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THE PARABOLA OF THE CAMEL AND THE NEEDLE EAR AND THE KTETOR IN VISUAL ART

Key words: *ktetor, parabol, wealth, art, sins, God, St. Mathew.*

Abstract: *The parabola of the camel and the needle ear indicates the impossibility of the rich to enter heaven as understood in Christian societies. Yet the rich has efficiently overcome the problem by financing the art and the church. This text will deal with some of the Eastern and Western examples of ktetorship by using historical method and iconography method where applicable. The modern example of this aspect in the work of John Baldessari's Camel Contemplating Needle (2013) proves the idea is timeless and requires several approaches and readings. The expected results lead towards conclusions on human intelligence and art in overcoming crucial moral dilemmas and social policy the Church put into practice to enable the rich to use their income to beautify the world and glorify God and the church. At the same time to ease their burden of not being admitted to Heaven and enlarge hope their sins will be no large obstacle if helping the society by helping the Church (religion, and its role to help people, improve their morality etc). Thus the rich through art has helped themselves become not forgotten, and beautified the lives of people, helped development of art, and architecture.*

Even though sinners, rich men devoted to God, had approached heaven through art, and through giving became not forgotten. Many people had benefited through royal or rich men donations to the church to help poor people and development of art, thus improving quality of live and their society. Rich Church has the power to help less fortunate, to enable their education, well being, to improve human dignity and ambitions.

The term “**eye of a needle**” is used as a metaphor for a very narrow opening and occurs several times throughout the gospels. The parabola of the camel and the needle ear indicates the impossibility of the rich to enter heaven as understood in Christian soci-

eties. Yet the rich has efficiently overcome the problem by financing the art and the church. Or that is not the case?

“The eye of a needle” is part of a quotation attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. It was a response to a young rich man who had asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus replied that he should keep the commandments, and the man replied that he had done so. Jesus responded, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” The young man was unwilling to do so. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked: “Who, then can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’ (Matthew 19:23-26)

Parallel versions appear in Mark and Luke. “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (*Mark 10:23–25, New Revised Standard Version*)

This implies “man cannot serve both God and Mammon (wealth). In the early Christian times three great cultures met and largely influenced each other: the Classical, the Hebrew and the Christian. They had radically different views of money and wealth. The Hebrew culture prized material wealth, the Classical and Christian cultures either held it in contempt or preached indifference to it, but with different point of view.

The attitude of the Jews as expressed in the Old Testament is “completely different from the classical view.” Servile and hired work was not scorned by the Jews of the Old Testament as it was by Greco-Roman philosophers. Instead, such work was protected by biblical commandments to pay workers on time

and not to cheat them. The poor were protected from being exploited when in debt. However, poverty was not admired nor considered a positive value by the writers of the Old Testament. (Perrotta, Cosimo (2004). *Consumption as an Investment: The fear of goods from Hesiod to Adam Smith*. Psychology Press. p. 44.)

Also St. Luke strongly ties the right use of riches to discipleship; and securing heavenly treasure is linked with caring for the poor, the naked and the hungry, for God is supposed to have a special interest in the poor. This theme is consistent with God's protection and care of the poor in the Old Testament. Thus, Jesus cites the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1–2) in proclaiming his mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. —*Luke 4:18–19*

The Gospel of Luke expresses particular concern for the poor as the subjects of Jesus' compassion and ministry. In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, the poor are blessed as the inheritors of God's kingdom (Luke 6:20). God's special interest in the poor is also expressed in the theme of the eschatological "great reversal" of fortunes between the rich and the poor in The Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55).

It is also expressed in Jesus' repeated use of the phrase "many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first" and similar figures of speech.

In the *Parable of the Wedding Feast*, it is "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" who become God's honored guests, while others reject the invitation because of their earthly cares and possessions (Luke 14:7–14).

Ktetorship

As a kind of mediation between the world of the rich and the sacred, beautiful and divine, ktetorship has been invented. It may have started with the Roman diplomat, Gaius Maecenas.

Another tradition which had pre-Christian precedent was royal or imperial images showing the ruler with a religious figure, and can be found in Egyptian art, Assyrian art and Ancient Mediterranean art.

There are numerous Eastern and Western examples of ktetorship. As for the meaning of the word, related to the Ancient Roman maecenas, **Ktetor** (Greek: κτήτωρ) or **ktitor** (κτιτωρ), in Latin *donator*, means 'founder', a title given in the Middle Ages to the provider of funds for construction or reconstruction of an Eastern Orthodox church or mon-

astery, and/ or beautifying them with icons, frescos, and other works of art.

The modern example of this aspect in the work of John Baldessari's *Camel (Albino) Contemplating Needle (Large)*, 2013 proves the idea is timeless and requires several approaches and readings. It actually inspired me for this text.

A donor portrait or votive portrait is a portrait in a larger painting or other work showing the person who commissioned and paid for the image or a member of his/her family. *Donor portrait* usually refers to the portrait or portraits of donors alone, as a section of a larger work, whereas *votive portrait* may often refer to a whole work of art intended as an ex-voto.

Among the ktetors there were either male and female persons, monastic and sacral ktetors. Usually the number of female ktetors has been enlarged in the 14th C. in the Balkans. In the period under the Turks in the Balkans there was often due to economical reasons joint ktetorship visually expressed by joint holding of the church image, extended membership and connection between royalty and nobility.

In the early Christian period in Macedonia there are several female ktetors mentioned in the mosaic decoration of the churches, while the rest are bishops or anonymous persons. Sometimes the church dignitaries were founders of both the architecture and the wall painting.

By building, restoring or painting an endowment or commissioning a representative art work, donors expressed their hope and gratitude to the holy patrons, seeking their intercession with Christ the Savior on Judgment Day. The second purpose was the commemorative function of church dignitaries' donor portraits, and the right of the ktetor to be mentioned in the Divine Liturgy during his lifetime, the right of being buried at the endowment, and the right to an annual memorial service after the donor's death. The logic of including living people into the picture of the Kingdom of Heaven is the same in fresco and icon painting and follows the vertical hierarchy of sanctity. In frescoed churches and on icons, they were placed in the bottommost zones; on icons, ktetorial portraits are in the lower segment or flanking the figure of Christ, the Mother of God or saints. Churches display images of the Kingdom of God, and the representations of the living people occupied the lowest positions in the spatial hierarchy of sanctity.

Since the church makes itself known in its spiritual fullness in the Eucharistic togetherness of people (the Divine Liturgy), the church as the place of their coming together is the most suitable place for painting saints, i.e., the renowned members of the Body of Christ – the Church. For the same reasons, the time when the Divine Liturgy is performed is the

most important for the effect of the imagery of saints because that is when their presence is at its strongest. Iconographical depictions of saints in the frescoes on the walls of the church iconologically participate in the same act as the faithful, just as the exemplars of those saints ontologically take part in the Liturgy.

The donor portraits also had a legal role as visual reminders of all ktetorial legal rights and of the legitimate authority of the Church. When the ktetor is depicted in the vicinity of Christ, the Holy Virgin and the saints, it is historical figure that “speaks” through the words inscribed in the title and written on the scroll or next to the portrait. Many ktetors were painted approaching the Christ or Virgin Mary while praying or offering their small donation, mainly depicted as a model of the church they hold in their hands.

Such are the portrait of the St. George in Polog, Holy Archangels in Lesnovo, St. Sophia in Ohrid 2nd floor catholicon of St. John etc.

Rarely do we see only female donors, apart from the wives adjoining the husbands donors. Female donors are mentioned in the early Christian period in Ohrid five nave basilica, and Stobi mosaics.

A painting in the Catacombs of Commodilla of 528 shows a throned Virgin and Child flanked by two saints, with Turtura, a female donor, in front of the left hand saint, who has his hand on her shoulder; and very similar compositions were being produced a millennium later.

There is literary evidence of donor portraits in small chapels from the Early Christian period, probably continuing the traditions of pagan temples.

Imperial patrons

Emperor or ruler with courtiers receiving divine approval is one of the popular medieval donor compositional solutions.

St. Constantine is the first Roman emperor to use state budget to build and decorate churches. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was built on his orders at the purported site of Jesus’ tomb in Jerusalem and was deemed the holiest place in all of Christendom. Helena, his mother recovered the True Cross at the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, when she travelled to the Holy Land in 326–328.

Constantine was an idealized archetype of the Christian ruler, a symbol of the emperor’s legitimacy and identity and a model for comparison. Therefore, Byzantine emperor was considered heir of Constantine and the defender of the faith - he was considered “as new Constantine”. This Byzantine political ideology was also adopted in medieval Serbia. In the 13th and the 14th century, this ideology was almost simultaneously developed in painting and literature. In the



Mosaic in the Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, donor portrait of Emperor Constantine I with a model of the city (photo Wikimedia Commons)

wall paintings this comparison was emphasized by placing the Serbian sovereigns face-to-face to Sts. Constantine and Helen or by juxtaposing them.

Originally there was a portrait of Theodoric in the Basilica of San Apollinare Nuovo. Justinian I decorated the church of St. Vitale in Ravenna with his and his wife portraits depicted as being part of actual liturgy.

In the Early Middle Ages, there is a group of mosaic portraits in Rome of Popes who had commissioned the building or rebuilding of the churches shown as standing figures holding models of the building, usually among a group of saints. In time these traditions were accepted by the lower classes, especially in illuminated manuscripts, where they are often owner portraits. Later on, clergy were the donors most commonly shown, other than royalty, and they remained prominently represented.

Donors are usually shown kneeling to one side, in the foreground of the composition. Often, even late into the Renaissance, the donor portraits will be at a much smaller scale than the principal figures, in defiance of linear perspective. By the mid-15th century donors began to be shown integrated into the main scene, as bystanders and even participants.

The reason for donor portraits was to memorialize the donor and his family, and to solicit prayers for them after their death in perpetuity. Gifts to the



The 6th-century mosaic panels of the Emperor Justinian I and Empress Theodora show each of the imperial couple standing confidently with a group of attendants, looking out at the viewer. (photo Wikimedia Commons)

church were often accompanied by a bequest or condition that masses for the donor be said, and their portraits were thought to encourage prayers on their behalf. Displaying portraits in a public place was also an expression of social status. Their additional purpose may have been to serve as role models for the praying believer, as a mirror for the recipient to reflect on himself and his sinful status.

When a whole building was financed, a sculpture of the patron might be included on the facade or elsewhere in the building.

Jan van Eyck's *Rolin Madonna* shows the donor Nicolas Rolin painted as large as Madonna and Child. Rolin had given great sums to his parish church, which is represented by the church above his praying hands in the townscape behind him.

The donors may be shown on the closed view of an altarpiece with movable wings, or represented on both side panels, or just on one side. If they are on different sides, the males are usually on the left for the viewer, the honorific right-hand placement within the picture space. In family groups the figures are usually divided by gender. Groups of members of confraternities, sometimes with their wives, are also found. Additional family members, from births or marriages, might be added later, and deaths might be recorded by the addition of small crosses held in the clasped hands.

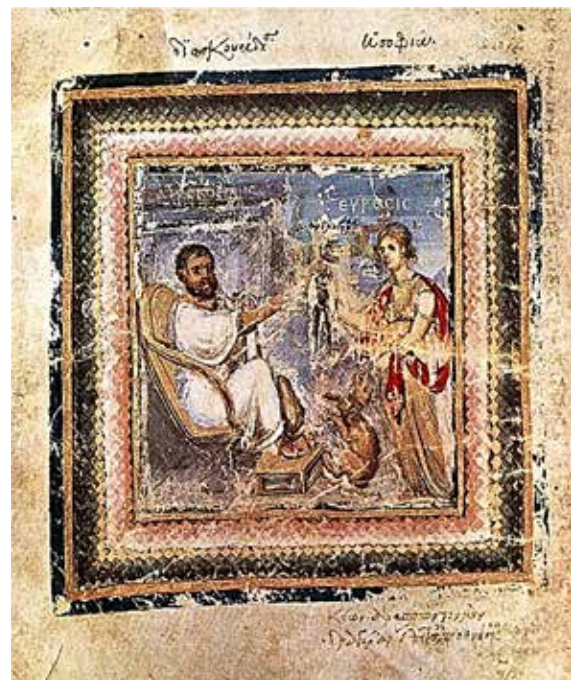
Yet, some small donors' portraits may have been erased in time not related to their character. For instance, in Northern Italy, there was a large group of small frescoes with a single saint and donor on side-walls, that were liable to be repainted as soon as the number of candles lit before them fell off, or a wealthy donor needed the space for a large fresco-cycle, as portrayed in a 15th-century tale from Italy.



Donor portraits have a continuous history from late antiquity, and the oldest known Christian donor portrait of Anicia Juliana, the Byzantine princess is painted in the manuscript *Vienna Dioscurides* (a little prior to year 512, Austrian National Library, parchment, folio 491). (photo Wikimedia Commons)

Illustrations

A particular convention in illuminated manuscripts was the "presentation portrait", where the manuscript began with a figure, often kneeling, presenting the manuscript to its owner, or sometimes the owner commissioning the book.



It is interesting that on Folio 4v, we see the author of the paintings portrait. Rarely we have this opportunity until the Renaissance period when self portraits of artists appeared. (Wikimedia Commons)



Manuscript miniature of Maria of Antioch with Manuel I Komnenos, Vatican Library, Rome (photo Wikimedia Commons)



Fresco from St. George, Kurbinovo, St. Constantine and St. Helene (according to Cvetan Grozdanov)

Donor portraits of noblemen and wealthy businessmen were becoming common in commissions by the 15th century. A very common Netherlandish format from the mid 15th C. was a small diptych with a Madonna and Child, usually on the left wing, and a “donor” on the right, normally intended to be kept in donor’s home. He may have a praying pose, or may pose more like the subject in a purely secular portrait.

The usual formula in the Early Christian period was “whose name is known to God”. From there we come to donors with their name (the bishop of Stobi, mosaic in the old Episcopal basilica) or at the palace of Peristeria in Stobi the owners name is preserved in the mosaic inscription and on a ring); and later to portraits of the whole family of the donors in the Medieval period and the New Age.

For Macedonian medieval art it is very important that the portrait of the byzantine emperor Manuel Komnen, has been depicted in St. George, Kurbinovo but disguised as St. Constantine the Great with his second wife represented as St. Helene. And we find out about it because there is existing portrait of the couple in a manuscript kept in Vatican.

The portrait of St. Konstantine and Helene in St. George in Kurbinovo are actually the portraits of the ruling Byzantine tsar and his late wife as was discovered by Belgian art historian Lydie Hadermann Misguich (Lydie Hadermann Misguich, *Les fresques de Saint-Georges et la peinture byzantine du XIIe siècle*, Bruxelles 1975, 11-21). Also, Stefan Dušan has been



St. Nicholas with portraits of the donors, King Uroš Milutin and Simonida (1319; Bari, Basilica of St. Nicholas, crypt, the restoration revealed the son of the king. The icon has been donated by Uroš III (1322-1331), (photo Wikimedia Commons)



The donor's composition at St. George, Pološko (photo: Ana Popova)

assimilated with St. Constantine the Great and Archangel Michael in St. George at Pološko.

In the orthodox world, monastic donors and even patriarchs seem to have preferred commissioning their ktetorial portraits as frescoes; and when commissioning icons, the placement of their ktetorial portraits follows the medieval tradition.

As some of the most ornate and representative artworks of their time, including devotional texts, those icons have a prominent place in Balkan icon painting in the period of Ottoman occupation.

Proskynesis

Ktetors sought to be represented on frescoes in the immediate vicinity of the holy men and women in whom human nature came to be deified, and hence their representations reflect new eschatological principles. The ktetors wanted to have their created nature transformed, whereby they too become limbs of the Body of Christ – the Church, taking part in unmade divine energy and glory. “I fell at Your feet to worship You” echoes their image.

Some ktetorial representations, mostly those on icons, are characterized by the use of poses that strongly suggest repentance and supplication. Of those figures, some are shown in the act of proskynesis that expressed a prayerful state inseparable from the feeling of joy-giving sorrow that can be accompanied with weeping and tears.

Ktetor portraits and their burial sites

Ktetorial portrait represents one of the essential prerogatives of a ktetor, proclaimed by the document that regulates ktetorial rights, usually by the typikon of a certain endowment. In the Middle Ages, portraits of ktetors were painted in their endowments, typically above their burial sites. Ktetorial portraits simulta-

neously represented votive and funerary portraits that the spectators regarded as memories of the deceased.

Those portraits communicated with the surrounding space, especially with the rest of the wall paintings, and together, they formed sacral topography of the church in which the ktetorial portrait was placed. During the 14th century, ktetorial portrait compositions gained a more complicated political connotation - they marked the position of ktetors in the hierarchy of Christian family of nations. Moreover, they represented private piety and dedication to Jesus Christ, Mother of God or other saints to whom the female ktetors would pray for personal and family protection and salvation.

Portraits of female ktetors in the 14th C. Serbia and Macedonia show combination of ktetor portrait and ruler portrait, and usually they are portrayed as widows with their children - as in Holy Virgin, Matka near Skopje). Sometimes the widow has meanwhile become a nun (despot wife Marina, mother of Dragušin in St. George, Polog, portrayed as nun Maria, holds the church model in her hands, 1343-1346 (For details see Pavlovic, Dragana (2021) *Portraits of nobility of Serbian Medieval art, A contribution to the study of their iconography*, ZMSLU 49, Novi Sad, 31-49).

In the church of St. George at Pološko is depicted one of the most striking galleries of historical portraits. Prior to this church, the members of the dynasty and the family of the noble founder were depicted face to face. In Pološko, the disposition of Dušan's family portraits better reflect superiority of the emperor's status. The face-to-face arrangement reflected the harmony between the rulers and their vassals, while the elevation of the image of the sovereign above the nobles insisted on the hierarchical difference that existed between them.

The donor's composition at St. George, Pološko is developed on the west facade of the church. In



Lesnovo portraits of Tsar Dušan and his wife, and the ktetor despot Jovan Oliver; (Wikimedia Commons)

the upper register are depicted Serbian king Stefan Dušan, his wife Jelena and his son Uroš. Above the royal family two angels descend from heaven, one to crown the queen and the other to bring the sword to the king. In the lower zone is represented the posthumous portrait of Jovan Dragušin with his family, and his wife is the actual ktetor.

This iconographic solution, where the Serbian royal family is represented above the donors, is introduced for the first time in Pološko. It is later repeated only in the narthex of Lesnovo. The iconography indicates the hierarchy of the two kingdoms - celestial and terrestrial, as well as the hierarchy within the Serbian kingdom - that of the king and his dignitary. By placing the royal family above that of the donors the painting indicates that the power of Dušan proceeds from Christ, in the same way that the donor's power proceeds from Dušan. Also the colors follow the hierarchy, the portraits of the royal family are represented on a red background, while the donors are on a blue background. In this way the iconography, according to the Byzantine tradition emphasize the divine origin of the power of the Serbian sovereign. For some reasons the ktetor of Lesnovo church, with the rank of despot, became unpopular with the tsar and had to become monk and was buried elsewhere and not in the church he built as his burial place.

The most recent donor portraits in Macedonian art have been painted in Radoviš church Holy Trinity, where we see the donor with his last wife and children on the south wall. The rebuilding of Holy Virgin church in Skopje by Trifun Kostovski family is an example of a donor who did not order his family portraits within the church he built. Since St. Constantine and Helen church in the very center of Skopje is not finished, we do not know if the other

business magnate family will miss the opportunity to come close to immortality. Trifun Kostovski also donated the portrait paintings of several Macedonian academicians on display in MANU. Orce Kamčev on the other hand, built a bridge as pedestrian approach to his hospital. He also donated several modern metal sculptures in the area around the Sistina Adjibadem hospital path.

Only a few churches are built or donated by successful businessmen including a small one in the Mavrovo valley that is actually private church of Stojmenov family (while the Russian style church in Aerodrom settlement in Skopje has been stopped by the local authorities).

Shall I mention over 300 mosques built within less than two decades in the western Macedonia region with no traces of art sense, along with monuments to the 2001 UČK terrorists? The mosaic in the Old Bazaar in Skopje that celebrates Albanian past has been made by very untalented artist. Political and ultra national motivation behind that plus absence of talent causes pity and sadness and serves to mark religious and political power and to inspire hate. None of this helps the poor or can change the migration process that empties the country. And is an offence to the good taste.

The modern example of the aspect of the camel and the rich men is reflected in the work of John Baldessari's *Camel Contemplating Needle* (2013). It proves the idea is timeless and requires several approaches and readings. To stress the irony, the camel is puzzled. The piece looks like a giant lump of camel-shaped plastic, smooth and white. The artist has coloured in the eyes which from most angles seem to be gazing not at the needle before it but heavenward. It is a reference to the saying about rich men hav-



Bob Rennie stands with John Baldessari's *Camel Contemplating Needle*, 2013 (Artnet photo)

ing as much chance of getting into heaven as a camel has of passing through the eye of a needle. Whitney informed us that the saying can, more or less, be associated with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The saying is written on the gallery wall in Arabic. The owner of this art work is Bob Rennie, who has a collection of 1700 artworks by 300 artists, and his own museum.

So this work is about rich men and their difficulty getting to heaven represented in a exhibition curated by a rich man (Bob Rennie). The opening reception

for the Ian Wallace exhibition (Ian Wallace: Collected Works, 27.05. - 30. 09. 2017) at the Rennie Collection was a celebration of both Ian Wallace and Bob Rennie's donation of 197 art works to the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, marking Canada's 150th anniversary. It suggests a highly self-critical view both personally and socially, which is borne out through the rest of the exhibition. Is it another irony or attempt of a rich man to ensure his memory for the future?

Снежана ФИЛИПОВА

ПАРАБОЛА ЗА КАМИЛАТА И ИГЛЕНИТЕ УШИ, И КТИТОРОТ ВО ВИЗУЕЛНИТЕ УМЕТНОСТИ

Резиме

Иако грешни, богатите верници се приближуваат до Бога преку уметноста и донирајќи го избегнуваат заборавот на времето. Многумина од нив донирајќи на црквата им помагаа на сиромашните, но и го стимулираа развојот на уметноста. Така успеваат да го подобрат квалитетот на живеење и ја помагаат својата заедница. Богатата црква има моќ да им помогне на помалку среќните, да им овозможи образование, благосостојба, да го подобри човечкото достоинство и амбиции.

Овој вид донатори, спомнати и богато, а често и гордо илустрирани на Истокот и Западот, се чини сепак го илустрираат мислењето на светите евангелисти дека овие богати личности никогаш нема да влезат во рајот. Тие и помагаа на Црквата која беше дел од владејачката аристократија. Наместо директно да им помагаат на сиромашните, тие го одржуваат нивниот спомен по нивната смрт.

Човечката интелигенција и уметност ги надминуваат клучните морални дилеми и социјална-

та политика што Црквата ја применува за да им овозможи на богатите да ги користат своите приходи за да го разубават светот и да го слават Бога и црквата. Во исто време им ја олеснуваат грижата дека нема бидат примени во Рајот и ја зголемуваат надежта дека нивните гревови нема да бидат голема пречка, ако му помогнат на општеството помагајќи и на Црквата. Така богатите преку уметност си помагаат себеси да не бидат заборавени и им го разубавуваат животот на луѓето, помагајќи во развојот на уметноста и архитектурата.

На Скопје му беа донирани и уметнички дела по земјотресот во 1963 година и тоа резултираше со изградба на првиот Музеј на модерна уметност. Тие дела беа донирани со цел да се намали трагедијата и да се запамети минатото и да се разубави животот на преживеаните и идните граѓани на градот и државата.

Уметноста е иднината на секој народ и ниту еден општествен статус не е важен или не може да го оправда нејзиното отсуство.