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TALES FROM IMAGINARY ARCHIVES:
painterly, biblical and otherwise

Key words: *Byzantine painting, Kurbinovo, King Marko's monastery, Leonardo da Vinci, Symbolism.*

Abstract: *the paper examines the ways and manners of creation of visual narratives based on Biblical sources that have been depicted in another fashion - different, yet not distinctive from their textual background. It investigates the artistic approach towards significant subjects of biblical nature and their visual articulation born out of personal invention and/or freedom of imagination. In that regard, the paper tries to disclose the motifs behind some of the most popular illustrations of themes described in the verses of the Gospels which do not coincide soundly with their textual frameworks. In other words, it shows how much a prominent subject matter can be modified in order to satisfy the notion of visual alternation of well known Biblical chapters.*

The saying *every picture tells a story* is commonly used to express the idea that visualization of certain subjects reaches our mind faster than their existing narratives. It is also true that each picture has a different approach to the process of visualization, except some pictures tell more than one story. That process, by all means, encompasses the initial ideological or emotional connection of the artist to the subject matter regardless of how complex or complicated that subject matter can be. In the millennia long artistic activity, from the cave painting up to the invention of abstract art, the pictures have been witnessing the social, emotional and/or aesthetical relationship of the humanity to the ongoing circumstances of different nature. Still, in the 21st century art historians cannot explain the accurate purpose of the monumentally depicted zoomorphic representations on the walls of the Altamira cave¹, nor decipher how the images of the imperial couple appear in the mirror placed in the backdrop of Velásquez' master-piece entitled *Las Meninas*².

¹ D. S. Whitley, *Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit: the Origin of Creation and Belief*, Buffalo 2009, 35.

² G. Kubler, *Three Remarks on the Meninas*, *The Art Bulletin* 48/2, Milton Park 1966, 212-214; M. M. Kahr,

This is simply due to the fact that no matter how one tries to comprehend the essence of the picture using logical parameters and rational approach, one can never penetrate into the depths of artist's personal imagination which is his most intimate feature, exclusive to him and him only. Even if the artist is inspired by a literary source or a canonic text, such are the verses of the Bible, he envisages the story in a particular way characteristic of his own imaginative skills and painterly approach. Hence, the same subject appropriates different iconographic assemblage in the works of different authors which makes the artistic procedure more attractive for comparison or discourse. This is highly attributive to the Biblical subjects both in the medieval and later painting. What is more peculiar, the same artist can paint the same subject multiple times which can be observed in Byzantine fresco painting whereat the artist was commissioned to execute similar fresco programs in several churches. However, the executions were never the same no matter how similar they might look to an unprofessional observer. That is due to the desire for an authentic creation distinctive of all great painters in human history, thus, one can recognize the painter's handwriting, yet his creative imagination as an integral part of his artistic credo will never allow the *copy and paste* principle.

On the other hand, the observer can look at the painting in the most individual manner. When acquainted with the subject, the observer can recognize the basic matrix of artistic visualization originating from the textual synopsis. Still, if one looks at the picture as a visual assemblage of the basic matrix (description) + additional components (imagination)

Velásquez and Las Meninas, *The Art Bulletin* 57/2, Milton Park 1975, 225-246; W. D. Carr, *Painting and Reality: the Art and Life of Velásquez*, in: *Velásquez* (W. D. Carr and X. Bray Eds.), London 2006, 46-47.

+ finishing touches (articulation), than the impression created by that picture is threefold. If one tries to compare the same subject in several different pictures, one will notice that the description is similar, the imagination varies, while the articulation is exceptionally diversified. In other words, the biblical event has happened in a certain way, it has been perceived by the artist in a personal mode and visualized in an original manner. This triad is the constitution of all art works regardless of their chronological reference, social milieu or aesthetic character. It builds the structure of each picture no matter how simple or how complicated it is: from the austere Paleolithic cave painting to the luxuriously designed Baroque spectacles and later. In other words, the artist chooses a common theme, through the painterly procedure gives that theme a particular framework and ennobles it with a genuine finishing touch. Hence, this process starts from the familiar ground, goes through the distinctive paths and ends up in the original sphere of artistic creation. However, in the course of that process the balance of the three elements in the triad can be disrupted and not always to the advantage of imagination and articulation, but the description and vice versa. Here are some examples to verify the claim.

Exotic tale: *the dance of Salome*

Probably the most romanticized event in the painterly expression, described in the verses of the New Testament, is the tragic destiny of John the Baptist, decapitated by King Herod Antipas (Gospel according to Mathew: 14, 3-11; Gospel according to Mark: 6, 17-28). The Gospel stories clearly indicate that the moral principles of John the Forerunner targeted towards the royal family have caused his arrest and martyr death. However, the feminine dimension of the tale is crucial in the narration, suggesting that a great assistance to the punishment of the Baptist was given by the stepdaughter of the Judean King, young Salome³. Hence, in the verses of the Gospels (Mathew: 14, 8; Mark: 6, 24-25) the mother – daughter couplet is counterpoised to the king and prophet duo, yet in the end, the first pair succeeds in their intention, accentuating the feminine aspect to the outcome of the story. In the Byzantine painting, in the frames of which John the Forerunner is one of the most popular saintly images, biblical narration is condensed and executed in a form of a winged figure holding his severed head on a platter with an allusion to his role as a divine messenger⁴. In this instance, the

³ *Josephus' Jewish Antiquities* XVIII, 5, 4.

⁴ С. Габелић, *Манастир Лесново. Историја и сли-*



Fig. 1 Gustave Moreau, *Salome dancing before Herod* (1874/75)

tale is compressed in a single image of the prophet martyred at the court of the Judean monarch. Somewhat more narrative manner is employed in the picture which depicts the decapitation usually included in the illustrated cycles dedicated to the Forerunner⁵. Hence, Byzantine artistic expression has not only marginalized the events leading to Baptist's death, but completely denied the feminine participation in the event. Western painting, particularly in the age of Baroque art, has produced much more dramatic spectacles of the beheading giving the event a dimension of an ancient tragedy⁶.

The age of Romanticism brought a new meaning to the Christian subjects in artistic expression, New Testament themes including⁷. Putting an emphasis

карство, Београд 1998, Fig. 100; Д. Војводић, *Зидно сликарство цркве Светог Ахилија у Ариљу*, Београд 2005, Pl. 20; М. Марковић, *Свети Никита код Скопља. Задужбина краља Милутина*, Београд 2015, fig. on pg. 238, color plate 76.

⁵ Ц. Грозданов, *Охридското зидно сликарство од XIV век*, Охрид 1980, Fig. 41.

⁶ R. Vodret, *Caravaggio. L'uomo, l'artista*, Torino 2018, 223-224.

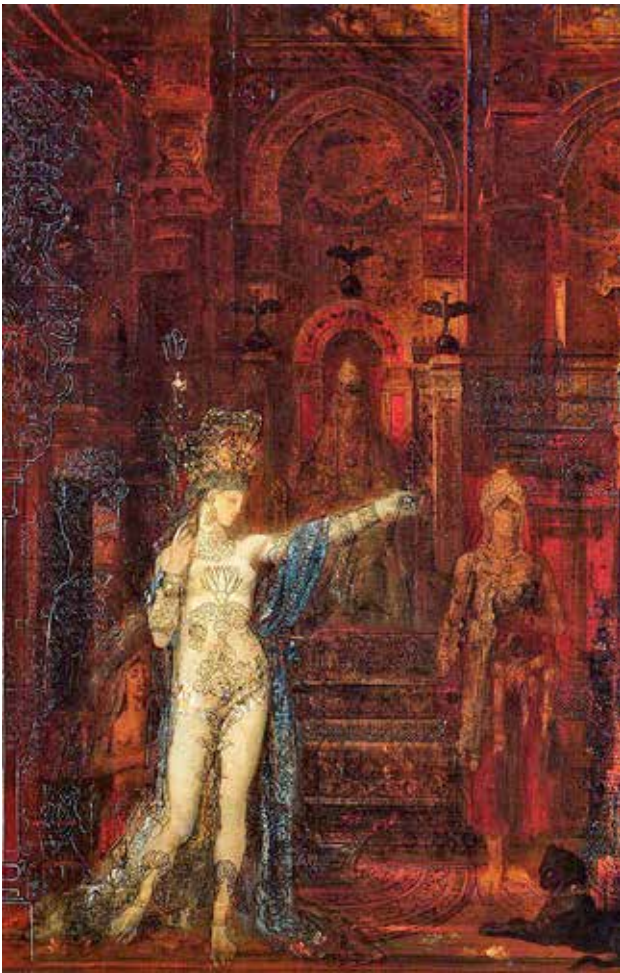


Fig. 2 Gustave Moreau, *Tattooed Salome* (1875)

on emotion and individualism, the *romantic* era was characterized by strong inclination towards past historic periods, Middle Ages being much more enticing than Antiquity⁸. Biblical subjects became a sphere of emotional dramas transformed into luxuriously articulated painterly spectacles⁹. One of the themes that gained a great deal of interest among the painters was the tale of how John the Baptist ended his life since it encompassed vivid emotions such as sorrow, suffering and tragedy. Yet, in the age of romanticism the beheading of the Forerunner was replaced by the much more alluring picture of young Salome dancing at Herod's banquet. Hence, the sorrowful image of the decapitated prophet and/or the ferocious scene of his decapitation were substituted with the visually irresistible feminine aspect of seductive dancing. Moreover, the name of the dance as the one with *the seven veils* given by literary authors¹⁰, thoroughly en-

⁷ F. Novotny, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe 1780-1880*, London 1971, 112-122.

⁸ Both in painting and literature, cf. L. Damrosch, *Adventures in English Literature*, Orlando 1985, 405-420.

⁹ Ph. Jullian, *The Symbolists*, London 1973, 89, 102, 108, 115, 122-123.

¹⁰ T. Bentley, *Sisters of Salome*, Lincoln 2005, 30.



Fig. 3 Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition* (1876)

compassed the frivolous character of the dance, alluding to its exotic nature. This feature of Salome's performance can be seen in several art works from the period in question.

One of the painters who has dedicated several of his art works to the subject of Salome's dance in the most imaginative manner is the French symbolist Gustave Moreau¹¹. In his picture from 1874, entitled *Salome dancing before Herod* (Fig. 1), it seems that the dance has just begun with the slow motion of the girl who is reaching towards the king seated on his royal throne. In front of the luxuriously elaborated backdrop, she is performing tentatively while her wavy outfit, long and layered, gently sways around her slender figure. Very similar scenery is depicted in Moreau's *Tattooed Salome* from 1875 (Fig. 2), although, in this instance, her body is liberated from the clothing, revealing the perfect anatomy of her seductive physique. The following year, Gustave Moreau has painted the next episode of his exotic sequel, named *The Apparition* (Fig. 3), whereat she claims the head of the Baptist placed in a ray of light

¹¹ R. L. Delevoy, *Symbolists and Symbolism*, New York 1978, 247; P. L. Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau*, New York 1994, 309.



Fig. 4 Gustave Moreau, *Salome Carrying the Head of John the Baptist on a Platter* (1876)

in the center of the scene, while Herod is seated in the left portion of the composition. Part of the veiled garment is wrapped around Salome's arms, yet her desirable figure is exposed enough to reveal the character of her dancing performance. The last stage of the tale appeared the same year under the title *Salome Carrying the Head of John the Baptist on a Platter* (Fig. 4) as an expected closure of the thrilling event. Looking at Moreau's paintings one can say that being deeply inspired by the verses of the gospels he has remained true to the sequence of episodes narrated in the Bible, giving them a glimpse of exotic mystery in the iconographic articulation. A bold step further in the illustration of this enchanting motif can be seen in Aubrey Beardsley's *The Climax*¹² (Fig. 5) which goes beyond the New Testament tales and gives the picture a vengeful erotic dimension of an unrequited affec-

¹² L. G. Zatlin, *Wilde, Beardsley, and the Making of Salome*, *The Journal of Victorian Culture* 5.2, Oxford 2000, 341-157.

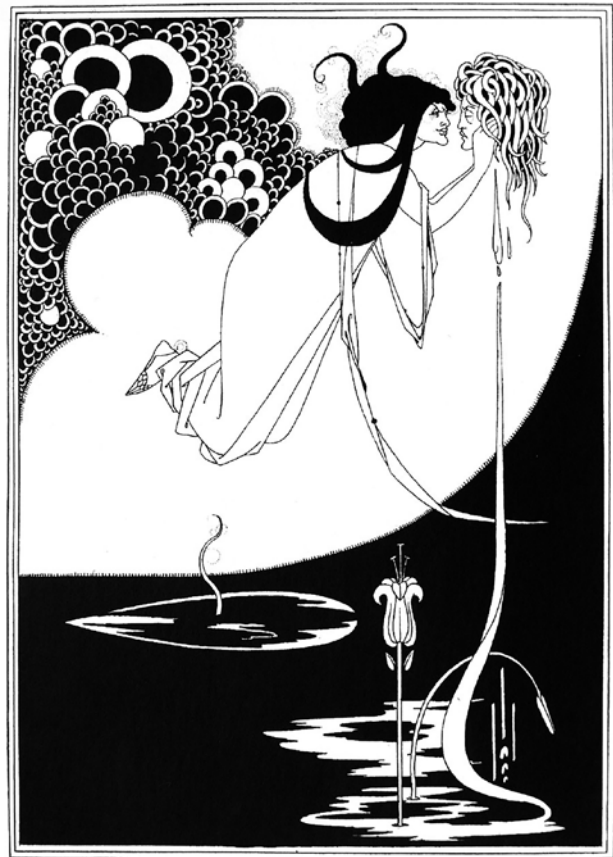


Fig. 5 Aubrey Beardsley, *The Climax* (1893)

tion. It seems that no matter how scarce the emotional charge of the verses describing the event that took place at Herod's banquet is in the evangelic tales, it gave an immense doze of unrestricted imagination to the artistic expression of symbolism and art nouveau.

Epic tale: *the slaughter of the innocents in King Marko's monastery*

Unlike the dance of Salome described in the Bible and painterly transformed into a much more romanticized version than its biblical description, the mini-cycle dedicated to the Slaughter of the innocents in the church of Saint Demetrius in Sušica has an entirely different character in regard to its biblical nature. Namely, the Gospel according to Mathew (2, 1-18) is very determined that King Herod, feeling endangered by the new born Jesus, has ordered the massacre of male infants up to two years of age. Since the three magi did not fulfill the task given by the monarch to expose the location of the divine child, he ordered the bloodbath in Bethlehem and its surroundings leaving multitude of young corpses in the final embraces of their weeping mothers. Executed in a number of Byzantine monuments from the earlier, as well as from later times¹³, the description of the ferocious event

¹³ A. Wharton Epstein, *Tokali Killise: Tenth Century Metropolitan Art in Byzantine Cappadocia*, Washington



Fig. 6 King Marko's monastery, The Masacre of Innocents (1376/77)

is always elaborated with dramatic rhythm of the suffering of both matriarchs and their slaughtered newborns. Such a great savagery described in almost twenty biblical verses was quite compliant for artistic imagination since it involved the king, the magi and the baby Jesus the destiny of whom was at the stake under the orders of the Judean monarch. Moreover, the dramatically emotional content of the last verse which refers to the prophesy of Jeremiah (31, 15): *In Ra'ma was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not* (Mathew: 2, 18) puts this mother on the pedestal of irresistible heartache transforming her into a painful symbol of all broken-hearted motherhood.

In the church of King Marko's monastery, the cycle dedicated to the slaughter of the innocents is executed in the high zones of the southern wall as an effective painterly addendum to the composition of Nativity¹⁴ (Fig. 6). The verse of Mathew (2, 16):

1986, 62; Г. Бабић, *Циклус Христовог детињства у пределу с хумкама на фресци у Грацу*, Рашка баштина 1, 1975, 50-55; J. Lafontaine Dosogne, *Iconography of the Cycle of the Infancy of Christ*, The Kaiye Djami IV, Princeton 1975, 229-234; A. Stavropulo Makri, *Le theme du Massacre des innocents dans la peinture post-byzantine et son rapport avec l'art italien rennaisant*, Byzantion 60, Bruxelles 1990, 366-381; Е. Димитрова, *Манастир Матејче*, Скопје 2002, 179-180.

¹⁴ Ј. Мирковић – Ж. Тагић, *Марков манастир*, Нови Сад 1925, 62; В. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, Београд 1975, 81; S. Korunovski – E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia L'arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*,

Then Herod.....and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Beth-lehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under has been illustrated by four episodes of the bloodbath with groups of women holding infants and executioners waving the swords to slay the children. Four of the scenes are depicted in rocky landscapes, whereat the first one is situated above the window in the midst of the cycle picturing a soldier who is detecting a mother holding a toddler. Eastward, there are two scenes with soldiers taking the babies from their mothers and killing them, while the one depicted west of the window is showing the cave in which Elisabeth and the newborn John have found their safe refuge according to the text of the apocryphal Gospel of Jacob¹⁵. All the mentioned spectacles are infused with accentuated kinetic energy of both slayers and mothers, the earlier swinging their weapons and the later desperately trying to protect their offspring or mourning the already murdered male issues. The most striking scene is the one in which Rachel (Mathew: 2, 18) laments over a group of babies as a heraldic symbol of motherly grief (Fig. 7). Hence, giving the finishing touch to the illustration of the bestial massacre, the painter has created a picture of a woman who wails for the

Milano 2006, 205-206; Е. Димитрова, С. Коруновски, С. Грандаковска, *Средновековна Македонија. Култура и уметност*, Македонија. Милениумски културно-историски факти (П. Кузман, Е. Димитрова, Ј. Донев Eds.), Скопје 2013, 1747; М. Томић Ђурић, *Фреске Марковог манастира*, Београд 2019, 217-223; Е. Dimitrova, *The Church of Saint Demetrius at Sušica* (King Marko's Monastery), Skopje 2020, 34.



Fig. 7 King Marko's monastery, The Cry of Rachel (1376/77)

slaughtered children becoming an unforgettable figure of parental tragedy.

According to the Bible, the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem was ordered by Herod named the Great, father of Herod Antipas and monarch of Judea appointed by the Romans. His title is owing to his long rule as a king of Judea, as well as due to his efforts to embellish his kingdom with a great number of fortresses, aqueducts, palaces and other public edifices¹⁶, including the magnificent fortification at Masada built at the eastern fringe of the Judean desert overlooking the Dead Sea¹⁷. Within the architectural components of the Masada complex in 2007 Israeli archaeologists managed to locate the site of Herod's tomb¹⁸, which, regrettably, did not produce any archaeological or osteological material. However, the most significant building erected during Herod's reign is the Second Temple in Jerusalem out of which only a part of the western portion survived, known as the Wailing Wall. What is more important for our interpretation, among the multitude of social, political and family intrigues that marked Herod's reign over Judea archived in the history of Josephus¹⁹, the most reliable source of Judean ancient history, there is no record of a massacre in Bethlehem

¹⁵ J. L. Elliot, *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives*, Leiden-Boston 2006, 109-110.

¹⁶ S. Perowne, *The Life and Times of Herod the Great*, New York 1956, 67-71; S. G. F. Brandon, *Herod the Great: Judaea's Most Able but Most Hated King*, History Today 12, London 1962, 234-242; D. W. Roller, *The Building Program of Herod the Great*, Berkley 1998; E. Netzer, *The Architecture of Herod, the Great Builder*, Tübingen 2006.

¹⁷ J. Magness, *Masada. From Jewish Revolt to Modern Myth*, Princeton 2021.

¹⁸ J. Magness, Jodi, *Where Is Herod's Tomb At Herodium*, Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 324, Chicago 2001, 43.

¹⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XIV, 8-9.

as described in the Gospel of Mathew. Since it was supposedly ordered by the monarch, it would have been more than a significant event to be mentioned in the annals. Yet, legend has it that frightened by the possibility of losing his throne to some members of his numerous offspring, Herod ordered the execution of three of his children²⁰. This tyrannical act done to the male issues of his own flesh and blood could have easily contributed to the bloodthirsty character of the monarch portrayed in the Bible. If the tale related to the murder of Herod's sons is taken into relatively serious account, the substitution of his children with the infants of Bethlehem makes a solid ground for creation of an epic narrative which reflects the intriguing atmosphere of Christ's birth. The recompensation of history and mythos, as well as the self induced interrelation of facts and fictions (data and interpretation), have led to fabrication of an impressive epos of a dramatic nature and lamentable character.

Ecstatic tale: *Harrowing of Hell in Kurbinovo*

One of the most controversial events in regard to Biblical, as well as religious notions is the act of Christ's resurrection since no one has actually saw the miracle of Him returning to life. As described in the Gospels, a particular event, gladly executed in Byzantine mural painting, testifies to its occurrence: the myrrhophores finding the empty tomb on Sunday (Mathew: 1-6, Mark: 16, 1-6, Luke: 24, 1-6, John: 20, 1-6). In that regard, all four Gospels have a similar narrative which refers to either Mary Magdalene in the Gospel according to John, both women named Mary in the Gospel according to Mathew, the three women carrying the myrrh in the Gospel according to Mark and an unidentified number of females according to the Gospel according to Luke. Regardless of their singularity or plurality, they bear witness that the tomb is empty and realize that Christ is no longer in it. Although the fourth Gospel accentuates the more intimate atmosphere of the event in which Mary Magdalene visits the graveside alone and soon after expresses her astonishment by the sight of the empty tomb to the apostles while in the synoptic Gospels angels reveal the astonishing announcement to the women, all four texts are clear about the *fact* that Jesus has miraculously left the sepulcher where his body was laid after the crucifixion on Friday. *He is not here for he is risen* (Mathew: 28, 6), *He is risen, he is not here* (Mark: 16, 6), *He is not here, but is risen* (Luke: 24, 6) is actually a repetition of the same claim that He was laid in the grave as crucified

²⁰ A. Kasher, E. Witztum, *King Herod: A Persecuted Persecutor. A Case Study in Psychohistory and Psychobiography*, Berlin and New York 2006, 155-163.



Fig. 8 Kurbinovo, Harrowing of Hell (1191)

and deceased, yet left the shrine as reanimated and reliving.

The second event that testifies to Christ's resurrection is the occasion of His Descent into Hades described in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus²¹ with an allusion to some verses from the New Testament, particularly in the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians (4, 9) the text of which says: *Now that he ascended what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth*, and in the First Epistle General of Peter (4, 6): *For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in spirit*. Although neither of the passages mentions that Christ liberated the dead, the later one suggests His soteriological act in the underworld. Based on apocryphal texts with strong references to New Testament, Byzantine painting has generated the picture of Harrowing of Hell with the representation of Christ who helps the liberation of righteous from the depths of Hades²². Although this

miraculous event in patristic works, as well as in Byzantine literary culture is called Anastasis, the verb harrowing in terms of expressive ordeal of Christ descending into Hades seems to be the most suitable verbification to explicate the dramatically climactic development of the subject. As it is described in the Gospel according to Mathew (27, 53-54): *And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose. And came out of the graves after his resurrection*, the event encompasses not only the testimony to Christ's ecstatic coming to life, but his power to give living energy to all that have been buried in the darkness of their tombs.

The scene of Harrowing of hell in the church of Saint George in Kurbinovo²³ is depicted in the eastern part of the north wall of the temple together with the composition of the Myrrhophores at the empty tomb as an enforced corroboration to the resurrection of Christ (Fig. 8). Situated in front of a luminous circle which symbolizes the borderline between the world of the living and the one of the dead, the res-

²¹ M. R. James, *The Gospel of Nicodemus, or Acts of Pilate*, in: *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford 1924, 631.

²² A. Grabar, *Essai sur les plus anciennes représentations de la "Résurrection du Christ"*, *Monuments et mémoires publiés par l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* 63, Paris 1980, 105-141

²³ L. Hadermann-Misguish, *Les fresques de saint Georges et la peinture byzantine du XII^e siècle*, Bruxelles 1975, 162-167; Ц. Грозданов, Л. Хадерман Мисгвиш, *Курбиново*, Скопје 1992, 55; Ц. Грозданов, *Курбиново и други студии за фрескоживописот во Преспа*, Скопје 2006, 96; E. Dimitrova, *The Church of Saint George at Kurbinovo*, Skopje 2016, 16.



Fig. 9 Kurbinovo, Harrowing of Hell, detail (1191)

urrected Messiah is holding the wrist of Adam, the forefather of humanity as an act of salvation of the entire mankind. Pulling him out of the depths of the underworld while holding his martyr cross as a symbol of the crucifixion, Christ is manifesting a heroic determination to bestow the gift of eternal life to the deceased as a victorious consequence of his death transformed into an act of redemption. By positioning Adam as the main target person of Christ who is effectuating his messianic role of savior of mankind, the picture of Harrowing of Hell in Kurbinovo actually depicts the visual form of the spiritual belief that relates Christ's death and resurrection to his ultimate accomplishment as a universal life-saver and protector of the souls of the entire humanity - all the way to its primordial ancestry. The dramatic atmosphere of the scene is also accentuated by the element of the metamorphosed mountain placed in the upper corner of the spectacle²⁴ (Fig. 9) which, owing to the highly illuminative painterly language of the Kurbinovo master, overlooks the righteous waiting for deliverance. The powerful swing of Christ who steps out of his celestial *orbis* in order to save the sinful mankind, the lively motion of Eve, Abel, John the Baptist, kings David and Solomon who salute their savior in

²⁴ S. Korunovski, E. Dimitrova, *Macedonia. L' arte medievale dal IX al XV secolo*, Milano 2006, 80; E. 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, 1605; D. Georgievski, *Mysterious Mountain in Kurbinovo*, Byzantion 85, Bruxelles 2015, 70-76; E. Dimitrova, O. Zorova, *Beautiful Creatures in Art and Archaeology. Macedonia as "The Garden of Earthly Delights"*, Niš & Byzantium Symposium, The Collection of scientific works XV, Niš 2017, 96-97.

dignified expectance, the diminished size of the black figure symbolizing earthly death, as well as the rocky landscape deprived of scenic vegetation form an energetic visual structure of the composition depicting the victorious descent of the Messiah into the harsh sphere of earthly demise. Pictured next to the empty tomb of Christ guarded by an angel, the spectacle of Harrowing of Hell in Kurbinovo, although not explicated in the Gospels, has appropriated potent, vibrant and authoritative visual design of a biblical magnitude.

Esoteric tale: *Leonardo's Last Supper*

According to Biblical sources, the actual start of Christ's passion that will ultimately conclude in His resurrection and the salvation of mankind is the event of the Last Supper, which in eastern orthodoxy has attained a veil of a mysterious and secretive occasion²⁵. The significance of the Last Supper as a celebration of the Passover has been summarized in two major announcements: the forthcoming suffering of Jesus, as well as the betrayal of one of his disciples that will enable Messiah's ordeal. If one looks at the Gospel according to Mathew (26, 23) the traitor is the one *that dipped his hand with Jesus* (also in Mark: 14, 20 and Luke: 22, 21), while John in his Gospel (13, 26) claims that *he is to whom Jesus will give a sop when he has dipped it*. In the same verse, John discloses the identity of the apostate being *Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon*, while in Mathew (26, 25) Judas discloses himself as a culprit with a revealing question (which triggers a positive response by Jesus). In all four Gospels the Messiah doubtlessly point to the traitor in a proclaiming manner, but only in the one according to John, one can find out his name and generic affiliation. Also, gospels point out that there was a certain self-questioning among the disciples about the identity of the apostate in: Mathew (26, 22), Mark (14, 19) and Luke (22, 23) among all of them, while in John (14, 23) his favourite disciple openly asks Jesus to expose the renegade. In the first two gospels, after the disclosure of the traitor, Jesus announces his passion in a Eucharistic manner (Mathew: 26, 26-28; Mark: 14, 22-24), yet in the Gospel according to Luke (22, 19-20) the sequence of events is reversed. All these elements make a groundbreaking base for an imaginative illustration of the last supper of Christ with his apostles.

By all means, the most celebrated, investigated and admired picture of the analyzed event is the Last

²⁵ G. Millet, *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'évangile au XI^e, XV^e et XVI^e siècles d'après les monuments de Mistra, de la Macédoine et du Mont Athos*, Paris 1960, 293-297

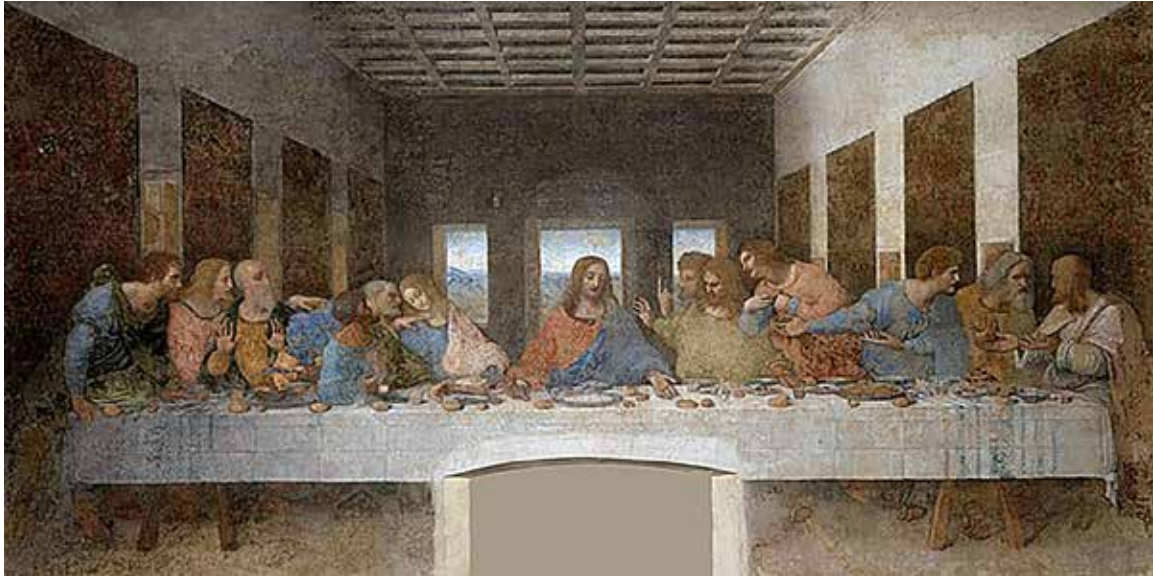


Fig. 10 Leonardo, The Last Supper (1497/98)

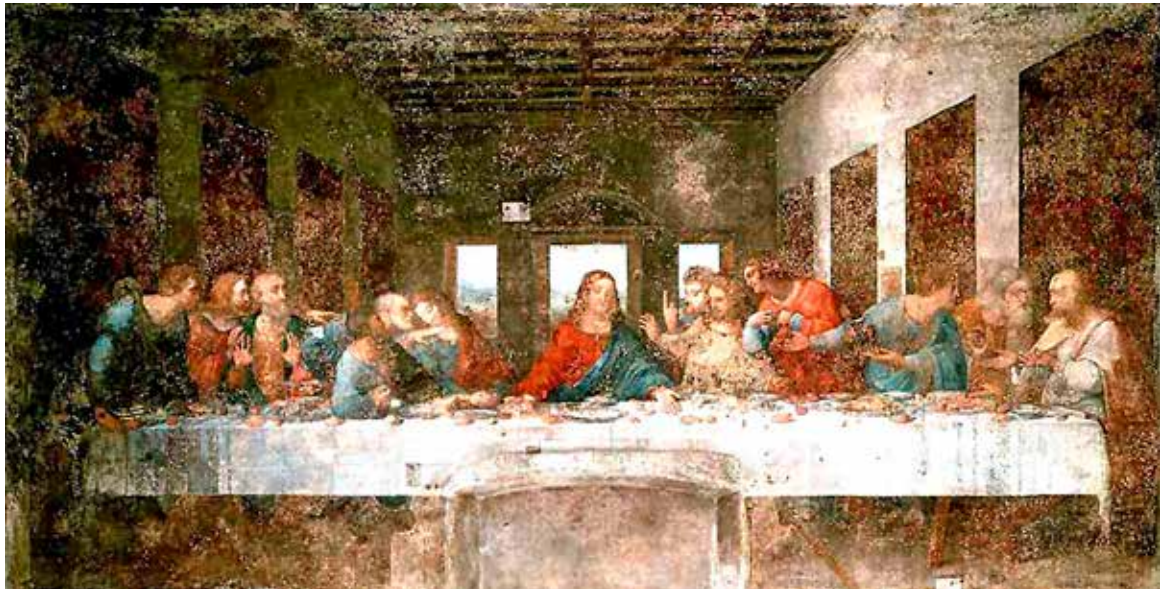


Fig. 11 Leonardo, The Last Supper (1497/98), situation in 1975

Supper executed by Leonardo as a commission of the Duke Ludovico Sforca in the present day refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan²⁶ (Fig.10). Although a subject of multiple restorations and retouches whereat much of the original *furnish* of the fresco has been lost, the illustration of the Last Supper by da Vinci, completed in 1497/8²⁷ is still a breathtaking spectacle; in many instances it is a perfect visual depiction of a biblical event created by a human hand. Marked by early deterioration due to technical issues of the wall surface, the fresco representation has been *acquainted* to a great number of artists who struggled to repaint its damaged portions as least as possible, yet at present day only percentages of the authentic

coloristic pigment of Leonardo has been preserved (Fig. 11). Nevertheless, the perfectly arranged mise-en-scène of the composition, the mathematically calculated depth of the spatial coordinates, the energetic, yet thoroughly balanced rhythm of the kinetic energy, the plethora of figural poses and stances, the luxurious range of individual portraits, the masterfully organized compositional elements permeated with delicate chiaroscuro and the luscious hues of the concordant coloristic amplitude speak in favour of one of the most elaborated pictures of the Last Supper in the evolution of art history.

Art historians have long ago explicated the specific features of Leonardo's work in regard to the unconventional representation of the Last Supper, such as: the lack of hallows, the grouping of the disciples, the tripartite window perforation as an allusion to the Holy Trinity, the semi-circular frame of the central

²⁶ R. King, *Leonardo and the Last Supper*, New York and London 2012.

²⁷ K. Clark. *Leonardo da Vinci*, London 1993, 144.



Fig. 12 Leonardo, The Last Supper (1497/98), detail

window as a simulacrum of a nimbus placed above Jesus' image, the vast blue landscape in the backdrop as an imaginative vision of the heavenly horizon, etc. Also, one can clearly notice that the picture illustrates the moment after the announcement of the betrayal visible in two components: the commotion among the apostles puzzled by the revelation of the traitor, as well as the motion of Jesus who points to the bread and the wine as a substitute of his forthcoming sacrifice on the cross of Golgotha. However, Leonardo succeeded to include a vivid testimony to the betrayal, as well, picturing Judas as he stretches his left hand to reach for the plate while tightly squeezing the bag with the thirty pieces of silver in his right. His face is darkened in comparison to all other apostles as he gazes towards the rabbi with a questionable outlook. Saint Peter holding a knife behind Judas' back while talking to the young apostle (supposedly John) refers to the Gospel according to Luke (22, 33), but also to the Gospel according to John (23, 24) which speaks in favour that da Vinci took into account all four gospels when designing the complex staging of his composition. In that regard, one would say that Leonardo followed the verses of the biblical passages with a particular care, yet, some structural components of the spectacle might suggest otherwise. Although the identity of the apostles in their arrangement at the dinner table has been doubtlessly revealed²⁸, the method of their grouping in triplets has never been investigated. Except for the fact that each group is composed of individuals represented in three different age categories: young,

middle aged and senior, they are depicted in diverse dynamic frameworks, as well; the cohesive one in the left portion of the picture, the moderately dramatized one in the right part, the intensively agitated group to the left of Jesus and the one on the other side which unites Peter the "rock", Judas the traitor and John the favourite - portrayed with accentuated feminine features (Fig. 12). No wonder by some esoteric scholars the later was *identified* as Mary Magdalene in relation with a passage from the Gnostic Gospel of Philip which mentions her as Jesus' closest companion²⁹. Knowing Leonardo's profound erudition and his emphasized inclination towards esoteric disciplines, it might show his sophisticated sense for ambiguity, as well.

In sum, every picture produced within the long run of art history tells a different story in terms of its approach to the painterly motif. When it comes to biblical subjects, there are ways and manners to avoid the visual replication of the scenes despite the frequency of representation which can cause a dose of iconographic repetitiveness of compositional components. However, hundreds of artistic creations (out of which we have only chosen four explicit examples) show that the basic iconographic matrix is usually only the starting point for further imaginative elaboration of the subject which results in genuine and distinctively cultivating articulation of the theme. The exotic narrative of the fable related to the martyrdom of John the Baptist visualized through the romantically imagined dance of the young Salome, the epic character of the legend derived from the

²⁸ L. Steinberg, *Leonardo's Incessant 'Last Supper'*, New York 2001, 75.

²⁹ W. Isenberg, *The Gospel of Philip*. The Nag Hammadi Library in English, Leiden 1996, 139.

massacre of the innocent infants in Bethlehem as a consequence of the Nativity, the ecstatic dimension of the miraculous resurrection of Christ who testifies to his messianic powers by descending into Hades, as well as the esoteric atmosphere of the obscure meal of the twelve apostles with their rabbi at the disclosure of the betrayal have certainly given substantial background for painterly intuitiveness in the process of artistic structure of the subjects. In that regard, the passionate embrace of Salome who kisses the sev-

ered head of the Baptist in Beardsley's *Climax*, the inconsolable mother Rachel who cries for all slaughtered children in King Marko's monastery, the resolute gesture of the resurrected Messiah who redeems the forefathers from mortality in Kurbinovo, as well as the cryptically toned ambience in Leonardo's master-piece illustrating the Last Supper are, by all means, some of the most consequential testimonies to the painterly imagination of biblical tales.

Елизабета ДИМИТРОВА

ПРИКАЗНИ ОД ИМАГИНАРНАТА АРХИВА: ЛИКОВНИ, БИБЛИСКИ И ПОИНАКВИ

Резиме

Изреката *секоја слика раскажува приказна* вообичаено се користи во контекст на идејата дека визуелизацијата на определени мотиви има побрз импакт врз набљудувачот отколку нивните постоечки наративи. Притоа, доколку гледачот е запознаен со текстуалното сиже на прикажаната тема, ја набљудува нејзината ликовна форма како визуелен асамблаж на основната матрица (дескрипцијата), дополнителните елементи (имагинацијата) и завршниот акцент (артикулацијата). Ако, во тој процес, се спореди истиот мотив во неколку различни ликовни творби, ќе се забележи дека дескрипцијата е симиларна, имагинацијата е варијабилна, додека артикулацијата е особено разнолика. Во тој контекст, ако се работи за библиски настан – тој се случил на определен начин (дескрипција), ликовниот уметник го перцепирал како личен впечаток (имагинација) и го прикажал на автентичен начин (артикулација). Оваа творечка тријада ја дефинира констелацијата на сите уметнички дела без оглед на нивната хронолошка референца, социјалното милје или естетскиот

карактер. Со други зборови, ликовниот уметник го селектира определениот мотив (лично или по нарачка), низ творечката процедура му дава на мотивот специфична ликовна рамка и го облагородува со автентичен завршен акцент. Пример за тоа е делото *Климакс* на Обри Бердсли, инспирирано од библиските стихови за декапитацијата на Јован Крстител, во кое Салома ја бакнува отсечената Јованова глава со горчлива страст на невозвратена љубов. Фигурата на мајката *Рахела* во сликарството на Марковиот манастир, која со неутешна болка ги оплакува закланите витлеемски новороденчиња е, исто така, инспирирана од библиски стих и величествено трансформирана во трагичен симбол на родителско страдање. *Симнувањето во адот*, пак, во курбиновскиот живопис на специфичен начин го илустрира сотериолошкото сведоштво за Христовото воскресение, додека Леонардовата *Тајна вечера* отвара многу повеќе прашања и дилеми отколку нејзината наративна форма во четирите Евангелија.