gained a painterly concept adequate to their feminine exposition and womanly expression. In that sense, different categories of medieval ladies have gained different conceptualizations of their particular physical attraction. Thus, the article aims at disclosure of the social and cultural ideas which underline the definition of feminine beauty in the Byzantine Balkans.*

Beauty is in the heart of the beholder

H. G. Wells

When one thinks of beauty, one usually imagines the paramount of highest aestheticism perceivable by the eyes and enjoyable by the soul. From ancient times, through the ages of cultural rebirth up to the modern era, beauty has been the most powerful engine of human creativity, not only in the sphere of artistic expression, but in the delicate horizons of social and emotional life, as well. According to Plato and Aristotle,

beauty refers to ethical principles and human virtues¹; Leonardo da Vinci found beauty in the perfect proportions of the human body following the golden ratio of the Vitruvian Man², while modern art still searches for a paradigm that would differ from the already established fundamentals of valorization, proving that it is difficult to deny tradition only by using abstract means of expression³. However, beauty and attractiveness as its social feature have been the standard normative of perception from times immemorial, only the categories of beauty have changed through the ages transforming their visual parameters according to the cultural aspects/circumstances of the respective epoch. In that regard, the *Golden Ratio* of Beauty which originates from the Antiquity was highly popularized during the Renaissance when Leonardo and Michelangelo used this mathematical principle to compute the beauty in their masterpieces. However, during the Middle Ages beauty has been given another, more elusive and transcendent dimension of a spiritual quality appropriate to the religious and cultural climate of the era. Cultural, cognitive or evolutionary, beauty was perceived as an aura of the metaphysical isohypses of the faith that dominated the visual aesthetics of all creation – artistic and/or mundane.

¹ G. M. A. Grube, *Plato’s Theory of Beauty*, The Monist 37/2, Oxford 1927, 269-288; J. S. Marshall, *Art and Aesthetics in Aristotle*, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 12/2, Oxford 1953, 228-231; A. Kosman, *Beauty and the Good: Situating the Kalon*, Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 105, Boston 2010, 348-350.

² D. A. Brown, *Leonardo and the Idealized Portrait in Milan*, Arte Lombarda 64/4, Milano, 1983, 102-116; E. Lugli, *In cerca della perfezione: nuovi elementi per l’Uomo vitruviano di Leonardo da Vinci*, in: *Leonardo e Vitruvio: Oltre il cerchio e il quadrato* (F. Borgo Ed.), Venice 2019, 69-87.

³ T. Andina, *Contemporary Art: Judgements and Normativity*, Rivista di estetica 65, Torino 2017, 24-44.



Fig. 1 Lesnovo, Church of Saint Archangel Michael, Lady Anna Maria and Despot Jovan Oliver (1349)

In Byzantine culture, the notion of beauty has been given the attribute of divine energy according to the Neoplatonic conception transferred to medieval philosophy by Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite⁴. This, of course, refers to the ontological categories in theological tradition since the highly prolific Neoplatonic philosopher has not created a specific art theory. However, the divine luminous glory and theophanic beauty which originate from his gigantic corpus of literary works⁵ had a significant impact on the creative techniques of artistic production throughout the entire Byzantine era. Although Byzantine art was one of the most solemn and elevated modest of religious expression ever developed⁶, its scope and visual capacity encompassed depictions of historic personages, as well; those were the ones who have social power and financial means to commission the fresco ensembles of monumental painting which reproduced the religious ideas of the Christian oecumene in the most conspicuous and aesthetically appealing man-

ner. In that regard, besides the illustrations of biblical subjects, saintly images and/or figures, the fresco ensembles of Byzantine provenance encompassed the khetorial arrangements, as well⁷, picturing the historically powerful, politically influent and financially affluent individuals – both male and female, who dominated the social life of the Era.

However, one has to admit that if one looks at the catalogue of images visualized across the walls of the Byzantine churches, the first thing that comes to mind is that female characters are not in balance with the male ones⁸, at least by the number and frequency of their representations. Although women have been present in art with many distinctive roles, they have never required the prominent place occupied by their male “colleagues” and were usually represented as secondary figures accompanying their male partners or serving as visual aspects of religious iconography, thus testifying to the validity of Biblical and Gospel stories⁹. However, as some of the Byzantine schol-

⁴ E. S. Mainoldi, *Deifying Beauty. Toward the Definition of a Paradigm for Byzantine Aesthetics*, Aisthesis 11/1, Minneapolis 2018, 13-29.

⁵ See: P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A commentary on the texts and an introduction to their influence*, New York, 1993.

⁶ R. Cormack, *Byzantine Art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, 2.

⁷ E. Dimitrova, *V. I. Personalities in Medieval Macedonia, Five Paradigms of Supreme Commissionerships (11th – 14th century)*, Folia Archaeologica Balcanica III, 2015, 601.

⁸ J. G. de Matons, *La femme dans l'empire byzantin*. Histoire Mondiale de la Femme I, Paris 1967, 11–43.

⁹ E. Dimitrova, *Colourful Sparkles of Imaginary Vistas: Saintly beauty in the eyes of the beholder*, Zograf 37, 2014, 83-84.

ars have clearly shown, female images in Byzantine artistic production were the only ones adorned with pure beauty among their numerous manly companions¹⁰. This implies that the function of the female figures in Byzantine artistic practice was, by all means, dedicated to aesthetic purposes¹¹; however, their roles within the fresco arrangements served other intentions, as well. The most interesting category of female representations is, by all means, the one encompassing the donor portraits of women who belonged to the highest social circles of medieval history¹². The methodology of design in the structure of donors' arrangements, once again, reveals the domination of male characters; however, there are commissioners' compositions in which female representations are visually as imposingly attractive as their male counter partners or even much more appealing, as well¹³. In that regard, we will present four cases of khetetorial arrangements with, what appears to be, the most attractive female individuals that belong to four different social categories: female aristocrats, princesses, queens and empresses. The manner of execution of their portraits and figures within the commissioners' compositions might look very similar; yet, as this article intends to show, it is much more the element of their personality, reputation and social respectability which determined the way of visualization of their feminine characters.

Beauty case 1: file name *ravaging*

- Anna Maria Liverina
the most glamorous spouse

.....glamorous as a specimen
of unparalleled beauty

The first case refers to the Lady Anna Maria, the wife of the powerful and well respected feudal lord and diplomat John Oliver, the commissioner of the

¹⁰ E. Dimitrova and O. Zorova, *Traces de Feminite in Macedonian Middle Ages – art and archaeology*, Niš and Byzantium Symposium. The Collection of scientific works XVIII, Niš 2020, 428-429.

¹¹ E. Dimitrova, *Animae Pulchrae: Depiction of Saintly Images in Byzantine Mural painting*. Perception of Beauty (M. P. Levine Ed.), Rijeka 2017, 34-35.

¹² E. Dimitrova and O. Zorova, *Imago Historica – Thy Name is Beauty: feminine and masculine*, Niš and Byzantium Symposium. The Collection of scientific works XX, Niš 2022, 392-398.

¹³ D. M. Canko, *Woman and Beauty in Byzantine Aesthetics*. Contemplating Violence Against Women (Ed. S. Cagin, Z. Türkyilmaz, G. N. Yengul), Izmir 2020, 97-108.



Fig. 2 Lesnovo, Church of Saint Archangel Michael, Lady Anna Maria (1349)

Lenovo monastery¹⁴. Out of the two khetetorial arrangements in the church depicted in a time span of some seven years, only the later contains the breathtaking figure of Oliver's spouse due to reasons which belong to the category of his highly compromising socio-political nature¹⁵. Executed in 1349 and situated in the newly erected narthex of the temple (Fig. 1)¹⁶, the khetetorial scene embraces probably the most beautiful woman of medieval Macedonia, if not

¹⁴ И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске vlaste у доба Неманића*, Београд 1994, 153-154; С. Габелић, *Манастир Лесново. Историја и сликарство*, Београд 1998, 112-118; Б. Тодић, *Натпис уз Јована Оливера у наосу Леснова, Прилог хронологији лесновских фреска*, Зборник радова Византолошког института 38, Београд 1999/2000, 379-381; Е. Dimitrova, *The Portal to Heaven, Reaching the Gates of Immortality*, Niš and Byzantium Symposium. The Collection of scientific works V, Niš 2007, 373-374; S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L' arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, Milano 2006, 195; Е. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, in: Македонија, Милениумски културно-историски факти (П. Кузман, Е. Димитрова, Ј. Донев Eds.), Скопје 2013, 1733-1735; Е. Dimitrova, *V. I. Personalities in Medieval Macedonia, Five Paradigms of Supreme Commissionerships (11th – 14th century)*, Folia Archaeologica Balcanica III, Skopje 2015, 615-617; S. Gabelić, *Rise of late feudalism – the endowments of the Serbian nobility*, in: Byzantine Heritage and Serbian Art II. Sacral Art of the Serbian Lands in the Middle Ages, (D. Vojvodić and D. Popović Eds.), Belgrade 2016, 346-347.

¹⁵ E. Dimitrova, *The Portal to Heaven. Reaching the Gates of Immortality*, 373-374; Eadem, *V. I. Personalities in Medieval Macedonia. Five Paradigms of Supreme Commissionerships (11th – 14th Century)*, 613-617.

¹⁶ С. Габелић, *Манастир Лесново. Историја и сликарство*, 167-172; И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске vlaste у доба Немањића*, 159-160; S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L' arte medievale*



Fig. 3 Lesnovo, Church of Saint Archangel Michael, Lady Anna Maria (1349)

much wider. If one looks at this painting with an eye that has been trained for comprehensive approach to inter-spatial arrangement of the displayed figures, one can tell that, according to the dimensions of the images of the two spouses, Anna Maria is positioned slightly behind her husband's figure. This was, by all means, not a misfortunate painterly coincidence since the khetorial ensemble in the Lesnovo narthex (as in the case of the one depicted in the naos) had a very decisively constructed political message¹⁷. Regardless of that, as well as of the imposingly pictured Jovan Oliver's portrait with his lavishly designed costume and all its accessories¹⁸, Anna Maria's image is fascinatingly beautiful, thus aesthetically not

dal IX al XV secolo, 195-196; E. Димитрова, С. Коруповски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1739-1740.

¹⁷ С. Габелић, *Манастир Лесново. Историја и сликарство*, 172; E. Dimitrova, *The Portal to Heaven. Reaching the Gates of Immortality*. 374.

¹⁸ for useful information on feminine costumes, see: T. Dawson, *Propriety, Practicality and Pleasure: the parameters of Women's Dress in Byzantium, A.D. 1000-*



Fig. 4 Psača, Church of Saint Nicholas, Lady Vladislava (1365-1371)

falling behind the striking portrait of the pompous despot at all.

Actually, if we apply the modern scholarly criteria of Dr Kendra Schmidt¹⁹, founded upon the ancient *Golden ratio* of beauty, the despotess Anna Maria

1200, in: *Byzantine Women. Varieties of Experience*, A.D. 800-1200 (L. Garland Ed.), Milton Park 2006, 77-90.

¹⁹ K. Schmid, D. Marx, A. Samal, *Computation of a face attractiveness index based on neoclassical canons, symmetry and golden ratios*, *Pattern Recognition* 41/8, Amsterdam 2008, 2710-2717.



Fig. 5 Kučevište, Church of Presentation of the Holy Virgin, Lady Vladislava (1332-1337)

would be the catalogue example of a perfectly beautiful female facial character (**Fig. 2**). In other words, if one applies the mentioned criteria in which the Golden ratio measures 1.6 (which is considered extraordinarily beautiful), one will get the visual features of Jovan Oliver's wife with precision of 100%. Oval shaped facial perimeter, almond shaped eyes, arched eyebrows, high cheek bones, thin nose, small and round lips, fair complexion and a slender neckline constitute a dream like image of a young woman in a prime time of her femininity. Tall and slender, elegant and graceful, long fingered and strikingly gorgeous, she certainly does not fall behind her husband neither in regard to her glamorous outfit, nor her valuable accessories (**Fig. 3**)²⁰. Namely, the epithet *basilissa* which accompanies her name in the khetorial inscription is not merely a formal denomination of her high ranking feudal title; it is more of a label of her exquisite feminine character that can be compared to those of imperial status.

²⁰ E. Dimitrova and O. Zorova, *Imago Historica – Thy Name is Beauty: feminine and masculine*, 392-393, 394-495.



Fig. 6 Saint Sophia, Chapel of Saint John the Baptist, Ohrid, Lady Anna Maria and Despot Jovan Oliver

Compared to spouses of other feudal lords pictured with intention for an accentuated exposition of feminine beauty and style, Anna Maria Liverina outclasses all of them by far more qualities than her pure physical appearance: the fashionable Vladislava - Sebastocrator Vlatko's wife from the church of Saint Nicholas in Psača (**Fig. 4**)²¹ by the outstandingly noble stance of her figure, the tall and voguish duchess Vladislava from the temple dedicated to the Holy Virgin in Kučevište (**Fig. 5**)²² by the imposing gracefulness of her corporeal posture, the overly embellished young wife of the nobleman Gradislav from the Treskavec monastery²³ by the cordial serenity of

²¹ F. Kämpfer, *Die Stiftungskomposition der Nikolauskirche in Psača – Zeichentheoretische Beschreibung eines politischen Bildes*, Zeitschrift für Balkanologie X, 2, München 1974, 42-50; И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 173; E. Dimitrova, O. Zorova, *Imago Historica – Thy Name is Beauty: feminine and masculine*, 395-398.

²² З. Расолкоска-Николовска, *О ктиторским портретима у цркви Свете Богородице у Кучевишту*, Зограф 16, Београд 1985, 41-53; И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 135; E. Dimitrova, *The Portal to Heaven. Reaching the Gates of Immortality*. 370.

²³ М. Глигоријевић, *Сликарство тепчије Градислава у манастиру Трескавцу*, Зограф 5, Београд 1974, 48-51. И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 166; E. Dimitrova, Ph. Niewöhner, R.

her unimposing carnal motion, etc. Similar impression is radiating from her khetorial portrait executed in the chapel dedicated to Saint John the Baptist erected within the cathedral church of Saint Sophia in Ohrid²⁴ (**Fig. 6**), although the facial features of her image in this edifice are quite “gone with the wind” of painterly distraction. However, her tall and slim silhouette, in this case ennobled with elegant courtly gestures, is positioned in line with the figure of her sturdy and masculine spouse, thus presenting her with equal ceremonial function in the khetorial ritual as the despot Jovan Oliver himself. If we keep in mind that the two matrimonial partners are wearing the exact same costume (only hers is revealing a slender physique, while his discloses a monolithic figure of an athletic nature), than it becomes obvious that she is pictured as his feminine counterpart: aesthetically flawless and visually irresistible.

Beauty case 2: file name *delicate*

- Simonis
more a princess than a queen

.....*delicate as the whiter shade
of pale of scrupulous femininity*

The second example refers to the fifth wife of the Serbian King Milutin, the Byzantine princess Simonis. Caught in the “military fire” between the ambitious Serbian monarch who penetrated the Byzantine territory conquering the town of Skopje and moving further south and the Byzantine Emperor Andronicus II who desperately wanted to keep his remaining Balkan domains, the young toddler Simonis, being only five years of age, acquired the role of a sole solution to the crisis in the Empire²⁵. Doomed to leave her father’s court and travel to her unknown destiny in the expanding Serbian monarchy, Simonis became “the tool” used to save what has been left of Andronicus’ diminishing power over the Balkans after the furious invasion of the Serbian King from 1282. Marrying a man forty two years her senior, who has already been in four previous matrimonial relationships, all of which were politically established and exhausted,

Paligora, G. Velkov, *Seven Churches in the Regions of Pelagonia, Mariovo and Prespa*, Skopje 2019, 97.

²⁴ Ц. Грозданов, *Охридското сидно сликарство од XIV век*, Охрид 1980, 62-63; И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 158; Е. Dimitrova, G. Velkov, I. Pandžak Pineva, *Seven Churches in Ohrid*, Skopje 2022, 51.

²⁵ Г. Острогорски, *Историја на Византија*, Скопје 1992, 592.



Fig. 7 Gračanica, Church of the Annunciation, Queen Simonis (1321)

Simonis is, by all means, one of the most cunningly abused women in history, not only by her husband, but her own biological creator, as well. Such a feminine misfortune was probably not a very significant issue in medieval history when arranged marriages were a standard obligation, yet this one did not produced nor offspring, neither a promising future for the junior bride. Although she became Serbian queen at a very young age due to the peace treaty concluded between her father, the Byzantine emperor and the Serbian monarch²⁶, she remained only a *princess* at the Serbian court having no connections whatsoever with the politics of her husband and/or the social life in her own surroundings²⁷.

Regardless of the historic circumstances, in the fresco arrangement of the Gračanica monastery²⁸ (**Fig. 7**) Simonis is represented as one of the two powerful columns of the state – the old ruler and his

²⁶ Л. Мичега, *Краљ Милутин, биографија светог српског краља*, Београд 2017, 151.

²⁷ More than enough proof of her social introversion is her own private chapel the stairway towards which was built in the south-western pillar under the dome of the church in the Gračanica monastery; no one else had the access to it.

²⁸ Б. Тодић, *Грачаница. Сликарство*, Београд – Приштина, 1988, 170-173; Idem, *Serbian Medieval Painting. The Age of King Milutin*, Belgrade 1999, 56-57.



Fig. 8 Gračanica, Church of the Annunciation, Queen Simonis (1321)

young bride brought from the Byzantine Empire to fortify the alliance between the two political powers in the Balkans. Within this khetorial ensemble, Simonis is depicted facing forward, with pale complexion, oval face with a long and narrow nose, small mouth and arched eyebrows²⁹. Open crown, decorated with rubies, emeralds and pearls, as well as massive and luxurious golden earrings with pearls beautify her image (**Fig. 8**). In terms of painterly approach, her face is represented idealized, with noble character and zero facial expression. The figure is tall and slender, but without any hints of anatomy beneath the luxurious garment. Covered head to toe with the delicately woven, as well as tastefully ornamented fabric of the glamorous outfit, she presents herself as a conservative female offspring from the house of the Palaeologans, *sacrificed* for the dramatically retrieved wellbeing of the Empire.

In comparison to the portrait encompassed by the commissioners' scene in the church of Saint George in Staro Nagoričino³⁰ (**Fig. 9**), depicted a couple of years



Fig. 9 Staro Nagoričino, Church of Saint George, Queen Simonis and King Milutin (1317/18)

earlier, Simonis from Gračanica is thinner, paler and more elegant. Although in both representations, she wears similar garments and almost the same jewelry, the princess in the Gračanica looks more lavishing due to the tailor made costume in comparison to her dress in Staro Nagoričino created more traditionally. Also, in Staro Nagoričino, Simonis' picture is highly conventional, while in Gračanica, it is embellished with a hint of greater femininity in the exposition of her slender and elegantly positioned figure, radiating with melancholic feminine energy of a young Byzantine princess who has been brought to console the aged King Milutin. If one looks at another portrait representation of Simonis, executed in the King's church at Studenica (**Fig. 10**) as her earliest depiction as a Serbian queen³¹, damages caused to the painting aside, one should conclude that there are no noticeable distinctions in the portrayal of the young lady, whatsoever. Falling a victim to traditional and most conventional painterly approach to her feminine attributes, if any, Simonis in Staro Nagoričino is a copy of herself from Studenica, while in Gračanica she is a copy of herself from Staro Nagoričino; only in the

²⁹ Б. Тодић, *Грачаница. Сликарство*, Fig. 105; Idem, *Serbian Medieval Painting. The Age of King Milutin*, Fig. XXVII; D. Pavlović, *Queen Symonis*, in: *Serbian Artistic Heritage in Kosovo and Metohija, Identity, Significance, Vulnerability* (M. Marković, D. Vojvodić Eds.), Belgrade 2017, 218-219.

³⁰ Б. Тодић, *Старо Нагоричино*, Београд 1993, 118-

121; Idem, *Serbian Medieval Painting. The Age of King Milutin*, 55-56.

³¹ G. Babic, *The King's Church of Studenica*, Novi Sad and Studenica Monastery, 2000, 200; B. Todić, *Serbian Medieval Painting. The Age of King Milutin*, 56.



Fig. 10 Studenica, King's church, Queen Simonis and King Milutin (1313/14)

case of Gračanica, she is pictured in a different ideological context – not as a highly formal companion to her husband (Studenica, Staro Nagoričino), but as a constitutive component of the matrimonial partnership of the Serbian Kingdom.

Beauty case 3: file name *socially accepted*

- Queen Jelena

the matriarch of the Monarchy

.....sustainable as the problem
solving matrimony

The third example encompasses the portraits of the Bulgarian princess and wife of the Serbian monarch Stephan Dušan, Queen Jelena, the human link that established centuries long political cooperation between Serbian and Bulgarian states³², as well as their productive and sustainable political alliance. However, contrary to the matrimonial mismatch of princess Simonis nuptials, both in age and sentiments, Jelena's marriage to King Dušan was not only successful in political terms, but in regard to the social role of his beautiful and ambitious wife, as well³³. Most probably it has to do something with Serbia being in the *golden age* of its reign over a large portion of the Balkans in the time when the throne was occupied by Stephan Dušan and Jelena as a ruling couple, a match

made maybe not in Heaven, but in an ideal earthly political establishment, for sure. Therefore, Queen Jelena became an integral component of historical, socio-political, as well as visual character of the Serbian state in the early 30ties of the 14th century and remained a significant individual within the frames of Serbian public image in internal and diplomatic affairs alike.

In that sense, within the khetorial ensembles, Jelena is represented as an equal partner of the Serbian monarch in constitution of the two columns of the State³⁴, sharing political authority with her husband and producing Dušan's only son and heir, the future King and Emperor, Stephan Uroš (**Fig. 11**). Tall and elegant, beautiful and charmingly presentable, she was, by all means, a desirable character not only in regard to her social status and political capacity, but her highly noticeable feminine attributes, as well. In that regard, in some portraits, she is depicted as a true Matriarch of the Serbian Monarchy, flanked with the two eligible successors of the throne: her son, young King Stephan Uroš and her husband's half brother Simeon Siniša³⁵; yet, in the portrait executed in the paraklession of the Dečani monastic center she does not restrain herself from showing warm sentiments toward her son by gently petting his crowned head and manifesting more than a motherly concern to highlight

³² М. Ал. Пурковић, *Јелена, жена цара Душана*, Диселдорф 1975, 3.

³³ Р. Михаљчић, *Крај српског царства*, Београд 1989, 24.

³⁴ as in the church dedicated to the Annunciation in Dobrun, cf. И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 144.

³⁵ as in the South paraklession of Dečani, cf. Д. Војводић, *Портрети владара, црквених достојанственика у наосу и припрати*, Зидно сликарство манастира Дечана, Београд 1995, 268-270.



Fig. 11 Dobrun, Church of the Annunciation, Queen Jelena, Young King Uroš and King Dušan (1343)



Fig. 12 Dečani, Church of Christ Pantocrator, Queen Jelena with Young King Uroš and Simeon Siniša (1345)

Uroš's hereditary advantage over his uncles' kinship aspirations (**Fig. 12**). Her fair complexion, hazel eyes and luscious lips, but most of all her dignified facial expression, complement her tender and loving, yet cautiously intuitive feminine character.

Another aspect of Jelena's femininity can be associated with the slightly elusive family ensemble combined with the Deesis scene and depicted on

the northern wall of the church dedicated to Saint Nicholas in the village of Ljuboten³⁶. Spotlessly proportional in every aspect of its depiction, the reigning triad visualizes the epitome of historical and political harmony of the Serbian state; yet the mother Jelena and the son Uroš have received equal dimensions of their carnal portraiture regardless of their significant age difference (**Fig. 13**). In this case, she not only supports her ambitious husband who will soon be promoted to an emperor, but her young son who will ascend to his regal throne, as well. In that regard and in line with the proportional arrangement of the family ensemble, the portrayal of Queen Jelena is strict and traditional, solemn and conventional – appropriate to the feminine role she acquires as a matriarch of the Monarchy soon to be promoted to Empire. Somewhat later (probably less than a year) in Saint George temple in Pološko³⁷, one can see another arrangement – this time seemingly disproportional, yet highly decisive in its visual symbolism (**Fig. 14**). Associative of the forthcoming advancement of the Serbian monarchy into Empire³⁸, the picture itself is ceremonial and glam-

³⁶ З. Расолкоска-Николовска, *О владарским портретима у Љуботену и времену настанка зидне декорације*, Зограф 17, Београд 1986, 45-53; И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 146; S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 181; Е. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1718.

³⁷ Ц. Грозданов, Д. Ђорнаков, *Историјски портрети у Полошком I*, Зограф 14, Београд 1983, 60-67; И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 148; Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, 178; Е. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1716-1717.

³⁸ E. Dimitrova, *The Portal to Heaven. Reaching the Gates of Immortality*, 371.



Fig. 13 Ljuboten, Church of Saint Nicholas, Queen Jelena (1345)



Fig. 14 Pološko, Church of Saint George, King Dušan, Young King Uroš and Queen Jelena (1345)

orous; Queen Jelena, depicted in its southern portion, is so tall and graceful, so elegant and dignified that one can mistake her not for an empress, but for a real, living and majestic wonder woman. The same year, however, she became the center of the composition in the khetorial ensemble executed in the porch of the church dedicated to Saint Nicholas in the Bolničko area in Ohrid³⁹, ennobling the composition not only with her physical beauty, but essential visual charisma, as well (Fig. 15).

Beauty case 4: file name superior

- Empress Jelena

the influential consort

.....authoritative as an aesthetic
paradigm of visual glory

When Serbian Queen Jelena was crowned an Empress⁴⁰, she became politically the most power-

ful and socially the most influential woman in the Balkans. Being positioned at the top of her historic career which will continue long after her husband, Serbian Emperor Stephan Dušan died in 1355, she gained a chance and a number of historic opportunities to express her femininity in the most desirable, yet most efficient way. Such an influential position which encompassed authority, ability, experience and good looks acquired an appropriate visual interpretation, as well. In the khetorial ensembles executed after April 1346, she gained a position of a true and solid founding component of the imperial State. Nevertheless, in cases in which the political magnitude of her husband had to be publicly shown⁴¹, Jelena supports the Emperor Dušan with all of her good looks, elegance and gracefulness as his sincere consort, political collaborator and loving partner (Fig. 16). This is particularly apparent in the khetorial arrangement in the narthex of the Lesnovo monastery in the constellation of which the imperial family is situated in the second zone of the donors' ensemble⁴² (Fig. 17).

³⁹ Ц. Грозданов, *Прилози познавању средњовековне уметности Охрида*, Зборник за ликовне уметности 2, Нови Сад 1966, 207-214; В. Ј. Ђурић, *Три догађаја у српској држави XIV века и њихов одјек у сликарству*, Зборник за ликовне уметности 4, Нови Сад 1968, 76-87; Ц. Грозданов, *Охридското јидно сликарство од XIV век*, 54-58; Е. Dimitrova, G. Velkov, I. Pandžak Pineva, *Seven Churches in Ohrid*, 99.

⁴⁰ К. Јиречек, *Историја Срба I*, Београд 1978, 222; М. Благојевић, *Идеја и стварност Душановог царевања*, *Историја српског народа I*, Београд 1981, 527; Б. Панов, *Средновековна Македонија 3*, Скопје 1985, 95; А. Атанасовски, *Македонија во XIV век*, Тетово 2009, 52.

⁴¹ as on the north wall of the narthex in the monastery of Dečani, cf. Д. Војводић, *Портрети владара, црквених достојанственика у наосу и припрати*, 285-286.

⁴² С. Габелић, *Манастир Лесново. Историја и*



Fig. 15 Church of Saint Nicholas Bolnički, Ohrid, King Dušan, Queen Jelena, Young King Uroš, Saint Sava and Saint Symeon

Depicted slightly inferior to her husband (**Fig. 18**), in the same way that Anna Maria Liverina is pictured in comparison to her spouse, the despot Jovan Oliver (**Fig. 1**), Empress Jelena is portrayed in a manner that visually reflects feminine support and wholehearted encouragement in the most appropriate way.

Beautiful, elegant and dignified, tall, slender and graceful, Empress Jelena epitomizes what a confident, ambitious and accomplished female character looked like in the social atmosphere of the medieval world. As we have already mentioned, far from losing anything of her feminine features in regard to her physical appearance, fashionable qualities and/or womanly posture, she stands proud in support of her husband, the most powerful ruler in Balkans' history, even if that sometimes acquires visual subordination to Dušan's portrayal within the parameters of the painterly procedure. However, she managed to commission her own mausoleum church, apart from that of her husband, which, by default, speaks in favor of her social charisma, political sustainability and personal self-assurance. Within the khetorial composition in her mausoleum temple⁴³, she holds the

architectural replica of her endowment with her son, King Uroš instead of her husband, Emperor Dušan, thus manifesting her influential and highly significant status of an imperial matriarch (**Fig. 19**).

The donor's composition in the church thoughtfully dedicated to the Dormition of the Holy Virgin in Matejčec⁴⁴ represents a festal assembly of the principles of the Serbian State and Patriarchate, reflecting the imperial character of the endowment. On the other hand, the inclusion of the khetorial characters within the Deesis conceptual arrangement reveals the funeral context of the painterly program of the temple intended to dominate the Žegligovo region as a colossal mausoleum of the Serbian empress. Although the rough centuries of wars and military disasters have nearly erased the facial features of Jelena's khetorial image, her firm figure dressed in her traditional

сликарство, 169; И. М. Ђорђевић, *Зидно сликарство српске властеле у доба Немањића*, 160; S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, Fig. 142.

⁴³ Е. Димитрова, *Манастир Матејче*, Скопје 2002,

185-190; Eadem, *On the New Dating of the Fresco Ensemble of the Church of the Holy Virgin in Matejče*, *Balkanoslavica* 30-31, Prilep 2002, 95-103; Eadem, *The Church of the Holy Mother of God at Matejče*, *Skopje* 2016, 7-8; Eadem, *The Portal to Heaven. Reaching the Gates of Immortality*, 374-375; S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*. 178; Е. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, 1730.

⁴⁴ Е. Димитрова, *О ктиторској композицији и новом датовању фресака у цркви Свете Богородице у Матејчу*, *Зограф* 28, Београд 2003, 181-190.



Fig. 16 Dečani, Church of Christ Pantocrator, Imperial family (1346/7)

purple garment decorated with gold embroidery and *fleur-de-lis* ornaments stands monolithic and proud, ennobled with elegance and dignity, gracefulness and motherly care. Keeping the courtly stature of her previous imperial portraits, Jelena in Matejčce has another matriarchal function – to promote her son and heir who, in the meantime became a King, thus an official co-ruler of the vast Serbian state with his father, the Emperor Dušan. Hence, the khetorial arrangement of characters in the donors' composition in Matejčce not only denotes the unbreakable cohesion of political power and ecclesiastical rule within the Serbian empire; it portrays the One who is the firm link of that indestructible cohesion in the figure of the loving mother, as well as loyal and gorgeous imperial consort Jelena (Fig. 20).

As our examples of represented female celebrities have clearly shown, feminine characters gained very distinctive places among the khetorial individuals portrayed in the Byzantine fresco painting from the 14th century Balkans. Attractive as representatives of the aesthetically superior gender, the female figures in the mentioned churches were glowing with sparkles of attraction in the eyes of the beholder who entered the temples in pursuit of religious assistance. Radiating with charm and dignity, shining with elegance and gracefulness and impressing with courtesy and manners, the historic female characters have not only beautified the vision of the congregation, but have also given their most presentable appearance to the perception of aesthetic horizon of the medieval painterly production. The ravishing beauty, as well

as the fashionable and extravagant styling of the despotess Ana Maria, the mild mannered character of princess Simonis, the radiating glow of Queen Jelena and, particularly, the powerful femininity of Serbian empress Jelena in the painting of the above mentioned monuments, are the main parameters of the catalogue of pure beauty, feminine energy and aesthetic charm created in the frescoes of the medieval Balkans. As one could see, in those pictures beauty was not only a formal shape of physical attractiveness characteristic of the female gender, yet socially recognizable feature of those who set examples for everyone: women of virtues and morality, of noble breeding and courtly experience, of well

behavior and good fortune, of social significance and public approval and of astonishing delightfulness and charismatic captivation.



Fig. 17 Lesnovo, Church of Saint Archangel Michael, Empress Jelena and Emperor Dušan (1349)



Fig. 18 Lesnovo, Church of Saint Archangel Michael, Khetetorial ensemble (1349)



Fig. 19 Matejče, Church of Dormition of the Holy Mother of God, Empress Jelena and King Uroš (ca. 1352)



Fig. 20 Matejče, Church of Dormition of the Holy Mother of God, Empress Jelena, King Uroš and Emperor Dušan (ca. 1352)

Елизабета ДИМИТРОВА

“УБАВИЦАТА БЕЗ СВЕРОТ”

Социјални и културни аспекти на убавината во византиското сликарство

Резиме

Кога се зборува за убавината како поим, вообичаено се мисли на најделикатната естетска доблест во творештвото која постои како категорија достапна за филозофска анализа, но и за визуелен восхит. Иако параметрите за *евалуација* на убавината се менувале со промената на социо-историските прилики карактеристични за различните поднебја, таа никогаш не го изгубила квалитетот на основен критериум за естетски дискурс од антиката сè до модерната доба, иако денес промените во сфаќањето на убавината се далеку подинамични од сите изминати историски епохи. Во византиското сликарство, неоплатонските идеи и размислувањата на Плотин ја дефинираат *црвената линија* на убавото, но кога се зборува за убавината на женските претстави, особено на благородничките и на владетелките, таа линија се надградува со деликатната нота на визуелната префинетост диктирана од етаблираните социјални норми и облагородена со топлите нијанси на дворската женственост. Оттука, кога се анализираат портретите на една од најпривлечните дами во македонското средновековно сликарство, втората сопруга на моќниот феудален господар Јован Оливер, се забележува нејзината префинета субординираност во однос на сопругот во насликаните ктиторски аранжмани; сепак не може да не се констатира дека таа го претставува каталошкиот пример на научните анализи на убавината спроведувани во последната деценија на Универзитетот во Невбраска, каде биостатистичарите го пресметале златниот сооднос на елементите во фацијалната убавина на женското лице – математички пресек кој би ги потврдил фацијалните квалитети на деспотката Ана Марија Ливерина. Наспроти нејзината отмена женственост, принцезата Симонида Палеолог, жртвеното јагне на Византиската имерија

во опаѓање, е прикажана со девствена појава која ја рефлектира нејзината социјална субмисивност, непланирана, но изнудена, за неа безизлезно фатална, но политички оправдана. Сосема понаков пример манифестира бугарската принцеза Елена, младенката на српскиот крал Душан, која ја претставува есенцијалната алка на историското пријателство помеѓу српската и бугарската држава од времето на склучувањето на монархистичкиот брак сè до денешни денови. Нејзиното политичко влијание, заедно со високата и стамена фигура, правилните фацијални црти и елегантната доминантност во ктиторските аранжмани, се видливи на начин кој проектира жена со голема социјална харизма – вистински матријарх на Српското кралство и личност достојна за неодминлива историска почит. Некои од нејзините портрети одразуваат матримонијална поддршка, други мајчинска грижа и ранливост, трети ја прикажуваат како функционален елемент од владеечката гарнитура итн. Со нејзиното крунисување за царица, портретите на Елена добиваат нова естетска и социо-културна димензија: таа не ја губи улогата на матријарх; напротив, нејзината матријатрхална одговорност прераснува во конститутивна компонента на грижата за семејното наследство. Тоа особено се забележува во ктиторските портрети насликани во Дечанскиот манастир и во нејзиниот мавзолеј во Матејче, во кој царицата Елена го симболизира плодното јадро на српската империја со лик на лојална сопруга, создателка на империјалниот наследник и грижлива мајка, посветена православна верничка и горлива поддржувачка на српските религиозни култови, влијателна владетелка и господарка на своите поданици, горда и привлечна жена.